



John Madill / H-P staff

Upton Middle School students in Joe Rommel's Language Arts class show off their blue bracelets Tuesday in the school's media center. The wristbands read, "I'm Giving Water," as the students raised money for an African well by giving up their favorite beverages for two weeks while drinking water instead. Ann St. Amand (left), president of Phyco Tech Inc. in St. Joseph, is matching the funds collected by the students.

A well of deep concern

Upton students work up a thirst learning about world water shortages

By JOHN MATUSZAK
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ST. JOSEPH — It's something that most Americans take for granted, but 1 billion people — one in seven of the world's population — do not have access to clean water.

That shortage affects everything from health to education to economic development.

Inspired by a story in their new textbooks, sixth-graders at Upton Middle School have decided to take a small role against these appalling conditions by raising money for a well for an African village.

The students in Joe Rommel's language arts class have raised almost \$600 to be donated to The Water Project, and Ann St. Amand, director of PhycoTech, a water analysis company in St. Joseph, has agreed to match the money the students collect.

Their contributions will be combined with contributions from other schools

to build a well, which costs around \$2,500.

"Here you can go to a tap and get a drink of water anytime you want," said St. Amand, who supervises the UpStream ecology program at Upton. "In other parts of the world some people walk miles just to get a drink of water. You can go two weeks without food, but you can only go two or three days without water."

The students were prompted to action by the true story, "Ryan and Jimmy and the Well That Brought Them Together," about an American student who raised money to bring clean water to a Ugandan village.

When the Upton students expressed an interest in doing something similar, Rommel assigned them the task of researching the issue and finding the best way to make a difference.

"Anytime they can connect to something outside of school, it's important," said Rommel.

It was the first time Rommel could recall one of his classes starting a fundraiser based on their class reading.

As with the boy in the story, the Upton students

were shocked by what they discovered about the daily struggle to find water in much of the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

Donovan Cool, 11, learned that kids his age or younger have to travel six or seven miles round-trip, several times a day, to bring water to their homes.

Dar Comfort, 12, added that the water they find is often "disgusting" and filled with bacteria. "They don't drink the water because they want to, but because they have to."

The lack of clean water creates a "domino effect," explained Gabby Hardy, 11.

Children who become sick from drinking dirty water can't make it to school, and sick adults can't support their families, adding to their poverty.

Unclean water is a leading cause of death in these countries. The Water Project reports that a child dies every 15 seconds from a lack of clean water.

Water-related illnesses kill more people than wars, according to The Water

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Project.

Children – typically girls – who have to haul water can't attend school, said Upton student Haley Rich, 12. Older girls quit school because there are no sanitary facilities. The lack of education feeds poverty in a vicious cycle.

"It impacts education so much, because they are spending so much time physically hauling water" in cans that can weigh as much as 40 pounds, Rommel said.

"The reason almost all of the (African) continent is poor is because of water," Gabby said.

Skiping coffee

The students selected

The Water Project as the best conduit for helping to alleviate this problem, and Rommel set up an Upton page on the organization's website to encourage and track donations.

The students spoke to other classes at the school and explained the plight of people who don't have clean water. Students and teachers took a two-week pledge to give up their favorite beverages, such as coffee and pop, and donate the money to the well project. Those who took the pledge wore blue armbands supplied by The Water Project.

St. Amand was pushed by her daughter, Katie, an Upton seventh-grader, to give up coffee, and then volunteered to match the money collected by students.

A site for the well has not yet been selected, but it will be in Uganda, the location of the story that first inspired the students.

The Upton students will be informed when a location is selected and will be provided with GPS coordinates and photographs.

Videos from villages that have received wells show children and adults who are overjoyed, the Upton students said.

"Just from water," Gabby said.

The project also has made the students mindful of how much water is wasted in this country. The United Nations Development Program reported in 2006 that the average American used 575 liters of water every day, the highest rate of usage in the world.

Ethiopians use 11 liters

per person per day, and Rwandans use 15 liters.

The students also learned simple ways to cut back on usage, such as turning off the faucet while brushing your teeth, which can save four gallons of water.

Cutting back on shower time from 15 to eight or 10 minutes can save a great deal of water, Haley Rich suggested.

St. Amand wants the students to make good decisions about using these resources, because "every source of water is connected to every other source of water on the planet."

The students have completed their fundraising at school, but people interested in donating may contact Rommel at Jrommel@sjschools.org, or visit the Upton page at thewaterproject.org.