

NIC instructor traveling to Ethiopia, Kenya

Renee Bourque will help initiate, implement water development

By Amber Yohe
Correspondent

Water is life, and sometimes death.

This rings especially true for Africa's Liban Zone in the Moyale District, the border area of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. Some families in this area walk three days to the nearest water source, which oftentimes is a polluted mud puddle contaminated with typhoid and other diseases.

"No one washes their face there because there isn't enough water," says Renee Bourque, community education instructor at North Idaho College. "There is a disease where flies land in the crust that forms around the kids' eyes 'and lay eggs, and the kids go blind. All they need to do is wash their face once a day. That is the very elementary solution to a lifelong affliction."

For years, this area has been devastated, largely from lack of potable water development, and neglected from representation and assistance on all levels.

"These people spend their whole lives going back and forth to the water source, so there is no opportunity for them to get health care, education, and to really dedicate themselves to a family life," Bourque says. "Until you take care of that very oasis thing, you can't do anything else."

Bourque aims to do just that. As project manager and fund developer for 21st Century Basic Human Services, an international nonprofit organization that supports water quality and education, community health and economic development, she will be creating and implementing water development in an area roughly the size of Texas. She and others will spend about three weeks later this month getting acquainted with the Moyale District and its residents. There will be subsequent trips to Africa as the project progresses, which could continue for many years because the needs are so great.

She is organizing and garnering support for the project on the local, regional, federal and international level.



In addition, people from Africa and the United States, and various categories of professionals are volunteering their skills and expertise to the project to raise the standard of living in the service area, says Bourque.

"There is a tremendous swell of interest and support in this project," said Bourque. "Everyone knows this area has been discriminated against,

people know the need is great, and people know there are leaders who will be effective and fair."

Long-term goals for the region include the creation of a wildlife refuge in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya as well as new schools, health clinics and businesses. However, the initial and crucial focus is to establish an accessible system for providing clean water.

Bourque, who holds a master's degree in education from Seattle University, currently

divides her time between Coeur d'Alene, where she teaches grant-writing courses at the NIC Workforce Training Center with her mother, Janet Bourque, and in Seattle, where she owns Bright Star Grant Consultants, a strategic planning and organization development consulting firm.

She was first approached by 21st Century Basic Human Services through Bright Star to develop funding for human service projects in the Moyale

District. However, once the sheer scope of the project became clear, her role became much more involved.

"There are people there, there is a rich culture there, but its an area which has been completely ignored. It's like going back 3,000 years," Bourque said. "There is nobody there to hear their voice."

Among the growing number of project participants, Bourque enlisted the help of her brother, Tom, principal engineer for TerraGraphics Environmental Engineering in Moscow, Idaho, with engineering the various water and sanitary irrigation projects for the service area. In addition, Coeur d'Alene resident Judy Lyding, a retired onCologist, will also make the trip to see where she can assist with education and health care.

"The thing that is important to me about this project is that the community asked us for help, and that means a lot in terms of our ultimate success," said Lyding, adding the project is still "very much in the beginning."

Community participation and support of the project is vital to its long-term survival. A common mistake by well-meaning aid groups is to move into an area, implement a project without community involvement and then leave, which often leads to failure, Bourque said. 21st Century Basic Human Services plans to conduct community forums to encourage dialogue and create political partnerships to ensure the project's success. The project is very much a grass-roots effort, she added.

Bourque recently told Seattle's Ethiopian immigrant community about the project and how it would be implemented in the Moyale District, and the Ethiopians wept with joy and gratitude for the help in their home country. Bourque said one young Ethiopian woman was so moved, she said she was going to mark that day as the day she was truly born.

It is this deep appreciation for acknowledgment and help among these African communities that inspires Bourque to motivate and educate others - for example, on the significant impact a \$7,500 hand-dug well would have in the service area.

"I find this work very exciting because I feel the outcome of my work is so vital," Bourque said. "I am not working to produce the next widget, I'm doing work that is going to save people's lives and doing work that is going to help bring equal opportunity to women and children."