

The School Algonquin Built

Expedition team revisits a legacy and is surprised by what they find

By Christopher Hunt

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The expedition team didn't know what to expect as their bus headed towards Rongai.

There had been rumours the school Algonquin College had helped to build during the Small World Big Picture expedition to Africa in 2006 had been abandoned.

"The word was that the school may no longer be in use and that the village had been moved, so we weren't certain what we'd find," said Jennifer Daly-Cyr, Algonquin's director of marketing and college enrolment and expedition team member.

The school had been built to improve the learning environment of children living in Rongai.

Before Algonquin built the present school, lessons were given in a rickety church with no water supply. Many of the students endured walks in excess of 10 kilometres to get to the school.

Algonquin raised funds, provided materials (including two trucks) and even sent over a carpentry student and teacher to assist in the construction of the new school.

If the school proved to be abandoned, what would that mean for the efforts of the current expedition to Africa, which is presently building a girls dormitory for the Awet school in the Arusha region?

When the bus pulled close to the school, the expedition members weren't prepared for what they saw.

The building bore signs of recent activity and flowerbeds had been planted around it, a testament to the

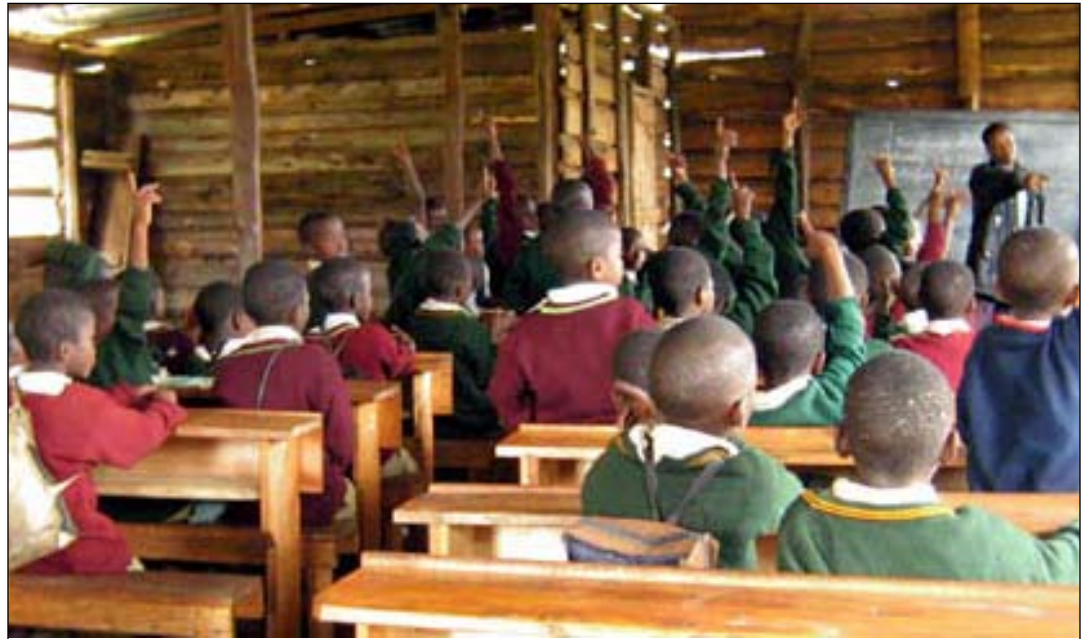


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A flurry of hands fly towards the ceiling, as the teacher points at a child out of view. The school in Rongai that Algonquin College built in 2006 is not only still standing, but thriving under the care of the local community.

significance placed on the building by the local community.

What is different is that the teacher walks two hours from the neighbouring village each day just to teach them.

Sherry Poirier
Expedition Team Member

A quick peek through the windows showed signs of use such as math equations on the chalk board and posters with the alphabet on them.

The students were on summer vacation, but a counselor from the school spoke to the expedition team about the impact the school has had on local students.

He said that the school teaches 70 kids up to Grade 2, and despite the fact that

the kids still struggle to school supplies, they persevere.

Louis Lamontagne was a member of the team three years ago that helped build the school.

"These are young children who never had a school to go," he said in an audio blog in which he later added, "a few thousand dollars well placed makes a huge difference in this part of the world."

The impact the girls dormitory in Awet could have on its students may very well be greater. Awet already boasts a thriving scholastic environment and boasts the highest test scores in the district.

The problem is space.

The present dormitory has space enough for less than a third of the girls enrolled at the school. The social conditions in Africa are not fa-

vourable to women. In the local villages, girls are forced to do domesticated tasks and are at risk of harassment by the male population.

Sherry Poirier counts the visit as one of the high points of the early part of her trip, although she was surprised by what the teacher in Rongai goes through just to be able to teach.

"They attend Monday to Friday, just like our kids do at home. What is different is that the teacher walks two hours from the neighbouring village each day just to teach them. It was a very soulful and rewarding 20 minutes. It certainly brought a tear to my eye and made me feel very privileged to be a part of this."

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www.algonquincollege.com/africa2009/awetDormitory.htm