

# Reaching Beyond Our Borders by Timothy D Deschamps



Figure 1: Constructing a borehole well.

In 2004, as the Northeastern Mosquito Control Association (NMCA) prepared to celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, President Curtis Best was also seeking to expand the reach of the Association beyond the New England area. As we know, mosquitoes, their control and the diseases they carry are not limited to one region, one country or one continent. Curt's idea was to reach across the lines on the map and extend our benevolence and generosity beyond our customary boundaries.

The NMCA membership is no stranger to philanthropy. We have had a scholarship and grant in aid program (<http://www.nmca.org/scholarship.htm>) in place for many years, that now awards up to \$2,000 in each category. Over the past 10 years alone we have awarded nearly \$30,000 to

22 worthy candidates. But Curt was searching for a new endeavor, something "out of the box" for NMCA.

After researching many options, like malaria control in endemic regions of the world, purchasing and giving out bed nets through various organizations, Curt focused in on an organization called AMREF. The African Medical and Research Foundation was founded in 1957 as the Flying Doctors of East Africa. Their goal is to improve the health of impoverished people in Africa as a means for them to improve their quality of life and possibly escape poverty. Curt told me "I was looking for an organization that worked to fight malaria, an obvious choice for us. In reading about the difficulties in Africa, in addition to malaria, there are

*problems with other diseases like tuberculosis and AIDS. Soon I realized AMREF works in all these areas. They don't just hand out money or equipment, they actually are right on the ground in the thick of things."*

AMREF is Africa's leading health development organization according to their website (<http://www.amref.org>), and works in six critical fields called Priority Intervention Areas (PIA):

- HIV/AIDS, TB and Sexually Transmitted Diseases
- Malaria
- Safe Water and Basic Sanitation
- Family Health
- Clinical Services, Disaster Management and Emergency Response
- Training and Health Learning Materials

While malaria intervention would seem to be the logical choice for us at first, we were steered in a slightly different direction by our contact at AMREF USA, Bill Yaggy, Director of Institutional Giving. Mr Yaggy asked if we could consider sponsoring an individual to go through a laboratory refresher course. This was partly due to the increasing importance of

development organizations. They have a central lab in Nairobi and satellite labs in Uganda and Tanzania which serve as reference laboratories for the East Africa Region, provide training and quality assurance services, and work with the Ministries of Health to develop and refine laboratory policies. He reports that they currently have US Government-

week refresher course for working laboratory technicians, most of whom work in very rural, isolated areas where they have no access to continuing professional education, effective supervision, or even up-to-date reference materials. This course enrolls 15 to 20 students each year, and is the only course like it available in the region.



Figure 2: Philip Kilusu leaving class.

laboratory diagnosis to malaria control efforts and partly due to the opportunity it provided to NMCA to support an individual student in this course who could then make a difference in his or her own community.

According to Mr Yaggy, AMREF's capacity in laboratory science is highly unusual among health

funded projects to strengthen health laboratories in Uganda and Tanzania and are just embarking on a new project, as one member of a consortium of agencies, to strengthen malaria diagnosis in 15 African countries under the President's Malaria Initiative. According to Mr Yaggy, each year at the main lab in Nairobi, AMREF offers a 12

The first recipient of the NMCA grant was Mr Philip Kilusu, a young Maasai man who had worked for several years as a laboratory technician and wanted to upgrade his skills to be of more help to his own community. The Maasai tribe lives in the Trans-Mara district, in the Rift Valley province of Kenya. Maasai are best known for their beautiful





**Figure 3: Digging a spring for clean water.**

beadwork which plays an essential element in the ornamentation of the body. Beading patterns are determined by each age-set and identify grades.

Mr Yaggy writes that Philip was inspired by his experiences to want to attend AMREF's year-long Diploma in Community Health course, which prepares mid-level health professionals with several years of experience to become community health administrators. While tailored to African health professionals like nurses and laboratory technicians, it is roughly comparable to a Master's in Public Health degree in the United States according to Mr Yaggy. Although Philip was accepted into the course that year, he could not afford to attend.

Mr Yaggy informs us that the next

year Philip re-applied and was accepted again, but needed help to afford the course. NMCA agreed to make its \$2,500 contribution available to support

Philip, AMREF USA contributed another \$2,500, and AMREF Headquarters made up the final contribution of the \$7,400 tuition. Eventually AMREF USA also contributed to Philip's living expenses in Nairobi. He has now successfully completed the course and received his diploma on December 6, 2007.

Philip writes in a letter to NMCA: "The module under which I took the photos is environmental health. We were constructing a spring, a latrine and a borehole well. This was to help us be able to construct them in our communities where we are going to

work. Spring protection and the digging of the borehole will enable the community to drink safe water. In the process we also teach them the importance of drinking safe water to avoid water-borne diseases. The knowledge acquired will be of great help to the Maasai community, which I come from, in disease prevention, especially malaria, which is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality in the community. The course has enlightened me and towards this end I have a desire to continue with the studies to attain a degree in community health. On behalf of the community, and myself, I say thank you and may God bless you all."

Through AMREF USA, Philip sent NMCA Treasurer David Boyes a handmade necklace as a show

of gratitude for the support he received from the NMCA membership. At the 53<sup>rd</sup> NMCA Annual Meeting in Plymouth, MA, Curt was presented with this necklace to pay tribute for his vision and foresight in the creation of this philanthropic arm of the Association. In a letter from Mr Yaggy that was enclosed with the necklace he writes:

*"Philip gave me the enclosed piece of beadwork to pass on to you in gratitude for your support. It is normally worn by Maasai men on their chests when they are in traditional dress. He thought you could hang it on your wall. He is really quite a thoughtful man – I know he is struggling financially, and yet he wanted to send this to NMCA as a token of his thanks. (In fact, AMREF USA has decided to give him a small living stipend in addition to the contribution to*

*his tuition. I learned that his salary for his laboratory position, which the government pays while he is in training, is 10,000 Kenyan shillings a month, which is about \$150. On this he is supporting himself to live in Nairobi during the course while also supporting a wife and two children at home, about 400 kilometers away)."*

Mr Yaggy writes in a later letter that the second lab student supported by NMCA was Ms Cecilia Naponi who attended the refresher training course offered January through early April 2007. She works in a tuberculosis and leprosy clinic in Maridi in South Sudan. She is a laboratory assistant trained on the job, and through the refresher course she expected to increase the scope of testing in her laboratory and head the program's lab which was expanded during the year.

After six years on the job, this was her first intensive training in medical laboratory science according to Mr Yaggy.

Mr Yaggy continues on and states that South Sudan has been affected by severe conflict for much of the last century, and during the last 20 years almost all doctors and other highly trained professionals fled, leaving the already very weak health system in a shambles. He says AMREF is committed to rebuilding the health system, and manages a training institute in Maridi for the Ministry of Health. Therefore, Cecilia Napoli seemed a very fitting student for NMCA to support. She completed the course successfully and returned to her job in Maridi.

The Benevolent Fund, founded by Curt, and administered through



Figure 4: Building a foundation for a latrine.



the NMCA Charitable Committee on behalf of the membership, receives much of its funding through our Silent Auction, held each year during our annual meeting. In 2004 Curt discussed his idea of creating this fund with Paul Capotosto, who organizes the Silent Auction for NMCA each year, and then approached the NMCA Executive Board. The Executive Board voted unanimously to accept Curt's idea. Thus the NMCA Benevolent Fund was created and the Charitable Committee formed to steward the funds. The generosity of the membership is augmented by the NMCA Executive Board which, under recommendations from the Treasurer, often increases the NMCA donation. The NMCA Charitable Committee voted in November 2007 to propose that AMREF be considered as a continued recipient of the Benevolent Fund for 2008. This endorsement was voted upon and accepted at the recent NMCA Annual Meeting. The 2008 contribution has been mailed to AMREF USA and we will once again sponsor a student in the Laboratory Refresher Course.

Mr Yaggy concludes: *"We at AMREF are very grateful to all the members of the Northeastern Mosquito Control Association for your generous support of these students over the past 3 years, and we look forward to continuing to work with you."* As evidenced by the recent vote of the membership, we also look forward to working with AMREF.

While we focus some of our benevolent efforts on a different continent, we are aware of struggles in our own country. In early 2006, as a show of compassion and support, the NMCA Executive



Figure 5: Curtis Best accepting Philip Kilusu's gift.

Board voted to send donations to both the Louisiana Mosquito Control Association, whose members felt the ravages of Hurricane Katrina, and to the Florida Mosquito Control Association membership which was affected by Hurricane Wilma. Gratitude was extended back to us for our outreach and the membership felt we provided a small measure of comfort to our colleagues in a difficult time. If you know of areas our Charitable Committee can consider, please contact us at [nmca@nmca.org](mailto:nmca@nmca.org).

Donations to the NMCA Benevolent Fund can be made through our Treasurer at: Dave Boyes, PO Box 438, Barrington, RI 02806.

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USA, Director of Institutional Giving; Mr Curtis Best, founder, NMCA Benevolent Fund and NMCA President, 2003-2005; NMCA Executive Board (<http://www.nmca.org/nmcaoff.htm>).



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