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Days for Girls chapter in Orange aims to bring dignity to Kenyan females

By Pam McLoughlin, New Haven Register

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ORANGE >> In the villages of Kenya — where simple items such as cheap reading glasses and hand washing stations near bathrooms can significantly improve lives — sustainable feminine hygiene products and a bit of education provided by the international Days for Girls program can revolutionize a women’s life beyond that time of month, according to a local couple who have joined the cause.

All it takes are hand-sewn kits made by volunteers; and a training session for the effort is coming soon to New Haven.

Having the products means overall empowerment for women: more days in school, lessons on the male and female anatomy, information on reproductive health and diseases and the right of women to say “no” in a male-dominated society, said local resident Mary Ann Stroup, a registered nurse. She and her husband, Dr. Ralph Stroup, a faculty member at Yale School of Medicine, have established a Days for Girls chapter in Orange.

The Stroups are founders of the Kenyan Health Care Initiatives — or KHCI — which has a broader mission of raising money to build healthcare clinics in remote areas of profound poverty. The couple thought the menstruation products cause was a logical branching after learning of the need while visiting Kenya as part of KHCI work. That was 2013 and shortly afterward, a story about Days for Girls appeared in Oprah magazine, leading Mary Ann Stroup to fly to Washington state to become a certified teacher in the program. According to the group’s website, thanks to “a global grassroots network of thousands of volunteers and supporters on six continents, we have reached women and girls in 75 countries on six continents.”

Mary Ann Stroup said Kenyan culture is complicated because it is a Christian community, mixed with a tribal culture, clan codes and with British and other western influences.

Without feminine hygiene products, women are subjected to taunts of “Leaky, leaky, leaky,” if blood shows through their clothes in school as they use primitive measures such as dirt, leaves and corn husks to keep blood from dripping down their legs. When menstruation time is revealed, girls in the villages must miss school, which amounts to five days a month, they can’t touch water or milk a cow. Elementary school is open to all, but not everyone gets into high school — it takes grades, as well as

money — so missing two months of class per year certainly affects women, the Stroups said.

“For me, it is the whole idea of creating a sisterhood around the world,” Mary Ann Stroup said. “In order to lift third-world countries, we need to empower women; and the way to empower women is through education,” including how their bodies work. “Together, we can all do something for the greater good.”

Mary Ann Stroup will hold a “Sew-a-thon, kit assembly and informational session Oct. 4 at Trinity Episcopal Church on the Green in New Haven from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. for those who want to help. For more information, she can be reached at OrangeCT@DaysforGirls.org. They can also use donations of materials, including cotton and flannel prints — none with animals, camouflage or all-white — and other specific items that can be determined through email.

The way the Days for Girls program works, girls are distributed kits of colorful prints, sewn and put together by volunteers. The girls in the village carry them to school all the time so no one knows who has their period. There is also an educational component.

“We want to create the feeling that we are all sisters across the world. We make babies,” Mary Ann Stroup said.

Each kit includes a colorful drawstring bag for the girl to carry to school that includes a pair of panties (girls sizes 10-16), a visual instruction sheet, eight absorbent tri-fold pads made of colorful cotton or flannel, two one-gallon Ziploc Freezer bags, one washcloth and two moisture barrier shields to hold liners comfortably in place. The kit allows them to wash the pads and sanitize them through drying in the sun.

Ralph Stroup, a urologist, said the cause is a logical extension of KHCI because “it encourages health education while empowering women.” Ralph Stroup said he loves that multiple accomplishments can be made in Kenya with “relatively little funding and laying groundwork.” The Stroups have helped establish a sewing center for the kits near their clinic project in Chumvi.

The Stroups became interested in Africa after Ralph Stroup was asked by a friend in 2008 to travel to Africa and join in an HIV workshop to train community members about the disease.

“I was so touched by what I saw,” Ralph Stroup said, referring to abject poverty and clinics in disrepair. He vowed to return and help. He’s been there five times and his wife twice.

He said once a clinic is built in Kenya for about \$30,000, the government will stock and staff the facility.

The Stroups raise money and awareness of their causes by talking to civic groups and church groups and forming partnerships with churches. For more information, email them at Infokenya@KHCI.org or visit www.KHCI.org.

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