

Operation Imani

Waterloo engineer's journey to Tanzania detailed in new documentary

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A year spent backpacking around the world opened Greg John's eyes to the struggles people face in parts of Africa.

It made such an impression on the Waterloo native that he signed on with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to do another year long internship on the continent.

The Waterloo colligate institute grad figured he could put the systems engineering degree he earned at the University of Waterloo to good use.

"Having seen some of the need out there, and also realizing that some of my engineering background could be very useful, I applied to the CIDA internship," said John. "I ended up spending two years in Tanzania and was hired to build an HIV centre at a hospital."

What he wasn't prepared for was the inventive and innovative things that Africans were doing to help themselves, including a project near the northern Tanzanian town of Moshi called the Imani Vocational Training Centre.

He'll be showing some of what's inspired him to return practically every summer since in a new documentary he's produced called Operation Imani: Ideas for Sustainable African Development. The film will be showing at the Princess Twin Cinema tonight starting at 9 p.m.

"In some ways it's not unique because there are vocational programs all over Tanzania, sub-Saharan Africa and beyond," said John. "But it's really the work that they are doing to support themselves that really got me interested."

The centre offers programs in carpentry, tailoring, knitting, welding, bricklaying and catering to give youth the skills they would need to find jobs.

But the program, run by the Sisters of Our Lady of Kilimanjaro,



Waterloo native Greg John holds some bricks that Jeremiah Lyimo, the contractor, was using to build the Imani Centre. John directed a documentary about the construction of the centre.

ELIZABETH LAVOIE PHOTO

also tries to be self-sustaining with fish ponds and a drip irrigation system to help feed students and teach them how to grow and collect their own food.

"There are a lot of programs that are good at the vocational training but not so good at supporting themselves," said John.

"Some constantly require money from the government or international donors and sometimes fall short.

"This organization has grown tired of constantly asking other people for money so, in addition to teaching students, their other goal is to support themselves.

"That's what really makes it unique for me."

The 30-year-old high school teacher put a presentation together two years ago called Africa Not As Seen On TV, in an attempt to raise awareness about the lack of investment in long-term, sustain-

able solutions like the Imani project. But it was one thing to talk about the experience.

It was another thing to tell the story in pictures.

"During my next trip to Tanzania I brought a video camera along, not sure exactly what it was going to turn into," said John. "But having told people about the project,

"I wanted to show them what was going on because a picture

tells a thousand words and with moving pictures I hoped it would tell a lot more.

"It was while I was there I was able to figure out what I wanted to show people while I was in Tanzania."

That's why he's back at the Princess Twin Cinema tonight, ending a documentary tour that included showings in Vancouver, Calgary, Ottawa and Toronto.

He hopes these moving pictures will inspire people in his hometown and across Canada to think of African aid in a different way.

He hopes that if more Canadians commit to helping the type of sustainable projects being done by Imani, they will help rural Africans with a hand up and not just a hand out.

"It will expose Canadians to these sorts of ideas," said John. "Canadians, I find, are very motivated to help out and have positive attitudes to helping, but do it in a way that doesn't end up in long-term suspendibility of those people."

While food and clothing will help with the short-term needs, the long-term problems remain.

Those needs have to be filled through sustainable projects.

If you teach a man to fish, he'll eat for a lifetime, the saying goes.

But, John's vision goes one step further.

"It's not a matter of giving them fish or teaching them how to fish, it's about making the investments so the can produce their own fish," he said.

"I'm trying to give people a channel to support this project.

"A lot of people when they donate to a charity don't know where it is going.

"I'm still in touch with the people there and I can assure them of the good work that it's doing."

For more information about the Imani Vocational Training Centre visit www.operationimani.com or e-mail operationimani@gmail.com.