

APPLAUSE SUSAN SCHWARTZ

Couple help build a better Ethiopian village

Two-room schoolhouse was funded by donations from Montrealers

A school in Shumargie, a village in northern Ethiopia, has been built and is now up and running – because of the commitment and efforts of a Montreal couple.

Benjamin Sternthal, a Montreal developer, and his wife, Julie Schneiderman, a communications manager for Novartis Pharmaceuticals, were on holiday in late 2009, backpacking through the African country of Malawi. They were kayaking on Lake Malawi and they had pulled up on a beach to camp for the night. It was Hanukkah and they were carrying a small travel Hanukkah menorah – a candelabrum lit during each of the eight nights of the Jewish festival. They took it out and lit it – and the entire fishing village in which they were staying came to see what was up, Sternthal wrote to Applause.

They taught them Hanukkah songs – and decided, during that trip, to create the Kulam Project. “We were inspired to ... take our love for these countries and create positive change,” Sternthal wrote. Kulam is Hebrew for everyone or all of them.

Kulam’s partners are Ve’ahavta, a Toronto-based NGO (www.veahavta.org), and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (www.jdc.org), a Jewish humanitarian assistance organization. Both support international development projects in Ethiopia and Rwanda. Kulam’s key advisory team includes lawyers John Galambos and Larry Markowitz of the law firm McMillan, and Arlene Sternthal (Benjamin’s aunt).

In the last two weeks of 2010, the couple travelled to Ethiopia and met with teachers, community leaders and students in Shumargie. The school has now been completed and its 60 young students – who had been studying in a one-room schoolhouse made of branches, sitting on makeshift mud benches – now have a two-room concrete school featuring windows, a tin roof and classrooms with desks.

The \$21,500 cost of the school was contributed by the Montreal community, with Sternthal and Schneiderman working their personal and business relationship. As well, they organized an event, hosted by Concordia University as part of its Abitibi Bowater lecture series, at which Rick Hodes, medical director in Ethiopia for the JDC and a member of the Kulam team, came in to speak and to try to build community awareness of the Kulam Project.

Under Hodes’s supervision, 11 young Ethiopians had major heart surgery recently in India, where experts have experience in treating the heart ailments the children had. Kulam provided post-operative medications for them.

Students at the Shumargie school, who had been using grain bags from the United Nations to carry their minimal supplies, have each received a schoolbag full of supplies, including pens, pencils, rulers and scissors, to help them focus on learning.

“We are proud that the Shu-

margie school will change the reality for the better and for the entire Shumargie community,” Sternthal said.

Through Kulam, the couple plan to continue to support Hodes’s work and to try to provide more new schools as well as access to medical care and wells. Having a well provides a community with clean, safe drinking water and eliminates the long walk women and children make several times a day to collect water. Each well costs \$3,500.

As well, plans are being discussed to help orphans of the Rwandan genocide through the Agahozo Youth Village, a community that provides young survivors with housing, education, medical care and a place to call home.

Sternthal and Schneiderman can be reached at kulaminfo@gmail.com. Visit www.veahavta.org/index.php/our-projects/international-programs/kulam-project.



COURTESY OF BENJAMIN STERNTHAL

Students at a new school built in Shumargie, Ethiopia, financed by the Kulam Project. “We were inspired to ... take our love for these countries and create positive change,” project co-founder Benjamin Sternthal says.