

THE GIFT OF WATER: Daytona businessman donates filtration system to Kenyan school



Miller-Leaman President Marty Shuster recently went to Africa, where he donated a water purification system to a school that didn't have access to quality water.

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DAYTONA BEACH — Back in April, Marty Shuster and John Upchurch went on one of those African safari trips people dream of. Bouncing around the vast countryside in an open air vehicle with a canopy roof and no doors or windows, they rolled up to packs of hyenas, lanky giraffes, elephants lumbering through the bush, crocodiles lurking in rivers, lions napping under shade trees and a hippopotamus that popped above the water long enough to crank open its huge mouth. "It was like you'd see on TV, but up close," Upchurch said. They saw wild Kenya, and they saw urban Kenya in the capital city of Nairobi, which has a population of around 4 million and clusters of tall buildings that house more than 100 major international companies and organizations. They also saw the slums filled with scores of tiny huts made of sticks and clumps of animal excrement. It was there that they left behind a gift neither they nor dozens of people of the east African nation on the coast of the Indian Ocean will forget.

On their 12-day trip Shuster, president of Daytona Beach-based Miller-Leaman, donated one of the mobile water purification systems his company distributes to a Kenyan school where the kids in grades three through 12 stay a few months at a stretch. The 16-inch-tall machine isn't much bigger than a coffee maker, but the second Shuster had it up and running it started making a difference to the dozens of kids and staff of Emurutoto School. The village elders sang and danced for them to say thank you. Simon Saitoti, assistant program officer with the Africa Foundation, sent an email to Shuster and Upchurch April 20 saying their visit "has really made lives of many positively different."

"The water purifier machine is a great gift to us," wrote Saitoti, whose organization is a non-profit that works to empower rural communities adjacent to conservation areas in eastern and southern Africa. Getting safe drinking water is a challenge for many in Africa, Shuster and Upchurch have learned. "They have a lot of water-born illnesses there," Shuster said. "They treat their water by boiling it, but that still leaves a lot of sediment in it." "The taste of the water was poor," added Upchurch, who noted the lifespan of rural Kenyans is lower because of water-related illness. Slum residents receive water through kiosks and end up paying much higher prices than those who have access to water piped to their homes. Virginia Bachoo, a donor relationship officer with the Africa Foundation, told Upchurch in an email that trenches are being dug so four water kiosks can be linked to a filtration plant to bring water into villages.

Shuster is working on getting a larger water purification system to Kenya, but it will still have to be portable. The stainless steel 28-pound machine comes with a hard plastic case for easy transport. The machines his company produces on Orange Avenue in the Midtown neighborhood are much larger. One has the dimensions of a phone booth and can cleanse dozens of gallons of water per minute. The much smaller version he donated in Africa, which his company distributes but does not make, can process half a gallon per minute and 750 gallons a day. It will kill bacteria and most viruses, he said. "It tastes like bottled water," he said. The model he gave away is worth about \$2,500, and with the extra filters Shuster left the school the value of his gift jumped to \$4,000. Especially important after a disaster or in a remote location, the machine can run off battery power or solar power if electricity isn't available. A solar strip a few feet long can be connected to the device. "In 30-45 minutes, I could explain to anyone how to use it and maintain it," Shuster said. When Shuster set up the small machine in the African school's cafeteria to show how it works, staff and elders crowded around to watch. The apparatus can suck water out of a bucket, sink or reservoir.

Miller-Leaman was founded in 1991 and manufactures filtration products out of a renovated 52,000-square-foot facility built in 1925 that used to be a bakery. Their products are distributed worldwide. The donation in Kenya is not the company's first. They've given away tens of thousands of dollars worth of equipment. "We've done other humanitarian projects on a much larger scale, including at a hospital in Africa," Shuster said. The company has also donated filtration systems to Haiti, and they want to help additional countries.

Upchurch, owner of Ormond Beach-based Odyssey Travel, had been thinking about going to Africa with his wife and he wound up inviting Shuster and his wife as well. They researched what they could donate and where, and then the foursome went on the adventure of a lifetime.

They floated over the countryside in a hot air balloon, rode horses, went on morning drives to observe big game and stayed in a camp where their fully-furnished tent was more like a nice hotel room complete with king-size beds, a toilet and a shower stall. They also spent a little time in Zambia to tour the massive waterfalls there. Upchurch, who has traveled all around the world and immersed himself in many cultures, said it was "one of the most amazing experiences" of his life. Watching people more than 50 years old drink decent water for the first time in their lives was hugely rewarding, he said. "A highlight of not just this trip, but of my entire life, was bringing the fresh filtered water to the (Emurutoto) School and the surrounding community of the Masai Mara," Upchurch wrote in an email to Saitoti, the Africa Foundation official, shortly after the trip. "To see the joy on the faces of these men and women made me so happy that we were able to help the community we were visiting and impact them for years to come."