

A suitcase of hope; Students at Bliss Carman Middle School are sending suitcases of supplies to the children they sponsor in Haiti

By Lori Gallagher

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Most of us think of a suitcase as a way to get our stuff from point A to point B, but in the right hands it carries much more than just things.

The students of Bliss Carman Middle School have packed suitcases full of school supplies, personal care items, sports equipment and more, but what they're really sending to three sponsored children and others in their community in Haiti is hope, love and the knowledge that people care.

The three children are sponsored through FreddyLink, a program that links individuals in Fredericton with children and families in need in villages in the Cobocol Area Development Program in the central plateau of Haiti through World Vision.

"We have a partnership whereby we've sponsored three children from Haiti, one per grade level, where we do fundraising throughout the year in order to cover our sponsorship costs," says Michelle Keefe, a Grade 7 teacher at Bliss Carman Middle School. "We got lucky this year and had an offer to send real supplies to our sponsored children and their community."

The school was invited to pack suitcases and a group that was planning a trip to Haiti would ensure they were delivered.

"The response has been overwhelming. We had the opportunity to send three suitcases and we probably could have sent at least six more with all the stuff the kids have collected," says Keefe.

"In each suitcase, there is material for not only the sponsored child but also for their community. We did make sure we put

some things in specifically for the sponsored child."

They've sent each of their sponsored children a Bliss Carman Middle School sweatshirt and T-shirt, along with their own individual pencil cases and other items.

"We wrapped those separate with a card attached so they know it's just for them. And the rest of the stuff they can distribute," says Keefe.

She believes projects like this are a good way to help students at Bliss Carman become better global citizens.

"There are people all around the world that need help and this is a way for them to reach out beyond their own little world of Fredericton, to do something helpful and to have fun doing it," she says.

The school started working with FreddyLink a few years ago, after their commitment to the Twitti School in Zambia was finished. They wanted to find another project to get behind and this one was a good fit.

Nich Butt, 13, is a Grade 8 student at the school and was active in the project to fill the suitcases.

"We were all collecting stuff like school supplies and personal supplies for everyday," he says. "The past while we've done quite a bit. We raised money and this was our latest campaign to get stuff for them. Once word got out, people were filling the box with donations. The entire school has been helping us out."

The Grade 8 students sponsor a girl named Sylvie Etienne.

"I hope that she'll have stuff to use that will make her life a little easier," says Nich of the items the school is sending.

He says his class is learning a lot about Haiti by being connected to these students.

"I find it's really nice for everyone to come together and help out these people," he says.

It hasn't just been members of the school that have donated, says Heather Ingalls, a Grade 8 teacher at Bliss Carman. When the Fredericton District Soccer Association heard what they were up to and learned the students in Haiti love soccer, they donated two soccer balls and pumps.

The woman who is helping to get the packed suitcases to the sponsored children is Fay Best. She is part of a group of 13 that is going to Haiti from March 1 to 10 with Three Angels Children's Relief.

Best organized the trip with another woman and they're taking several teens, including two of her own children, 14-year-old Aiden and 13-year-old Maria.

"This is Maria's first year (at Bliss Carman Middle School) and when I walked in they have on their display board three World Vision students from Haiti," says Best.

She spoke to the school's principal about her planned trip and he put her in touch with Ingalls. From there, they contacted Bernie Zearth, the FreddyLink project co-ordinator, and World Vision to arrange to not only get the suitcases to Cobocol, but for Best and her two children to have a chance to visit as well.

"On Wednesday, March 6, we're going to be picked up by the World Vision driver at the Three Angels orphanage compound and we're going to be driven approximately two, 2 1/2 hours to Cobocol where the World Vision students are that Bliss Carman supports," she says.

"We'll have lunch with them, meet the three sponsored children, get a tour of what

they're doing at Cobocol and deliver the bags."

Each of the 13 participants is already taking two bags each for Three Angels, but were happy to add a few more for FreddyLink and World Vision, she says.

The rest of their time in Haiti, they'll be working with Three Angels Children's Relief. The organization has three main components - an orphanage, a school and a hospital.

The group from Fredericton will mainly be working at the orphanage and school, as well as helping on a five-acre farm.

"The orphanage has need of people to hold, love and care for babies," says Best. "Most of the babies that are there are all under a year old and most of them have been found in dumpsters and brought in. Several of them have HIV."

She's been wanting to go to Haiti for a few years, but circumstances didn't work until recently.

"I organized the school trip for Devon Park last year, took a group of 30 students to Ottawa and Quebec, and we did some work in street ministries. I came back and I said it's time," says Best.

She began organizing this trip to Haiti at the end of May last year. She notes that her children raised their own money to be able to go.

Maria is excited about the trip. She's not really sure what she'll be doing, aside from working on the farm and in the orphanage.

"I'm excited to hold the babies," she says. "I got the opportunity because my mom was doing it. I prayed about it for awhile and then felt like I was called to do it."

This will be her first mission trip, though both her mother and brother were on the trip with Devon Park Christian School last year.

"I think this will not only shape them, it will shape me as well," says Best. "I'm excited about how it will transform us individually and I'm excited about how that transforms our relationship as well, to have this shared experience and to be able to reflect back on it, short term and long term."