

Love can change the world; FreddyLink is bringing Tony Campolo to the city to speak at Smythe Street Cathedral on June 16

By Lori Gallagher

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With open minds and open hearts, a group of Frederictonians is reaching out to the community of Cobocol in the central plateau of Haiti.

They're doing so through FreddyLink, a unique partnership that was created with the help of World Vision.

"The idea was communities helping communities," explains Bernie Zearth, the project co-ordinator with FreddyLink. "It's basically what World Vision does, but it's a special pilot project where we're partnering directly one community to the next."

It's a new thing that's just started over the last few years, he says.

"Typically it's individuals sponsoring different children, but this way it's as a group, then we have a better connection. We've gone to visit the community, we've had people come to visit here. We had a thing last spring where we invited people into the Charlotte Street Arts Centre and did a Skype link so they could see some of the kids, and the kids sang a song."

Zearth has travelled to Haiti a couple of times, and was in the country when the earthquake occurred. After that, it took the group a year to get back to the community.

The Cobocol Area Development Program covers four small villages, he says.

"We got to see the programs in action and meet some of the people who live there. They had a big party where they invited in all the children that are sponsored by people in Fredericton," he says, noting that the local group recently broke 100 sponsored children in the community. "It was quite something to see them all there and to meet them."

While there, they gave the children envelopes of items from their sponsor families, then took pictures to bring back to the sponsors in Fredericton.

"They're just beautiful children and they're just so open."

Zearth had the opportunity to meet the child he sponsors while there. Obenky Gilles was eight at the time.

"It's difficult because they speak Creole, and of course I don't speak it. They're very shy, but to them, the stuff (we brought) is like a treasure. They take it and they're just holding it," says Zearth, smiling at the memory.

Obenky was hugging his envelope to his chest, he says.

"I had to get him to take the toys out. He took them all out and he didn't really want to play with them, I guess he was a little shy, so he put them all back in."

Meeting the people of Cobocol was an amazing experience, he says.

"The thing that surprised me is I went down there preparing myself that this is going to be hard because we're going to see all the poverty and devastation, and they'll be depressed. And it wasn't like that," he says.

While there was extreme hardship, there was also a sense of vision.

"I was impressed by their sense of hope and their vision for the future, for their families and for the community. It was inspiring, actually, to see it," he says. "And then you get to see the programs themselves. They're so effective and the staff are so good. All the World Vision staff in Haiti are Haitian."

The seeds for Zebarth's involvement with FreddyLink were planted a few years ago during a conversation with his wife.

"We started to talk about when we get to the end of our lives and look back, what are the kinds of things we want to be able to say that we've done," he says.

This project is that kind of thing for him. He already sponsored two children in other areas through World Vision before adding Obenky through FreddyLink.

"I just find it so fulfilling. This is the real thing," he says.

When the local group travelled to Haiti, they met people from three projects.

"FreddyLink only works with one, Cobocol, but we visited two others, and they're all at different stages."

Too often, organizations throw money at something, hoping that will fix the problems.

"The beauty of this is that it takes the community from poverty to self-sufficiency," says Zebarth.

Initially, World Vision goes in and helps the community to self-organize.

"If you go into Haiti, effectively there is no local government, so they don't have the ability to make a community decision. (World Vision) helps them to organize," he says. "Then, once they're organized, the community themselves develop a plan."

Once they do, World Vision helps the community to implement their plan.

"As an example, let's say they decide they need a school. Well, they've got lots of labour. Unemployment is high. They have the skills to build but they may not have the concrete. So the funds from the sponsorship of the children, what it's going to is to give them those extra things that they don't have so they can do it themselves."

Toward the end of a project, World Vision begins to pull out.

"The idea is that at the end of 15 years, they just keep going and World Vision can

move onto the next location," he says. "I love it because it's transformational."

The three projects they visited were close in proximity, yet completely distinct.

"They have different people, different situations, different skills, so they're different. I love it because it's driven by them. It's their community," says Zebarth.

The plan is for some of the members of FreddyLink to return to Haiti this winter, possibly in January or February.

"The idea is that every second year we'll go down and in between someone will come up."

Thanks to their partnership with World Vision, FreddyLink is bringing Tony Campolo to Fredericton on June 16.

Campolo, a respected sociologist, author and past spiritual advisor to Bill Clinton, will be speaking on the topic Love Changes Everything.

"Part of the reason I got involved with FreddyLink is I wanted to make a difference. It's so easy to be overwhelmed, there are so many issues and really, as an individual, what can I do to make a difference. It's easy to become paralyzed," says Zebarth.

"Through FreddyLink we wanted to say here's an avenue where you can make a real difference, you can see where your money goes, and see the changes you make."

This is along the lines of what Campolo will be talking about.

"He challenges people and inspires them - here's how you can make a change. We wanted to get that message out there. Whether it's through FreddyLink or through something else, we can do this."

If you come out to the event and decide you want to get involved in FreddyLink, there will be an opportunity to do so.

"The best way to get involved is through sponsoring a child. It's \$40 a month," says Zebarth.

For more information, visit www.freddylink.com.

Love Changes Everything, featuring Campolo, is taking place on Saturday, June

16, at 7 p.m. at Smythe Street Cathedral. Tickets are \$5 and are available through the cathedral office at 458-8206, online at www.smythestreetcathedral.com or at Tony's Music Box.



Making a connection: Tony Campolo, shown with children at a Compassion project is working with World Vision Canada to spread the message that Love Changes Everything. He'll be speaking in Fredericton at Smythe Street Cathedral on Saturday, June 16, at 7 p.m.