

Bolton teen spent part of summer helping out in Kenya under Me to We

By Bill Rea

Laura Lopachyk has always had an interest in helping people, and she got a great chance to do just that over the summer.

Laura, 16, spent a couple of weeks in Kenya under the Auspices of Me to We.

Me to We is an innovative social enterprise that offers socially conscious and environmentally friendly products and life-changing experiences. It was founded by Craig and Marc Kielburger, well-known activists for the rights of children.

Laura was away from Aug. 2 to 22, travelling to Kenya and staying in a community called Ngosuoani. It's a small community with a couple of houses and a school.

"It was an amazing experience," she said. "I wasn't expecting it to be that incredible."

The group she was with was assigned to do manual work, in the form of building two foundations for additional classrooms on the school. "I'd never done any work like this before," she said.

There were two facilitators in the group to show them how to do the work, and 27 young people, ranging in age from 13 to 20.

They stayed in tents most of the time, although Laura said they spent two nights in a mud hut camp, known as a miniyata.

There was a bit of an adjustment to be made for the weather.

"It's winter there," she said, adding temperatures were about 10 degrees at night and 20 during the day, so it wasn't uncomfortable.

Volunteer staff prepared the food, which she said was heavy on potatoes and vegetables. "We had chicken a lot," she added.

Getting used to the local food wasn't much of an issue, she said. People there eat a lot of vegetables and fruit, and that's what she eats at home, so it was pretty much what she was used to.

The student at Humberview Secondary School said she got the idea of Africa from her cousin, who had visited Ghana. She also saw a presentation at Humberview by two Maasai warriors who also spoke about the program. At the time, Laura had been busy with sports (she's active in pole vaulting, as well as cross-country and Nordic skiing), but she also found herself getting interested in Africa.

"I wanted to give back somehow," she said.

The registration process was not very competitive, she said, adding she did have to raise money to finance the trip.

One of the big impressions made on Laura was the way youngsters and families along the road stopped and waved at the group.

"That's one thing I missed when I got home; everybody waving," she said.

Laura observed there was quite a lot of poverty in the area where her group was staying, but that didn't seem to affect the mood of the people living there.

"They're always smiling and happy, even despite the conditions," she observed.

Communication with the people there was not difficult, she said. They speak English and Swahili, and Laura said she even learned some basic Swahili.

"We asked them a lot of questions and they were so kind in answering them," she recalled.

And Africa is known by a lot of people for the animals there, and Laura saw her share. She said it was "exciting" to see a journey of about 50 giraffes, as well as a host of other creatures like hyenas and hippopotamuses.

Laura said there was a lot of personal growth she gained from the experience; "just like opening eyes to what's out there in the world and seeing how lucky we are with what we have here."

She also believes the experience helped her develop her social skills.

Laura found the experience so worthwhile, she's anxious take another trip.

"I want to do it again," she said. "I'm hoping to go to the Amazon next summer."

Laura said she hasn't developed any career plans yet, but she has some ideas on what she wants to do.

"I definitely want to do something where I'm with people and helping people," she said.

