

Paying it forward

Winkler man raising funds to build school in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

By Ashleigh Viveiros

When Assani Muhanuzi arrived in Winkler two years ago, he was greeted with a generosity he found hard to believe.

Muhanuzi and his family had fled their war-torn Congo for Canada, eventually settling in Winkler where he got a job at Triple E.

Having arrived with little more than the clothes on his back, Muhanuzi reported for his first day of work without a lunch.

He didn't stay hungry for long.

A co-worker, learning that Muhanuzi intended to go without so that his children could eat, took up a collection for the family.

They presented Muhanuzi with \$400 in cash and other donations of food and household supplies to help get them started in their new home.

"When I came to Canada, to Winkler especially, so many people helped me," he says. "I feel like people here are very special."

Today, Muhanuzi and his wife, Yvette, and their four children have settled into their new lives, recently purchasing their first home.

They've come a long way, but they've never forgotten the kindness of the strangers who helped make their first days in this community brighter.

Now Muhanuzi is paying it forward.

"I cannot give back to them what they gave to me, but I can now give to others who are less fortunate than me," he says.

Last spring, Muhanuzi got a call from his brother-in-law, Emmanuel Ndagano, in Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"He had this land and he's always wanted to build a school on it," Muhanuzi says, noting the land is located in the village of Ciriri. "That is something I've also wanted to do because the research has shown that for the last 20 years of war in my country, seven million children have been kicked out of school."

Initially, Ndagano hoped Muhanuzi would be able to contribute \$10,000 to the project, which started off with

lofty plans for a large school.

It was money Muhanuzi didn't have. He was, however, able to scrape together \$1,500 to get things started.

"That was all I could do," he says. "We had to start it small."

Ndagano stretched that money as far as it would go, starting work on a basic four-room schoolhouse.

"When I saw the first photo, all I could say was, 'Wow.' I had a big smile on my face," Muhanuzi recalls, grinning again at the memory. "If this is where we reached with \$1,500, this means we can do something."

With the support of his wife, Muhanuzi began putting aside every cent his family could spare for the project, sending additional funds to finish off the roof and purchase other building supplies.

By August, a good part of the building had been completed and 80 children had registered to start classes.

But though the walls may have been up, the school was in no shape to house students.

"We had no doors, no windows, no flooring, but 80 children wanting to start school," Muhanuzi says, noting

they also still needed to purchase blackboards and desks. "And now we had two weeks before opening."

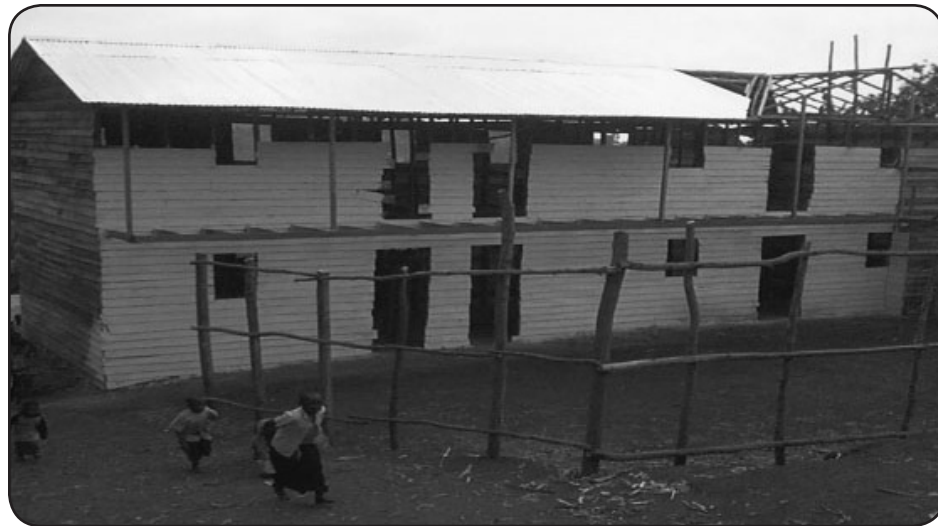
August was a rough month financially for the Muhanuzi family, what with Yvette on maternity leave and back-to-school shopping expenses for his own children coming up.

"I had a choice to make: my own children's school or this school that I'm busy building," he says. "And I said, 'Please, God, help me.' I was sure these 80 children were praying for me, and I was sure something was going to happen."

His prayers were answered.

"The community of Winkler, I always say that I really don't know what to say. Somebody took over my children's school costs."

The help Muhanuzi's family received allowed him to scrimp together a few more dollars of his own to send to the project. Another several hundred dollars donated by his co-workers and others in the community



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

Assani Muhanuzi has been raising funds to build this four-room classroom in the village of Ciriri in Democratic Republic of the Congo. The school opened for 103 students this September.



who had heard about what he was doing allowed Muhanuzi to send the funds needed to complete the school the day before classes were to start.

"The school was opening on Monday, Sept. 5, and they were building on the Sunday," he laughs, shaking his head. "But it was ready."

Though now open for classes, the school remains a basic two-storey structure: four classrooms for 103 Gr. 1-4 students, with the upper floors still open to the elements.

Despite all that, to Muhanuzi, it's a beautiful sight to see.

"That first Monday, lunchtime at work, I got photos of children at the school ... I couldn't stop smiling," he says. "It is finally open."

But there remains a lot of work still to be done, including finishing off the second floor. Tuition fees will cover the costs of the teaching staff (though Canadian donations allowed students to attend in September for free—an announcement that was met with a great deal of shock and celebration) but Muhanuzi expects he'll need to continue sending funds to not only finish off this first phase of the project, but also soon expand the school to include more classrooms.

"There are things we need to do to make the school safer, complete," he says, estimating it will require approximately \$3,000 to do that, which he hopes to raise by year's end.

"And for next year, I want the Gr. 4s to have a Gr. 5 building, a Gr. 6 building to grow into," he adds. "My goal for this is to see every child in that village attend school."

Expanding the building is something Muhanuzi intends to tackle in earnest in the new year, and he welcomes the help of anyone interested in donating to the project or helping him set up fundraisers.

"It is not just my project anymore," he says. "Anyone who wants to get involved can."

Muhanuzi sends his thanks out to everyone in the community who has already stepped up to support the school, including Triple E, which provided 40 matching T-shirts for the Gr. 1 class to enjoy, and companies like MIG Insurance, Access Credit Union, and Royal Bank, who donated pens so that each child could have a special Canadian one to use.

"My wish was to have something of Canada there for them," Muhanuzi explains. "My philosophy is let's take Canada to the world, instead of bringing the world into Canada. Let's let other people feel the love, the caring of Canadians, even if they're not here in Canada. That's why I wanted the kids to have something of Canada there."

"With all the support coming from this area already, this is like another Winkler school," he adds. "This is our school."

"My next dream is to see a whole team of Winklerites going to visit it, to see what they have built, meet the children."

If you'd like to get involved with the project or make a donation, contact Muhanuzi evenings or weekends at 204-332-2410 or 204-325-7639 or via email at jos.akonkwa@gmail.com.

"I CAN NOW GIVE TO OTHERS WHO ARE LESS FORTUNATE THAN ME."