

# HANDS aims to branch out to more nations

By Ashleigh Viveiros

A Winkler man's philanthropic project half a world away continues to grow.

Assani Muhanuzi's grassroots campaign to build a school in his home country of the Democratic Republic of the Congo has now become HANDS (Hope for All Nations Developments and Sustainability), an organization with a team of volunteers that plan to build schools in developing countries all around the world.

"It's not only going to be in Africa. Africa's not the only continent in trouble," said Muhanuzi. "If you look at Asia, look at South America, there are a lot of areas that need our help. And as soon as we have a charitable number we will be able to do more."

To receive charitable status, HANDS needs to find an existing Canadian charity to partner with for one year. They're currently in talks with a few agencies and Muhanuzi is optimistic the process will move ahead soon.

"We're focusing on getting a partnership. Any organization that believes and trusts and understands what we're doing, that can [help us] manage our finances. And then after

a year we can do our application for our own charitable status," he said. "When that happens, we can go anywhere."

In the meantime, HANDS' focus is on their flagship school in the village of Ciriri.

On Sept. 4, nearly 200 children kicked off the school year in what is now, finally, a completed facility.

"We had a target to get the whole building completely finished, and we have," said Muhanuzi. "The structure is made up of six classrooms, three at the ground floor level and three on top with the offices."

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It's a much more rustic school than the average Canadian is accustomed to, but it's a significant improvement over students having to travel miles to attend classes in a neighbouring village or even miss out on a chance at an education altogether.

"We have no cement on the ground, but we have walls and windows and doors, and we have a blackboard in every classroom ... it's ready to accommodate students," said Muhanuzi. "And because we are using people around the village [as staff in a variety of roles, including as teachers], it is really their school."

"It's a dream coming true," Muhanuzi said. "We wanted to get as many



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Hundreds of kids started school Sept. 4 in the school built by HANDS (Hope for All Nations Development) with the help of local funds.

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Though Muhanuzi got the ball rolling last year with his own funds, it was the people of Winkler and the surrounding area who really stepped up to help him bring this project to fruition.

So many individuals and businesses have donated toward the school's construction and operational costs (tuition for a single student is \$3.40 U.S. a month—a pittance here, but a hurdle for many families in the Congo), and words can't express the gratitude Muhanuzi has for his adopted community.

"I thank the community so much for helping me," he said. "After the first donations, after the first support I got from the community, I'm no longer surprised at how big we can go."

"I'm now seeing us growing and becoming a bigger and bigger organization. Everything that is happening is like, okay, this is one more step now."

The next step is to make the school fully self-sustaining. To that end, this fall they've set up a small pig farm on the grounds to generate funds.

"We're just getting that started with five pigs," explained Muhanuzi. "Pigs, they breed very quickly, and we think if we have five pigs and they're breeding them and they can be selling them, that will all come back to the school."

Other future revenue streams in the works include a sewing shop and a garden, both of which will also benefit students directly through nutritious food and affordable school uniforms.

"We're trying everything to make sure that by next year the school will be able to sustain itself," said Muhanuzi. "Our plan is not to be helping

them every day. Our plan is to help them until they can stand on their own two feet and then we can move to another area."

## MORE HELP IS WELCOME

HANDS has certainly come a long way since last year, when its Canadian fundraising operations were handled entirely by Muhanuzi and his wife, Yvette.

Today they have a few other people involved locally, helping to lighten the organizational load significantly.

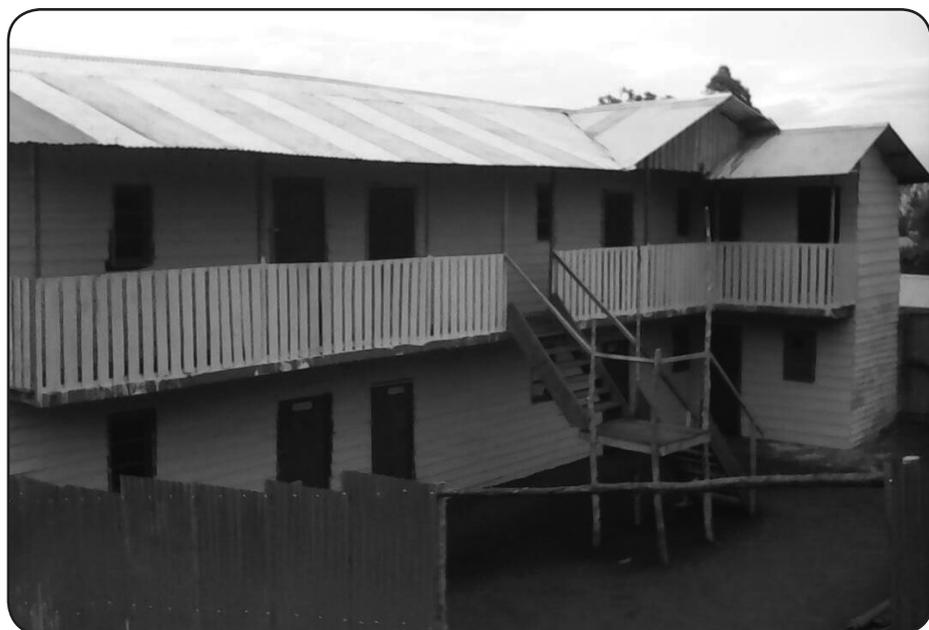
"I've got two people that have joined me from the community, which means they will be also coming with different ideas," Muhanuzi said, noting the extra help was a godsend this summer, as his wife and children were involved in a serious car accident. They are still recovering, and the incident illustrated clearly the importance of having more volunteers on board.

"The more people we can get, the better we can do. Because look at what happened to my family, and we got stuck," he said of the months he wasn't able to focus on the project.

"We need people who understand and appreciate what we're doing," Muhanuzi stressed. "It's not my project. It's for anyone who shares the same ideology."

"Anyone who understands that as small or as little as we are, we need to do our small contribution to this world because everyone has to do something according to what he is or what she can."

For more information on HANDS, including how you can support the project or get involved in another way, check out their new website at [handscanada.com](http://handscanada.com).



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Work on the six room school in a village in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is now complete.