

Life: Helping build a future – local woman returns from aid mission in Ethiopia

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Posted 3 days ago

Lydia Penner says Africa is a world nothing like Canada, and she would know. She was in Ethiopia earlier this month – so recently she is still just a bit sunburned.

But of the world of difference, she says the part that gave her the thrill was jaywalking – a common thing there – and the rules of the road or lack thereof.

“Vehicles and animals and people and bikes all intermingle in the same space that you call a road,” said Penner.

“There are so many people walking down the shoulder of the road. There’s no such thing as jaywalking – people just cross the street wherever they need to cross the street. People are honking all the time, but it’s not because they’re upset. It’s because they’ve got to let you know that they’re inching up beside you.”

She says traffic and the whole concept of space is completely different, and it’s a part of the experience she loves.

“I just get a thrill out of jaywalking, because you’re not supposed to in Canada but you get to over there,” she said.

Penner, a Grande Prairie resident originally from DeBolt, spent May 10-18 in the village of Arbu Chulule near the capital of Addis Ababa, as part of a volunteer team put together by Engineering Ministries International Canada. A surveyor by trade, her diploma in geomatic engineering made her an ideal choice as crew chief for a team tasked with developing a 530-acre topical survey of a 4,000-acre community development project-to-be.

That is what eMiC does, according to director Steve Ulrich – help smaller ministries in places such as Ethiopia get off the ground in their projects.

The organization provides architects, engineers, surveyors and anything else involving the pre-construction of a project – services that very often cannot be found or cannot be afforded in a third world area.

In this case, the ministry is HopEthiopia, whose project on those 4,000 acres – given by the government of Ethiopia – is to include an orphanage and other housing, as well as a reforestation component.

Penner knew about the project months before she decided to go, but when she did it was the right thing to do at the right time.

“I think I was Googling and I was looking for mission opportunities that had to do with engineering. That’s how I found out about (eMiC), I think,” said Penner.

“And then I was reading a surveyor periodical where somebody had gone on a trip and had written about it ... they mentioned (eMiC), which I thought I recognized ... I was in school, so I just filed away the article and thought ‘some day, maybe.’

“Now that I’ve graduated and I’m back in the field, I pulled out the article and thought it might be worth looking into.”

She spoke to the writer of the article and a few other individuals he had referred her to before she made the decision to go. There was some initial skepticism for her to get over first.

It would not be the first she had gone to Africa, or the first time she did mission work.

PAST EXPERIENCE

“Three and a half years ago I went to Africa, partly as just a tour – to travel and experience the world and see what life was like over there. During that time I went on a building project for an orphanage,” said Penner.

“That was unskilled. I just went to lay some bricks – they taught me how to lay bricks.”

She said she came back from that experience in Uganda quite disillusioned about mission work, poverty and aid. She said she came back with numerous questions.

“I just did not know what the right way was to respond to the poverty – I didn’t know if what the church was doing to try to help in aid was effective,” she said.

She took the chance on this latest trip.

“This experience, I think was quite a bit more positive – maybe better organized. I just felt like we were focused on the job and we went and we did what we had set out to do. We kept the priority of the project more of a priority,” she said.

Her team’s priority was to take all of the topographic features they were aware of, and those they became aware of as they worked, and tie them all together into a single data mash-up that can be referenced as the project progresses.

Elevations.

Where the ground slopes – how quickly it slopes.

Key drainage locations.

It was all pretty basic stuff for a surveyor, according to Penner. She said the technical aspect of what she was doing in Ethiopia is something that a lot of others in her line of work could have done.

Still, over there it was something of a big deal to the locals. She received a marriage proposal, with a sheep offered in trade for her hand. She swears, though, that only happened one time.

For a conventional survey, she would have taken a position with an instrument called a Total Station – a device set up on a tripod – while “chainmen” go out with a prism that reflect the lasers her tool shoots out at them back to her, where distances are measured.

“So I’m standing beside my instrument, and if I were here in Grande Prairie I would be all alone – I might be in the middle of the bush,” said Penner.

“Well, in Ethiopia, as a white person with an amazing piece of equipment, you have an audience – you have people standing around you and watching you and trying to lean in and look at things and try to figure out what’s doing what.

“Probably for 75% of the time, I had at least five but sometimes 15 or 20 people watching me survey.”

That’s where personal and professional were able to mix for Penner. She was there to do a job, and that aspect was the most important thing to her, but moments like that allowed her to interact while she worked.

She said it was fun to be the centre of attention, but there was a need to keep perspective.

“At the same time I was just like ‘I’m not a celebrity – I’m not the answer to your life’s problems.’ I went there to do a simple job and I hope and pray that it’s helpful, but I’m leaving – I’m here for a week and then I’m gone,” she said.

Gone for now, at least – Penner said if a survey team were sent out again, she would be interested in going.

She does not necessarily have all the answers to the questions raised by her first trip to Africa, and she does not know what to put her finger on as far as how she has grown as a result of her second. But she said she feels her life has changed once again.

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