

BowiePatch

Local Teacher Beverly Berndt's Passion for Service Makes Global Impact

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Berndt (between two similar dresses) poses with a group in Gambia during one of the service trips.

What started as taking a small group of young people to Gambia for service trip has sparked projects across the country working to help those in need.

When Bowie resident Beverly Berndt took her oldest daughter on a service trip to the tiny country of Gambia in 1999, she never imagined the impact that experience would have on her, those who knew her in the states and countless communities across the country.

“I was amazed to see how much it impacted her, and how much she really gained an appreciation for the value of relationships,” Berndt said of her daughter. “A lot of kids are just plugged into their electronics, relationships are falling by the wayside.”

Berndt started working with groups in Gambia with that first trip in 1999, then began bringing small groups to Gambia in 2007 for three weeks at a time.

“It’s really good exposure for American young people, for anybody really,” said Berndt.

One of the young people who traveled to Gambia with the group in the past is Bowie native Abby Wojcik, who was impressed and inspired by Berndt's demeanor and dedication for service.



Beverly Berndt submerses herself in every part of the Gambian culture and becomes part of the community when she's there.

“Her passion for helping others really drives everything else she does,” Wojcik said. “The way she helps others and never expects anything in return is one of a kind.”

Wojcik also described how comfortable Berndt seemed with the people in Gambia, explaining how Berndt seemed like a local, seamlessly integrating with daily life in the country.

“She doesn’t live a materialistic or lavish lifestyle, so she easily fit in. She has that stop-and-smell-the-roses-type of attitude,” she said.

Berndt, who lives in Bowie, teaches sixth grade classes and algebra to high school students at New Hope Academy in Landover Hills, where she’s been since the school opened 21 years ago. She also tutors, helps with the youth ministry at her church and is currently housing four foreign exchange students, some of whom are from Gambia.

Since Berndt began organizing and going on the trips, her drive has inspired many others to take on similar projects with the guidance she has provided over the years, and she is still contributing to the progress of those programs.

In Gambia, elementary school is free, but middle and high school tuition is roughly \$75 to \$100 a year. While this seems like a minor fee for schooling, many families in Gambia can't afford it. Berndt started a program through New Hope Academy to provide scholarships to Gambian students. More than 450 have been awarded in the past decade.



Berndt talking to a group in Gambia during the 2010 trip there.

Another organization that started because of Berndt's work is Side by Side, which started a nursing school that now houses 40 children. That, too, is running out of money to keep going. Berndt is working on a plan to help pay teachers and other employees to keep it afloat.

Finally, the annual summer program is still running strong. It is what Berndt describes as "the ultimate peace-keeping mission." The program is open to anybody over the age of 17 who wants to have an amazing experience and stay in Gambia for more than three weeks.

One year at the summer program, two imams from the area came to talk to the group about their beliefs on marriage and family. To the surprise of those on the trip, they had many of the same underlying values as the young Americans.

Though that was the only time Berndt met the imams, she got an e-mail from one of them right after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. He expressed his condolences, saying that the attacks in no way represented Islam and he wanted to make sure Berndt and her family were OK.

"All this kind of outpouring of heart to decry the situation that happened. And I thought, 'Wow, I had only met him at this conference,' then I realized that I was the face of America to him," she said.

Berndt believes the kids that go on the trips to Gambia are really like ambassadors from America.

“They are representing the United States, so that the kids that we meet—which we interact with a lot—will never be involved in the radical Islam because they know people from other places who are good people.

“I feel like that’s really the most important byproduct that I wasn’t really thinking about at the time,” she said. “We really make lasting relationships with the people there.”

Because of Berndt's inspiring work, she has been selected as the "Greatest Person of the Day" by Huffington Post.