

New Jersey Herald

Sparta man travels to Tanzania to help build new school



Submitted photo — Will McHugh, of Sparta, teaches a local boy named Ally in Tanzania. McHugh stayed there for three weeks to help build a new school.

By Lori Comstock New Jersey Herald

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It was during a walk home from a college class at Virginia Tech in September 2016 that a flier hanging on a board piqued Will McHugh's interest to visit Tanzania, a trip where he would go to finish building a school for students in the underdeveloped country and climb Africa's largest mountain, Mount Kilimanjaro.

The flier was from the organization Growth International Volunteer Excursions, or GIVE, which combines volunteer work and adventure where students assist with sustainable development projects designed to improve infrastructure, educational opportunities, implement fresh water systems, and protect endangered wildlife.

The flier listed three locations -- Central America, Africa or Southeast Asia -- all places that GIVE has firmly planted roots over the years.

An engineering student with an interest in helping others, McHugh, 22, signed up for the Africa adventure and flew 16 hours to Tanzania with 22 other GIVE volunteers the day after Christmas in 2016.

The day of his arrival, McHugh encountered goats and cattle roaming freely, cars driving erratically and garbage spread all over.

Living in a hostel with other tourists for his three-week excursion, McHugh would go over to the village of Zanzibar and, in 90-degree heat, throw on his gloves and assist in building a school piece by piece.

Prior to the new school, meant for elementary school students, children would have to walk at least three miles just to attend another school each morning. The new school will provide students a shorter walk and more space, he said.

Once the school was completed, a task that GIVE crews have been working on for many years, McHugh was able to, for a short period of time, teach some English to anyone willing to learn.

McHugh, who was born and raised in Sparta and attended Sparta High School, said that students have to test out of the primary school to be eligible for the high school but found it odd that the tests were given in English.

"Many of those who lived in the village had a very difficult time speaking English since primary schools don't teach it," McHugh said, adding that he wasn't sure why that was.

For someone to continue on to college there, more and more tests are given to students, making it very difficult to obtain a higher education, McHugh said.

Regardless of where the villagers lived -- they build their own huts -- or how hot it was, McHugh said the children were happy and very friendly.

"They are living in this tough situation and they are just so happy to run up to you," he said, adding that the same was true for the adults. "They are just genuinely happy with their lives."

During his trip, McHugh also got to explore some of the country, going on an open safari with tigers, cheetahs, elephants, warthogs and giraffes, and even swam with dolphins.

The last six days before heading back home, those who had previously signed up to climb Mount Kilimanjaro started their trek up the largest freestanding mountain in the world.

"It was tough; we were all physically and mentally ill," he said.

Once they got to the peak of the mountain, which stands at 19,341 feet, the group stayed for only 20 minutes due to the lack of oxygen before descending.

"Everyone had trouble breathing up there and even though we all took altitude sickness pills, we were just so fatigued and I had a constant headache," he said. "Many people threw up."

The view from the top, however, was one he will never forget.

When McHugh was growing up in Sparta, he knew how lucky he was spending his time outside hiking, hanging in the woods and taking his boat out on Lake Mohawk.

He began his college education at Virginia Tech and, as a sophomore, took a paid internship with CP Professional Services, a consulting firm in Sparta, where he worked on a \$10 million reclamation facility near the Delaware River Basin.

He continues to work there any chance he has, such as during winter and spring breaks, and was delighted when the firm donated money toward his fundraising for the trip.

Stan Puszcz, managing partner from CP Professional Services, said that McHugh has been a "valuable member of the company," and speaking for the entire company, said that they were happy to support him.

McHugh said friends and family also helped him raise the funds needed to go on his trip and was grateful for all their help.

McHugh is set to graduate in May with an environmental engineering degree and said his future plans are up in the air, but would be willing to take a job in another country if one should open.

"I love traveling and helping others; you see that there is a need there and I want to be a part of that," he said.

McHugh said it takes trips such as his to Tanzania to make someone realize how lucky they may be and all the advantages he has in America.

"We get to go to school for 12 years and then to college if we want to get a better education, we have access to clean water and electricity and housing," he said, adding, "It makes you think about your life at home and just how lucky I am."

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