



Dale Peterson with some of the Mwebaza students who are wearing their new green “Sister School” t-shirts from their Niwot pen pals.

MWEBAZA

School & Classroom Program (SCP) partnership fosters gratitude

An interview with Dale Peterson, recipient of the 2011 SCP Community Service Award

Let’s start at the beginning. How did you hear about PTPI’s School & Classroom Program and what motivated you to join?

I teach first grade in the wonderful community of Niwot, Colorado. Niwot is a relatively affluent town, with a highly-educated population. One day, I was thinking about my students and assessing what they really needed. They come to school having eaten well and in clean clothes. They are involved in many outside activities such as youth sports and Scouts. They are learning to read, write, and compute just fine. What many of them seem to be lacking is an understanding that where and how they live is not typical. I have never wanted to make them feel embarrassed for their privileges. Rather, I have wanted them to see that with privilege comes responsibility.

After being matched and starting communication with your partner class in Uganda, did you notice any effects on the students in your classroom? If so, did those effects spread beyond your classroom?

When I started communicating with Ms. Namatovu, I could quickly tell that she is an extraordinary person. The love she feels for her school

and her students was so evident in her e-mails to me. She was clearly very bright, organized, and dedicated to fostering the friendship between our schools. I would share her letters with my students and their parents. Ms. Namatovu would answer student questions through her e-mail correspondence, and from her we learned about such intriguing topics as eating grasshoppers, tribal funeral and marriage customs, and witchdoctors. Moreover, we learned about the daily lives of the children at our partner school.

Your students ultimately became inspired to provide humanitarian assistance to your partner school. Can you tell us how that idea came about and how it evolved?

Soon after the establishment of our friendship through PTPI, I suggested to Ms. Namatovu that we have our students write to one another, and she agreed. Later, we wired some funds to Uganda so that the school could purchase a camera. I asked Ms. Namatovu to take some photos of the children, not only at the school, but in their community and at their homes. I scanned the photos onto my computer and made DVDs that I sent home with the children in the class.

The next day, I was contacted by quite a few parents. Many of the children expressed a desire to help their pen pals. Some of the parents asked me if there was any way we could collectively help the children of Mwebaza School. But I believe that many of us realized that we had a responsibility to do something if we could. The children and parents already had developed an affection for Ms. Namatovu. She was our collective friend.



LEFT: Teachers, colleagues, and friends: Ms. Namatovu and Dale Peterson at a cultural celebration in Uganda.

I knew, however, that if I was going to be raising funds with kids, it would not be prudent to funnel such funds through my own personal bank account. I worked with some amazingly talented and giving people in our community to form the Mwebaza Foundation, named after our partner school in Uganda. “Mwebaza” means “gratitude” in the Luganda language. It seemed fitting to me that our foundation should be named “Mwebaza” because we were feeling such gratitude for the friendship from Mwebaza School, and I know they were feeling gratitude for our efforts to help them.

Niwot Elementary and the local community managed to raise enough over time that Mwebaza School was able to do more than just add a metal roof and put concrete on their floors. They used our funds to build a new, 3-room school building to help address their overcrowding issues.

Our Foundation has really grown, thanks to the dedication and support of many people. Every child at Niwot Elementary is now involved — not just my class. We have now linked two other Colorado schools with two other African schools in need, and are fostering similar cross-cultural partnerships between these schools.

Mwebaza and St. Paul Schools now raise chickens and feed the eggs to their students as a source of protein in their often insufficient diets. Send a Cow — Uganda has trained the children and staffs of the Ugandan schools in making highly-efficient keyhole gardens. These gardens are being used to feed the children, and the children are learning the skills to build these gardens at their own homes. At Mwebaza School, rainwater is now being collected and sterilized as a source of clean water.

Ms. Namatovu and I have become very dear friends, and through this relationship and other relationships with many wonderful, supportive people, positive change has occurred. A girl at another one of our partner schools asked for donations for St. Paul School rather than presents from her friends for her birthday, and raised enough to build a much-needed latrine at that school. These are the types of things that I had hoped to see. Kids are feeling empowered to make a difference in this world.

That is why being recognized by PTPI is such an honor. PTPI understands the power of relationships to inspire kids to change their world!

“With all the development projects with which the Mwebaza Foundation is now involved, we try not to forget the ideals that inspired both Ms. Namatovu and I to partner with PTPI in the first place — developing true relationship is the only way to break down barriers, develop understanding, and make lasting change.”



BELOW: Students benefit from the clean water now available through a rainwater collection tank.

If you could talk to yourself in 2007, would you have imagined what that School & Classroom Program registration form would lead to?

Everything that has happened since filling out the PTPI School and Classroom Program registration form has been a surprise! I did not realize that I would develop one of the greatest friendships of my life through the match with Mwebaza School. I have had the privilege of visiting Ms. Namatovu twice in Uganda, and this December, after three years of trying to get her a tourist visa, Ms. Namatovu will be visiting Niwot Elementary and our other Colorado partner schools! We are so delighted to host her and learn from her!

As for the students at our partner schools, I do believe they are less “insulated” than they were before. Now, we don’t just tell the kids, “You can make a difference.” We can say, “Together, we have made a difference,” and show them the evidence. And I believe that, more than anything, makes them want to do it again!

For more information, visit www.mwebaza.org. ■

How to participate

- PTPI’s School and Classroom Program is a free service that links classes and youth groups in different countries for pen pal exchanges and projects that foster cultural understanding and friendship. The program has served over 3,000 teachers and 200,000 students in 123 countries.
- The registration period occurs July — October each year.
- Groups are matched with partner classes that have a similar number of pupils of similar age.
- All participating teachers receive a program manual. This document offers guidance, tips for communication and project ideas.
- When two groups are matched, contact details are exchanged between teachers so they may communicate directly.