



EDUCATION

## Columbus 5th-graders make, sell Christmas ornaments to help save African school

BY MARK RICE

DECEMBER 09, 2017 04:21 PM



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Double Churches Road Elementary students have made Christmas ornaments with a 3D printer to raise money for their digital pen pals whose school in Kimilili, Kenya, is struggling to stay open BY ROBIN TRIMARCHI

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It started simply as a Skype session to bridge the 7,800 miles between them, to learn from each other and to share videos. But then these Columbus fifth-graders heard

their counterparts in Africa explain a dire situation – and they devised a creative way to help while demonstrating the Christmas spirit.

In six days, by producing and selling more than 100 Christmas tree ornaments symbolizing hope for their cause, the students in Eric Crouch’s fifth-grade class at Double Churches Elementary School raised \$2,300 of the estimated \$16,000 the [HIP Academy in Kimilili, Kenya](#), needs to stay open.

Stricter building code regulations in Kenya have forced the impoverished school to upgrade its facilities or be closed, putting at risk the education of 63 children ages 4-10 and the two meals per day they receive each school day. The cost of feeding one child at the school for a whole month is only \$4, Crouch said.

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HIP is an acronym for Hope Initiative Programs. HIP Academy is one of the programs run by HIP Africa, a nonprofit organization in Bungoma County, Kenya, founded two years ago by educator Livingstone Kegode.

The ornaments can be purchased through the [fundraiser’s Facebook page](#). No price is set, but donations of \$20, \$50, \$100, \$250 or another amount are requested.

Other efforts through the nonprofit organization [Open World Cause](#), based in Colorado Springs, have put HIP Academy \$3,000 short of its goal, Kegode said in an email to the Ledger-Enquirer.

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Kegode, honored by Microsoft in 2015 as the Most Inspirational Skype Master Teacher, described the impact these Muscogee County fifth-graders have made on his Kenyan school.

“This help is of great value to our school,” Kegode said, “as it will help us build the classrooms needed as regulated by the government for us to stay open and continue serving these vulnerable students from the needy families to get quality education and the best foundation in their studies.”

The Double Churches students will continue their project through Dec. 15. Any money raised beyond the goal will go toward helping feed the Kenyan children and helping pay their teachers, Crouch said.

For \$2,700, Crouch bought the 3D printer his students are using to make the ornaments. He used part of the \$25,000 he [received last year from the Milken Family Foundation](#) as one of 35 Milken Educator Award winners across the nation in 2016. The award also enabled Crouch to meet Kegode through a [Milken Unsung Heroes fellowship this past summer](#).

“After our success last week, the founder of Open World Cause, Ben Honeycutt, reached out because he was so thankful,” Crouch said. “He Skyped with us this past week and asked if his class could sell ornaments, too. So we printed 50 and mailed them to Colorado.”

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Along with each ornament they mail, the Double Churches students include a thank-you card encouraging the recipients to post a photo of their ornament on social media so this fundraiser gains more exposure. The 135-plus orders in one week have come from as far away as South Dakota, California and Rhode Island.

“I am blown away by not only the efforts of the students but of our community,” Crouch said. “It shows a tremendous amount of generosity and support toward our students and our district. That support then expanded beyond our district to states all over the country. It’s something we want everyone to have a piece of.”

All of which also has wowed Crouch’s students. During the Ledger-Enquirer’s visit, some of them explained why they have stayed after school to work on this project.

“I’m helping out so the school won’t be shut down and the kids can learn,” said Alyssa Quinn, 11.

“Deep down, my heart was broken,” said Jihran Gomillia, 10. “They could have something taken away that they’ve worked so hard for, just throw it away like it’s trash. They’re learning very much. We’re going to teach them how to do adding and subtracting, and they’re going to teach us how to talk Swahili. And that makes me feel very good, that we can help somebody out in a faraway country.”

Raising so much money in such a short amount time for such a good cause made Autumn Eisenhauer, 11, feel empowered.

“We really accomplished something really, really big,” she said.

The students proposed various designs for the ornaments and voted on their favorite to produce. They chose one envisioned by Ella Scott, 11. It’s in the shape of the African continent, and it’s emblazoned with “HOPE” and a heart symbol where Kenya is located. They make the ornaments in various colors, whatever the donors want.

Ella summed up the significance of this project in three words: hope, care and dependability.

“Now those children have hope,” Ella said. “We’re caring for them, and they’re depending on us to help their school.”

So during every Christmas season the rest of her life, Ella said, she can recall this project when she hangs one of these ornaments on her tree.

“I’ll remember all the fun we had making them,” she said, “and all the hope we gave those kids.”

Crouch said, “Ornaments have a way of having a sentimental value. They’ll be able to pull out an ornament and say, ‘This ornament right here helped save a school. And we made it.’ ”

While his students worked on preparing another batch of ornaments for shipment, Crouch soaked up the scene.

“You hope that every lesson lands,” he said. “Not all of them do, and that’s OK. But when one takes off, and you have 15 to 20 kids wanting to stay after school every day to follow through on it, you know you’ve done something right.”

Even better, Crouch added, is when the lesson leads to others.

“It’s great to see them excited about their learning, and it transfers into the rest of their learning,” he said.

Crouch told his students, “If you can take something as simple as an idea and convert it into saving a school, then there’s absolutely no way you could justify not being able to learn about World War II or anything else we learn in this class. So it really helps to understand just how powerful the learning experience can be. Just because you’re 10 doesn’t mean you can’t have a substantial impact.”

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#### How to help

The students in Eric Crouch’s fifth-grade class at Double Churches Elementary School closed their original Facebook fundraising page after exceeding their goal by raising \$2,090 from 65 donors in one week. Now, they have another fundraising page open on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/donate/149932055648373/>. This time the goal is to raise an additional \$1,000. The deadline is Dec. 15.

For those without Internet access or prefer to buy in person, the ornaments will be on sale Wednesday and Thursday, from 3-4 p.m., at Double Churches Elementary School. No price is set. Any donation will be accepted.



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BY MARK RICE

AUGUST 07, 2020 12:35 PM



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