

Ojai Rotarian shouldersefforts in Ghana

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Funds help nonprofit assist homeless teens

As a licensed clinical social worker, Ojai resident Kay Bliss has dedicated most of her life to helping others.

But while her day job in private practice keeps her focused on problems close to home, her enthusiasm for helping people in need extends well beyond Ventura County.

Bliss has been a passionate supporter for 13 years of an organization that helps homeless teenage girls in Ghana. As a member and past president of the Rotary Club of Ojai, she's been instrumental in raising awareness of the girls' plight and securing grants and technical support for Street Girls Aid, a nonprofit that provides job training, child care and refuge for pregnant teenagers surviving on the streets of Ghana's capital, Accra.

Most recently, Bliss helped garner the largest Rotary grant yet for the organization, a \$78,000 Rotary Global Grant supported by contributions from 13 clubs in Southern and Central California as well as the Rotary Foundation. The money will fund a new training program for low-skill, illiterate girls that will prepare them to find stable work as laundry workers in commercial facilities or start their own laundry services.

"It's just very exciting to see that you can actually do something," Bliss said. "It takes a lot of time and effort, but you can



Kay Bliss, with the Rotary Club of Ojai, stands with an oil painting from which the club created postcards for its first fundraising effort for Street Girls Aid in Ghana. ANTHONY PLASCENCIA/THE STAR

ROTARY CLUB

see you can really have an impact also, and that's really just something very gratifying."

Bliss has traveled to Ghana several times, starting with a Rotary trip in 2001 on which she learned through a friend and Rotary member there about Street Girls Aid. Bliss said she was impressed with the organization's budding efforts to train and house pregnant teenagers.

Although no stranger to Third World poverty, Bliss said she was taken aback by the desperate plight of the girls

living on the street. Many come from rural areas, hoping to escape abuse and poverty, but end up on the streets selling trinkets in the market, unloading produce from trucks and sometimes falling prey to prostitution. Life becomes even more difficult if they get pregnant.

“To see, it is a really different situation,” Bliss said. “It was very hopeless.”

The Rotary Club of Ojai secured a \$43,000 grant for Street Girls Aid in 2005 to help it set up a center where pregnant girls ages 13 to 17 stay before and after giving birth.

The organization also runs vocational training programs in hairdressing, catering and dressmaking. The laundry training will provide another way for girls to find secure employment, taking advantage of a need for laundered clothes among workers in Ghana’s offshore oil industry.

“They’ll be able to actually have jobs where they know where their money’s coming from,” Bliss said. “It’s not just that they’ll have more money, but they’ll be able to plan a little better. That’s a huge, huge difference for the girls, for anyone in that poverty situation.”

Bret Bradigan, current president of the Rotary Club of Ojai, commended the efforts by Bliss to help Street Girls Aid and said he hopes the latest grant will lead to a “virtuous cycle of reciprocity” through which girls helped by the program can go on to help themselves and other women.

Bliss “has been instrumental in really moving this from just a dream to reality,” Bradigan said.