

## Weekly Interview

# Rotarian making connections near and far

By Nate Jones

Staff Writer

This fall, former Cape Elizabeth Town Councilor and State Rep. Janet McLaughlin, like most Mainers, took a trip someplace warm before toughing out another winter. Her two-week excursion wasn't to Florida or the Bahamas, however, but to the east African countries of Ethiopia and Kenya.

"Some people ask me if I'm scared to go. Honestly speaking, there are places in the U.S. I'd be more afraid to travel to," she laughed.

McLaughlin, now an assistant director of planning design and construction for the state, is no stranger to travel. She said having family in England enables her to visit parts of Europe and Australia, although it wasn't until she became involved with the South Portland / Cape Elizabeth Rotary Club that her trips became more than vacations.

In 1996, a year before McLaughlin officially joined the Rotary Club, she and five other non-members traveled to Argentina as part of a study exchange program. While there, she said she was able to meet residents with similar occupations — at that time she was working for South Portland's planning department. She also attend a local government meeting.

"It was like a Boston City Council meeting. There were tons of people," she said. "I read a prepared statement in Spanish thanking them for allowing us to

another's hometowns. On her way to visit a runner training camp in the village of Ietn, where several Beach to Beacon runners were training, McLaughlin said she traveled through the village where Kibet and his family live.

"He told me he was hoping to help support an orphanage there," she said. "I told him, 'Well, I'm in the Rotary, let's do something.'"

McLaughlin teamed up with several National Honor Society (NHS) students who made the orphanage their fundraising focus last year.

McLaughlin said they raised more than \$3,500, which the Rotary Club agreed to match.

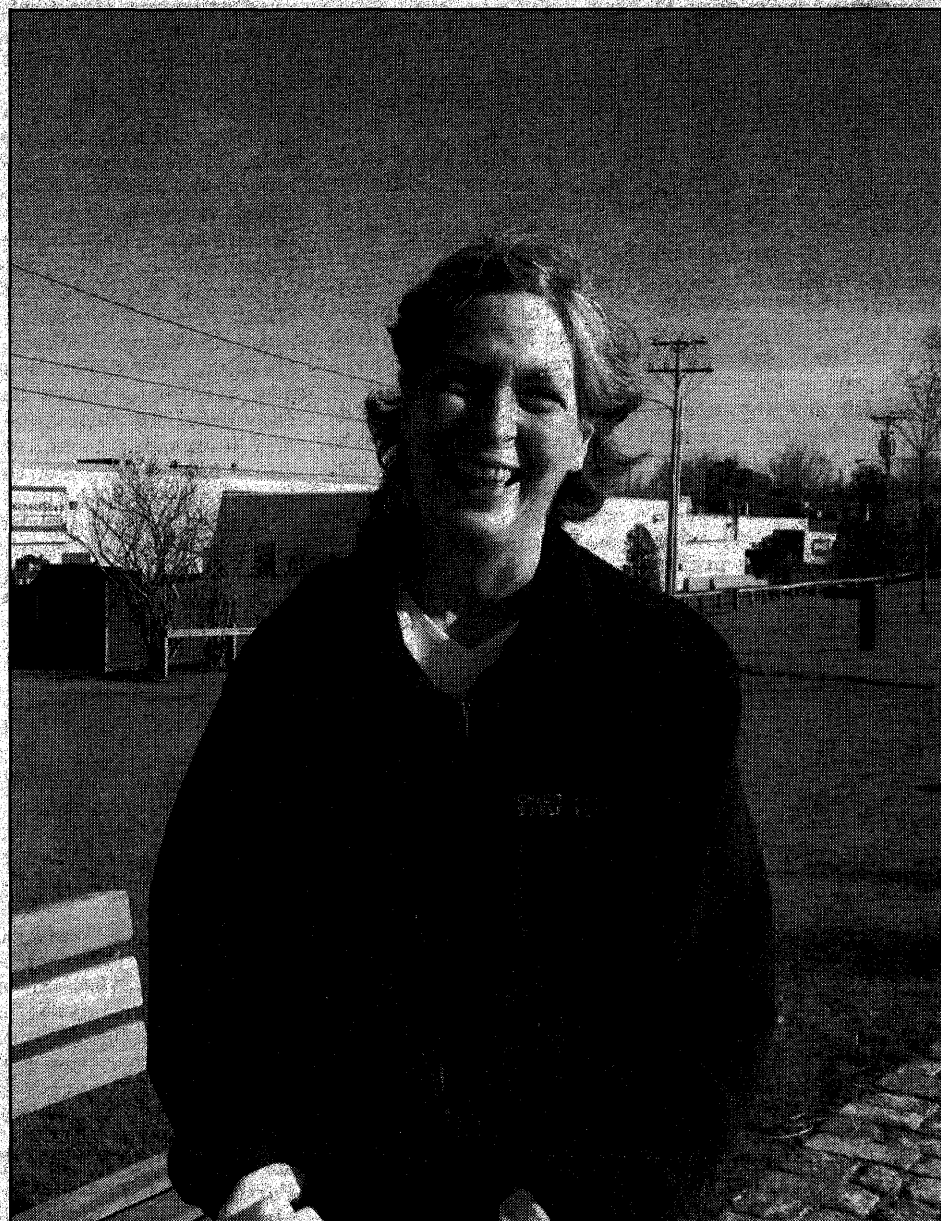
"We planned on taking [the NHS students] to Kenya that year, but with the clash following the [Kenyan] national elections, we couldn't guarantee it would be safe," McLaughlin said. "They went to Honduras on a service trip instead."

Although McLaughlin and the students had to

cancel their trip, the \$8,000 they raised stayed in the bank, waiting for the right time.

"[The students] could have taken it with them, they could have wiped it out," McLaughlin said. "They said, 'The money was raised for the orphanage, that's where it should go.' How great is that?"

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Portland's planning department. She also attend a local government meeting.

"It was like a Boston City Council meeting. There were tons of people," she said. "I read a prepared statement in Spanish thanking them for allowing us to attend. A lot of the women there seemed impressed I was able to travel that far."

McLaughlin said it was only natural for her to join the Rotary Club after her return to the states, since many of her friends were already in the organization. Her social circle doesn't stop there, however, as she said she has become close with many of the Beach to Beacon runners as a host family coordinator. Last year's winner, Kenya native Duncan Kibet, made a particular impression on McLaughlin.

"I liked him right away because he offered to do the dishes," she laughed.

At one point during his stay, McLaughlin said she found Kibet sitting at the end of her driveway, waiting for a ride to another host family's residence where his friends were staying. McLaughlin said she promptly "went outside and sat with him."

During their conversation in McLaughlin's driveway, the pair discovered they had each been to one

it should go. 'How great is that?'"

When McLaughlin heard of a Rotary-sponsored trip to distribute polio vaccinations in Ethiopia earlier this year, she immediately thought to combine the trip with a visit to the orphanage. The details began "falling in place" when Kibet, while staying in town for this year's Beach to Beacon, agreed to be her driver while she was in Kenya.

After spending a week with 60 other Rotary members distributing polio vaccinations – as well as T-shirts and hats to those who flocked to their vans – to remote villages in Ethiopia, McLaughlin and one other South Portland / Cape Elizabeth Rotary Club member landed in Kenya for the first time "without a plan B."

"We looked around and there was no Duncan," she said. "It was 15 minutes of angst [waiting for him], then he came walking around the corner. I barely recognized him."

After visiting another Rotary Club in the area, visiting a national park and "doing the touristy thing" for two days, the pair traveled to the orphanage for the first time. McLaughlin said her companion was struck by the "poverty" of the three-building facility, a term she considers

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relative to its context.

"For me, it's a different level of living. It's so much different than poverty in this country," she said. "They're happy with what they have, at least not always wanting something better. Sure, they'd take [something better], but don't feel like they absolutely have to have it."

McLaughlin said children in both Ethiopia and in the Kenyan orphanage, some of whom had never seen a white person before, were formally polite but hesitant to open up to their new visitors.

"It makes sense: Here comes this strange looking person from you don't know where and they're trying to do something to you," she said. "You just get over being white. After a while they start dancing and singing."

The orphanage, with 15 children living at the facility full-time, five attending boarding schools and more than 200 staying in "host households" throughout the surrounding villages, operates on an annual budget of \$6,000, McLaughlin said.

"That year they had included two cows and a computer," she said. "They hadn't

even touched our [\$8,000] yet. They are being very financially responsible."

The orphanage director introduced McLaughlin to the local government, where he served as the financial chairman.

"Their mayor is called 'The Worship,'" she laughed. "I couldn't bring myself to call him that."

Formal titles aside, McLaughlin and local politicians saw eye-to-eye on the financial needs of the orphanage. After their visit and a discussion of McLaughlin's fundraising efforts, officials agreed to include some funding for the orphanage in the next budget cycle, she said.

"If that's all it takes, I'll go anywhere again," McLaughlin said.

McLaughlin is currently looking for volunteers to return to the orphanage next May. She said the trip would cost less than \$3,000 and those interested should email her at [JMCL1147@aol.com](mailto:JMCL1147@aol.com). The Rotary Club is also sponsoring a benefit concert at the Trinity Episcopal Church on Forest Avenue in Portland tonight at 7:30 pm. All proceeds will be used for school funding for children at the orphanage in Kenya.