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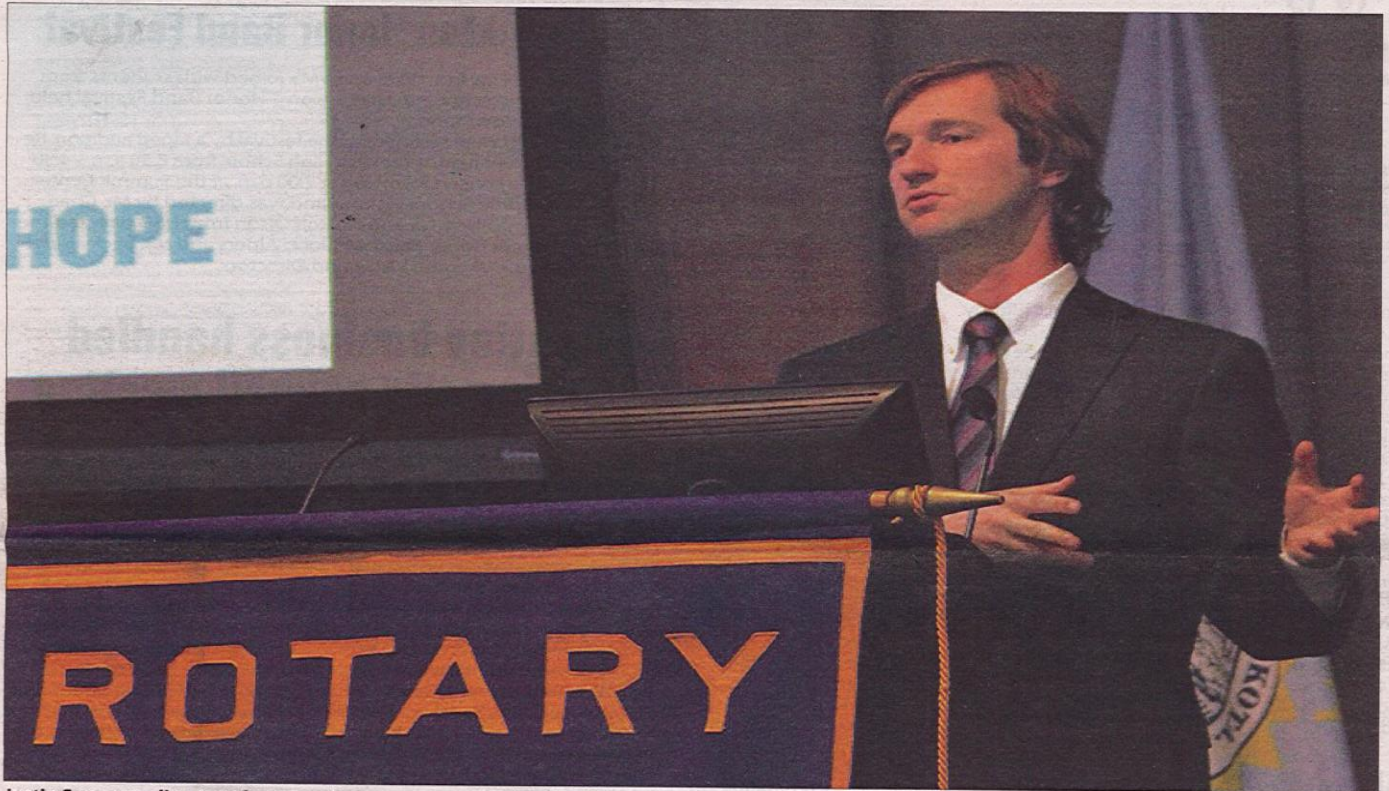


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TODAY'S WEATHER



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Justin Swanson, director of community engagement for the Omaha, Neb. - based Global Partners in Hope, describes the organization mission in West Africa at the Nov. 4 meeting of the Vermillion Rotary Club. (Photo by David Lias)

Local Rotary considers new partnership to provide hope to West Africa

DAVID LIAS
Managing Editor

The Vermillion Rotary Club is contemplating becoming a "partner" with the Global Partners in Hope, an Omaha, Neb. - based organization after hearing an address from Justin Swanson, its director of community engagement.

"The mission of Global Partners in Hope is to bring hope to international communities through partnerships between people who can help, and people who need hope," Swanson said.

Swanson talked about a woman simply known as Hawa to illustrate how the organization helps people in need.

Officials from Global Partners in Hope first met Hawa six years ago. "She lives in a very rural, impoverished region of Mali, West Africa, called the Bako region," Swanson said. "Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world, and the statistics are really grim. It has one of

the highest infant mortality rates in the world, and one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world.

"There are so many factors at play - from not having sanitary water, to not having access to nutrition, or basic medical care, that sort of thing," he said.

A Global Partners official asked Hawa where she got water for her children.

"She replied that when it rains, her six children will drink from the puddles," Swanson said. "That was the most readily available source of water, and that's what they would resort to."

Hawa daily had to walk miles for water for her children. Food was scarce, and when one of her children became sick, medical care was 80 miles away.

Swanson noted that, statistically, one of her five children will likely die before age 10. And with few job opportunities, Hawa has little chance to improve her situation.

That was before Global Partners in Hope built a medical clinic and water well in her

village. Now, for the first time in her life, Hawa has hope. She will no longer have to walk a long distance each day just for drinking water, and when one of her children gets sick, medical help is nearby, he noted. And with the availability of a microfinance program, self-employment opportunities will give her the chance to build a future for her family.

Global Partners' mission in West Africa, he said, is to provide access to water, medical care, sustainable energy, and education.

"Clean water is what I'm here to tell you about primarily," Swanson said. "We've been able to provide clean water for about 40,000 people in Mali, West Africa, over the course of about six years. We don't personally build the wells; instead we partner with local organizations who do the installations. We try not to do the work that local Africans can do for themselves."

In the Bako region of Mali, the statistics are staggering:

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- Clean water access is an average of two miles away on foot.
- 20 percent of children die by age 10.
- The average person lives 80 miles from a hospital or medical clinic.
- Mali has the world's second worst infant mortality rate coupled with world's second highest fertility rate
- The average income is only \$23 a week
- 30 percent unemployment
- Among the world's 25 poorest countries
- 46 percent literacy rate

(Statistics from CIA World Factbook)

Swanson said the organization's focus must extend beyond simply providing additional sources of clean water. Medical care, and providing new, creative ways for people in this region of Africa to make a living are also critical.

"These elements are really like pieces of a puzzle," he said. "You can address just one of these things, for example – you can just provide water – but we really want to bring these communities from surviving to thriving, and so we believe these other elements are really necessary in order to make that big step."

Global Partners in Hope has helped establish several medical clinics in West Africa.

"It makes a huge difference. One person told me that it was actually U.S. Civil War-era medicine that was available before these clinics were established," Swanson said. "Once the clinics are installed, it's more like 1950s-1960s era medicine that's available."

According to Global Partners in Hope's web

page, the organization, in partnership with two Malian organizations, ODES and CPAM, has been working with four villages in the Bako region: Tatrima, Adamabougou, Koro, and Tiecorabougou.

Through local partnerships in the U.S. and in Mali, each village will build:

- A clean water well which will reduce water-borne illness and the number of hours each person spends daily just to meet basic needs, freeing up time to work or care for children.
- A medical clinic to provide maternity care, preventative care and treating illness.
- A microfinance program to help families create a sustainable income.

As of July 2014, wells and clinics have been constructed and staffed in Tatrima, Adamabougou, and Koro. A well has been completed in Tiecorabougou, and construction is nearly finished on the clinic. Upon completion, each project provides water and medical care to 10,000-12,000 men, women, and children.

Global Partners in Hope is also striving to bring sources of sustainable energy to West Africa.

"Sustainable energy is the next big jump. When you have a medical clinic, you can do a lot of great things, but when you can't power medical devices, when you can't power a refrigerator to keep drugs cool, when you can't have a fan blowing, or can't have an oxygen unit, you really can't do much," Swanson said.

Some villages rely on gas-powered generators, but those are costly to operate and are unreliable.

During his talk to Vermillion Rotarians, Swanson showed a photo of a solar panel be-

ing installed in one of the villages.

"In a country that's very close to the Sahara Desert, one thing you have a lot of is sunshine," he said. "One sunny day can power a medical facility for three days."

Solar panels are also used to provide power to schools that Global Partners in Hope have helped construct in West Africa.

"The final piece of the puzzle is education. You can install clean water wells, you can build medical facilities, but if people don't understand the value of it, you might as well have not done it," Swanson said. "It's really critical that we educate people, and this is where we really lean heavily on our African partners."

"We like to come alongside our African partners and help them better their own lives. We don't do any partnerships or projects without significant local backing, so the last few communities where we have operated to build a clinic and a well, the local communities raised actually about 15 percent of the total cost," he said.

The Bako region of Mali is about the size of New Jersey, and is home to hundreds of thousands of people. "It is an area that is very remote, and very un hospitable," Swanson said. "Clean water access is so crucial!"

He asked his audience to focus on the two-mile daily trek that the region's residents, must make, on average, just to get water. The water is carried in a five gallon container that, when full, weighs 40 pounds.

"That's a ton of time, and a ton of energy that must be expended just to get water," Swanson said, and many times, women and children are fetching water for their families. "When you think about children doing this,

it means they are losing a significant amount of time when they could be in school, not to mention the energy that's being expended."

Much of the water is gathered from streams and rivers – places that contain runoff from livestock and human waste. Resources are so scarce, Swanson said, that at times, people must decide between boiling water and cooking food.

"We try to provide clean water wells as an alternative to this," he said. "A clean water well can provide water for between 10,000 and 12,000 people. Each well that we build has a water tower and a solar-powered pump."

The cost of each well is about \$12,000. Global Partners in Hope has teamed up with individuals and organizations to provide clean water and other necessities to this region of the world.

"We've partnered with a number of different corporations across the country, churches, public and private schools, colleges and universities, and non-profit organizations," he said. "Our partnerships are pretty diverse, and we're always looking for new partners."

Vermillion Rotary Club President Art Mabry noted that fellow local Rotarian Steve Walters, pastor of Hillside Community Church in Vermillion, helped arrange for Swanson's visit to address the club.

"The (Vermillion Rotary Club) board of directors is giving serious consideration to supporting this program," Mabry said. "We possibly may be moving some of the funds that we use for other international programs that seemed to have run their course to this one."

Mabry urged Vermillion Rotarians to give their input to members of the club's board of directors.