Back to School Edition

Summer is over and while many kids in North America see fall as the end of lazy months filled with oversleeping, playing outdoors and trips for ice cream. Other children only dream of going to school with longing for the opportunity to learn and work toward a better life. Mercy-USA is trying to help kids get what they need to make their dreams a reality. This issue of our newsletter is focused on some of the many education projects we have around the world and in the USA.
Read more beginning on page 2.
Closing the Gender Gap in Somalia’s Schools

According to UNICEF, Somalia has one of the lowest school enrollment rates for primary-aged children in the world. Only 30% of Somali children are in school and of that 30%, less than half of them are girls. Faced with extremely limited resources and within a traditional social structure where a boy grows up to be a man who will support a wife, children and his parents in their old age, families often prioritize their sons’ education. Additionally, scarcity of female teachers, inadequate space for learning and lack of private bathroom facilities for menstruating young women contribute greatly to the school gender gap between boys and girls in Somalia.

One of the primary goals of our education projects in Somalia is to increase enrollment among girls in each community and inspire them to strive for higher education. We are supporting schools with infrastructure improvements such as building new classrooms, bathroom facilities and clean water wells, as well as providing teacher training and specialized curriculum. Girls who are of menstruating age receive a feminine hygiene package that includes undergarments and supplies to keep her comfortable and able to attend school every day of the month. We have formed local community committees that focus on identifying out-of-school children and finding ways for their families to overcome whatever obstacles they face in not sending their children to school.

Hawo, a nine-year-old girl in south-central Somalia, is one such child. She is the only girl with seven brothers. A Mercy-USA supported Community Education Committee (CEC) team in her region found her working at home during school hours. She told the committee that while she longed to attend school with her brothers, her parents thought the school wasn’t safe for her. The CEC members spoke with her mother and helped her understand that the improvements we have made to the school facility itself left no excuses to exclude Hawo from school. They explained how Hawo would be given specialized curriculum that would help her catch up with her grade level peers within a short time, eliminating the stigma of her being too old to enter first grade at 9 years old. The CEC team assured her that there are private bathroom facilities for girls and that Hawo would sit at a desk with other girls comfortably on par with the boys in the classroom. Her mother was convinced and Hawo began school for the first day of classes in August, 2019. Her joyful proclamation was the answer to every obstacle that was overcome with this project, “When I finish school, I want to become a doctor and I will help my parents and my community.”

Nasro is quickly catching up to her peers’ grade level with the specialized curriculum delivered by Mercy-USA trained teachers like Fahmo Hassan, Nasro’s science teacher.

Too Young to be Working: Nasro’s Story

Mercy-USA’s Somalia Educate a Child program found 10-year-old Nasro tending a shop on the streets of Mogadishu on a day when other children like her were attending school. She told our Community Education Committee that she had left school after second grade because her mother lacked the school fees for her. “I am out of school because my mother can’t afford the fees, books and other things for all four of us. I am working to help my siblings go to school.”

Nasro’s mother is a widow who supports her children by taking in washing. Since fees for school institutions range from $30 to $70 a month, educating all her kids was impossible. Mercy-USA CEC members intervened for Nasro and because she is an orphan, her fees are waived. Our project provides her books, supplies and makes it possible for her to attend a school with improved facilities.

Nasro is quickly catching up to her peers’ grade level with the specialized curriculum delivered by Mercy-USA trained teachers like Fahmo Hassan, Nasro’s science teacher. Nasro’s favorite subject is science and she is catching up quickly in the subject with the loving support of her teacher, Fahmo Hassan. The little girl still worries about her mother struggling to care for the family while the children are in school, but she knows—even at the tender age of ten—her capacity to help her mother in the long run will depend on her ability to gain knowledge and skills through education.
Muslims around the world observe two sacred holidays each year. Eid al Fitr marks the end of Ramadan where Muslims fast from before the dawn until sunset for a month. Mercy-USA delivers food baskets or hosts large iftar meals to break the fast around the world for families in need. Fitra food baskets are also distributed at the end of Ramadan. Last month, meat was distributed to thousands of needy families in observance of Eid al Adha. Many tell us that the Qurbani/Udhia meat they receive is one of the few times they are able to provide meat for their children all year.

Stories like Muna’s, featured above, are an example of how these seasonal food distributions have a big impact on the lives of people struggling to survive. We met Muna, a widow with 7 children, in a camp for Internally Displaced Persons in Somalia. Due to armed conflict, she and her children were forced to flee their village, wandering for more than a year from camp to camp trying to find assistance. They had finally settled outside Mogadishu after walking more than 60 miles in search of help when we met her and delivered a Ramadan food basket. The joy on her face as she sifted the rice we brought for her and her children was a reward for all.
For the second year, Mercy-USA made the first day of school for hundreds of Detroit’s school children a bit brighter with new backpacks and school supplies. Before school began, our volunteers assembled over 550 backpacks and teacher supply kits to be distributed at two Detroit public schools and a family homeless shelter.

At J. E. Clark Preparatory Academy school, volunteers came to the school’s open house the week prior to the first day of classes. Students were invited to choose their backpack and fill it with all that their supply list required. The school’s Principal, Ms. Yvette Willingham told us it wasn’t uncommon for children to arrive to school without any supplies, and our program saved the children from embarrassment and the feeling of not having enough. “Thanks to this project, all our students are guaranteed to start the year off strong.”

This community project is popular with our local supporters. It’s never difficult to garner dozens of volunteers eager to connect with their neighbors who may not be as fortunate as they. Volunteers are always grateful for the opportunity to get out and put their willingness to help into action.

Mercy-USA local projects are a win-win for families having a tough time and for families grateful to make those times easier.
Where We Work • mercyusa.org

Albania
- English and computer skills training for orphans and orphans
- Read to Succeed program for school-age children

Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Vocational and career training for orphans, at-risk teens, and young adults
- Agriculture Education Center to aid farmers and local communities with sustainable farming methods

The Gaza Strip
- With grant funding to UNRWA, support for a special school for blind and visually-impaired elementary school-aged children.

India
- Seasonal food aid

Indonesia
- Aiding farmers and local communities with sustainable farming methods. Also assisting farmers in forming cooperatives.

Kenya
- Nutritional support for mothers and children
- Hygiene and sanitation training and promotion

Lebanon
- Syrian Refugee assistance in Wadi Khalid, Lebanon
- Palestinian Refugee Assistance in Beddawi and Nahr-Al-Bared Palestinian Refugee Camps

Pakistan
- With funding to implementing partner, The Citizens Foundation (TCF) building a secondary school in Sindh Province

Rohingya Refugees
- Food baskets for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

Somalia
- To date about 650 new or rehabilitated wells for access to clean drinking water throughout Somalia including emergency drought relief
- Nutritional support and health services for mothers and children
- Hygiene and sanitation training and promotion
- Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention
- Building food security through veterinary services for livestock.
- Support for primary & middle schools in 5 regions of Somalia.

Syria
- Monthly food baskets for thousands of vulnerable families in northern Syria
- Winterization projects for vulnerable children and their families
- Shelter, blankets, mattresses, mats for displaced families
- Medical services for vulnerable Syrians living in hard-to-reach areas

United States
- Seasonal food aid
- Support for Refugees
- Local support for Detroit area homeless shelters
- School backpack program for disadvantaged students

Yemen
- Food baskets for displaced persons in Yemen

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