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Helping children whose home really is a dump; Almonte's Tom Affleck works hard -- and cheap -- to create an oasis for students in Nicaragua

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Illustrations: Photo: Tom Affleck, The Ottawa Citizen / A young boy in Managua's La Chureca dump peers through the fence of salvaged material that his family has put up around their tiny home.

For Tom Affleck, a country boy in a huge hurry, operating principles can be pretty down-to-earth.

His are "KISS" (Keep It Simple, Stupid) and "Get down to basic brass tacks."

In Nicaragua's poorest neighbourhoods, he gets down to cement blocks and mortar.

Bureaucratic delay? Over study? Wasted (but salaried) time? This 30-year-old foreign aid worker, desperate to "make a difference," can't afford them. And neither, he thinks, can the poor people of one of the hemisphere's poorest countries.

In just one year, 2008, Tom, his SchoolBOX charity and hundreds of volunteers and donors have:

- built and equipped two cement-block schools, each in two to three months;

- renovated three schools;

- given school supplies to 3,480 children in 26 communities, as children in Nicaragua can't attend school without their own pencils and notebooks;

- given 366 children their first toothbrushes and toothpaste kits for the Big Smiles dental hygiene program;

- set up and equipped two youth soccer leagues in 10 communities.

The price tag? Less than \$90,000.

The idea for SchoolBOX came to him two years ago. Then 28, and working in Nicaragua, Tom handed a little girl a pencil and notebook, only to discover they were her ticket to an education.

He started SchoolBOX, based in his home town of Almonte, west of Ottawa.

Between November 2007 and November 2008, receipted donations rose by 1,000 per cent to \$83,730. By this November, he's aiming for \$250,000 to reach 5,000 kids in 35 schools, to build five schools and to renovate others.

For SchoolBOX, charity does not begin at home. It owns no building, pays no executive salaries, treats itself to no elegant "working" restaurant lunches and dinners, uses no first-class travel, throws no charity

balls, hobnobs with no one.

"We're helping people here," says Tom, who, when his own money ran out, slept on the floor in the slums of Managua where his friend, Ronald Chavarria Arauz, lived and where they both worked on SchoolBOX.

Today, Mr. Arauz, a chartered accountant and the charity's Nicaraguan co-ordinator, works in an office subsidized by a Managua businessman. SchoolBOX, which still functions with "barebones administrative costs," says Tom "has gotten over the hump. It's a lot of fun and we're full of hope for the future."

SchoolBOX started work last year on one unusual school in Managua. It sits in one of Central America's largest slums, surrounded by the infamous La Chureca (The Dump). The dump's population estimates range from 800 to 1,500 of Nicaragua's most desperately poor people.

Says Tom: "You can see the kids playing and bathing in one of the most contaminated bodies of water a person could ever imagine.

"It made us all want to vomit and cry. It's the most dramatically-impooverished place you can imagine. It's surrounded by garbage, so the kids swim in a pool of stagnant water in the middle of the dump. The garbage is smoking as it burns, spewing toxic fumes. Families fight over scrap metal, plastic. Some children are made into prostitutes. One little girl there is 12 and has AIDS. The kids are sick."

The dump children work from the age of four -- picking up plastic, metal, cardboard and paper. "They go through everything," says Tom. "Sometimes they die from eating rotted food. Essentially, they're harvesting the dump."

The dump school, named Juntos Con Tigo -- (Together With You) -- was started by university students. "We joined with them," says Tom. The students work mornings in the dump, afternoons at small jobs and go to school at night.

The school consists of two shipping containers with a roof and serves 60 students, aged three to 30. "It is an oasis in the middle of that dump where love and food are provided," he says.

SchoolBOX installed a big fence (to keep out people and stray dogs), a washroom, septic tank, computers

and bookshelves and it donated books, sports equipment, writing kits. A dental hygiene program was also set up.

Tom returned to Nicaragua last week after weeks of fundraising here -- totalling \$25,000 -- and after attending a Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) conference in Toronto for small organizations.

"We are really eager to work with CIDA on programs we're building in Nicaragua and Canada," says Tom.

One group, Aboriginal Youth Empowering Students, brings Canadian aboriginal youths on reserves to help build schools in Nicaragua. Last summer's pilot program brought two young women from the Burns Lake reserve in northern B.C.

Also last year, 30 Canadians joined SchoolBOX in Nicaragua.

"It helps Canadian students understand about life for a child in Central America, to see their own advantages and to break the Canadian bubble so these kids can see what impact they can have in the world."

Canadian schools and teachers have been key. His No. 1 teacher is his mother, Jennette, a recently-retired special education and kindergarten teacher who lives in Almonte. "She believed in me, and loved and supported me when SchoolBOX was in its infancy, when people thought I was doing something that was just over the top and impossible."

Ann Bird, a retired teacher from Smiths Falls who also lives in Almonte, gained charity status for SchoolBOX and serves as treasurer. Leonard Lee, founder of Lee Valley Tools, donated editorial and graphics services from his Algrove Publishing Ltd., and with R.S. Lee and Commercial Print Craft, produced the SchoolBOX brochure.

Other key supporters include Nathan Rudyk, owner of Almonte-based Market2World Communications, Read's Book Shop in Carleton Place, Equator Coffee Roasters of Almonte, and Total Move Management of Ottawa, which has shipped soccer equipment and books. St. Paul's Anglican Church in Almonte has provided volunteers and an office. Tom's girlfriend, Sarah Kerr, works alongside him, and has kept the charity and its founder on an even keel.

Tom wants to do much more.

Given funding, he'd hire an administrator for accounting and school programs. And he's looking for "champions" -- volunteers who are experienced retired business people to expand SchoolBOX and tap into resources and funds.

"I would like to get to the point where we're helping millions of kids," Tom says. "We have a lot of room to expand regionally in Central America and, longer term, to other regions of the world.

"It's simple and it's effective and it's very replicable."

For more information, go to schoolbox.ca or e-mail info@schoolbox.ca.

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