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Photo courtesy/Michael Smith

Megan Smith, back row far right, and her father Michael, front row second from right, visit Western Washington University with Kenyan students and other hosts.

A taste of Africa

Sumner High School junior hosts Kenyan students for a week

BY AVANI NADKARNI
of The Herald

As Megan Smith walked around the tree-lined campus of Western Washington University in early February with five female students from Kenya, she saw the girls' world expanding right before her eyes.

"They said, 'We want to come (to the U.S.) for university,'" the Sumner High School junior said. "I hope some of them do make it out here. That would be so great."

This year, with the help of Issaquah High School students Kim Varney and Sabrina Barnett, Smith collected nearly 2,000 pounds of clothing for Kenyan orphans. The clothing was then sent on a plane Boeing was delivering to Kenya Airways. Boeing provided the boxes, but the girls had to collect and package the items themselves.

"They're sending the plane over anyway," Smith said. "So we might as well fill it up."



Photos courtesy/Nathan Le

Megan Smith, left, and Issaquah High School students Sabrina Barnett and Kim Varney speak with television reporters before watching the plane they helped fill take off.



The Kenya Airways flight filled with donated clothing takes off from Seattle and heads toward Africa.

"They're sending over the plane anyway, so we might as well fill it up."

MEGAN SMITH
Sumner High School junior

The Sumner High School junior is no stranger to eye-opening experiences, or to Kenya. Her father, Michael, a sales director at Boeing, has been working in the East African region stretching from Kenya to South Africa for 13 years. His job is to sell planes to airlines, but that hasn't stopped him from instilling a love of giving to his children.

Five years ago, Smith watched as her brother Cameron, now a freshman at Western Washington University and neighbor Chris Franich helped to fill a Kenya Airways Boeing jumbo jet with donated computers for the first time. The two boys got to fly with the jet, which was being delivered to Kenya Airways from Boeing and see their fundraising at work.

Since then, Smith has worked to fill Kenya Airways jets with everything from school supplies to books to a giant weaving loom and has made two trips to Kenya herself.

Then, in early February, she hosted five girls from Kenyan schools, who were handpicked by the CEO of Kenya Airways to visit the United States. Smith asked four students from her leadership class to each take one of the girls around with them during a school day; Smith herself took one of the girls around with her.

"We took them to all our classes and introduced them to our own friends," she said. "They didn't just sit around and follow us, though. They took tests, did group activities. It was a normal day for us, but they thought it was awesome."

"The Sumner School District has been really cooperative and really good about this," Michael Smith added.

The girls, who all go to boarding schools, were also in awe of another aspect of American high school life.

"They kept asking where we sleep," Smith said, laughing. "They thought it was so cool that we get to go home and see our families every day."

She accompanied the girls on the trip to Western Washington University, as well as to the Museum of Flight, bowling alley and go-kart racing track.

"We gave them a taste of the Northwest," she said.

"It's very rewarding to see the kids get together," Michael Smith added. "And when the Kenyan children come to visit, it's amazing how many tears there are when they have to leave. It becomes a part of your life."

For Smith and her father, who travels for a majority of the year, fundraising and hosting children gives them some time to bond. As they speak of their efforts, it is apparent that both are equally passionate about the cause.

"It's something we all enjoy," Michael Smith said of himself and his children.

Smith had hoped to visit Kenya again this year, but said her school schedule most likely won't permit it. Still, she plans to continue the fundraising efforts each time a new jet is delivered to Kenya and is hoping to visit the African nation again in the future.

As for her dad, he takes pride in seeing his children work so hard for those less privileged. The reward comes, he said, when he sees the Kenyan schoolchildren expanding their own dreams after seeing the possibilities.

"We went to visit a Kenyan school, an all-girls school with a male headmaster," Michael Smith recalled of a trip to Africa a few years ago. "The headmaster told the girls 'Maybe one day you can be stewardesses.' One girl stood up, looked him in the eye and said 'No, sir. I'm going to be the pilot.' It was really, really neat to see her stand right up and say that to him. That's what it's about."