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What a Difference a Dollar Can Make for Sudan Students, Teachers & Their School - posted Thursday, August 24, 2006

By Roger Hardister, NEF Vice President for Program Development

It was an early summer morning in Sudan, hot and humid. I was anxious to get out of Khartoum to Dar El-Salaam el Rabwa, home to over 20,000 displaced persons who struggle to make a life for themselves in the heat and barren surroundings of the capital city Khartoum.

NEF (Near East Foundation) and its partners, such as Human Concern International (HCI), are working with residents in Dar El-Salaam to improve children's education. Our plans were to visit the Tagwa Community School and several smaller schools in the area. It was six months since my last trip and almost a year since we began school upgrading in Dar El-Salaam. We had great expectations for Al-Tagwa and the others and I hoped to see progress, particularly with Al-Tagwa where we had first begun.

As we arrived at the school, it was very obvious--this was a most exciting day for the students! While schools across Sudan were scheduled to open the following day, the kids of Al-Tagwa had shown up a day early. Teachers had been working all week to prepare, and the school looked very different from when I last saw it. Thanks to the generosity of NEF donors, partners, and online givers, El-Tagwa Community School was being transformed!

The kids at El-Tagwa had been forgotten by all but a few. Previously unable to attend government schools because of their poverty, now they had a second chance at education. For a few pennies, they could attend classes, learn to read and write, enjoy being a child, and earn a certificate to help employment later on. For these children, an opportunity for education had been something only to dream about; few ever expected that dream to come true.

A FEW PENNIES BUY A TRANSFORMATION

Al-Tagwa still had no desks and chairs, forcing many students to drag broken chairs and stools from home each day just to stay off the ground and get a good view of the teacher. Teachers, who are really volunteers, brought their own children to school; women came with their babies and cared for them while teaching eager, young students. All of this was a far cry from the atmosphere and conveniences of modern American education.

So, what's new?

First of all and very important, El-Tagwa Community School has a new roof that shades students and teachers alike from the burning sun--previously it



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had none. Second, classroom walls composed of sun-dried mud brick have been repaired or rebuilt--previously they were half-built and crumbling. And the school's outer walls are being covered with a thin coat of cement, a project now in progress that will protect against heavy seasonal rains. Otherwise, the outer walls simply melt away.

Once these repairs are completed, NEF plans to add doors and windows to further shelter children and teachers from the heavy rains that batter down on the community; and in summer, keep out the dust and sand that frequently ravage the area. Interior walls will also receive a coat of fresh paint. This will be done one classroom at a time as funds are available--at a cost of \$500 per classroom. A total of eight classrooms and a small office/sitting area for teachers still need repair.

Some furnishings have been installed and as classrooms are completed, new desks and chairs are on the way. Thanks to the generosity of an individual donor, a feeding program will begin shortly for those most in need. Books and teaching materials have been provided for teachers. Unfortunately, until now few students can afford their own workbooks. However, despite these shortages, everyone is thrilled with results so far!

El-Tagwa is the first and the largest of the Dar El-Salaam schools NEF and its partners are upgrading. It is basically a day school, while others offer afternoon and night classes for those unable to attend the day program. These much smaller schools are constructed from mud-brick and consist of a walled enclosure, often in disrepair, with no roof, no access to water or sanitary facilities, and lacking both floors and ceilings. Most students go without books and teachers without any type of teaching aids. On the positive side, NEF's nearby Dar el Salaam health center is providing health education and preventive services for children attending these schools.

TRUE WISH FULFILLMENT

For Mohamed El-Tayeb, El-Tagwa's founder and director, progress made so far is all part of a dream come true, one that began only a few years ago when he and his colleagues decided to try to do something for their own children and those in the community. Now everyone's talking about El Tagwa. They are all amazed others have taken such an interest; and are beyond proud their small local initiative has attracted attention and support outside their community.

"We now have to live up to not only our own expectations, but the trust that others have put in us," Mohamed El-Tayeb says with evident pleasure and much gratitude for the support channeled through NEF and HCI from people both within his country and around the world. "We never imagined we could make a difference and were hesitant to even try," remarked a teacher, adding emphatically, "Now we know we have to continue! We can't stop! We have to keep going with what we've started. The future of these kids depends on us."

Before setting up El-Tagwa Community School, Mohamed had dropped out after completing high school, forced to work to support himself and his family. Although he desperately wanted to continue his education, tuition was a luxury he simply could not afford. Despite this lack of formal education, he has contributed so much and truly is a model for others to follow. NEF hopes to

help Mohamed obtain a teaching certificate so he can contribute even more, helping other teachers and improving education at El-Tagwa.

He now earns only \$25 per month. To complete his education will cost another \$150 per month for two years. NEF seeks donors to help Mohamed and upgrade the teaching staff at the school. If interested, please contact NEF or donate online to "El-Tagwa Fellowships." While \$150 will pay for a month's education for a teacher, smaller contributions are welcome and funds can be used for short-term workshops and teacher training. They also are needed for El-Tagwa school furnishings and equipments, books, and educational materials as well as increased assistance to other area schools.

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