A stitch in time: Sew ‘n Sews help Ugandan girls stay in school

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Story and photo by Manda Perkins

LOGAN – It was three years ago that the Institute for Sustainable Economics, Education and Engineering – or SEEE Me – found out that many girls in Uganda never finished school. They could not attend classes during their menstrual cycles due to lack of access to sanitary supplies.

Cache Valley volunteers responded by starting the Uganda Girls Project. They have now distributed more than 700 hygiene kits with washable pads in villages across the country. “There are disposable pads there, but they’re very hard to find and extremely expensive,” said Jane Debyle, a SEEE Me member who lives in River Heights. “And there’s no way to dispose of them, so many of the girls will just use banana leaves and things like that.”

Debyle said it isn’t a matter of not wanting to be in school, but having the resources during that week of the month to sit in a classroom. It wasn’t until she traveled to Uganda with that she realized the impact of this effort.

“We pulled out the pads, and the girls started crying and dancing, and I’m like, ‘What is going on?’” said Debyle. “This was a big deal for them.”

SEEE Me works with Logan First Presbyterian Church’s humanitarian group, the Sew & Sews, to make this project possible. The Sew & Sews make the pads and kits that are sent with SEEE Me volunteers to Uganda. The volunteers then teach the girls how to use the pads and about the maturation process.

Sonia Manuel-Dupont, a professor at Utah State University and a SEEE Me volunteer, said after missing so much school every year, many girls become discouraged and stop attending.

“If they drop out of school in the fourth or the fifth grade, they have become literate, but they haven’t garnered enough education to do anything except work in the fields,”

Dupont said. “If they have any hope of making it into high school and then having a career and being able to bring something back to the community, they’ve got to be able to go to school every day.”

Linda Roberts, who started the Uganda Girls Project, said it’s about much more than providing comfortable sanitary supplies; this idea of “bringing something back to the community” is what SEEE Me is all about.

“It is important for me, and I think for everyone who participates, to support girls so that they can get as much education as possible,” Roberts said. “There are numerous studies from a lot of different places in the world that show that educated women can participate more in the economy, and the economies are more successful. So, that is the focus of beginning this whole thing — so that they can go to school, because it will mean so much in their lives and their families’ lives, and really, you can say the country.”

To help these communities be more sustainable, SEEE Me is raising money to provide villages with treadle sewing machines and basic sewing kits so local seamstresses can make and sell the pads. As of now, seven machines have been purchased and are being used in orphanages and women’s centers.

“The long term goal is for them to continuously make their own for the girls,” Debyle said. “We’d like them, in the long run, to be able to make enough that they can sell them around and make money. But it’s just barely getting off its feet, so as long as the girls stay in school right now, that’s the main goal.”

SEEE Me and the Sew & Sews are holding a fundraiser Dec. 7 at the Sustainable Gift Market, where patrons can donate to purchase supplies or part of a sewing machine. But Roberts said anyone willing to donate supplies or sewing time are encouraged to do so at any time.

“If you think there’s nothing you can do, you’re so wrong,” she said.

For more information on the Uganda Girls Project or any other projects SEEE Me is working on, visit www.seeeme.org or the organization’s Facebook page.