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## Haiti project takes on new urgency



by Patrick Thomas

When the Ecomacs environmental club at Mother McAuley High School decided to construct a biodiesel fuel processor in December for an impoverished school in Haiti, club members knew they were taking on a humanitarian cause as much as they were a science project.

But when a deadly earthquake suddenly changed everything in Haiti on Jan. 12, the local students fully understood the importance of their project and redoubled their efforts for those in the devastated country.

"I was shocked," said sophomore Christina Lopez, of Mt. Greenwood. "After the earthquake, I just wanted to put the project in overdrive and give it 120 percent."

The startled girls picked up the phone and read news reports to learn the school they were supporting in the southeast town of Pichon, Haiti, was safe from the damage, about 50 miles from the epicenter of the earthquake.

Hearing the school was still standing and the project still on, sophomore Eileen O'Donnell, of Morgan Park, said she and her classmates went from "freaking out" to excitement, knowing they still had the opportunity to make a difference.

"It's a pretty fulfilling thing to get involved in. It's exciting. We always intended to get it done, but now we are definitely kicking into gear. We are on You Tube and writing letters to President Obama," O'Donnell said.

The project is a collaborative effort between students at McAuley and Thornridge High School in Dolton under the leadership of science teachers Roz Iasillo from McAuley and Brian Sievers from Thornridge. Iasillo said it was horrifying to hear about the earthquake, but it did not stop the club from moving forward.

"The girls were devastated," Iasillo said. "They've invested so much into this. They want to get it up and running, and they believe they can change the economy."

They plan to ship the processor to Haiti near spring break, and Iasillo and Sievers plan to travel there in June to install it.

The biodiesel processor can change the local economy, and even go as far as making officials in Haiti rethink their construction practices, said Pierre Balthazar, vice president and founder of Education for Prosperity, Inc., the non-profit organization, which opened the school and coordinated the biodiesel project through Michigan State University.



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Balthazar said the McAuley project illustrates for students the level of Haiti's poverty and its lack of infrastructure, which proved to make conditions worse when the Port-au-Prince area crumbled to the ground, trapping and killing thousands of people following the earthquake and its aftershocks.

The tragedy furthermore underscores why Haiti needs to improve its building codes and enforcement, he said.

"The earthquake will not change anything. But it will change our focus on how we use the environment and our building codes and how we build," said Balthazar, a native of Haiti who studied at Michigan State University. "There is good that will come out of this tragedy. We have to look at the good things after an earthquake and look at more systemic ways of changing the ways we build."

Balthazar said that if a similar earthquake, measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale, shook cities like Chicago, the devastation would not be nearly as bad. He said shoddy construction practices exacerbated the situation.

However, even before the earthquake, Haitians have been concerned about building codes in the Caribbean country. On Nov. 7, 2008, a school in a Port-au-Prince suburb collapsed, killing nearly 100 children and injuring another 150. The collapse at the church-operated school came as a result of insufficient structural support and materials, according to news reports.

"Hopefully this puts into focus building codes and the government enforcing the law," said Balthazar, whose family avoided tragedy in the earthquake. "In Haiti, they don't respect zoning laws or building code. The government needs to revisit the laws and impose them."

Villagers at the school in Pichon, Haiti, will use the biodiesel fuel processor to convert waste or plant oil into a green energy source and perhaps create much-needed jobs and a foundation for the local economy.

With 80 percent of Haiti deforested, the soil has been eroded to the point of uselessness, lasillo said. One plant, however, the jatropha, will grow in practically any type of soil, is resistant to drought and pests, and produces seeds which can be used for oil extraction—thus making it an ideal choice for the production of biodiesel fuel in Haiti. The processor combines methanol and potassium hydroxide and adds it to jatropha oil that has been heated in solar thermal cookers. The chemical mixture results in two end products: biodiesel fuel, which can power diesel vehicles and generators, be sold as a commodity or used like kerosene in lanterns; and glycerin, which can be made into soap or used as a fertilizer. Over three days, the processor can create up to 45 gallons of biodiesel fuel.

Solar panels donated by BP will produce the electricity for the pumps that move the oil through the processor, and the panels will also provide extra electricity to light the school in Pichon and allow older students to attend school at night and thus continue their education, lasillo said.

"Our hope is to get them to stop cutting trees down and having more alternatives to wood," lasillo said. "A smallscale project like this is the kind of thing that can stimulate depressed economies in developing countries."

Surrounded by mountains, the ocean, unpredictable tropical storms and hurricanes—and now an earthquake—Pichon deals with an overwhelming uncertainties in farming and agricultural industries. Balthazar said it is in the poorest part of Haiti, the most impoverished nation in the western hemisphere.

With the biodiesel processor, Balthazar said, his organization and school can change the bleak outlook in Haiti.

"You have no idea what this can do," he said. "We want to become a model for [nongovernmental organizations] in a place where no one wants to live," Balthazar said. "We can't serve everybody, but we can be visible. Our hope is that the most impoverished places in the world can serve as the model."

The other hope is that by building an economy, improving construction practices, providing a better education and keeping children in class, more future leaders have a reason to stay in Haiti.

The school, which serves preschool children through sixth grade, enrolls almost 300 pupils, but retention is a problem, with only about 10 sixth-grade students still at the school.

Cindy Goren, a graduate student at Michigan State University studying biosystems and agricultural engineering, came across Sievers' name on the Internet when researching the topic of biodiesel and then petitioned the students to take on the challenge.

"There are so many parts to it. With the processor, we are bringing electricity to the community, agriculture, building soil, the economy, giving adults something to stay for and something to bring to the community," Goren said.

After taking a tour of the processor at McAuley on Jan. 15, 19th Ward Ald. Ginger Rugai praised the students for their dedication.

"It's very impressive that the club members have volunteered on this. It's not just a science project. It's not for a grade. That's what makes it even more impressive," Rugai said.

For their efforts, the 11 McAuley students will be recipients of Gov. Pat Quinn's 2009 Environmental Hero Awards.

Sophomore Jenna Krukowski, of Oak Lawn, said students could have taken their creative energies elsewhere, but helping less-fortunate students in Haiti mattered most.

"I joined because I felt like our project would be appreciated."

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