

VARIETY

Minnesota ties to Tanzanian water project span family generations

Children, grandchildren
and a great-grandchild
have carried on the effort.

By NEAL ST. ANTHONY
Special to the Star Tribune

In 2005, a chance encounter with a Tanzanian minister led to Jim Vanderheyden, an Osseo engineer, and his wife, Katie Vanderheyden, accepting a challenge to see if they could help fix a long-idled water pump in the minister's rural, dirt-poor village.

Today, the nonprofit business founded by the late Vanderheydens, aided by three generations of their family and other Minnesota donors and volunteers, is working with Tanzanian partners to create well-and-distribution

systems that have helped 18 villages and thousands of residents build healthier, stronger communities.

The Tanzania Life Project (TLP) has become a force for good in capital- and expertise-hungry neighborhoods by helping subsistence farmers and working-poor families improve health and wealth through locally operated water systems.

"Ikombolinga Village has benefited from the water project funded by TLP," village Executive Officer Michael Kisoka said in an email. "Before this project reached us in 2020, the water problem in our population of 6,110 was a very big issue.

"We now have 27 public water stations and more than 10 private stations. This led to

See **WATER** on E3 ►

African water project has spanned generations

◀ **WATER** from El the improvement of social and economic activities through accessible clean and safe water. We are real evidence of the way in which TLP touches the lives of Tanzanians, especially in rural areas.”

In August, Jim and Katie’s granddaughter Bridget, her husband, Brad, and daughter Sophia flew to Tanzania to climb legendary Mount Kilimanjaro and raise funds for TLP (tanzanialifeproject.org) with other Minnesotans and Tanzanians.

The TLP story begins in 2005.

“Ben Mlula, the Tanzanian minister, was attending a conference for Anglican ministers in Canada,” said Bridget Koch, 41. “Ben missed his connecting flight in Minneapolis and was invited to stay with a Minnesota minister. Ben talked about his home village [Mtuba in central Tanzania] having a broken well and no clean water for years.

“My aunt said, ‘I may know somebody.’ My Grandpa Jim was an engineer. My grandfather and grandmother went over there. It took a couple months. On the last day, the well worked. Just seeing the children’s faces was impactful for my grandparents. Many rural villages didn’t have access to clean water.

They decided to do what they could to change that.”

Nearly two decades later, Vanderheyden descendants and others fund an operation that is largely built and maintained by Tanzanians in 18 villages. There’s a waiting list of 80 villages.

Mlula has led TLP since 2006 as executive director and board chair. Water users are charged small fees to fund labor and maintenance.

A modest start

The Vanderheydens began this nonprofit business with their own capital and a modest solicitation of extended family and friends from their Christmas-letter list.

TLP raised \$418,478 in contribution and grant revenue in 2022, according to its tax return. The only paid employees are Tanzanian management and workers. Vanderheydens, American board members and supporters travel to Tanzania at their own expense.

Six of Jim and Katie Vanderheyden’s children, seven grandchildren and a great-granddaughter, Sophia, 13, have made exploratory and fundraising trips, including the Mount Kilimanjaro trek in August.

Tanzania is one of Africa’s fastest-growing economies, according to U.S.A.I.D., the development agency. However,



Provided

Bridget Koch, her daughter Sophia and husband Brad traveled to Tanzania in August to help raise funds.

half of its population lives on less than \$2 a day. It boasts great natural resources and a growing tourism industry. Agriculture, which employs 75% of workers, is dogged by low productivity, and rural areas are restrained by lagging infrastructure.

TLP works with the Tanzanian government, which is trying to improve infrastructure in rural areas, including water and sanitation.

Jim Vanderheyden, who died in 2022 at 87, was a talented engineer who worked on the first color TVs for RCA and the Apollo space program. He and Katie were frequent volunteers.

“We want to continue their

legacy,” said Brad Koch, Bridget’s husband and a financial adviser.

“These are self-sustaining, three-year projects. We help with the pump and reservoir and distribution points. There are several employees and a Tanzanian engineer. It’s local people. They train 10 or 15 people in each village who run the systems and charge a little money to sustain them. And TLP transitions out within three years.”

John Vanderheyden, Jim’s son, and his wife, Mary, volunteers since 2007, worked with their parents on procedures and documentation that has resulted

in an increasingly efficient, low-cost operation that can be operated and maintained locally.

“TLP fundraising is opened in that once a village project is completed, another begins,” John Vanderheyden, 63, a retired businessman, said in an email. “The faster funds are received, the faster projects are completed.

“The only fixed expense that TLP has is for its Tanzanian staff. Everyone involved in TLP in the USA is a volunteer. This allows for 97% of donations to go directly to project expenses in Tanzania.”

Brad, 42, Bridget and Sophia Koch participated in the Mount Kilimanjaro hike that has brought in about \$15,000 so far. The goal is \$19,341, equivalent to Kilimanjaro’s height in feet.

The trips also have resulted in a personal connection.

In Chitope, a village of 7,700 people, the Koches toured a TLP water project with proud Chitope technicians and villagers. That was followed by joyous singing and dancing. In Ikombolinga, a years-old installation, the visitors learned about innovation and expansion.

“We’ve also learned some Swahili,” Bridget Koch said. “The people appreciate that.”

Neal St. Anthony is a Minneapolis freelance writer.