

# THE BAY STATE Banner

## Project MEMA touches lives in Tanzanian nursery school



(Photos courtesy of Amy Wendel)

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When asked why she started the nonprofit organization Project MEMA, Amy Wendel takes a serious tone and describes the conditions at Magereza Nursery School in Moshi, Tanzania. "I just couldn't get them out of my head, it's that simple," she says

Wendel was a volunteer in October of 2009, when she first visited the city of Moshi, Tanzania. The children's struggles there changed her life.

She recalls the children's daily routine in a three-room school of 80 students ranging in age from 2 ½ to 7. They began each morning by erasing the previous day's math assignments from the only sheet of paper they had in order to reuse it.

They also had just one pencil, sharpened on both ends, to share, or "fight over," as Wendel puts it. Wendel, whose own mother is a preschool teacher in New Jersey, remembers how her vision of what a pre-school should look like crashed with modern-day reality in Tanzania. "They walked to school, sometimes for over an hour, by themselves, and in shoes 2-3 sizes too big for them," she remembers. Soon after returning to Boston, Wendel decided that she had the power to make a difference in the lives of the students that she had met. She founded Project MEMA, a nonprofit organization whose name describes its mission, Making Education in Moshi Accessible.



Mema also means 'good' in Kiswahili, the local language of Moshi, and that is what Wendel has set out to do.

In September of last year, Wendel returned to Magereza with suitcases full of supplies — and a mission. She vowed to use funds raised for her nonprofit to provide a reliable source of useful and essential school supplies, to make one significant change to the nursery school each time she visited and to visit at least once a year.

Before her last visit, she organized local volunteers to help build a Learning Landscape from locally sourced recycled tires. She used plans from The Learning Landscape Network to build the educational playground. The area serves as a much-needed recreational space and has also been used for reading and math lessons.

She also purchased local materials and hired women to make 80 new uniforms for the students. The uniforms cost approximately \$5 each to make.

Wendel said she realizes that what seems like a very small expense to many Americans can make a dramatic difference in the lives of the children she is striving to help. She is operating her organization based on what she describes as "modest but very meaningful goals."

Wendel plans to return to Moshi in August of this year and has worked with the school's teacher to set up a schedule of things that need to be done. With this coming trip she will buy local lumber and again seek volunteers to build much needed benches and tables for the school's porridge house. Porridge is made at the school from flour, sugar, and milk, and is often the only meal many of the children eat in a day. Currently the children have no choice but to eat standing up or sitting on the damp ground.

Wendel says that during the rainy season this is particularly problematic. She describes what a difference this simple addition to the school can make to build the children's confidence.

Wendel has found support for Project MEMA in family, friends and colleagues, and has begun to branch out into larger fundraising efforts. Over the holidays she sold calendars made with photos of Magereza and the children, and on March 7 J. Lohr winery is sponsoring a wine dinner for Project MEMA at Bistro 5 in Medford. The proceeds from the dinner will help to provide the funds Wendel needs to buy lumber for the porridge house furniture.

Among her future goals, Wendel says, is a plan to offset the tuition of as many students as possible. It costs only \$12 a year to send a child to Magereza, but this is an expense that many families in the community simply cannot afford. Parents often have to pay the tuition in installments of 25 cents at a time and when they are unable to make those payments, many children simply have to stop coming to school. She has visited another nursery school in Moshi that she hopes to help, "It is smaller," she says, "but they need so much."

In Tanzania only 20 percent of children are able to go through primary and onto secondary school. Wendel lists in her future goals the possibility of setting up a scholarship to sponsor one child per year graduating from Magereza nursery school, based on academic achievement and need.

She would like to be able to send them through primary and secondary school, and give them a shot at an education many American children take for granted. She estimates that this support of a child through age 18 will cost approximately \$1,500 per child and has already brainstormed the details of how she could begin to set up trusts to ensure the honest execution of her plans.

She also said that she has a wish list. "And I would love to buy them all shoes!"

More information about Project MEMA can be found at [www.projectmema.org](http://www.projectmema.org)