

A Single Drop of Water
by Robert Freeman



A story of how a high school
teacher and his students
set out to change the world,
with a dollar

“Even the greatest waterfall starts
with a single drop of water.”

~ African Bantu Saying

Chapter Eleven Teacher Heroes

Steve Mills



Steve Mills is a teacher and former Director of Student Activities at Burlingame High School in California. Born in London, England, Steve grew up in an Air Force family, splitting his childhood between California, England and what was then West Germany. His interest in service and leadership began with his involvement in the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts, continued at UC Riverside where he majored in Political Science and Law & Society, and has been an integral part of his 17 years as a teacher and Activities Director. When he's not at school, Steve can be found enjoying time with his family, on the golf course or rooting for his World Champion San Francisco Giants.

Ubuntu is the essence of being human. It is more than just a word; it's a worldview, rooted in ancient African culture. It evokes the interconnectedness of all human beings and emphasizes relationships, generosity, and mutual understanding. Ubuntu was the last thing I expected to encounter as an activities director and leadership teacher at Burlingame High School. But after five years of working with ODFL, we have created Ubuntu on our campus. It has become part of our school culture, and we are all more human as a result.

We started doing dollar drives at BHS in the spring of 2008, after I learned about ODFL from a new counselor at our school. She had worked with Robert Freeman at her previous school and said I needed to meet him. I emailed him and asked him to come up to meet with me and my student leader in charge of service learning, Emma Anders. We sat down with Robert to discuss ODFL and after about 10 minutes we were hooked!

Robert had shown us a picture of some students in blue uniforms in Manyesa, Malawi, sitting in the dirt under a tree, facing a teacher standing at a makeshift blackboard. He explained that they needed desks for the new school ODFL was just finishing. Of course, Emma and I knew students need desks to learn. We knew that our school's students would know this as well. So we had a project to commit our school's service learning drive toward...now, how the heck do we do this?!

The concept of a “Fundraiser-in-a-Box” was one of the biggest selling points to me as an activities director. Organizing activities for high schools has many challenges, so I was impressed to see that all the tools we needed had been built and assembled into one place, ready to use. The best part was you could tell the students had taken the lead in creating them. Emma and her leadership team printed out the checklist forms from the website and started organizing.



Students in Manyesa before completion of their new classroom

We needed two weeks to reach our goal of \$1,500, or about one dollar for every person on our campus. We used the Public Service Announcements from the ODFL web site, copied the flyers, and posted them around the campus. We followed the ODFL playbook to the “T” and awaited the results. By the end of the first week, we had collected \$1,000. We collected another \$800 by the end of the 2nd week! It turns out teenagers really do have altruism, especially if you give them something good to practice it on.

In these two weeks, our school came together like at no other time in that year. Students learned about Malawi; where it was, its economic and political condition; what life might be like there. It was one of the rare times in my eight years at BHS that students felt part of something bigger than themselves; that they could bring about real change in the world. We had over 1,300 one dollar bills and another \$500 in change when we went to the bank to get the cashier’s check to send to ODFL! The students believed in what they were doing and felt good about helping students on the other side of the world.



Desks funded by Burlingame High School students

The reward came a few months later. An envelope from ODFL contained a picture of the rudimentary wooden desks our students had helped to purchase. They were simply a few boards nailed together to create a bench seat and a flat surface to write on, but compared to the picture of the kids sitting under the tree they were amazing works of educational luxury! The next year's drive was even easier: I just showed the faculty and students what we had done the prior year. We raised over \$2,000 during the next dollar drive.

In our third year of doing ODFL, the student leader in charge was senior Brittney Reyes. Brittany had done two previous ODFL drives and had a vision of connecting the drive to the community. Our students thought of new and creative ways to raise money; hosting lunchtime activities with the goal of getting \$100 in donations during 30 minutes. One English teacher volunteered to be duct taped to the outside of one of our buildings for dollar donations – we raised almost \$150 that day! We brought in over \$4,000 but even better, another crop of student leaders had gained experience and confidence in their ability to make real change in the world.

In March of 2010, I received an email from Robert that would change my life. ODFL was organizing a summer trip to Kenya so students could help build their next school project. The students would pay their own way, but the male chaperone who was scheduled to help lead the trip had canceled at the last minute. Would I be interested in going? I remember reading the email two or three times to make sure I understood it correctly before turning to my wife and saying, “Honey, I think I’m going to Kenya this summer.”



New classroom in Gakawa, Kenya

Getting to see the dollar donations from American students manifest into an actual stone structure was literally breathtaking. It all seemed so simple yet so amazing that this school classroom being built in Kenya was possible because 10,000 American students had donated a dollar at their school. We worked each day on the new classroom while our student hosts and their classmates attended classes.

During breaks, the Kenyan students would come over and surround the room we were working on and watch us paint the walls and ceilings, dig drainage ditches around the perimeter of the building and eventually sketch and paint a world map mural on the interior classroom wall.

Staying with our host families for nearly two weeks made me realize how much we take for granted at home, and the value that is placed in Kenyan culture on neighbors and family. One of the most memorable parts of the trip was teaching a lesson on American government to a classroom of Kenyan 11th and 12th graders. What was scheduled to be a 30 minute lecture turned into a 2 hour Q and A session that was one of the highlights of my teaching career. The generosity of our hosts, and the excitement that comes from giving of yourself to a cause larger than you were constant and lasting themes.

I was especially proud on my return to later read a letter from the school's principal, above. It described how seeing the American students and teachers working with their hands and doing manual labor really broke some stereotypes the Kenyans had about Americans. The 9 students and 2 chaperones who went to Kenya that summer not only helped to build a school that will last for generations, we changed the hearts and minds of the families we stayed with...and for that we are all better people.



To,
The Director,
One Dollar for Life

July 20th, 2010.

Thank you ODFL

On behalf of students, parents and the board of governors of Gakawa Secondary School, I wish to say a big thank you to the ODFL students and teachers who visited and stayed with us from 20th June to 2nd July 2010.

At first it was anxiety. "How would the Americans live with us in our humble dwellings?" students and their parents would ask.

Anxiety then quickly turned into incredulity. The American kids were no different from our own! They lived with us. They ate with us. They shared with us, both their hopes and fears.

The Classroom Construction

Most of us always believed that Americans were delicate people who just used machines to work for them.

But now we know better. The American students walked to and from school each day and tirelessly worked in the classroom construction site. This really endeared them to the local parents who were often heard to murmur, "I think these American students are great! Not only have they contributed one dollar each for this project but they have also come and shown our children that it is not demeaning to use your own hands to help others. This strong and beautiful classroom will be an indelible mark of the American's sojourn at Gakawa". Other parents would nod in unison.

Impact assessment

One of the objectives of the project was to uplift the standard of infrastructure in our school. This was achieved successfully. Students now have a much needed classroom. The programme also created a learning opportunity where our students and parents interacted freely with their American counterparts and learnt a lot about a different culture. They learnt the virtue of selflessness and being mindful of those in need.

I can now only wish the ODFL fraternity well and hereby state that we are happy to be associated with you and SEANET. Thank you ODFL! Thank you! Thank you!

Daniel Muketha,
Principal,
Gakawa Secondary School.

Letter from principal at Gakawa Secondary School

The summer service trip to Kenya allowed me to see the “other” side of ODFL; what the dollar donations actually accomplish on the ground in the developing world. It is unbelievable and has been a highlight of both my teaching career and my life. I’ve always believed that the classroom is not the only location that learning can take place, and ODFL has shown me that service learning is real and important work for American students. Emma Anders and Brittney Reyes learned about Ubuntu from organizing our dollar drives and introduced it to our school where it has taken root. This is what ODFL is all about; building bigger students here at home while building a better world out there.