

Volunteer Shows Uncommon Dedication in Kenya

By Susan G. Schram and Diana Roach

When ACIDI/VOCA volunteer Tom Dobler and his wife, Rose, look out the window of their home these days, they don't see the fertile fields of their Burlington, Colorado, farm. Instead, they are likely to see a hippopotamus staring back at them or trampling their flower beds. Indeed, life in Naivasha, Kenya, presents many new challenges that the Doblens never faced on their farm in Burlington.

Dobler, an experienced dairyman, has been volunteering for ACIDI/VOCA since 1990. He has completed 16 assignments in nine countries, including five trips to Kenya since 2005, and was awarded a Presidential Volunteer Service Award in 2008. In Kenya he observed firsthand some of the issues contributing to food insecurity there. On his assignments, Dobler focused on problems related to the adequacy of feed for dairy cows during the Kenyan dry season, when poor storage practices caused the silage to spoil. He saw that a more consistent supply of feed over a longer time period would greatly improve herd health and result in higher milk yields.

Over the course of his assignments, Dobler developed a reputation in Kenya for having excellent management skills and a strong work ethic. As a result, the owner of the large dairy farm near Lake Naivasha invited Dobler to take a five-year position managing, and partly owning, the farm. He accepted, and in spring 2009, the Doblens moved to Kenya.

The farm has 145 employees. Dobler says, "The people are very poor, many coming to work in sandals made of tire sidewalls. They have virtually



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nothing and rely on the dairy to provide a place to live and to provide a school for the children. They earn just over \$2 a day. They do almost everything by hand. Getting them to use machines, and especially to maintain them, is a huge hurdle."

Dobler has acquired a lot of experience with equipment in Kenya. On his volunteer assignments, he saw farmers attempt to harvest several hundred tons of silage corn using worn-out, 25-year-old equipment and realized that the tools they needed were not available in the country. At the farmers' request, and with their funds, he returned to the United States to find affordable, reliable, used equipment. With the help of ACIDI/VOCA staff in D.C. and Kenya, Dobler in September 2006 shipped the first container of used John Deere silage choppers to the farmers. He repeated this effort three times, donating countless hours of his personal time to locating, inspecting and purchasing equipment, then arranging for the containers to be loaded and shipped to Kenya. Each time a container arrived in Kenya, Dobler helped the farmers assemble the equipment and trained them on



its safe operation and maintenance.

Dobler's dedicated efforts will, no doubt, contribute to the improved food security of the people of the Naivasha area. He says, "This is definitely more than a job and very rewarding beyond just the financial rewards."

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