



Contributed photo

Mary Morrissey-Ross, right, presents mosquito nets to Waranka Elder, left, and Mor Sakho, center, during one of her trips to Senegal. Morrissey-Ross' award-winning video of her health care work helped her get even more funding for future trips.

Making strides in Senegal

By Kirk Lang
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Fairfield resident Mary Morrissey-Ross is a mother of three who works full-time and also is a Ph.D. student in Public Health at Walden University. Put simply, she is a busy woman. Even so, Morrissey-Ross found time in her schedule to enter a university-sponsored contest in which applicants had to submit videos showing how Walden has helped them to make a positive change in their careers, their lives or the lives of others. The contest was launched as part of a multi-media campaign celebrating Walden's commitment to social change.

Morrissey-Ross' efforts did not go unappreciated. She was one of five students chosen as a grand prize winner in the Scholars of Change video contest, and received \$5,000 in prize money plus an additional \$2,500 was donated to the charity of her choice.

The \$2,500 has subsequently been earmarked for the Health Care Initiative of The Senegal-America Project. Senegal-America expanded its scope after making connections with staff at Roger Ludlowe Middle School (RLMS)

in 2006. It started as a musician exchange, but now includes improving the health of the Senegalese people. From raising money to help build and support a new school in Guinaw Rail, to donating 2,000 mosquito nets to help fight malaria, and offering free diabetes screening, students, teachers and parents from Roger Ludlowe Middle School are doing what they can to combat malaria, cataracts, high blood pressure and diabetes.

Morrissey-Ross' video, which was partially shot in West Africa, describes how she implemented community screenings to address emerging diabetes and hypertension concerns in Senegal. She credits the faculty at Walden for encouraging her to focus her doctoral research on studying the emergence of chronic diseases in Africa.

Morrissey-Ross knew there were problems with malaria and cataracts in Senegal, but "the diabetes surprised me a bit," she said.

She went on the first of three trips to Senegal when her son Brendan — now 16 — was an eighth grader at RLMS. She and other parents were

encouraged to join their children abroad. Morrissey-Ross — a nurse, and more specifically, the clinical director at the Norwalk-based Nursing & Home Care — was invited back to go on a second and third trip. She agreed, “as long as we were able to do a health care project.”

On her return trip to Senegal, she helped set up a screening event in Dakar for diabetes. The RLMS contingent traveled abroad armed with glucometers and locals got their blood sugar levels tested to see if it was elevated. Eight were sent to the diabetic clinic in Dakar.

“We paid for their medication and treatment for that event,” she said. “Since then, I have connected them (a community organization called Waranka) with the International Diabetes Federation.”

The following year, screenings were expanded to cover both diabetes and high blood pressure.

“We found 42 people with [either diabetes or high blood pressure] one or both,” said Morrissey-Ross, adding that even in developing nations, “we’re finding Type 2 diabetes [generally found in adults].”

In a country where many cannot afford health care, this is bad news.

For her video project, Morrissey-Ross sent a video camera overseas to a friend to interview people she had screened and ask them what the screenings meant to them, what they got out of it and what they need in their area. Morrissey-Ross got back 90 minutes of video that she needed to cut down to 3 minutes.

Many in Senegal have seen their friends or family members lose appendages because of diabetes, so some in the video who were found not to have diabetes were “enormously relieved,” said Morrissey-Ross. Others in need of health care revealed lumps on their breast — likely cancer — rashes

roid). Some asked for help on the video.

“They have high hopes for me,” said Morrissey-Ross. Her son Brendan told her “the needs are so overwhelming but you have to start somewhere.”

Representatives of Waranka Association in Senegal, prior to a screening event for Diabetes Day, e-mailed Morrissey-Ross, noting they could use some supplies.

“A number of us got them what they needed,” she said. Morrissey-Ross said many clinics don’t even have basic pain killers or clean bandage supplies.

“They have nothing,” she said, and so she, along with her friends and connections, try to provide assistance. Blood pressure cuffs have been sent overseas, as well as medications, suturing materials, stethoscopes, bandage supplies and even umbilical cord clamps for the mid-wives.

As far as diabetes, Morrissey-Ross said it is always better when “we can find people who are borderline, and can get them to understand what they can do to prevent it.” In addition to losing limbs, those not properly treated for diabetes can get high blood pressure, go into a diabetic coma, suffer kidney failure, become blind or possibly lose their lives to the disease.

Additionally, high blood pressure, on its own (without having diabetes), said Morrissey-Ross, can lead to strokes and heart attacks as well as kidney disease.

“What I heard from people in Senegal is that people will just abruptly die and often they do not know why,” she said.

She said anyone who travels there and helps is looked at as a “figure of hope.” — when they leave, their return is awaited. However, it costs money to make progress and that’s why Morrissey-Ross was thrilled to receive the \$2,500 that she could provide to The Senegal-America Project. In addition to

ers raised approximately \$4,500 this past September with the help of the Silver Ribbon Jewelry Store of Westport, the site of the fund-raiser.

“My job was to get traffic in the store,” said Morrissey-Ross, who noted that people bought a \$20 chance on a bag of jewelry. The contents of some bags were pricier than others.

Morrissey-Ross said the money raised, and the money she received from the video contest win, can’t build a hospital “but it can go a long way.”

“It can provide follow-up to screening,” she said.

Walden, which offers working professionals flexibility via online course work, hopes to launch the video contest again in the coming months. More than 90 students and graduates created videos, sharing compelling stories about how their learning experience at Walden has impacted their lives and the lives of those around them. The judging panel included members spanning the university: faculty, academic leadership and marketing leadership. Members of the public were also invited to vote for their favorite video.

One motivating factor in Morrissey-Ross’ pursuit of a doctorate is the fact she’s always wanted to teach at the college level. She’s due to graduate by September 2013. While she does online coursework, she is required to do at least four residencies (spanning anywhere from a week to a long weekend).

“In the school of public health, you can choose a specialty of epidemiology or community health,” said Morrissey-Ross. “I hope to do my dissertation work in Africa. I’ve always wanted to do international public health work.”

What does her husband think of her busy schedule?

“He supports me,” she said.

That’s good because Morrissey-Ross isn’t done helping in Senegal.

“It is just the begin-

continue to conduct fund-raisers and to be directly involved.” That’s not all, Morrissey-Ross is having influence on others. Lida Ghiorzi, owner of the Silver Ribbon Jewelry store — the site of the September fund-raiser — plans on making a trip overseas in the near future.

Morrissey-Ross said she herself will continue to supply locals in the capital city of Senegal with screening materials, and, hopefully, funding for follow-up to the screenings.

Also, she hopes Walden’s spotlight from the video will encourage people to travel with The Senegal-America Project and determine how they can offer talent, ideas and resources for the project. Morrissey-Ross’ video can be viewed at www.waldenu.edu/About-Us/33459.htm or www.youtube.com/user/WaldenUniversity#p/u