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WNC retiree travels world helping entrepreneurs, such as a Kenyan flower farmer

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You might think that a retiree who has already traveled to 60 countries might want to settle down and relax, but Weaverville resident Bob Bond can't seem to sit still.

The former consultant and business professor at Western Carolina University has spent the past 12 years doing volunteer work around the world, using his years of experience to assist entrepreneurs from Moldova to Malawi. Bond returned to North Carolina from his most recent adventure in July, in which he spent 18 days in Kenya offering marketing advice to a small sunflower oil business.

"It's a good use of retired people," Bond said. "The quid pro quo is that you've helped somebody and spread goodwill, and hopefully they've benefitted."

Bond, 66, traveled to the remote village of Mitunguu, not far from the country's tallest mountain, Mount Kenya, and four hours away from Nairobi, the nation's capital.

"There's no Internet, no banks, you can only drink bottled water," Bond said. "In America, we complain about a lot of things, but the things we complain about would be luxuries to other people."

He said many people ask him whether he felt safe traveling to such an "exotic" location, but he never felt as though he was in any danger.

"The threat is not terrorism but to make sure you drink bottled water. I was never anywhere near to feeling threatened," Bond said. "Most people were as friendly as could be."

Farmer-to-Farmer

The trip was organized by nonprofit Citizens Network for Foreign Aid, one of four organizations that oversee the federal Farmer-to-Farmer program. Created in 1988, Farmer-to-Farmer provides voluntary technical assistance to farmers, financial institutions and agribusinesses in developing nations.

Program director Gideon Donoho said the name Farmer-to-Farmer is "a bit of a misnomer," and the organization tries to support agribusiness at multiple levels, from production to distribution to marketing.

"The idea is to link volunteers to an organization that will connect them to a lot of people," Donoho said.

In Mitunguu, Bond was introduced to local pharmacist and businessman Samuel Gathumbi, who owns a factory that extracts sunflower seed oil. They discussed marketing ideas, and while some didn't fly — coupons are not a familiar concept in Kenya — Bond made several suggestions that Gathumbi decided to implement.

Specifically, they decided to focus on making consumers more aware of sunflower oil's health benefits, which include the highest vitamin E content and highest level of unsaturated fat of all vegetable oils.

Although he was not working with farmers directly, Bond explained that if Gathumbi's business succeeds, local farmers will also benefit.

"I visited (Mitunguu) right after Bob left; at that point, (Gathumbi) had gone through the process of procuring the sample size bottles and selling them to the stores, and people had been very receptive," said Sapna Shah, program coordinator for East Africa.

"Emphasizing the health benefits of the oil was not something he had focused on before."

Bond said it was "extremely gratifying" to see Gathumbi begin to implement some of the ideas they had discussed.

"Before I arrived, he had not kept records of his sales," Bond said, "and after a couple of weeks he was sitting at his computer and saying things like, 'this is my top buyer,' and could look for other opportunities."

'Creative retirement'

In what Bond refers to as his "creative retirement plan," he has worked with a number of international nonprofits, volunteering in locales such as Honduras, Russia and Turkmenistan.

During his layovers stateside, he also finds time to take graduate classes at UNC Asheville, and has served as the chairman of the Asheville branch of SCORE, an organization that assists small businesses across the United States, for three years.

He hopes to be traveling abroad again as early as December, which suits organizations like CNFA just fine.

"Bob is a great guy, he's open to new experiences, and he's great at rolling with the punches, which is necessary," Shah said. "Marketing is a skill, and he's really good at it."
