

New Brighton resident teaches farming worldwide

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Bulletin staff

Rick Johnson is a world traveler, but not one like you would expect.

Johnson has traveled to Africa five times and will make his first trip to South America next year.

So how does a man from New Brighton, who works in Shoreview get to see so much of the world?

"I got involved through the farm and farmer program," he said.

He took his first trip to Nigeria in 2001 through his company, Land O' Lakes. The farm and farmer program is the United States Agency for International Development funded Farmer-to-Farmer Program.

The program provides volunteers who are experienced in various aspects of farming to help farmers, farm groups and agribusinesses in developing in transitional countries.

The idea is to help make improvements in food production, marketing and processing.

"You're teaching them basic, sometimes even before basic skills or industries or whatever," Johnson said. "Most of what I do is cows."

Johnson specializes in poultry and dairy feed, working in animal

feed sales for Land O' Lakes. He said one of his co-workers mentioned the idea of going on an assignment to him and he applied through the company for his first trip.

He then took the time off from work to travel to the Africa.

Johnson said those two to three weeks on assignment are "not a vacation, I can tell you that."

"They work the dickens out of you," he said.

Johnson worked with local farmers on each of his trips, helping them learn how to milk and breed cows; he also taught them cleanliness practices and techniques for handling raw milk.

He said the herd sizes in Africa are much smaller than in the United States — herds can be as small as one cow or as large as 10 — "that's a huge herd of cows for Africa."

Johnson returned earlier this year from his second trip to Malawi. Previously, he had taken two trips to Zambia.

Malawi is a fourth world country, Johnson said. He said it was very poor and very tiny.

"Zambia's not much better," Johnson said.

He said the average yearly income of most of the people he worked with was less than \$300.

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He added the people there are "just so happy" with "not a care." With animals being put into preserves to protect them from poachers, there isn't much left for the locals to hunt, Johnson said.

That's where he comes in to help them raise dairy cows.

"You do it because it just makes you feel so dang good. It doesn't cost you any money and it doesn't cost them any money," he explained.

Johnson called it a joint learning venture.

"I learn the culture and they learn whatever they want from me," he said.

One year, Johnson's wife went with him and helped teach filing and record-keeping to the stations that collect the milk. When she got there, she had to teach them basic accounting and more than she had originally bargained for.

"All of a sudden her assignment had to change," Johnson said. "She had to be flexible."

He said her influence spread to all of the stations in the area and pretty soon they were all operating off a piece of white paper with



Submitted photo

Johnson stands with a local farmer and veterinarian as they assess a flock of hens.

his wife's handwritten instructions.

Johnson worked with the farmers to develop natural, inexpensive feed for their animals.

He said a survey of local crops helped him find nutritious, natural ingredients for feed so farmers wouldn't have to buy feed.

"The best way to make the most amount of money is to not have to buy feed," he said.

He said they used things

like sun dried minnows to put in the feed for amino acids and roasted soybeans over an open fire. In the end he said they came up with a "pretty good diet."

The farmers are then able to sell their milk to locally owned co-ops and get a "big farmer price" while being one of the smaller farms, Johnson said.

At the end of the trip Johnson said he thought, "I just did something really cool. I just helped a

boatload of people."

He said he got a bug for helping other farmers and had to keep going. In February he'll travel to Nicaragua.

"Help people raise milk cows instead of raising poppies," Johnson said.

The program Johnson is going with, CNFA, has online list of projects. Johnson said he put his resume on there and they try to match assignments with his qualifications.

Sometimes the turnaround — from notification e-mail to plane ride — is as short as two weeks; this time its several months for Johnson.

He said there are a variety of assignments available for people of all different types of expertise.

"It's all good stuff," he said. "It's all stuff God would tell you to do if you could sit down and have a chat with him. He would say, 'Yeah go do it!'"

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