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## Group finds inspiration, purpose in summer visit

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**KENWOOD** - As Connie Ring's entourage of students and parents flew to war-torn northern Uganda, fellow passengers said they were crazy for going there.

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That didn't scare them, nor stop them.

"Just like anywhere, education is the key," said Ring, a Moeller High School math teacher. "Education eliminates all fear. We knew where we stood. It was fine."

She took four students, three parents and Moeller religion teacher Paul Kindt to visit the Upper Nile Institute for Appropriate Technology in Gulu.

Moeller and 10 other Cincinnati high schools have organized Unified for UNIFAT chapters to support the school, which educates students from preschool through seventh grade. They sponsor 120 students.

The goal of the 10-day June visit was to find out the needs of the children and school, conduct interviews for a video to spread the word about them and get to know the Ugandan children.

"That interpersonal relationship is just so important," Ring said. "Otherwise, it's just a picture on the refrigerator."

The visit led to emotional meetings for the students: Meghan Marth a Sycamore High School junior; Eric Werner, a Moeller senior; Billy Yates, a Moeller grad who will be a

freshman at Rollins College in Florida; and Will Tardio, a Moeller grad who will be a sophomore at Miami University.

Up until then, they had just exchanged letters with the children.

Werner, 17, of Blue Ash, met his student, Akot Brenda, a 12-year-old sixth-grader.

"It was an overwhelming emotional experience just to see her," he said. "We were crying and hugging. It was awesome. It was a very powerful moment."

When Marth met 4-year-old Atoo Irene, she couldn't let go of the little preschooler.

"She's so young, so I think she didn't really understand who I was," the 17-year-old Symmes Township girl said. "The most important thing is that she knew we were friends. I honestly was just so excited to meet her, to hold and hug her and to know that I was making a small change in her life."

Tardio, 19, of Blue Ash was one of three Moeller students who first saw the "Invisible Children" documentary that chronicled the plight of children abducted to fight in Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army against the government.

Moeller students seized on the "Invisible Children" issue and spread the word to other schools about the children.

Their involvement morphed into the student-run Unified for UNIFAT chapter, largely because a 1967 Moeller graduate, Michael Zimmer, knew school founder Abitimo Odongkara.

Individual students, families and school organizations contribute \$300 a person annually to the 120 students who are the most destitute. The money goes to tuition, lunch, uniforms, shoes and medical care.



Eric Werner, a Moeller senior, meets Akot Brenda, the 12-year-old Ugandan child that his family sponsors.

A small portion also goes to the school for construction. The Unified group saw the addition that the money helped build. The primary school, which educates 1,400 students, can now lower class sizes of 60 to 90 students to 40 to 60.

Although the school is called Upper Nile Institute for Appropriate Technology, Ring said their appropriate technology consists of paper and pencils - until now.

The group took six laptops - the school's first - donated by Moeller graduating seniors and the school's technology department. While there, they trained employees and teachers on how to use them.

The students live in internally displaced persons camps and temporary housing



**Students from the Upper Nile Institute for Appropriate Technology in Northern Uganda hold a farewell ceremony for their American visitors. A group from Moeller High School visited the school in the summer.**

because the villages aren't safe anymore, Ring said.

"A lot them are orphans to the war, orphans of AIDS. Several have been abducted and escaped," she said.

Despite what they've been through, the children and their families appreciate what Unified has done for them and still have a positive outlook on life.

"I so look up to them. I so look up to what they've lived

through and their ability to survive, and their unbelievably undying faith and strength and courage," Ring said. "And all we did was raise some money. I just didn't feel like we were hardly worthy of the payback that we got."

The students, too, were impressed by the people's gratefulness, hospitality and outlook.

"I just think that even though they're living in these horrible conditions, in our eyes, such poverty, they still had such hope and faith in God," Marth said.

It's the first time Ring or any of the students had been to Uganda. Now, it will be a yearly trip.

"This is it for me," she said. "My missing link. I can't describe it any better than that."

For more information about Unified for UNIFAT, visit [www.unifiedforunifat.com](http://www.unifiedforunifat.com).

### **Local support**

Students from these area high schools have or are starting a Unified for UNIFAT chapter to support children who attend the Upper Nile Institute for Appropriate Technology (UNIFAT) in Northern Uganda:

Anderson, Fairfield, Madeira, Moeller, Mount Notre Dame, Princeton, Purcell Marian, St. Ursula, Sycamore, Ursuline, Wyoming