Pottstown students aid Africans, expand worldview

Having won a nationwide “innovators” competition sponsored by the Dow Chemical Co., Pottstown pre-engineering students Jacob Eames and David Hicks joined their teacher, Andy Bachman, on a 10-day mission last summer to Kenya to help enlarge a K-8 public school sponsored by WE.org, an international community-building charity.

The Pottstonians joined peers from four states and Mexico, Algeria, Egypt and Thailand to help build a new kitchen for the Mwangaza Primary School in the Kenyan outback.

Because everyone spoke English, they quickly made new friends and absorbed different cultures first-hand.

The students learned rudimentary Swahili and bargained at a local market to buy a week’s food for a family of seven with just 1,000 shillings ($10).

They hand-dug a foundation and poured a concrete floor for a school kitchen.

(At present, Kenyan children are fed with lentil soup cooked over an open fire in a hole in the ground.)

The students lugged 50-pound jerry cans of water more than a mile from the communal well to the school, stockpiling a two-week supply of cans.

(Kenyan women “momas” carry water in jerrycans 1½ miles over open country, three to five times a day.)

The students visited a farm set up by WE.org to teach natives sustainable agricultural practices.

They showed each other their winning innovation projects (our Pottstown students devised a method to cut down on food waste in the high school cafeteria). Later, they repeated their presentations to Dow executives flown in from all over the world.

“Everyone was friendly and showed their gratitude for everything we did,” said Jacob. “They help each other and are proud of what they have.”

Said David, “It made a powerful impact on us. It opens your eyes to extreme poverty. It increased our ability to have empathy for other people.”