Tanzania is a country in East Africa with nearly 48 million residents. Of those 48 million people, it is estimated that between 60,000 to 80,000 deaths occur each year due to malaria. In the last several years, that number has begun to drop thanks to the efforts of organizations like Lutheran World Relief (LWR) and its Lutheran Malaria Initiative (LMI) campaign, supported by LWML grants. This past spring, former LWML President Janice (Jan) Wendorf was able to see firsthand how those efforts are paying off when she took a short-term mission trip to Tanzania.

“I was asked if I would go on this Lutheran World Relief trip as a way for the people to thank the LWML for all that it has done in support of the efforts in Tanzania,” explained Jan. “While Africa had never been on my bucket list of places to visit, so to speak, I was honored to go and represent the LWML in this way. And what an incredible experience it turned out to be.”

While in Tanzania, Jan was joined by LWR staff members Brenda Kimaro, Regional Communications Officer for East Africa; Carrie Constantini, Program Assistant for International Programs; and Melanie Gibbons, Quilt and Kit Manager. As part of the trip, the women spent time at the Lutheran Church in Usa River. Located in a high-producing rice area, malaria is particularly prevalent there because the many rice fields contain standing water that attracts mosquitoes. To combat this problem, three years ago the Lutheran Church in Usa River began the Children’s Survival Program through LMI. The program is open to poor women from the community who are pregnant, since pregnant women and babies/children are the most vulnerable to malaria. The women are able to remain in the program until their children reach four years of age. They meet regularly at the church and learn how to protect their families from malaria through education and prevention.

“One of the keys to prevention is consistent use of a bed net,” explained Jan. “Many of the women in the Children’s Survival Program were eager to show us how to use one properly. They had their children, their husband, and themselves crawl into their bed, which is about the size of one of our double beds, and then they meticulously tucked the end of the net, which hung above their bed, under the mattress to protect themselves from mosquitoes at night. We know it is working because in the last two years the parish has not lost a single member to malaria.”

Along with the use of insecticide-treated bed nets, mothers can also access healthcare through the Child Survival Program if malaria symptoms like chills, fever, fatigue, headache, and sweating show up.

“To see the beautiful smiling faces of the women and children who have been in the Children’s Survival Program, and to hear them singing their praises to God, was proof to me that LMI is working in Tanzania,” said Jan.
Along with visiting the Lutheran Church in Usa River, Jan also went to the Christian Council of Tanzania, to a warehouse where the LWR quilts and kits are stored and ready for distribution. “Lutheran World Relief has had a long and well-established relationship with the Christian Council of Tanzania,” explained Jan. “I was told that since 1979, when a customs clearance went into effect, the Christian Council of Tanzania has received 72,980 units from LWR. A unit is a box of kits or a bale of quilts, with the bales having 30–35 quilts in them. Those are pretty astounding numbers when you sit back and think about it for a minute. Brenda Kimaro, LWR Regional Communications Officer for East Africa, told me that the majority of quilts they receive come from the women of the LWML. When I heard this, it made my heart glad to know that our prayers and quilts are really having an impact in people’s daily lives.” Jan said she was particularly impressed with the organization and accountability the people who work at the Christian Council of Tanzania demonstrated.

“When organizations come to the warehouse in the capital city of Dar Es Salaam, I saw a warehouse that was safe, clean, dry, secure, well-organized and protected,” remembered Jan. “I was also given the chance to take part in delivering kits and quilts to organizations that do not have vehicles to come to the capital warehouse. When this happened, I was impressed by the fact that the employees write down the name of the person and the date they picked up their donation. It was wonderful to see that the quilts and kits the LWML has made, or are paying for, are being cherished and accounted for in such a meticulous way. There is absolutely no room for people to abuse the system.”

Due to the extreme poverty that most people in Tanzania live in daily, Jan explained the quilts are sometimes the only possession a person has. “We visited the Nunge Home for the elderly and the disabled while we were in Tanzania,” said Jan. “For most of these people, they have nothing, so their quilt is everything to them. They use it to sleep with, to wrap around themselves to keep warm, to store their meager belongings and, when needed, to provide a divider in their room for some privacy.” Jan continued. “Since the winter months can be cold and the people are used to a warmer climate during the rest of the year, their bodies are not used to cold temperatures. So, I was told heavy quilts, especially, continue to be needed and preferred.” When talking with the people, Jan said several times she was asked why someone who doesn’t even know them would send quilts to them. “I told the people that when the ladies of the LWML are making these quilts they pray that they will go to people who really need them and by using them, they will feel the love we have for them and the love Christ has for them.”

If you would be interested in inviting Jan to share her story, please contact her at Tanzania@missions.lwml.org.

Pam Knepper will serve as the new Quarterly News Editor, starting with the Spring 2014 issue.