**Animal welfare goes worldwide**

**NM woman’s project helps animals everywhere**

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*COURTESY OF KAREN MENCZER/ANIMAL-KIND INTERNATIONAL*A child with a pet in Katutura, a township outside of Windhoek, Namibia. Karen Menczer of Jemez Springs founded Animal-Kind International, which supports programs in poor countries like Namibia, which never had animal care services until funded by AKI donors.

Morris Darbo says he was born with such a great love for animals, he couldn’t bear to see them suffer. That’s pretty tough when you’re growing up in Liberia, a country so poor that people took to eating dogs during the African nation’s two civil wars, and some still do.

Animals are routinely abused and neglected in Liberia, more out of ignorance than malice, Darbo says. “I said to myself, I have to do something to bring awareness to people that animals have feelings,” he recounted on a visit to New Mexico in May, where he gave presentations about his work founding the Liberia Animal Welfare and Conservation Society.

Attitudes are passed down in families, Darbo says, so his group initiated a humane education curriculum that has reached thousands of schoolchildren in Liberia, thanks to funding from a group called AnimalKind International founded by Karen Menczer of Jemez Springs. Menczer met Darbo in Liberia and invited him to Albuquerque while he was at a Humane Society expo in Las Vegas, Nev.

Darbo’s group is just one of the organizations that AKI supports in the developing world, where Menczer spent her career as a biodiversity specialist with the U.S. Agency for International Development. An animal-lover since she started volunteering at Animal Humane New Mexico as a teenager, Menczer sought out like-minded souls wherever she traveled abroad.

It wasn’t so easy finding those people when she started her career in the early 1990s, before there was much of an internet. “It was an odd thing back then — there was no concept of doing that and no place to look online,” she recalls.

“There was a person, Francesca in Paraguay — she was kind of crazy looking, a crazy cat lady. She was really the first human connection I made back then. We got along and stayed in touch, and I didn’t have much of a concept then, but I wanted to help her.”

As Menczer and her husband moved from country to country in Latin America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe and Africa, she would look for the kind of people who fed and cared for stray animals. There wasn’t even a name for them yet; the term “rescue” had not gained widespread currency, even in the U.S.

The watershed moment came in Cambodia in the mid-1990s, when Menczer found an injured dog at the market and couldn’t get anyone to help her. She couldn’t bring the dog to work or put him in her hotel room. “I was crying at the market and I remember saying to (husband) Ron, this is not going to happen again.”

In Uganda, where they moved next, Menczer found more hope. Neighboring Kenya had an SPCA that had been formed under British rule and she connected with a Kenyan who wanted to start an SPCA in Uganda. Together, they launched the organization that ran successful spay/neuter clinics.

By the time Menczer moved to Jamaica in 2002, it had become easier to find animal welfare groups and volunteers, and they were no longer just the “crazy cat lady” type.

So when they returned home to New Mexico in 2006, Menczer knew what she had to do. What had seemed so difficult overseas became imperative now that she knew rescuers in nearly a dozen nations, working in nearly impossible conditions.

Last year, AKI raised $47,000 — all of which went to its 11 partner organizations overseas. Organizational overhead is minimal, since Menczer has her travel paid as a consultant for USAID.

The money brought humane education to thousands of children in Liberia, Ghana and South Sudan; built catteries, dog runs and water tanks for struggling shelters and rescues; and funded shot and spay/neuter clinics, food and vet care for street animals in Bosnia, Jamaica and Honduras.

Now that it’s easier for animal groups to find each other on social media, the important role played by AKI, Menczer says, is to ensure that overseas donations reach groups that can be held accountable. All the rescue groups funded by AKI are personally known to the group’s board members, and agree to adhere to its standards of accountability, transparency and open communication.

When people ask Menczer, who also volunteers at Jemez Valley Animal Amigos, why she puts so much energy into helping animals on the other side of the world, she responds that these countries depend on outside help because they don’t have the resources even to meet the basic needs of humans.

“There are people trying to do things and there’s so much need. The thing that really constrains them is money,” she says. “There’s no Petco or PetSmart grants, there’s not that infrastructure,” even in places that have rescue groups or shelters.

Seeing firsthand the challenges of operating in poor countries, AKI does not dictate how donations are spent, though donors can choose which groups or programs they would like to fund. In some cases, paying the electric bill is the first struggle to keeping a shelter open.

Liberia, for example, is not ready for spay/neuter clinics since there is only one veterinarian in the whole country. Instead, AKI is trying to fund basic vet-tech training for a volunteer who lives in Darbo’s community so he can treat simple problems like worms and mange.

The community where they live, Voinjama, has no electricity during the day and no indoor plumbing; it’s an eight-hour drive on dirt roads to the nearest city. But “when I walk around, the dogs look so much better than everywhere else,” Menczer observes. “And people are actually playing with their dogs.”

For his part, Darbo found his visit to Albuquerque provided more than money raised through AKI. “Seeing how people treat animals, compared to my country, there is much more that needs to be done,” he said, “to extend our program so that we can bring about awareness to others.”