

# And now for something completely different:



## Canadian students help prevent spread of malaria in Ghana

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Special to The CJN

**W**hen Mike Kapps visited Ghana the summer he graduated from high school, he contracted the disease that is the leading cause of death in the country.

"I actually ended up getting malaria myself, which wasn't a fun experience," the third-year Harvard University economics student said.

It was difficult for Kapps, who was in Cape Coast, the capital of the central region of Ghana, for a medical internship, to reconcile the fact that he was able to get quick access to medication that many Africans have to wait weeks to get – if they can afford it.

So the Thornhill, Ont., native decided to tackle the issue by forming his own NGO called the Ahoto Partnership for Ghana.

Created in 2008, Ahoto – which means "freedom" in Fante, a Ghanaian dialect – is a student-run, non-profit sister organization to the Free Foundation, run by Ghanaian residents Kapps befriended during his stay.

The two groups work together to prevent the spread of malaria by providing health education and mosquito

net distribution. They're flying on their own dime and plan to distribute 1,000 mosquito nets, starting with families with children, in Akotokyir and surrounding areas.

Having taken surveys of the area, Ahoto has been working on the basis of what the people's main concerns are.

But what got Kapps really excited was seeing the results of the three-day health camp they planned last summer for Akotokyir. For about \$250, the group was able to bring in nurses and doctors who diagnosed and treated between 400 and 500 people.

"They caught all kinds of afflictions that were shocking to me," Kapps said. The medical team diagnosed cases such as tuberculosis, malaria and gangrene, which could have led to amputations if not treated.

"That's when the light bulb turned on," Kapps said. "If we could serve as someone who connects the dots, the community could leverage itself."

Focusing on one area is the best way to start making a difference, said Kahn, a third-year business administration student at Wilfrid Laurier University.

"We don't have the background or resources to overthrow [the afflictions] of a continent," he said.

ty registered by the end of January, as well as subsidize registry costs for the elderly and those in great need.

"It's ideal charitable work," said Nicole Gileadi, another member of Ahoto's executive board and a friend of Kapps and Kahn.

"You have this immediate impact, which is fantastic."

The third-year political science major at McGill University was first drawn to Ahoto because of the immediate change she witnessed.

"There's direct transparency within the group," she said.

Since every member pays for their own costs, every cent of each donation they receive goes towards the cause.

"We want to offer volunteers here in Canada and the U.S. ownership over their projects because when people feel directly involved, you tend to get better results," Gileadi said.

It was this line of thinking that prompted the three friends to ask this year's leadership class at their former high school, Thornhill Secondary School, to create six projects geared towards helping Ahoto.

Gileadi, who hopes to travel to Ghana this summer, would love to see chapters of Ahoto around the world,

including one at McGill.

Gileadi, Kapps and Kahn, all of whom are Jewish, are volunteering in hopes of improving the lives of the less fortunate, which falls in line with the Jewish philosophy of tikkun olam, repairing the world.

"I think we all have a vision of a better world," Kahn said.

"It's something toward which every religion strives. Those of us in Ahoto, like countless others worldwide, certainly believe in the cause

of helping those less fortunate, and we're all lucky enough to have the means to do so."

Kapps believes that in the end, a more sustainable solution has to come from the community itself, and once health-care initiatives kick in, he hopes to see entrepreneurship develop.

Ghana has a vibrant university, Kapps says, and Cape Coast is a developed place where he wouldn't hesitate to vacation. But even though Akotokyir and other communities lie directly on the outskirts, there are inherent frictions between the slums and the cities, he says.

"I don't see this initiative ending just in this community. Our hope is that we have geographical expansion... That could definitely be accomplished within the next two years."

For more information about the Ahoto Partnership for Ghana, visit [www.ahotopartnership.org](http://www.ahotopartnership.org), join their Facebook group or e-mail them directly at [contact@ahotopartners.org](mailto:contact@ahotopartners.org).



Mike Kapps, during his visit to Ghana, offered first aid care at an elementary school.



Adam Kahn said he feels lucky to have the means to help the less fortunate.



A child in Akotokyir waits to be seen by a doctor during the three-day health camp Ahoto planned last summer.

nets to the people of Akotokyir, a village of 5,000 people in the slum regions of Ghana.

One of their main concerns is teaching people to boil water (currently an uncommon practice), as access to clean water is limited and expensive.

"I thought that my efforts didn't have to be particularly big to impact change in the community," said Kapps, who started funding the group with his own money.

"Five dollars will buy a mosquito net, which would prevent a child from getting malaria, and that is the equivalent [cost] of buying a Starbucks [drink]," Kapps said.

But the 20-year-old isn't working alone. With five other university students sitting on the executive board, as well as volunteers at Harvard and in Ghana, the organization is an international effort.

This month, Kapps travels to Ghana to oversee their winter campaign with his childhood friend and execu-

"So we're focusing on one area and we do operate with a scalable model that, if it's successful in this village, we can expand into other villages."

What also sets Ahoto apart is their plan to further implement Ghana's National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), making it the first NGO that includes NHIS registration along with mosquito net distribution in its plan.

One of the benefits of the NHIS, which is currently free for pregnant women and children under three, is that trips to health clinics would become more accessible, Kahn says.

"Right now, even if you do come down with something, it's often not affordable to obtain malaria treatment, which is something that is relatively cheap," he said.

There are still a lot of people who are not registered for NHIS and are not receiving benefit from it, Kahn said. Ahoto is hoping to get every child in the communi-