

With a video camera and a passion to help others, Mason Elementary fourth grader is making a difference for needy families in Belize

Nine-year-old Gigi Harris is using a video camera, her passion to help others and a little help from her teacher and parents to make a tremendous difference for needy families living in San Mateo, Belize.

A video created as part of a project for Gigi's ASPIRE gifted class has generated interest from Engineers Without Borders as well as engineering students from the University of Mississippi who have been raising money to help this community develop basic-necessity infrastructure that could result in roads and clean water.

The University of Mississippi students recently developed an organization to raise money to purchase sand and rock, and a groundbreaking for the much-needed road was held during March. As of mid-April, the road is approximately one-fifth complete with close to 250 feet finished.

In addition, Mason Elementary plans to adopt a "sister school," located in San Mateo, and is hosting a movie-night fundraiser May 7 to benefit the road fund.

Gigi, a fourth-grader at Mason Elementary School, is a frequent visitor to San Mateo, an extremely impoverished area, since it is located near San Pedro where her grandparents live. Gigi's grandparents also have a connection to San Mateo, a town where they organized volunteer dentistry for many years.

Over the past few years, Gigi has grown to know the people of San Mateo and has wanted to find a way to help them. "She has taken McDonald's toys to pass out to the children in the area when she visits," said her ASPIRE teacher, Jenny Reidlinger, and "she previously organized a Girl Scout project where they made blankets for new babies and included simple medical supplies."

"Gigi is an amazing, creative kid with a world vision that is unlike any I've ever seen," Ms. Reidlinger added. "She is truly passionate and motivated to make a difference for others."

This school year, Mason ASPIRE students are participating in the Reel Spirit video contest, and Ms. Reidlinger suggested that Gigi consider creating a video about San Mateo when she visited her grandparents this Christmas. The plan was to enter Gigi's documentary in the regional video contest "but also as a means to really get the word out about this area," Ms. Reidlinger added.

San Mateo is an area with no running water, no sewage, no electricity and no roads. The town is essentially under water – around 4 to 6 inches – so people walk on wooden planks nailed together to connect houses. This water is extremely contaminated, and San Mateo children have died as a result of infections from even minor cuts.

The video features Gigi's interviews with children and adults living in San Mateo and also the more affluent San Pedro. Those interviewed include children, parents, a doctor, a nurse, an educator and a city council member. They talk about what this impoverished area needs to improve their citizens' lives. Gigi ended the video by asking some of the children she met to explain what they do for fun. The dramatic video, which even features music performed by one of the San Mateo families, ends with the statement, "Could you be so happy with so little?"

Working with Ms. Reidlinger during early January, Gigi edited around an hour of video footage into an effective five-minute documentary about the challenges of the San Mateo people. The video also captured the happiness of these families, despite the fact that they are lacking so many basic necessities.

Gigi's parents, Bob and Lisa Harris, contacted Engineers Without Borders to ask if they might consider Gigi's video as a proposal. Although the charitable organization officials had never heard a proposal from a 9-year-old, they didn't hesitate to invite Gigi to their annual meeting in Kansas City, encouraging her to present her video and answer questions.

Engineers Without Borders members were so impressed with Gigi's video and proposal that they began researching how best to help San Mateo. One of the major challenges for the area is that the land must be filled in before roads can be developed. Without roads, the only way to the small island is by ferry or small sea plane, making the project even more difficult.

After the Engineers Without Borders formed an exploratory committee, they joined forces with a new EWB chapter at the University of Mississippi. Students have traveled to San Mateo to further research the needs. Beginning this spring, the university students began using Gigi's documentary to help raise funds and have been sharing it with other universities. The Mason student's video has been requested by universities from the University of California to Duke University.

"After a day of filming in San Mateo, residents passing by thanked Gigi," said her mother. "One man thanked her for 'coming to meet their people and loving their people,' a woman thanked her for 'giving our people a voice.' From the way things look, their voice is now being heard."