

BY JULIE GRECO

Track coaches and Big Red runners help students excel in East Africa



Above: Big Red assistant track and field coach Kevin Thompson speaks to Kamobo Secondary School students in Kamobo, Kenya, about staying committed to their education. Inset: Thompson, left, and Andy Arnold '12, right, present a soccer ball to children of Kamobo's primary school.



During the indoor and outdoor track seasons, Cornell assistant track and field coach Kevin Thompson, MRP '83, helps Big Red student-athletes reach their potential. In his spare time, he not only helps local disadvantaged youth prepare for the SATs through the Ithaca-based Let's Get Ready program but also helps African youth succeed through Cross World Africa (CWA), a nonprofit organization he co-founded with his wife, Michelle Thompson, MRP '84, Ph.D. '01.

CWA's mission is to provide African youth with educational opportunities in the United States; to support cross-cultural exchange and athletic opportunities for collegiate athletes; identify microenterprise opportunities; and expand medical service options and provide education on population control, HIV/AIDS and sports medicine.

"It's overwhelming sometimes, but whatever we can do over there is met with such gratitude," Thompson says. "It doesn't matter if you're doing something major or something small, as long as you're giving back. That's always been my mission, not only in coaching but in life."

In early June, Thompson led a group of 10 on CWA's "Big Red Tour II" to East Africa. Among the travelers were fellow Cornell track and field assistant coach Robert Johnson and a

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pair of the track team's mid-distance runners, William McFall '12 and Andy Arnold '12. The tour marks the second time that Thompson has taken Big Red runners to Africa – Aaron Merrill '08 and Adam Seabrook '08 joined him in summer 2009.

Thompson started the 10-day tour by taking the group to Nairobi to visit one of the largest squatter settlements in the country.

"That was moving for a lot of people to see," says Thompson. "To go to a place where people have no sewage, no running water, and there are a million people living there."

From there, the group headed to Eldoret, where they followed up with CWA's ongoing Cow Project. Started in

2008 by Michelle Thompson, the Cow Project provided five non-indigenous cows to five families in the small village of Kamobo. The cows provide milk, which the women sell to finance their children's education. CWA also paid to have ongoing veterinary care and each of those cows inseminated; the offspring were given to another family in need. On this last trip, Thompson and the group bought four new cows and gave them to members of the community with the agreement to give future offspring to other women in the village.

Also in Eldoret, Kevin Thompson presented sports equipment from Cornell Athletics, a monetary donation from the Cornell men's track and field team and an iPad from CWA to Phyllis Keino, executive director of the Lewa Children's Home (orphanage).

Thompson also visited St. Patrick's High School in Iten, Kenya, where he hopes to begin a pilot program for SAT prep based on the Let's Get Ready program. The school has many promising students and also has produced many world-class long-distance runners over the years. He hopes to get Cornell students and students at other Ivy League institutions to travel to Kenya during the intercession and summer break to run a two-week intensive SAT prep program.

While Thompson and most of those traveling with him returned to Ithaca, McFall and Arnold stayed behind



to participate in a six-week internship with the KenSAP Organization, which helps high school students who have scored high on the Kenya national exam with college preparation. McFall and Arnold assisted 13 students with SAT prep, helped them with the college admission process and served as mentors for another 13 students who had been accepted to colleges in the United States to prepare them for their future in America.

"I'm a kid from Harlem," says Thompson, who lost both his parents at a young age. "I lived my last two years of high school on my own, and I had to fend for myself, but I always cared about other people. I think as long as you try and do good in the world, that's the best you can do."



Top right: Thompson shows Phyllis Keino, executive director of the Lewa Children's Home orphanage, the iPad that was one of the gifts CWA presented to her. Above: Seniors Andy Arnold and Will McFall with high school students at St. Patrick's School in Iten, Kenya.