

# Acre Architects partner with charity to support Ugandan orphanage

**CHAT to the Future hopes to improve African community, lives of 17 children**

**COLIN MCPHAIL**  
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**SAINT JOHN** • A local architecture firm has stepped up to bring a charity's vision for an Ugandan orphanage one step closer to reality.

Saint John-based Acre Architects has offered to design a new orphanage and community centre for CHAT to the Future, a network of schools throughout North America that provide basic needs, including education, for 17 Ugandan children. The students, who fundraise to support the effort, connect with the Ugandans via Skype to swap stories.

Since starting the charity five years ago, founder Adam McKim, who doubles as a Saint John High School teacher, said they've been renting out space but are now ready to build on an adjacent acre and a half of land in order to better the lives of the kids and become a fixture in the community.

"I could not be more thankful for Acre Architectures in taking this leap of faith," said McKim on Saturday during his first session with the architecture firm.

"We're inspired by the organizations out there that are doing good things, whether it's Martell Homes or Acre Architects. We're just excited to have a chance to work with creative (people) that want to tell creative stories, to do something that benefits kids on the other side of the planet."

He said Pierre Martell of the Dieppe-based Martell Home Builders has also jumped on board, matching the funds (up to \$50,000) raised by students during this year and the next. Greg Hemmings of Hemmings House in Saint John introduced the businesses to the charity.

"\$100,000 is a lot of money. It should help us build something inspiring and effective," McKim said.

"Now, it's starting to become real."

Monica Adair, a co-founding partner of Acre Architects along with her spouse, Stephen Kopp, said they have wanted to do something to support children, both locally and abroad, for some time. She said the storytelling element attracted them to the project.



Acre Architects has offered to design a new orphanage and community centre in Uganda for CHAT to the Future, a charity founded in Saint John. From left, Acre Architects co-founders Monica Adair and Stephen Kopp, CHAT founder Adam McKim and Acre employee Dave Holborn. PHOTO: COLIN MCPHAIL/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

"We're storied architectures, Greg Hemmings is a storyteller and (CHAT) is actually communicating and telling each other live stories," Adair said.

"The importance of some stories are worth telling and some stories are worth writing, and this is one that lives can be changed by everybody that touches it. For me, it's exciting to watch."

Kopp said he was moved by the Ugandan children after attending a Skype session.

"It was pretty inspiring and it hits you hard just how easy our life is," he said.

McKim said owning their own space would increase its legitimacy in the country.

"In Uganda, it's essential for a charity to actually own something," he said. "(The government) doesn't really consider you to be a real charity until you do."

The higher standing in the area coupled with the new infrastructure will allow CHAT to go beyond supporting the orphanage and start affecting the community, McKim said.

"In order to do more, we need access to the community," he said.

Part of the cluster of structures on the piece of land will include a women's community centre complete with a computer lab, a sewing and craft centre and a microloan office.

"\$100 to a woman that wants to start a business can completely transform her life and the life of her family by simply starting a small business," McKim said.

The proposed two-storey orphanage, located in the town of Kasangati, would feature large areas to study and play as well as significantly more storage space. McKim said the children now tuck their possessions in garbage bags under their single beds.

Outside of the orphanage will be a firewood kitchen, pit latrine, washrooms for genders, rubbish pit or litter bins, laundry area, chicken coop, grassy play areas and a small garden.

The architects are in the information gathering stage at the moment, getting a feel for the charity's vision as well as

Ugandan building techniques.

Acre Architects employee Dave Holborn, who's been conducting the research, said it will be an interesting deviation from the western designs they're accustomed to, and a move back to basics.

"You see a lot of flourishing architecture and we deal with that in the western world, but it's kind of cool to do something that is purely needs and providing a good life to these kids and whoever we're helping," Holborn said.

Part of the research includes understanding the difference in lifestyle, Kopp said. An example he gave is that Ugandans spend the majority of the day outside in the heat near the equator. Extending the roof to provide more shade would therefore be incorporated in their design, he said.

Kopp said they have to ask themselves, "How can we make their lives better through architecture?"

Depending on funding, McKim said he hopes to break ground in two to three years.