

# HARBY HAPPENINGS

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## Melissa Watkins and Uganda

[www.beyond-the-classroom.com](http://www.beyond-the-classroom.com)



When I began teaching social studies in 2012, I was told to incorporate more reading and writing skills into my classes. During my research, I stumbled across a program called ePals that encouraged correspondence with classes across the world, so I signed my classes up. We wrote to nine different countries that year, but it was the school in Uganda that touched our hearts the most. When one of their students wrote that he hoped he did not receive any gifts for Christmas because he knew his mum could not afford them, it broke my heart. Here I was, encouraging my students to write about all the foods they would have for Christmas dinner, their family traditions, and of course, what they wanted for Christmas. And Kalisa just hoped they had potatoes for dinner. We decided then that Harby would send them some sort of gifts. However, a week later I found out the school's one and only restroom for 650 students had collapsed in a flood, and they did not have the money to rebuild. As always, they knew that God would provide them what they needed. He did...by way of sixth graders from HJH.

My reason for telling my students about what had happened to the school was to have them make suggestions on a gift that we could send to the students. I never imagined that this gift would quickly become so huge and so impactful. I remember talking to my 2<sup>nd</sup> period, and Jeffrey spoke up to say that we needed to buy them a new restroom. From there, my life and the lives of my students changed in ways that are unimaginable.

## Week of 3/4 -3/8

### This Week:

Monday 3/4

- Tennis Starts

Tuesday 3/5

- Geometry CBA in Class
- Track Meet @ Alvin High School
- Stefan Munoz' Birthday

Wednesday 3/6

- Choir UIL Dickinson FUMC All Day

Thursday 3/7

- Choir UIL Dickinson FUMC All Day

Friday 3/8

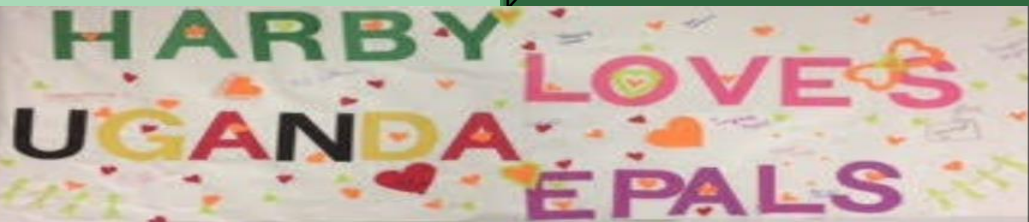
- Student/Staff Basketball Game-Dance Schedule
- End of Grading Period 3. Grades Due

**NEXT WEEK---SPRING BREAK!!!**

We had our difficulties that spring as we tried desperately to raise the money. We did fundraiser after fundraiser; I exhausted all of my ideas. I remember sitting on the floor of my classroom with three students (Haylie, Erica, and Christina), counting money. When I finished adding everything together, I started to explain that we didn't have enough, but the fundraiser was over. Erica simply shrugged her shoulders and said, "Then we're not done", as if it was that easy. I found out later that she went to the principal on her own and asked permission to do another fundraiser. How do you say no to that? It's quite humbling and inspiring to have students be so dedicated to seeing this through, even when I was ready to quit.

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This is how it has been since the first fundraiser. When my class found out that their friends couldn't go back to school because they didn't pay the fees, they started handing me money. Samuel didn't have much money, but he gave me the handful of change he'd saved to buy ice cream at lunch and said his ePal needed that more than he needed ice cream. He did get his ice cream. Our students, who by our own standards have so little, have the biggest, most generous hearts, and it is inspiring. When a student who never seems to have their own supplies suddenly brings in a new pencil, a toothbrush, or a box of crayons to donate, it makes me realize that they do care about others, and that student will forever have a pencil in my classroom, even if they never bring their own again.

Over the years my students have raised money for a bathroom (we built 2), a plot of land for a garden, school fees for 35 students for a whole year, shipping fees for donated school and hygiene supplies, and a new borehole and pump. Most of this has happened because our 6<sup>th</sup> graders have taken the initiative to make sure that their online friends received what they needed. It is an amazing thing to see that sense of empathy grow within my students.

My life has changed in ways that I can't even express, and I know that this journey is far from over. It's really just beginning. The way my students have stepped up over the years and pushed me to do something for the students in Uganda has made me a better person. I never imagined that this is what my life, both professionally and personally, would be like. I actually get to go to the school in Uganda and see in person all of the things that we've accomplished over the years. I really get to arrive with four suitcases full of school supplies and toothbrushes, and I get to see the joy on their faces for real, not just in pictures. I get to pass out stickers, personal letters, and homemade bookmarks to all of them and let them know that those are gifts from the students at HJH. I'm going to share stories, share knowledge, share videos and pictures from our school and my students, teach lessons, teach a song, play games, complete art projects, give a speech, pump water from the well, visit the equator, and probably cry... a lot. Happy tears, though.

## Traveling to Uganda with love from Harby

By David Rappaport  
Publisher

When her students get a week away from school each month during Spring Break, Melissa Watkins will be taking her own adventure—a trip to Uganda to help a school she and her students have become close to over the last seven years.

Watkins has been a teacher for 13 years, the last 14 at Harby Junior High. Seven years ago, she was asked to teach a new subject, and that more changed Watkins and her students.

"Seven years ago, I was asked to teach language arts to social studies," she said. "The main very principal goal is to teach students to implement more reading and writing in social studies."

"While searching ways to do this, Watkins stumbled across a resource for ePals. The site allows classrooms to become pen pals with other classrooms all around the world."

"The first year, Watkins' students wrote to students in one country. But it was one



Recently a fortune from a cookie said, "You will soon meet a lifelong kindred spirit." She and I found each other online about seven years ago. We developed a bond that goes beyond our love of teaching. Her name is Deborah Faith, and she lives in Entebbe, Uganda. I get to meet her on March 10<sup>th</sup>. I still can't fully wrap my head around the fact that I am seriously going to Uganda after all these years. Thank you to everyone who has contributed in any way to this school, our fundraiser efforts, or my trip. You have helped make this possible

You can follow my journey to Uganda by checking out my website, [www.beyond-the-classroom.com](http://www.beyond-the-classroom.com). I will post daily blogs, photos, and video throughout the entire trip.

## District Interview with Ms. Watkins

<https://youtu.be/veAoby8G1Mk>