



Meds & Food for Kids Director of Manufacturing Operations Remenson Tenor and MFK Founder and Senior Advisor at the factory in Haiti.

How St. Louisans help build Haiti's largest solar project

Meds and Food for Kids Director of Manufacturing Operations Remenson Tenor and MFK Founder and Senior Advisor, Dr. Patricia Wolff, have executed some ambitious ideas about how to save the lives of malnourished children in Haiti. Her latest effort may turn out to be transformative in helping starving people around the world.

Wolff, a retired St. Louis pediatrician, has been involved in humanitarian efforts in Haiti for more than 30 years. She founded Meds & Food for Kids in 2003 and left her practice eight years later to devote herself full-time to the nonprofit.

MFK produces a food call Medika Mamba, Creole for peanut butter medicine. Initially, the group was griding peanuts by hand to make this ready-to-use food that treats malnutrition. After

several years of fundraising, the nonprofit opened a new factory in 2012 in CapHaitien in northern Haiti. The factory allowed them to increase production tenfold and doubled the number of Haitian farmers needed to supply peanuts. It provided lifesaving treatment to hundreds of thousands of children. But the factory ran on diesel generators. The price of diesel fuel skyrocketed in recent years and roadblocks would cut off supply for months at a time, shutting down production.

It was clear to Wolff that they needed to ditch diesel and make the switch to sustainable energy.

"I had always thought that Haiti was the perfect place for solar," Wolff said. "It was short on a lot of things, but it was not short on sunshine."

In 2020, she talked to board

members Jeffrey Klopfenstein about the idea. He began searching for an engineering company to design a prototype.

Klopfenstein, who has been involved with the MFK board for just over a decade, had retired in 2020 after a career with Novus International, a St. Charles County-based company that makes supplements for animal feed. He found an engineer firm that gave them a report of what could be done and how much it might cost.

Wolff presented the proposal to the board in July 2020. They agreed to support it.

Then, they had to raise the \$1.5 million needed to make it happen. Wolff was told it would likely take two years to fund raise that much money. Because of the pandemic restrictions, she was unable to travel to Haiti from march to August of 2020. She devoted that time to raising money. They reached their goal withing 15 months.

Klopfenstein, an engineer by training, volunteered as project manager. The first phase was building the electrical infrastructure.

The equipment parts were shipped to Long Beach, California, and integrated in a shipping container. They used the shipping container as a building and sent the fabricated equipment to Haiti in May 2021.

The second phase was the solar phase. Klopfenstein hired another engineering company to make more detailed designs. The designs turned into purchase orders.

Klopfenstein said he ordered 27,000 parts last year. They had 680 panels and a battery system

the size of a Volkswagen microbus. They experienced the same supply chain issues the rest of the world was dealing with during the pandemic.

“I would call vendors, and I would make friends,” Klopfenstein said. He would tell the story of the organization to vendors and engineers – a story about trying to save lives while saving the environment – and people went above and beyond to help.

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not hopeless.”

“There were several engineers here in St. Louis who said ‘yes,’ and put in hours and hours to make it all happen,” he said.

He also located all the solar contractors in Haiti and put out a call for bids.

The Haitian company that won the contract worked six days a week for seven straight weeks to complete the installation. The bid package was well over 100 pages, and Klopfenstein had practically memorized it. He spent countless hours communicating through WhatsApp with the workers in Haiti answering their questions during the process.

“There’s a lot of bad press about bad things that happen in Haiti, but not everything in Haiti is like that,” he said. “There are hard-working people who want to do a good job. It was perfect teamwork.”

On March 24, they flipped on the switch at the factory.

It worked. The project came in under budget and ahead of schedule.

“It was thrilling,” Wolff said. They would no longer be exposed to the diesel fumes at the factory or the noisy generators. Most importantly, they would greatly expand their production capabilities.

Through MFK’s partnership with UNICEF Global, their Haitian-made therapeutic foods are used to treat malnutrition in 17 other countries.

“This year we have doubled our production of any prior year because we are so efficient,” she said. Currently, the factory is the largest solar-powered project in the country, although other projects are underway.

Haiti has long been a needy place, and headlines about rising chaos and violence have dominated the news. But Wolff said she refuses to be discouraged about the future.

“It’s more needy now, but it’s also not hopeless.”