

# A healthier way to cook

## Rotary Club gives solar cookers to Rwandan poor.

By Paula Lloyd

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The three shiny silver panels surrounding a solar cooker on Wilfred and Marie Pimentel's front porch make it look like a Hollywood starlet getting a suntan.

Even on a recent cold morning, there's enough crisp sunshine to bring the temperature inside the cooker to 250 degrees, enough to roast four sweet potatoes for lunch.

The Pimentels have used solar cookers for more than a decade. For a typical dinner of chicken, pilaf and carrots, "I'll have two or three out here cooking various dishes," Marie Pimentel says.

But solar cooking is more than a way of life for them. It's also their passion and their mission.

Since 1994, the Pimentels have traveled around the world to teach people in poor rural areas to cook using the sun's energy under the Rotary Club of Fresno's solar cooker project. Wilfred Pimentel coordinates the project that's given away about 30,000 solar cookers in Central and South America, the Middle East and Africa.

In February, the Pimentels will make their third trip to the central African nation of Rwanda with eight others from Fresno and the Bay Area.

The Rotary Club of Fresno is teaming up with the Rotary Club of Kigali (Kigali is Rwanda's capital). There, solar cooking is healthier than cooking over smoky wood fires, Kigali Rotary member Cally Alles says.

About 90% of people in Rwanda cook over wood fires, Alles wrote in an e-mail to The Bee. "Most of them are very poor people. The three-stone fire commonly used gives out a lot of smoke, which is injurious to their health. It also consumes a lot of firewood."

Pimentel says wood for cooking is becoming more

expensive and scarce, which makes cooking with the free solar power more attractive. "People are beginning to pay attention."

But solar cooking can be a hard sell to people used to age-old cooking methods like barbecuing or boiling food over a wood fire.

"Habits are not as easy to change with cooks, as you know. They still want a big fire," Marie Pimentel says.

Wherever the Pimentels take the solar cookers, they train community leaders to teach others and hold solar cooking demonstrations. "We use their pots and their food. We always make certain they see the steam," for the wow factor, Wilfred Pimentel says.

The key to the whole program is returning to see if the solar cookers are still being used, he says.

While the Pimentels will be checking up on solar cooker use, others in the Rotary group will be distributing about 1,400 wheelchairs and 50 treadle sewing machines. Paid for by donations and Rotary funds, the wheelchairs and sewing machines were manufactured in China and shipped to Rwanda.

The wheelchairs will be given to Rwandans with polio or HIV. They also will go to those injured by land mines, in vehicle accidents or during the 1994 genocide of Hutus and Tutsis.

Joan LeRoux, who is going on the trip, says getting a wheelchair can be life-changing. "I'm an occupational therapist, and I know the importance of mobility to a person's life. It's the key to people's ability to function and enjoy life."

The sewing machines will be given to local women's groups so women can make



TOMAS OVALLE/THE FRESNO BEE

Wilfred Pimentel, right, with wife Marie, coordinates the Rotary Club of Fresno's solar cooker project. About 30,000 cookers have gone out.

"haybaskets," a large woven basket lined and topped with insulated pads. They are used to keep food hot for hours.

Women also will be able to sew clothes for their families.

Alles appreciates the help the Rotary Club of Fresno is bringing.

"It is a great source of encouragement to people like us who are struggling to help the less fortunate and the country in general," he wrote. In Rwanda, 90% of the people are subsistence farmers and the average life expectancy is 47 years.

Alles is also impressed that the group is coming all the way from Fresno.

"It shows that there are people who care for others without expecting anything back in return."

The solar cooking project has had surprising rewards for Marie Pimentel. "It's been a project that's developed into something we didn't expect. You always come back with so much more than you give," she says.

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