SHEDD — For more than 30 years, Jerry Skiles has blended missionary work with aid to farmers in poor, often war-torn countries.

In November, Skiles, 60, became the first volunteer to participate in the USAID Farmer-to-Farmer outreach program in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Although Skiles has taught people to farm for decades, this trip was different, as he shared the financial aspects of farm operations with subsistence farmers who produce rice on half-acre plots of land near the capital of Kinshasha.

“*I was actually recruited for this trip,*” Skiles said. “*The Farmer-to-Farmer program contacted me.*”

Skiles, 60, is a 1972 Harrisburg High School graduate, who went on to wrestle at Clackamas Community College, finishing fourth in the nation at 177 pounds and earning All-America status.

He’s a big man who looks like he could still handle himself on the mat and is quick to smile with a hearty laugh.
"They know how to plant a crop, harvest it, eat and put some excess away," Skiles said. "But they really don’t have any idea on how to make a long-term business plan. And quite often, vermin gets into any excess crop they have stored away."

Skiles said part of the issue is that many of the farmers have been relocated from war-torn areas and don’t have a long-term mindset, because they never believed they would live a long life. The average life expectancy is just 48.

The Democratic Republic of Congo has a population of 75 million and the average annual income is less than $422, making it one of the poorest countries on earth. More than 63 percent of the Congo’s people live below the poverty line, according to the World Bank.

“Our goal was to train the trainers,” Skiles said.

Skiles left Oregon on Oct. 31 and returned Nov. 12, about a week earlier than planned due to the death of his father-in-law.

Skiles trained 37 people, focusing on how developing a financial plan will improve their farm’s management and their standard of living. He provided insight on record-keeping, budgeting, managing labor activities and assessing and managing risks.

Skiles brought a wealth of hands-on experience to the project. He farms 171 acres near Shedd and also owns a cashew orchard in the Ivory Coast that is managed by a local person.

For 29 years, Skiles and his wife, Cherry, have worked with the tribal people of Loron and Loma in the Ivory Coast, Africa and they lived there from 1985 until 2002. They continue to make annual visits as part of their mission work with the Shield of Faith Mission based in Bend.

“I didn’t get paid for this work, but all of my expenses are covered,” Skiles said of the Congo trip. “We stayed in a hotel in the Kinshasha. It was very cushy compared to many of the places I’ve stayed in over the years.”

Skiles speaks English, French and two African languages, which were valuable skills for the Congo trip.

“They really don’t know how to handle money,” Skiles said. “They’ve learned how to produce crops, but now, they need to learn about finances. It’s totally new to them.”

Skiles said one of the reasons he participates in these types of programs is to show other Americans that we have skills that are valuable in other countries.

“You don’t have to be anyone special,” Skiles said. “Just by living in the United States we have life skills and experiences that others can only dream about. We take for granted what we have here.”

Skiles said most Americans begin learning how to handle money by the time they are 5 or 6 years old.

“Remember when you saved up to buy a bicycle?” he said. “In a subsistence area, they don’t understand that concept. They just haven’t been exposed to it.”

Skiles was accompanied on the trip by a representative of USAID Farmer-to-Farmer, which is...
funded as part of the annual Farm Bill. Founded in 1985, the program has enlisted more than 12,000 volunteers who have contributed an estimated $34 million worth of volunteer time and expertise affecting about one million farmer families in more than 80 countries.

“I don’t like traveling to be a tourist,” Skiles said. “This way, I get to interact with people on a completely different level. It’s truly farmer-to-farmer.”

Skiles said his older brother, John, who farms near Toledo, got him interested in mission/farming work.

“We like to call ourselves the poor man’s ambassadors,” Skiles said. “We represent common Americans, not the state department. If I get asked a political question, I answer it honestly, how I feel about something, not from the government’s perspective.”

Skiles said one of the best compliments he has received is that native Africans told him that he “has white skin, but a black heart.”

“I respect them,” Skiles said of the people with whom he works. “We don’t have the answers from here, but we can help others discover the answers. My goal is to help people.”

Skiles said that he also wants to expose other Americans to other cultures.

“Things are very complicated,” he said. “We have opinions about things that we really don’t understand. It’s just not simple.”

Skiles said he prefers to work in countries where people want to develop their own resources and not just be handed things.

In 2015, Skiles hopes to return to the Ivory Coast and is in talks for a project in Burma.

“I’ll probably go out about three times next year,” he said.

In the past, Skiles has worked in Liberia, Guinea, Mozambique, Ghana, Lebanon, Mali, Kyrgyzstan, Haiti, Sudan, Indonesia, Brazil and Togo among others.

Skiles graduated from Clackamas Community College, attended the University of Arizona and earned a degree in management and communications from Corban College in 2006. He also has an associate’s degree in international studies from the New Tribes Institute in Sanford, Florida.

Contact Linn County reporter Alex Paul at 541-812-6114.

Copyright 2014 Albany Democrat Herald. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Tags  Usaid Farmer-to-farmer, Jerry Skiles, Democratic Republic Of Congo

More Local Stories

- He loved his cars