

CHESS: Renovations under way to transform Whittington building in Meadville to chess center

FROM PAGE 1

The man, a successful businessman who asked not to be identified, has ties to the county and used to live there. He said a friend in Memphis told him about Bulington's success with students at "very, very low-income" schools.

Bulington's students showed improvement in behavior, attendance and scholastic achievement — and went on to become state and national champions as well.

When the man heard Bulington might be leaving his Memphis job, he asked him to come to Franklin County. Bulington made a trip down and spent two days demonstrating his chess teaching techniques for school officials.

"They were sold on it after that," the man said.

"He's the most effective teacher I've ever witnessed anywhere. He's about a 16-hour-a-day working person."

And thus Bulington became the director of the new Southwest Mississippi Chess Foundation.

Bulington learned to play chess in first grade during the era of Bobby Fischer. He beat his schoolteacher in checkers so she taught him chess, a 1,600-year-old game that replicates ancient warfare with its pawns, knights, bishops, castles, queens and kings.

One day in church, when Bulington was 12 or 13, a local farmer invited him to play. "I had the foolish notion that I could beat anybody in chess like I had beat my friends," Bulington recalls.

He lost the game — and found a mentor.

The mentor took him to tournaments, and Bulington started a chess team at his high school. Later he got college degrees in philosophy and education, including a doctorate at Purdue.

Bulington arrived in Franklin County in June 2015. The plan was to start by recruiting elementary school students.

"I just went from classroom to classroom teaching chess," said Bulington, known as "Dr. B" to students.

The privately funded program covers kindergarten through sixth grade and will add a grade each year. It will last at least 10 years, he said.

The program is elective, and Bulington set up a classroom devoted to the game. Chess enhances a host of academic skills; reading, writing, math, history, geography, even music get worked into chess studies.

Writing down moves and reviewing games involves "algebraic notation." Students study chess textbooks. "To be a strong chess player, you need to become a strong reader," Bulington said.

The "coordinate grid" of a chess board is also instructive. "It's a nice thing to introduce kindergarteners to geometric coordinates in a fun and natural way," he said.

Chess can have a positive emotional effect on children, Bulington said.

"It gives children a chance to play in a world of dangerous conflict in which there are stakes, bad things can happen, but it's a fairytale world, it's not a real world," he said.

"Finding out ways to strive and struggle in a difficult world is a good thing."

Chess is also a way for kids who aren't athletic or skilled in other ways to excel.

"Someone who is thought of as a behavioral problem or a weak student may turn out to be something very different on a chess board," Bulington said. "They may can flip things around a bit."

Zachary Kent, 10, is an avid player. He said he likes "just getting to know people and travel. I just like that you both have an even game and both people can win."

His brother Jacob, 7, looks forward to playing next year.

"They're highly disciplined and it does help in



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Zachary Kent, 10, studies the pieces on a chess board. At rear left are school chess trophies.

their school work, because Dr. B sets rules," said their mother Angie, whose husband Chris is interim superintendent of Franklin County schools.

In April, the kids hit the tournaments.

They picked up two championships at state individual competition at Jackson State, and five of the six grade-level championships at the state team championships in Starkville. Franklin Upper Elementary students even won the high school division there, something no elementary team had ever done.

"We took six teams and we won five state championships," said assistant chess coach Bobby Poole.

Mississippi State Scholastic Chess Association director Jeff Bolhuis called the wins "a fantastic accomplishment," according to an article in the Franklin Advocate newspaper by school counselor Randy Youngblood. "The speed and extent of the kids' development has been amazing."

Former world champion and textbook author Susan Polgar said, "Their incredible success further proves that when young people are being taught the right way, combined with hard work and dedication, in addition to the support from parents and teachers, success will happen at the highest level. This is just the beginning. I am confident that not only will these young players continue to win on the chess board, chess will help them excel in school and in life."

Franklin teams placed fifth at national junior high championships in Indianapolis. "The top four winners in that place were middle school teams. We were fifth place with upper elementary."

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Dr. Jeff Bulington

Chess coach

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Two state individual championships
- Five state team championships
- Fifth in national junior high championships
- One second place, two third places in national elementary championships

hind it. The school administration is 100 percent behind it. The local paper puts it on the front page."

And renovations are under way in the 103-year-old Whittington building at the corner of Oak and Main streets in Meadville. The vacant, two-story brick building, which once held a general mercantile store, will serve as the county chess center.

"The center will allow us basically to set up a second school outside school," Bulington said.

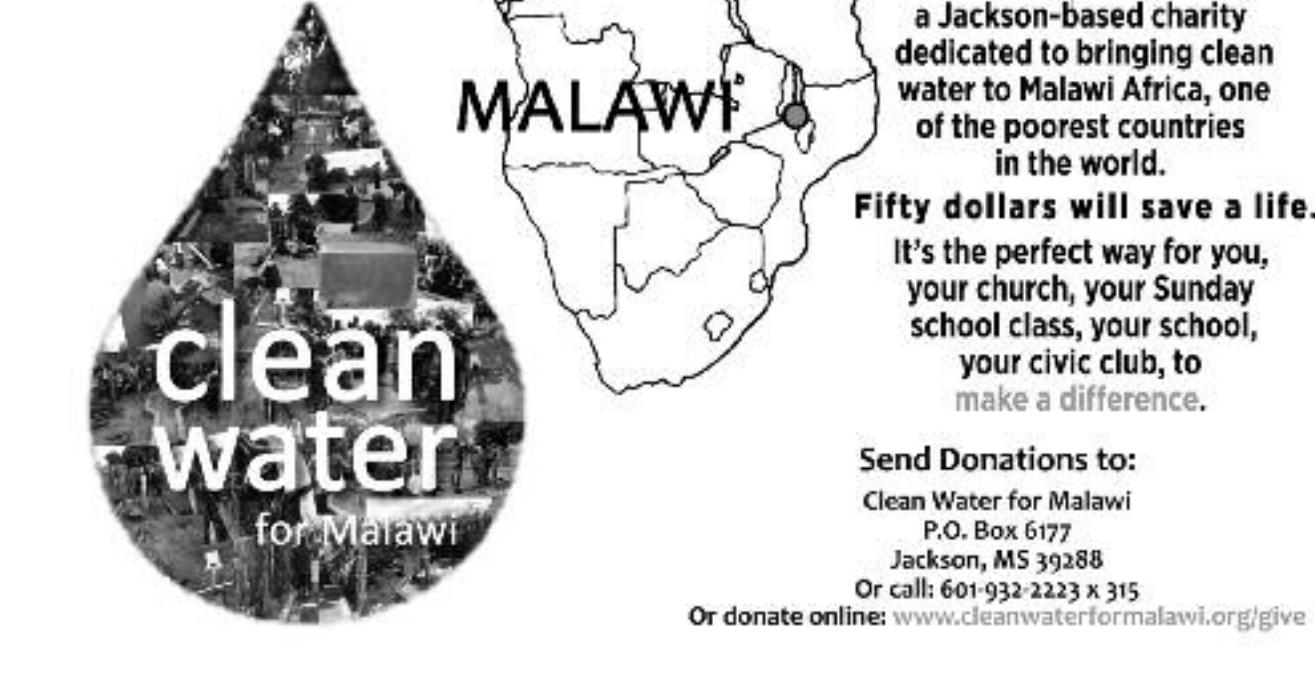
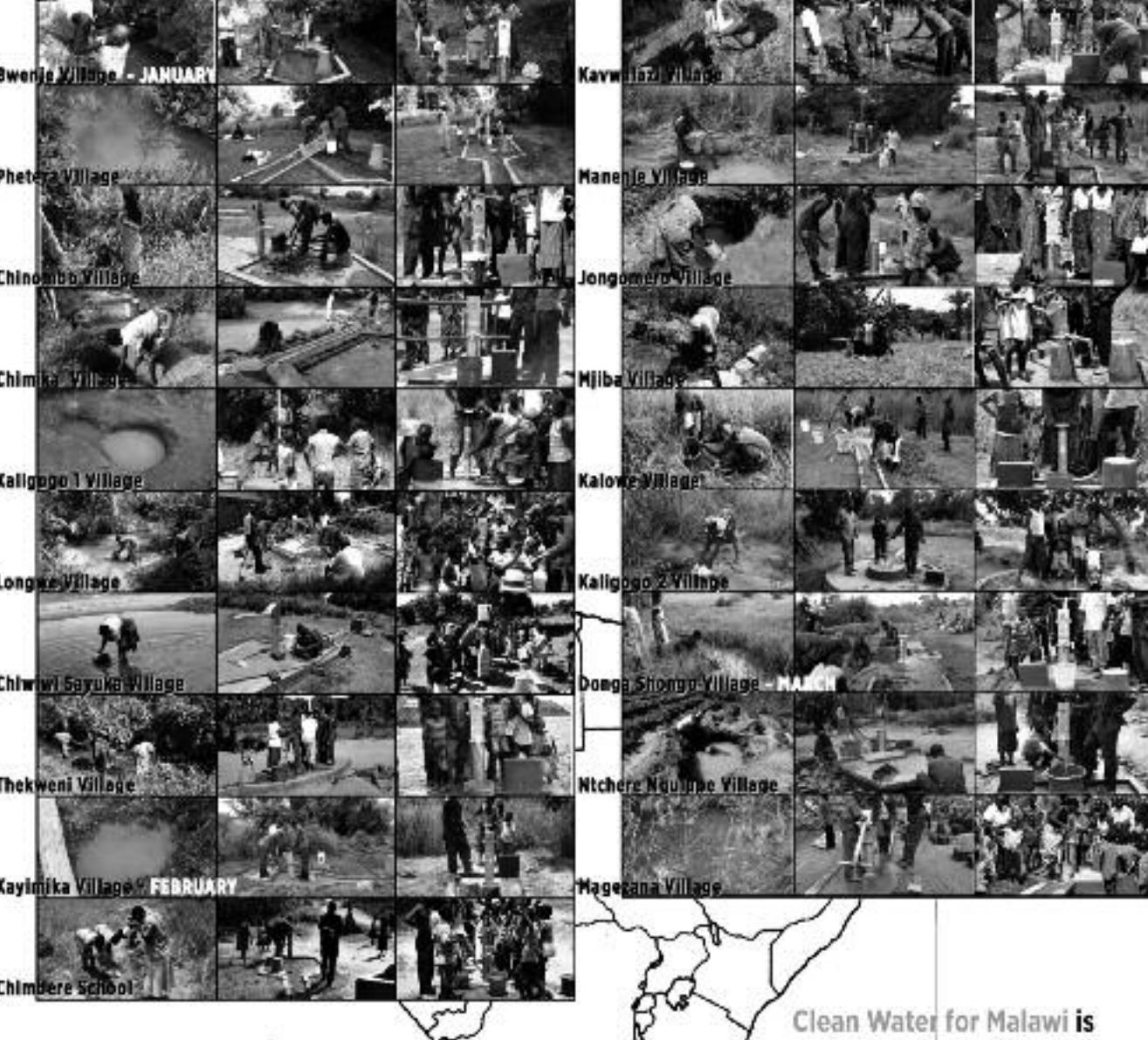
A spacious venue for tournaments, practice and instruction, it will be open seven days a week until 9 p.m. and accommodate up to 100 students at a time. The center is privately funded and will be freely available to Franklin County chess players.

"It'll be one of the finest of its kind anywhere," Bulington said. "This will be a most extraordinary place."

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