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Canadian kids visit poor village

By **LISA WILTON**, SUN MEDIA

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The phrase 'Think Global, Act Local' takes on a new meaning for a group of Calgary elementary students who embark on the trip of their young lives in Letters From Litein.

The two-hour documentary is not the slickest or most provocative film to deal with the subjects of African poverty or cultural exchange, but it does possess a down-to-earth charm and there are a few very moving and powerful scenes.

The film begins in early 2006 with students from Calgary's now-closed Fred Seymour Elementary School recording a charity single, which is then sold in an effort to raise \$50,000 for an orphanage in Kenya.

Through other fundraising initiatives, including hitting up Calgary's oil companies, the school eventually reaches its goal. And in August, 2006, seven Fred Seymour students and their families set off on an eye-opening expedition to the poverty stricken African country.

Joined by principal Brenda Zugman, assistant principal Kathy Laycock and teacher Sarah Kesler, the group visits the orphanage in Litein, a town of 4,000 near Kenya's Rift Valley.

Director Matt Palmer edited down hundreds of hours of footage to produce a well-paced 120-minute movie, which should become required viewing in the Canadian social studies curriculum.

While there isn't much in the way of explosive conflict, there are some tense moments. It was particularly intriguing to watch how the Canadian children reacted when their van was surrounded by a group of African street kids who were drunk and high on glue. And it was hard to tell who was more perplexed by their trip to a Litein market -- the Fred Seymour group or the curious townspeople who poked and pointed at the white visitors.

What is most interesting, however, is the transformation of the seven young Calgary students. When they first arrive in Kenya, they are the stereotypical North American spoiled brats. They chew gum like cows chew cud and are reluctant to leave the comfort of their little clique in order to spend one-on-one time with the African children.

When asked why he was having trouble befriendng the Litein orphans, one of the boys blurts out, "They all look alike."

But with some prodding from the adults, the kids finally start to connect with the Litein children and by the time they leave there are tears all around.

Shot flat-coloured, cinema verite style, Letters From Litein doesn't bother with a narrator and instead lets the events unfold through the words of those onscreen.

Letters From Litein is an inspirational look at the power of positive action and proves that no matter what your age or background you can still make a difference in this world.

Letters From Litein premieres at the Globe Cinema today and runs until May 7.

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LETTERS FROM LITEIN

2 hours

Starring: Fred Seymour Elementary School

Director: Matt Palmer

Sun Rating: 3 1/2 out of 5

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