



Trip Abroad Leads to Full-time Cause for Goose Lake Woman



Renee Farwell Continues Quest to Provide Education to Ghana's Children

By Katie Dahlstrom

Bridges Staff Writer

CLINTON — Goose Lake native Renee Farwell didn't plan to build a school in the African nation of Ghana; she says it simply was meant to be.

The 24-year-old first visited Ghana during a study abroad to the University of Ghana when she was a student at Roosevelt University in Chicago. She started teaching children in the nearby village of Kissemah after meeting Kwame Agoe, now 32, a Kissemah resident who had been educating children on his porch.

Farwell started volunteering to help Agoe with the 15 children who attended his class and soon found herself more involved than



Photo:

Above: Students in Mawuvio's Outreach Programme pose for a photo with founders Renee Farwell and Kwame Agoe.

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she planned.

"I just fell in love with the kids and the program," she said.

Because public school in Ghana costs \$200 to \$300, not many children can afford to attend.

Agoe stopped attending school when he was around 10 or 11 because his father died and he didn't have the means to pay for his own education. Based on his own experiences with education in Ghana, Agoe established the school on his porch for children like himself, who would not otherwise have the opportunity.

"We weren't thinking about how much of an impact everything we were doing would have," Farwell said of the work done to create Mawuvio's Outreach Programme, which provides free education

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Photos:

Left: Rene Farwell and Traci Trenkamp paint the mural at the school site in December 2012 while Sara Karner paints the Mawuvio's Outreach Programme logo by the door.

Below: The outside walls of the Mawuvio's Outreach Programme school is decorated with a mural depicting all the potential futures students have.

Submitted Photos



and developmental services to orphans and disadvantaged Ghanaian children. "At the time we weren't really thinking about it, we were just doing it." Since 2009 the program has grown from 15 kids to 60 with 200 inquiring about the school, which was licensed by Ghana as an official preschool through sixth-grade school in 2011.

Mawuvio's employs five Ghanaian teachers who instruct children from 4 to 15 in English, math, science, religious moral education, information communication technology, citizenship education and creative arts.

Because many of them don't come from a stable living environment, the school also provides children lunch as some may only see a meal when they attend class.

"We felt we needed to be the ones to provide them at least one meal a day," Farwell said.

These costs add up to about \$1,000 in operating expenses a month. Students make clay bead bracelets two days a week, which are sold to help fund the program. The program also accepts donations and has a child sponsorship program. For \$30 a month, one child's food, schooling and housing is covered. Sponsorships of \$10 or \$20 a month are also available.

In order to give the school a more permanent home, Farwell and Agoe planned to build a school and started working toward their goal in 2010. What turned into

a semester abroad in Ghana for Farwell, who was then 21, became a full year in order to get the school established.

Construction on the school building started in spring 2010 with \$11,000 Farwell raised to purchase 2 to 3 acres of land. The foundation was placed that fall for the school that will hold six classrooms, two dormitories to house first- through sixth-grade students, an office, a kitchen and a room for volunteers.

The school is registered as a non-governmental organization, and Farwell has obtained a social welfare certificate so she can legally house and feed students in the planned building.

In April 2012, an additional plot was purchased to expand the school to include a playing field and a dining/assembly hall. Farwell and others raised between \$75,000 and \$90,000 to build the school. Mawuvio's treasurer and Farwell's mother, Barb, also completed murals on the outside and inside of the school.

Directors are now focused on completing the inside of the building.

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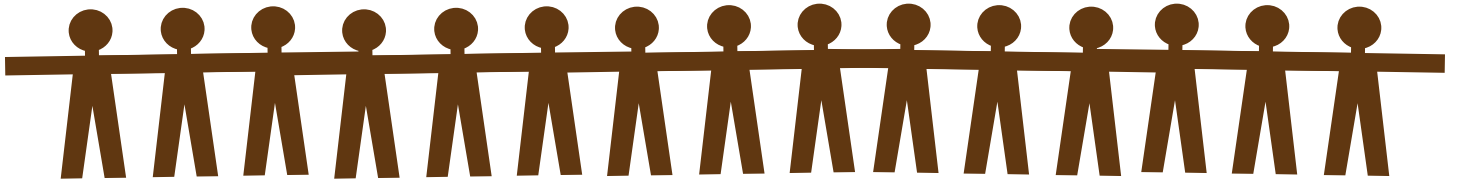
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Farwell estimates they will need another \$75,000 to plaster over bricks on the inside, install wiring, put in plumbing, furnish the building and complete other inside tasks. If enough funds can be raised, Farwell said she expects the school to be open by September. Farwell, who earned her degree in sociology, isn't paid for the work she does in Ghana. It's not something she's seriously considered, given the condition of the school.

"We've been working so hard to build this school, how do you take a wage when the school isn't finished?" she said.

She earns a living as a teacher in Chicago, but someday plans to make the program her full-time

career.

Farwell visits Ghana for months at a time every year. She had planned to move there, but the cultural differences and a case of homesickness compelled her to return to the Midwest. Farwell lives and works in Chicago now, but often travels back to the Gateway area to promote her organization and speak to groups about the work she has done. She hopes to expand Mawuvio's Outreach Programme to have a Chicago branch that will serve female middle and high school students on the west side. Farwell will then split her time between Ghana and Chicago.

What started as a trip abroad turned into what Farwell now



Photo:

Above: Renee Farwell and Kwame Agee smile with some of their students outside the school in 2011.

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views as her calling. For her, life without Mawuvio's Outreach Programme is something of the past and something she never plans to know again.

"There is no after Mawuvio's Outreach Programme," she said.

"It's meant to be." ■

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