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African village captures the heart of NE graduate

By Kate Howes
Staff writer

Renee Farwell of Goose Lake traveled to Africa earlier this year for the sake of her own education.

However, little did she know, she would end up bringing with her the promise of an education to a number of poor African children with smiles on their faces and an unfulfilled desire for learning.

Farwell, a 2007 graduate of Northeast High School and now a junior at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Ill., chose to study abroad mainly because she welcomed the opportunity to travel.

"I wanted to experience a culture totally different from my own," Farwell shares.

Also, she loves to help people and figured going to Africa would allow her the chance to work with people in need.

Shortly after Farwell arrived in Ghana in early August, she discovered just how much help the people and children there needed and was thrilled to be able to lend a hand.

It all began with a chance meeting with Kwame Agoe, a young man who occasionally works at the University of Ghana where Farwell is a student.

Kwame comes from a village called Kissemah, located just 10 minutes away from the university. One day while they both were making copies at a copy machine, the two began talking and Kwame shared with Farwell the story of how his own education abruptly ended in sixth grade after his father died and his mother abandoned him.

Now at age 29, Kwame has reconnected with his mother and is saddened by the number of children in his village who have had no education, yet are so eager to learn.

"It's something he said he is incredibly passionate about," Farwell relates. "There are lots of children there who have been orphaned or abandoned and have had no schooling whatsoever."

Although many villages speak their own tribal languages, English is the



Renee Farwell, daughter of Steve and Barb Farwell of Goose Lake, poses with one of the many children from the village of Kissemah she has become close with while studying abroad in Ghana, Africa. Before she returns to Africa Jan. 8, she hopes she can collect enough money to help the people in Kissemah construct a school where children can receive a free education. Contributed photo

How to help Mawuvio's children

Renee Farwell, daughter of Steve and Barb of Goose Lake and a 2007 graduate of Northeast High School, is trying to collect donations to help construct a school in the village of Kissemah in Ghana, Africa, where she is studying this year through the Roosevelt University in Chicago, Ill.

Anyone who would like to make a donation to the Mawuvio Outreach Program may contact Farwell at 563-249-6228, 563-577-2324, or via e-mail at ren_far707@hotmail.com.

The Mawuvio (meaning God's Children) Outreach Program is a non-profit organization run solely off donations. It will be a place where poor children living in and around the village of Kissemah can receive a free, quality education.

Farwell has committed herself to helping create this education center for the disadvantaged children in the village. She will return to Africa very soon for second semester and hopes to take with her enough money to construct a school large enough to accommodate the children.

Weather for De Witt
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official language in Africa. And, while many of the children can speak English well, they struggle when it comes to reading and writing.

Kwame told Farwell he wanted very badly to establish a school in Kissemah, where children not only can have a place to learn, but for those left orphaned or abandoned, a place to live.

Touched by his story and aspiration to start a school, Farwell agreed to help him any way she could.

A place for all 'God's children'

Soon, the two got started on the lengthy process of creating the education center Kwame had been dreaming about - a school which they lovingly named the "Mawuvio Outreach Program," with Mawuvio meaning "God's children" in Kissemah's tribal language.

Although eventually Kwame hopes to have a building large enough for classrooms as well as beds for children in need, the first step is to construct a structure large enough to accommodate a classroom full of students.

Farwell guarantees, the classroom will, in fact, be full.

"We went around to speak with the families of children Kwame knew were not in school," she says. "When we started in September, we had about 15 kids. Now, we have almost 50. They're so happy to be able to go to school and they want to learn so badly. They're hungry for it."

To get the school officially registered, Kwame enlisted the help of his friend, Kadri, who himself had started a school in Ghana's northern region.

In order to get things going, Kwame turned the porch on his mother's house into a temporary classroom, which contains little more than a couple of benches and one dry-erase board.

Farwell, Kwame and another student from the university, Kim, from Washington, D.C., began teaching the children. Little ones need to learn their "ABCs and 1-2-3s," Farwell explains, while older children need to learn how to read.

The students range in age from approximately 2 years old to children in their upper teens, and every single one is excited to learn as much as possible, Farwell notes.

Yet, space and materials are an absolute must if the students are going to receive an adequate education.

Farwell hopes, this is where other people can help in her cause.

'Change for Kissemah'

Twenty-year-old Farwell has launched a "Change for Kissemah" fund-raising campaign, in hopes of returning to Ghana second semester with enough money to purchase a piece of land and build a school big enough to fit students comfortably.

A goal of raising \$5,000 has been set, although Farwell insists, any amount of money will greatly be appreciated.

"So far, people have been trying to help in any way they can," she shares.

For example, after Farwell's mom, Barb, helped spread the word about her daughter's campaign, Northeast Schools shipped eight boxes full of clothing and school supplies to Ghana.

"It has helped so much," Farwell says with a smile. "The kids are so excited. Just to be able to have a book to take home with them . . . and it's not just the students who are excited, but the parents, too. They're all so happy."

Farwell also collected donations from her fellow students at the hostel where she lived first semester. After she returns second semester, Farwell says she intends to ask for more donations and for other volunteers to assist at the school.

She is hopeful before she goes back to Africa - which will happen Jan. 8 - she can collect as many donations as possible to take back with her.

After all, Farwell shares, she is now so attached to the children in Kissemah, she cannot possibly abandon this cause which has become so close to her heart.

"It's just been so exciting for me," she relates. "It's been so rewarding. This is definitely one of the best life experiences I have ever had. The people and children I've met have taught me so much.

"People here seem to get down so easily, but the people there are so happy, yet have so little. I would never have guessed I would have had such an experience in Africa. I'm so glad."

Lessons learned

While she is home on break, Farwell said another student at the university is helping keep an eye on things at the school and will continue teaching the children. Even after she returns home for good next spring, Farwell says she already is coming up with ways as to how she can remain in touch with the village and the outreach program.

For example, there is a woman who works at Roosevelt University and is a native of Ghana who might be able to help keep her updated about Mawuvio.

In the meantime, a pen-pal program has been established between the students at Mawuvio and in Mrs. Halverson's class at Northeast Elementary. Farwell has been going door-to-door hoping her hometown and the surrounding areas will help in her quest provide something many of the children of Kissemah have done without long enough - a chance at a quality education.

"This experience has given me a completely different outlook on life," Farwell shares. "Especially when it comes to things like material possessions. Now, I feel so guilty about all the things I have and don't really need. I'm trying to find a good balance, but being in Africa has really put my life into perspective."

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