

Ghanaian students' faith makes mark on Sugar Creek parishioners

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Catholic Messenger Staff

By Celine Klosterman

Lizzie Roling wishes that as a child she could have had the faith shown by students she met in Ghana. Although these children grow up in sometimes unsupportive families and live in shacks with dirt floors, they didn't seem pessimistic about their future, the 22-year-old recalled. "They trusted in God no matter what." She and her cousin Traci Trenkamp, 16, both members of Ss. Mary & Joseph Parish in Sugar Creek, spent Dec. 9-28 in Kissema Village in Ghana. There they assisted with classes taught through an organization co-founded in 2009 by Renee Farwell, a former classmate and neighbor of Roling, and Kwame Agoe of Ghana. The organization, Mawuvio's Outreach Programme, offers a free education and care facility for children who can't afford to buy the uniforms, textbooks and other supplies required by public schools. About half of the roughly 60 students attending Mawuvio's School are orphans, Roling said. None of the students, ages 4 to 16, had received more than a second-grade education before coming to Mawuvio's School, she said. The country's literacy rate is 58 percent, according to the U.S. Department of State. Roling was inspired to volunteer with disadvantaged people after a cousin died in summer 2011, years after her brother passed away. The tragedies made her want to do something more with her life, she said. She invited Trenkamp to join her in Ghana, where the two spent three weeks taking bucket showers and assisting Ghanaian teachers in a makeshift school on a house's front porch. "The kids were so happy to see us,"

Trenkamp said. "When we got there, they just ran to us. And they would always say, 'God bless you.'" Despite their bubbly demeanor, many students had sad stories, she recalled. Some had been kicked out of their homes. Some had tried to earn enough money selling food or goods on street corners to pay for one meal each day. "I don't think the role of parents is as strong as it is in the United States," Roling said. "You'll see parents make sure they get their own food before their kids eat. Or there are too many kids for one mom, so all of them do their own thing." Farwell and Agoe serve as parents to many of the students, Roling said. Spending time with the children was rewarding, "but you can only do so much. You can give them money, but not a family." Seeing what Ghanaian students lacked gave her and Trenkamp more perspective. "You realize how much you have and don't need," Roling said. Ghanaian children she met didn't have toys, but were excited to get a pot to cook in. Readjusting to a life of plenty in Iowa was hard, Trenkamp said. "I thank God for more of the things I have now." "It was a life-changing experience," Roling said.



'Higher power' guided school founders

Mawuvio's Outreach Programme was founded in August of 2009 thanks in part to Renee Farwell, a native of Goose Lake, Iowa. A sociology major at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Iowa, she was studying abroad at the University of Ghana – Legon when she met Kwame Agyepong at a copy machine. The Ghanaian had been orphaned as a child and had to leave school because, although tuition was free, he couldn't afford fees for a uniform, textbooks and other supplies. He told her he was trying to start a private school for disadvantaged children. "The public schools are highly overcrowded and run much more like businesses, passing students from grade to grade regardless of their actual knowledge so long as they are paying the school fees," Farwell said.

She had been looking for service opportunities, so she offered to help Agyepong.

"We say it was a chance meeting at a copy machine, but really, there was a higher power putting this together," said her mother Barb Farwell, who attends Ascension Lutheran Church in Goose Lake.

The school offers English, math and science instruction; religious moral education; citizenship education and creative arts through sixth grade.

For more information, visit www.mawuviosoutreachprogramme.org.



Traci Trenkamp, center, shares a moment with students at Mawuvio's Outreach Programme in Kissema Village in Ghana in December.