



Ugandan school ‘run by love’ of library staffer

BY LISA CRUTCHFIELD



Joanita Senoga came to Richmond from Uganda, but continues to support a school she started there.

When Joanita Senoga was forced to flee her native Uganda, she left behind a growing extended family. Since landing in Richmond, she’s added to it, incorporating the University community into her life and that of several hundred children more than 7,000 miles away.

Her journey led her to a job as night supervisor in Boatwright Memorial Library. In her non-working hours, Senoga is rallying the campus around the Circle of Peace School in Makindye, a suburb of Kampala. The school serves orphans and underprivileged children from preschool to age 14.

“The school is basically run by love,” said Senoga. But love doesn’t house and feed the students, purchase books or tend classrooms, so she still supports the school with her paychecks. Senoga’s dream is that UR will adopt Circle of Peace as a “little sister school.” She’d like to see more students volunteer and professors offer teacher training to staff there. And she hopes that people can visit to see firsthand what love and determination can accomplish.

Four Richmond students traveled to the school last summer, and a task force is working to raise awareness and funds for the school.

“She is a very focused person in terms of what she wants to achieve,” said Abiodun Solanke, Senoga’s supervisor at the library. “If she sets her mind to something, she’ll get it.”

She did in Africa, earning an education many of her peers couldn’t, and she has in Richmond, earning a degree from SCS in 2006.

Senoga considers herself fortunate. “My daddy went to high school, but my mother only went through middle school,” she said. “The thing she always said was that she was not able to get the education, but her children will.”

Senoga earned a teaching certificate and began working at a school in Uganda. Public education is not free there, and many students do not have the required tuition.

“I saw kids crying and having to leave the classrooms,” she recalled. “I would tell them to hide in closets or the bathroom” when administrators came to inspect. “It really, really touched me. These children belong in school.”

Eventually, she gave up job security to found a school for children with nowhere to go. “Growing up, my parents told us that education is the key to success in life,” she said. “I had to give these kids a chance — because I had it.”

The little nursery school soon outgrew her parents’ porch. Senoga’s father helped her secure a property for a new, though primitive, facility. But circumstances forced Senoga to flee Uganda in 1996. She came to the United States and ended up in Richmond cleaning schools, offices and homes, including that of Dr. Richard Leatherman, then an associate professor in SCS.

When he heard she had been a teacher, his interest was piqued. “I asked her why she was cleaning houses and offices if she was a teacher,” he said. Leatherman helped her transfer some credits to SCS, find grant and scholarship money and, with her daughter’s help, convinced Senoga to begin her degree.

It wasn’t easy. She juggled three jobs, went to school full time and raised her two daughters, Josie, ’12, and Jemi, who joined her from Uganda in 2001.

While she was studying, Leatherman helped establish the Joanita Senoga Bbaale Book Award, for a student whose native language is not English (Senoga’s is Luganda). “She had to work so hard to be successful in a school where English was not her native language. It’s incredible,” he said.

Senoga hasn’t stopped yet. Currently, she’s working on a master’s degree in library science, while holding two jobs.

She is modest about her accomplishments. “Without the help of the people who were touched by my story, life would have been 10 times more difficult.”

Back in Uganda, nearly 200 students are also at work on their educations at the Circle of Peace School, now run by her siblings and mother.

Senoga, accompanied by library colleague Iria Jones, '87, will return to Uganda in December, taking along school supplies, clothes and gifts for the children. She says she won't be tempted to remain.

"I'm going to stay here in Richmond," she said. "My heart is at the Peace School, but I feel like my home is here."

If you are interested in helping the Circle of Peace School, contact Bryan Figura, chair of the U.S. Task Force, Circle of Peace School at bryan.figura@gmail.com.

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