

The Post and Courier

Following the beat from Charleston to Ghana

Area groups help African village

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Children in Okurase in Ghana play traditional drums. Music and dance are a big part of village life. // Gerald Bybee

It didn't take much to reforge the connection: only making the dotted line solid.

The line first had been drawn between Charleston and West Africa in the 1700s, when the trans-Atlantic slave trade furnished the Lowcountry with captive Africans to work the rice fields. It fractured after the Civil War.

Now the line is solid again, linking three local groups to a certain village in Ghana: Okurase. And the link was made because of music.

From peril to purpose

The story begins in 1983 in Union Heights, a low-income neighborhood in North Charleston.

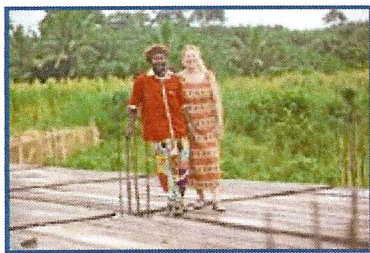
That's when residents started the Gethsemani Community Center at the site of a former Beacon Street church, using some federal dollars provided to help with property rehabilitation. The center was needed to provide after-school programs to the neighborhood's children, said its director, Ida Taylor.

Almost 15 years later, Taylor received a call from Cynthia Swenson, associate director of the Medical University's Family Services Research Center. MUSC had received money from the state to fund a program addressing community violence and crime with "multisystemic therapy," a health care approach that treats physical, social and economic ills in tandem.

"So we met," Taylor said. It was January 1998. "Unlike other people telling us what they were going to do for us, they basically listened to what we had to say."

Photo Gallery

Project Okurase



Project Okurase, backed by MUSC, and aided by the Djole African Dance and Drum Company of North Charleston and the Clemson Architecture Center in Charleston, is an effort to empower villagers in Ghana to create a sustainable community.

Video

Project Okurase



Children of Union Heights have made African drumming and dancing an activity of choice. It keeps them off the streets and teaches them about their cultural inheritance, says Ida Taylor, director of the Gethsemani Community Center.

And what Taylor and her neighbors said was that they were worried about the children, about what happened after school, about crime and drugs and the perils of urban life, perils that often are hard for poor kids to escape.

So with help from the Medical University and the North Charleston Recreation Department, the Gethsemani Community Center implemented new programs: summer basketball, running, cultural field trips and more, Taylor said. The effort was known as the Neighborhood Project, and it

spawned the Djole West African Dance and Drum Company.

"Once we took the kids to see a dance performance at Sterett Hall on the old Naval Base," she said. "They saw an African dance and drum troupe, and the kids wanted to do it." So a six-week summer drumming and dance class was organized in 1999. "But it kept going and going. The kids wanted to keep coming."

Drums were needed. The community center had been buying them in town, but a friend told Taylor about a drum-maker in Ghana known as Powerful. His were handmade instruments, high quality and affordable.

"So we ordered drums from this young man," Taylor said.

Meanwhile, Powerful was pursuing his own initiative across the ocean. In 2000, he started Nkabom Artist and Craftspeople Association in Accra, Ghana, an organization that uses music to bring people together to tackle health and environmental concerns.

Soon, with groups in the Lowcountry and in Ghana both pursuing similar goals and sharing a love for drumming and dance, a bond was formed, then strengthened.

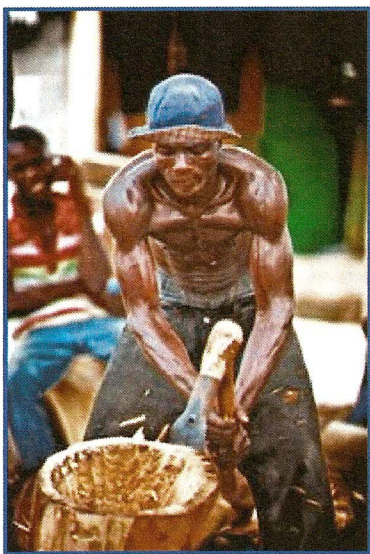
In 2006, Swenson and Taylor took 21 children from Union Heights to Okurase. There they met Powerful, whose real name is Samuel Nkrumbah Yeboah, and learned about life in the village.

Powerful has journeyed to Charleston on multiple occasions to teach drumming and learn about a distant place that values community, musicmaking and movement.

In 2008, Taylor, some of the children and their parents traveled to Okurase once again to witness something extraordinary: a groundbreaking.

It takes a village

Swenson travels to Ghana several times a year to coordinate efforts with Powerful and a small staff running Project Okurase.



Gerald Bybee

Provided

Drum-makers in Okurase sell their instruments to the Djole West African Dance and Drum Company, based in North Charleston. And now they are making drums for Charleston-area schools in a new fundraising program.

On the Web:

www.projectokurase.org

www.bpinot.com/BPinot.com/Okurase.html

www.djoledancecompany.org

Drums for Schools:

A new fundraising program to support local schools and the village of Okurase is launching Jan. 17, when Powerful of Ghana, and Ayo Scott of Sierra Leone, accompanied by young students of North Charleston's Djole West African Dance and Drum Company, deliver two African drums to Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary School.

The Drums for Schools program is an exchange that furnishes authentic drums, handmade in the village of Okurase, to schools in Charleston, Berkeley and Dorchester counties. Individual and corporate donors purchase the drums on the schools' behalf.

The money goes to Okurase to help fund construction of the village's vocational school and other facilities.

Anyone interested in purchasing and donating drums may contact Djole at 452-1310.

If you go:

What: Okurase: Portrait of a Village, a photographic exhibition by Gerald Bybee, featuring the Djole West African Dance and Drum Company.

When: Ongoing exhibition, starting Jan. 12.

Where: James W. Colbert Education Center and Library, MUSC, 171 Ashley Ave.

Price: Free.

What: Master drumming and dance class, featuring Powerful and colleague Ayo Scott from Freetown, Sierra Leone.

When: 9-10 a.m. Jan. 14 (drumming); 10-11 a.m. (dance).

Where: Dance Fx, 635 Rutledge Ave., Suite 103.

Price: \$20; \$15 students.

More info: Call 876-1802.

What: Cook-off featuring Aluette Jones-Small and Powerful, pitting Lowcountry fare against West African cooking.

When: 5-8 p.m., Jan. 15.

Where: Aluette's Cafe, 80 Reid St.

Price: \$40 (includes full dinner); \$30 for Slow Food members.

More info: Email info@slowfoodcharleston.org.

The village, home to about 2,500 people and governed by a female chief, has no electricity, no running water, no health clinic, no dedicated school building and little opportunity for its residents to earn a living wage.

In recent years, the Medical University has focused increasingly on global initiatives in an effort to build infrastructure abroad and collaborate in ways that "(highlight) the unique strengths of MUSC." Project Okurase fits nicely into MUSC's strategic planning, Swenson said.

Little by little, progress is made. Baffour Ampofo III, the village's chief, donated about 10 acres of her land to the project, and teams of villagers are making bricks with machines provided by the Clemson Architecture Center in Charleston.

They are using the bricks, made with compressed earth, cement and mortar, to build a vocational school, Swenson said. Next, they will build a medical center that will double as an MUSC training site for Americans and Africans in exchange programs administered by the university.

"Everyone's learning brickmaking," she said. And everyone's preparing for change. "The goal is to make the village a teaching village" and a model that can be replicated in other parts of Africa, Swenson said.

Ray Huff, director of the Clemson Architecture Center in Charleston, said his group got involved because of the opportunity for teaching and learning, here and abroad. "It was a win-win, so we jumped right on it," Huff said.

The Clemson Architecture Center was tasked with developing a strategy and design for community facilities that could accommodate a variety of project initiatives: health care, education, the arts, economic activity and more.

"What we delivered to the project was a design based on a lot of research," and a lot of consulting with villagers, regulatory agencies, engineers and craftsmen, Huff said. The result was a detailed 16-building plan.

When the Clemson people first embraced their role in the project, villagers were using a brick compression machine borrowed from India, Huff said. But the machine had to be returned, so Clemson students, egged on by adjunct professor and metalworker Sean Ahern, designed and produced a pair of machines that could manufacture two bricks at a time.

"It doesn't sound like much, but you're increasing productivity 100 percent," Huff said.

Villagers have made more than 60,000 bricks, some of which have been used to build the vocational school.

Documenting change

Brickmaking is part of the vocational training project leaders hope will boost local economic activity and help make Okurase self-sufficient, Swenson said. Since an excess of bricks is being produced, many can be sold to residents of other villages. And this affords an opportunity to share lessons learned about sustainability.

The project has begun to capture the imagination of people outside the Charleston area. A New Jersey-based nonprofit, Pedals for Progress, recently donated sewing machines to the women of the village, and the African Women Development Fund provided a small grant to fund a Gari operation. Gari is the high-carbohydrate result of ground cassava root, a staple food additive in West Africa. The grant helped the people of Okurase buy a grinding machine and small storage structure.

Fostering this kind of enterprise is not only good for local people, Swenson said. "It gives us the opportunity to teach and give back to people around the world."

In June last year, Swenson traveled again to Ghana, accompanied by California-based photographer Gerald Bybee, whose large-format images will be featured beginning Thursday in MUSC's James W. Colbert Education Center and Library.

Bybee said the 14-day trip was "a life-changing experience." The ties between the African slave coast and the American Lowcountry became vivid, he said. "It hit me between the eyes when I was over there and lived in the village for a while."

He shot thousands of pictures and lots of video with the intention of producing a book and, eventually, a documentary about the development of Okurase, he said.

As Bybee captured the villagers in images, the villagers captured his imagination, and the photographer quickly decided to commit himself to making Okurase self-sustainable.

He said he's particularly concerned about the village's poor sanitation and lack of electricity. This, he said, was the cause of many health problems. He hopes to introduce a solar power grid, composting toilets and water wells and purification to the village to improve the quality of life.

Bybee, who also is a wine grower in California's Sonoma Valley, near Santa Rosa, said he plans to return to Ghana soon, and repeatedly, to document local efforts.

"There is so much to be done there, everything is in its infancy," Bybee said. If executed well, the project could help Okurase shed the vestiges of colonialism and create a teaching environment where organic farming, local economic activity and cultural stewardship are prioritized.

"We're not imposing Western values, just helping them move back into a contemporary sustainable village," Bybee said, one very similar to the villages that flourished in Africa before the onslaught of slavery and colonialism. "It's an amazing project. It just needs support."

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