

Gazette.Net

Maryland Community News Online

Bowie teacher Beverly Berndt receives \$10K surprise donation for work in Gambia

Virginia Terhune, Staff Writer
March 1, 2012



New Hope Academy teacher Beverly Berndt of Bowie and senior Musa Jadama, 20, of The Gambia, a country in West Africa, stand in front of a bulletin board about the missionary work that Berndt is doing in the country. The school has contributed by raising money for scholarships, and Jadama has been living with Berndt and her family for three years while attending the private school in Landover Hills.

Landover Hills school aids in overseas missionary effort

Virginia Terhune/The Gazette Beverly Berndt of Bowie, a sixth-grade teacher at New Hope Academy in Landover Hills, was recognized recently by an international association for her missionary work in The Gambia, a country in West Africa. She and the school have raised more than \$37,000 to help cover tuition costs for students in Gambia.

It's not every day that a teacher at New Hope Academy, a private school in Landover Hills, receives a \$10,000 check in the mail.

But that's what happened Feb. 22 to Beverly Berndt, 61, of Bowie, a sixth-grade teacher who found out in late November the school would receive the donation for her missionary work in Gambia, a country in West Africa.

“I was shocked. I started crying in the office,” said Berndt, a member of Lovin’ Life Ministries, a Unification Church ministry group that initially got her involved in missionary work in Gambia and has its meetings at New Hope Academy.

“I felt awestruck that someone would help us like that,” said Berndt, who received the check and the Shining World Compassion Award from the Supreme Master Ching Hai International Association based in Taiwan. The check arrived over Christmas break and was returned by the U.S. Postal Service but then was sent again in February, Berndt said.

The association is composed of a group of practitioners who practice a type of meditation developed by Ching Hai, an international businesswoman.

An association committee selects individuals and organizations for donations based on their efforts to help others, said Pete Theodoropoulos, an association representative in Baltimore.

Hai provides the money for the awards from the proceeds of her businesses, which include jewelry, clothing and vegetarian restaurants, he said.

“It’s for doing outstanding services for the world,” said Theodoropoulos, who presented Berndt — who now fundraises and leads missions to Gambia — with a crystal heart symbolizing compassion at a ceremony Feb. 19 at New Hope, which has 235 students from prekindergarten through 12th grade.

“I’m so proud of her,” Principal Joy Morrow said about Berndt. “She’s made such a difference to so many different lives.”

Berndt and her family started doing missionary work in Gambia in 1997 at the request of the church, and the family now has a New Hope senior from Gambia, Musa Jadama, 20, living with them for three years while attending the school.

Jadama said the program is benefiting his country.

“I think it is really helping them for sure,” he said. “It helps students with financial problems, it helps them go to school.”

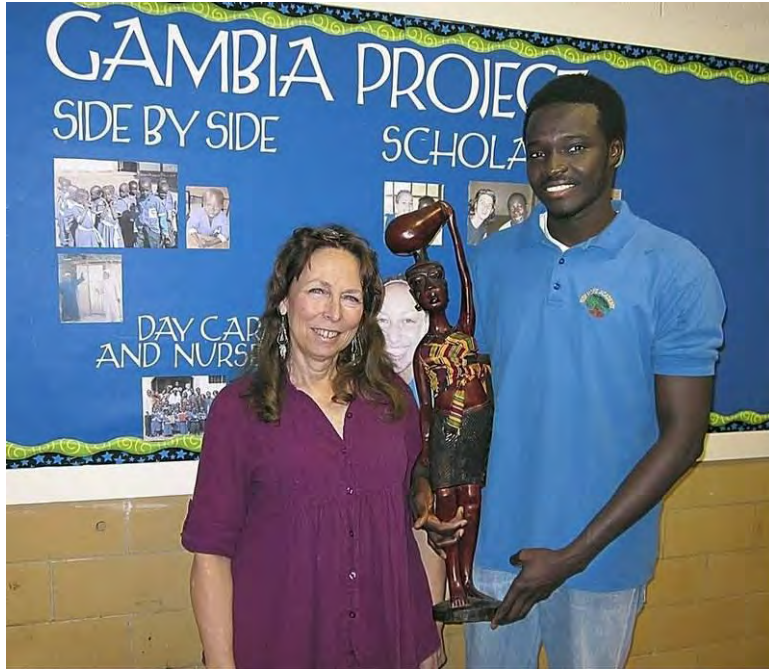
The family was matched with Gambia through a random selection process, but Berndt said she was glad about the assignment because she was inspired by Dr. Albert Schweitzer as a child and always had wanted to go to Africa.

In 2007, she started bringing small groups of American students for three weeks in the summer to work with volunteers in the country on community projects.

The school supports Berndt’s work in Gambia through the school PTA’s Gambia committee, headed by Berndt.

Gambian students must pay for school after sixth grade, and a donation of \$75 to \$100 covers a student’s education for a year, said Berndt, adding her group efforts have raised an estimated \$37,500 through individual donations since 2000.

A parent at New Hope also has been donating money to pay a Gambian teacher’s salary, \$50 per month, since October, she said.



New Hope Academy teacher Beverly Berndt of Bowie and senior Musa Jadama, 20, of The Gambia, a country in West Africa, stand in front of a bulletin board about the missionary work that Berndt is doing in the country. The school has contributed by raising money for scholarships, and Jadama has been living with Berndt and her family for three years while attending the private school in Landover Hills.

Berndt said she expects to spend some of the \$10,000 to upgrade a nursery school and hire another teacher for it, as well as build a village well in Gambia.

“I’ll be meeting with the leaders and see what they need,” said Berndt, who will visit Gambia in late June with 12 American student volunteers, some of whom attend New Hope, for a three-week visit.

Berndt said previous student-service projects in Gambia have included working at mother-baby clinics and at a nursery school, removing litter from streets, and conducting interfaith dialogues, leadership training and character education.

American students pay for their airfare, but Berndt said she hosts fundraisers to raise about \$4,000 per year to cover transportation and food costs for volunteers.

Berndt said word of the award and the check came out of the blue after The Huffington Post named Berndt its “Greatest Person of the Day” in October, catching the association’s eye.

In a Nov. 14 letter to Berndt, Hai commended the visits by student volunteers and New Hope’s scholarship program for students in Gambia.

“A service trip to Gambia in 1999 left a lasting impression that blossomed into a lifelong passion to help the less fortunate,” she wrote.

The association gives awards to a variety of people and causes, but on no set schedule, Theodoropoulos said. Among the past recipients: the founder of Equine Voices Rescue & Sanctuary in Green Valley, Ariz., in 2011, and the British Red Cross in 2008.