

DSU prof promotes literacy in Africa

Descendant of slaves forms nonprofit organization to build, stock libraries

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Delaware State University history professor Jahi Issa has traveled to Africa more than two dozen times since a “mind-boggling” trip to Egypt 20 years ago as an undergraduate student.

For the descendant of slaves, his trips to the continent brought to life his grandmother’s stories of time spent there. It also opened his eyes to a great shortage in rural areas of Ghana and sister countries. Although Africa is rich in natural resources, people don’t have enough books to read.

Issa’s recent trips to Africa have had a greater purpose than just sightseeing. He and a fellow history professor, Salim Faraji of California State University, Dominguez Hills, started a nonprofit organization called Building Libraries for Africa, which is looking to build six libraries in about five years, as well as stocking several existing buildings with books.



Delaware State University professor Jahi Issa started his nonprofit with a fellow professor at California State University.

(Buy photo)

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HOW TO HELP

Donations can be made online to the Building Libraries for Africa project through the librariesforafrica.com Web site or by mailing a check or money order to: Building Libraries for Africa, 9 Bacon Court, Dover, DE 19901. Call (252) 312-6730 to donate books or for more information.

The first library building – a plain, square structure of steel and wood – is already in the final construction stages in Paga, Ghana, where construction is being done with local labor and community volunteers. About \$15,000 in work and materials has gone into it, with about \$8,000 more needed to finish the job.

When it is completed, he hopes by the end of the year, it will be the first library in Paga, a village of about 15,000 inhabitants. There are only 15 public libraries in the country, Issa said. The organization also plans to ship newer books to four other libraries in Ghana.

“I would say that 90 percent of the books are 30 years old,” he said.

The goal is to build two more libraries in Ghana and one library each in Liberia, Sudan and Kenya. Issa estimates it will cost a little more than \$20,000 to build and run each library, which will include computers hooked up to satellite and appropriate furniture. He has approached companies, churches, schools and others to donate money and books.

Monica Grant, 22, a senior at Delaware State University, is heading a campaign by her sorority, Chi Rho

Gamma, to help out. It has collected a couple of hundred books in the past month, she said.

Grant said she visited Senegal and Mauritania in western Africa during the summer, and though they are not in need of libraries like some other places, she saw the thirst for knowledge, with people reading even as they walked around.

“We don’t value education as much as they do because we have everything,” she said. “They want to know how to make money like we do.”

Issa said he plans to take 500 books to Paga at the end of December to serve as a startup for the new library. He further hopes to ship another 15,000 books by July to help stock all of the libraries. They will be shipped by ship, because that will be less costly, he said.

There should not be a language barrier when Africans check out the books, he said.

“All of these places where we are building these libraries, English is an official or second language because of colonialism,” he said. “So that’s not an issue at all.”

Akwasi Osei, interim associate dean at the College of Arts, Humanities and Sciences at Delaware State University, as well as chair of its Department of History, Political Science and Philosophy, said he applauds the effort. He was part of the team that hired Issa earlier this year, and the humanitarian effort stood out on his résumé.

“Service to the community is something we expect from faculty,” Osei said. “In this particular instance, it wasn’t just community within the Dover area, it is global. I saw that as an edge that he had over some of the other candidates.

“It was a wonderful idea, providing opportunities in places where they haven’t had something like that,” he said of the project. “Books are a sustaining asset for any country. One of the things those nations need is education.”

Issa agrees.

“I think we have a social responsibility to help these nations that have not made it into the post-industrial world,” he said. “And what better way to do that than through education? We live in a global society now where we are connected. This is an effort not only to help Africa, but to help us.”

Contact Edward L. Kenney at 324-2891 or ekenney@delawareonline.com.