

Bettering Education in Sierra Leone

AS A CHILD IN KABALA, SIERRA LEONE, Sheku “SAM” Kargbo G’85, G’86 dreamed of going to school in the United States and using that education to better where he came from—a place where some people live on a dollar a day. “When we were growing up, I learned from my father that my education is not really for me, it’s for my community,” Kargbo says.

He first came to the United States to study at SUNY Oneonta, where he earned a bachelor’s degree, and later received master’s degrees from both University at Albany, SUNY, and SUNY Oneonta. At SU’s School of Education, he earned a Ph.D. degree in teacher education and a master’s degree in higher education. Now retired and living in Reading, Pennsylvania, Kargbo is motivated by his childhood dream. After spending years at various universities working in positions ranging from assistant professor to director of research, policy, and program development at the SUNY System Office, he has been working on improving his high school alma mater in Kabala. He began with a focus on the library, which had been “out of commission” for more than 20 years. Through an alumni group’s fundraising effort, the secondary school’s library was rehabilitated, but still lacked books. To stock the library, Kargbo reached out for book donations in Reading, and to communities beyond.

One woman who responded to his inquiry was Annie Schmidt ’85, a library media specialist at Conrad Weiser High School in Robesonia, Pennsylvania. Her school, along with others, donated books to Kargbo to be shipped to Sierra Leone. Additionally, Conrad Weiser provided science supplies and such technological devices as desktop computers, overhead projectors, and calculators. Schmidt says the school also held a “Jeans Day,” in which staff paid a small fee to wear jeans to work one Friday. The proceeds went toward scholarships for students in Kabala to attend the secondary school. According to Schmidt, Kargbo’s passion for helping his community back in Sierra Leone rubs off on you. “He’s very inspiring to me—to know that when you see something that needs to be fixed you don’t just sit and wait for somebody else to do it, but empower yourself to make a difference,” says Schmidt, a Whitman School of Management graduate.

While Kargbo and Schmidt had not interacted previously, they discovered they were both Syracuse University graduates in 1985 and had been on campus at the same time, when Schmidt was an undergraduate and Kargbo was working toward his doctorate. Now, Kargbo describes Schmidt as his partner in this project and feels they “share a passion.”

As for the big picture, Kargbo knows he must begin with “baby steps,” but he is also working on creating a nonprofit organization as well as developing a college in Kabala. He hopes to not only improve the education of youth in his hometown, but also to aid those in poverty. According to Kargbo, his determination to help and guide youth began at Syracuse University. As an assistant director in Shaw Hall and later a director of Sadler Hall, he worked with youth and adults to create a living and social space for students that blended with academic development. “I grew as an individual, I grew as an educator, and I grew as a leader,” Kargbo says. Now he is using those skills to improve the lives of those in his home community.

—*Gina Reitenauer*

Source: Syracuse University Magazine Fall/Winter 2017

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