

Giving Back to Cameroon

A brand new high school in rural Cameroon is providing hope for female students.

By Jillian Shaner

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Aumazo, Inc., a not-for-profit organization founded by Silver Spring resident and Cameroonian native, Jacqueline Audigé, is organizing, planning and soliciting funding for the construction of a charitable, “green” high school for girls in Bankondji, Cameroon. Aumazo is proud to have put in the school’s foundation and is building hope for a “green” and promising future for young women in this rural community.

“All the girls in the village are very excited about the new prospects,” Audigé said. This school will be more than an educational facility. “It is a lifetime opportunity for rural girls to depart from social isolation, educational neglect and economic marginalization.”

The boarding school is intended to provide a worry-free environment for young women from Bankondji and other Cameroonian villages. Students will often be reminded that their contributions are valued and that their actions count to the nation as a whole.

Unlike the U.S., in rural Cameroon, not all young women currently enrolled in ninth grade are between the ages of 13 and 15. Some young women are as old as 20, and many have no future beyond the walls of grade nine. Some will drop out if they do not want to repeat the grade, and others will be forced to drop out because of their age and family demands.

Life in these regions is an endless financial struggle. Without fixed income, many parents cannot afford education for their children, let alone luxury goods such as TV, running water, electricity, plumbing, radios and computers. “I grew up in the 20th century in these same conditions,” Audigé remarked ruefully, “and now we are in the 21st century and no major change has occurred. Young girls in the village are completely disconnected from the realities that exist outside of their everyday world.”

Aumazo, Inc. has integrated a long-term strategy to expand agriculture and small-scale manufacturing that will allow its students to acquire new skills while generating revenues for the school. Additionally, Internet capabilities will allow them to connect with the outside world.

“Schooling is compulsory in Cameroon, but education is not free,” Audigé drew the distinction, “and parents bear the burden of tuition and subsequent fees, even including teacher salaries.” In order to meet the existing needs of these rural families, students will be able to attend Aumazo’s school completely free of charge -- tuition, supplies and books will be provided. “At the discretion of the school, every family will be presented with the estimated costs of its child’s

education,” she said. “We want them to appreciate the gift and to develop a sense of responsibility and duty to the school.”

Despite their meager living conditions and income levels, the majority of rural families pay taxes, but they do not share in the wealth of the country. “Their needs are either unknown to the government, or are overlooked,” Audigé said. While tax revenues are meant to help run schools and provide services to these communities, appropriate infrastructure is lacking, which Audigé explained makes transportation a serious problem. “They pay taxes without real benefit,” she observed regretfully.

The unequal distribution of supplies, scarcity of financial resources and lack of employment opportunities in the rural regions puts young women there at a greater disadvantage than their urban counterparts. “The social contrast between the urban area and the rural community perpetuates the unjust inequality and fuels the marginalization of girls in rural communities,” Audigé said. “Their only source of income is agriculture, especially subsistence crops, and the rudimentary agricultural practices do not facilitate the process at all.”

Along with better career opportunities and educational funding, girls living in the urban regions of Cameroon enjoy access to technology and communication that are not available elsewhere. “Many rural girls suffer deprivation,” Audigé said. “In order to achieve social mobility and a better future, many move to urban areas, or just drop out of school.”

Aumazo’s high school will assist female students in securing gainful employment upon graduation, thereby giving them financial freedom while preventing abuses. “More often, rural girls are unaware of dangers that await them when they move to cities,” Audigé said. “Given their naive state of mind, and as a result of the lack of financial and emotional support, they become prey. They are really at the mercy of sex traffickers, teachers who coerce them to exchange sexual favors for school supplies, guardians who use them as household slaves, etc.” Audigé explained that many rural girls who leave their villages to pursue education in the city are forced to drop out, either for lack of financial support or due to pregnancies that result from sexual abuse.

“In the United States, well-educated women know the law and may use it to their advantage,” Audigé said. “By contrast, in Cameroon, rules to protect women are ‘on the books’, but many girls and women are unaware of them. For example, it’s normal practice for teachers to date their female students, but this will not occur at our school.”

Audigé believes the new high school, which will foster growth and values, will motivate young women to stay in, or return to the village. “I believe that the presence of this school will create a reverse exodus,” she said. “Many young people will come back to the community and build a better life there -- girls will remain in their community and get a quality education as well.”

As no high school currently exists in Bankondji, Audigé is working hard to open doors to the first students by fall 2010. Through Aumazo, Inc. she believes the torch of education will be passed on to the young women in her village, and eventually to other nations in Africa.

“Everybody who wants to change the world for the better should invest in education,” Audigé said. “The government will benefit from its investment in education. These girls will contribute not only to their communities as role models for progress, but also to the nation of Cameroon. By attaining this level of secondary education, the young women who cannot afford higher education, will be able to pursue more gainful employment that can lead to enriched lives for themselves, their families, and the larger community.”