

## One Person Making a Difference: Mary Rose\*

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*"Educate a man, you educate the individual; educate a woman and you educate a family, a nation"*

*African Proverb*

Cameroon, on the western side of the African continent, is a beautiful country with lush greenery and warm, loving people. It's also a poor country where most girls spend their days doing the household chores and looking after younger siblings, often missing out on an education most American children take for granted. This is changing, however, for the 300 students of St. Joseph's Girls Vocational High School in Bafut, Cameroon.

St. Joseph's offers girls and women between the ages of 13 and 24 a comprehensive education in math, reading, writing, science, history and religion. Students also learn life skills like hygiene, sewing and cooking. It's St. Joseph's goal to have these girls use their education and skills to support their families and communities. The success of St. Joseph's depends on the devotion and compassion of some very committed people. One of these people is Mary Rose from Milwaukee.

Rose learned about St. Joseph's from a nun friend who'd been to Cameroon. The friend told her about the school, what it was doing to help the girls and the challenges it faced. Rose's interest was instantly awakened. She was ready for a change in her life, the chance to make a difference. She'd also always been interested in African culture so when the friend asked if she'd like to come along on her next trip to the school, Rose responded, "I'm packed. Just tell me when."

Rose didn't know what to expect when she visited Cameroon and St. Joseph's. "I had no idea what I was getting into, other than I was open to their world and open to God's plan," Rose said. Initially, she was shocked at the lack of amenities at the school the students have to share an outhouse and have only a spigot to wash up. She recalled the stench of the thin foam mattresses the students had to sleep on and the lack of proper school supplies. One of her first missions was going into the village to buy new mattresses. However, she was also greatly touched by the students who were overjoyed about getting an education. She remembers the enthusiasm the girls showed as they went about their daily lessons and tasks. "The beautiful part is they are so eager to learn," she said.

At first, the students were shy around Rose but soon responded positively to her warmth and generosity, bestowing her with the nickname Mama Rose. She brought art supplies with her and taught the students origami. Most of the students had never seen a glue stick or stickers, items that any American grade-school student would have no problem identifying.

Rose, who stayed in Cameroon for a month, initially thought of starting a pen-pal project between St. Joseph's students and students back home in Milwaukee. When she asked the students who would like to be pen pals with American girls, all 300 hands shot into the air. However, Rose was so inspired by everyone at the school that she knew her involvement had to go beyond getting the girls pen pals. "You really leave your heart there," Rose said about the school, and she vowed to the school's principal, Sister Theodosia, "I will do your work back home."

Since her return to the United States, Rose has done just that. She joined forces Milwaukee's St. Ann's Center to develop a foundation for St. Joseph's called the Cameroon Fund/Educational Development Center to raise funds for the school. She has spoken to the members of her church about her mission to an enthusiastic response. She hosted "Arts in Action" at her condominium, featuring the artwork of local artists for a small fee. She even spoke to several classes at her granddaughter's school and the students were so moved that they helped raise \$500 for St. Joseph's. Last Christmas the foundation sold a Christmas CD to raise funds and will sell the CD again this Christmas.

This spring, Sister Theodosia will visit Milwaukee where she will give a presentation about the school to the Greater Milwaukee Foundation in hopes of raising more funds. Rose says Sister Theodosia can best tell the story of St. Joseph's because she lives it every single day.

Getting involved with St. Joseph's has been life changing for Rose. It is like a full-time job, or better yet, a calling. "When I came home [from Cameroon] I said, 'Here we have 300 young women that can make a difference; we can help them,'" she said.

The school faces many challenges that Rose is working to address. It lacks up-to-date books and adequate supplies. The conditions are unsanitary. Often the girls don't have enough money to attend the school and some of the families in Bafut consider education unnecessary for young girls because the culture is patriarchal. The school is also challenged by the problems plaguing the African continent, including poverty and AIDS.

Rose has also dealt with challenges back home. She said the biggest obstacle she faces is getting people to take this situation seriously, explaining that some people only want to keep their donated dollars in their communities and that others don't understand the magnitude of problems Cameroon faces.

Rose takes a clear look at these challenges and works on finding solutions. She feels it's her mission to get people to care and it's her passion that often makes people want to help the school. She's currently working with someone to develop a Power Point presentation that she can use at her talks in the community and a website is forthcoming. Rose knows in her heart that we can all work together to make a positive difference in the lives of these students and, therefore, change their world.

Both St. Joseph's and Rose have many goals. The school's goal is to have adequately equipped classrooms with updated books, abundant supplies and technological equipment. The school also needs sanitary living conditions in its dormitories. In September, Rose will return to the school to survey the progress it's making, see if living conditions have improved and learn of what else the school needs. Financially, she'd like to raise at least \$1 million. As St. Joseph's develops and educates its students, she wants to discuss the idea of having its graduates come to the United States for additional education and then go back to Cameroon to teach at the school. She'd also like to send recent American college graduates to Cameroon to teach at St. Joseph's.

Though the school's conditions are challenging, Rose ultimately finds St. Joseph's joyful. Like students everywhere, St. Joseph's students are filled with dreams and promise. They have shown abilities in many subjects, including mathematics, nursing, tailoring and graphic arts. Rose knows that by educating these amazing girls, many of Africa's problems can be alleviated. "I so believe in what I'm doing," she said. "It's not about me; it's about co-creating with people who really want to get involved in helping the women of Cameroon." These dynamic and smart young women

can help solve problems plaguing Africa including AIDS, poverty and hunger. They can help handicapped and sick children and can assist the elderly. They can also foster economic growth within their communities. Rose is convinced that if we all work together, we can help heal what is broken.

Ultimately Rose believes, "By helping these girls, we can make a lot of change in the world."

You can help make a difference for the students of St. Joseph's Girls Vocational High School. To make a donation or to learn more, please contact:

Cameroon Fund/Educational Development Center

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