

VASHON-MAURY ISLAND BEACHCOMBER



NEWS

Innovative school in Uganda has Vashon ties

Some 8,800 miles from Vashon Island, Washington, in the town of Ntinda, Uganda, there is a thriving center for education and community called Vashon Primary School.

By Kathryn True For The Beachcomber • March 22, 2023 1:30 am



Some 8,800 miles from Vashon, Washington, in the town of Ntinda, Uganda, there is a thriving center for education and community called Vashon Primary School.

It's not a coincidence. In 2011, the seed for the name was unwittingly planted during a lunch at the Vashon home of the late Ed Swan and Linda Barnes.

Swan, a beloved former islander and author of "The Birds of Vashon Island," died of a heart attack last October at age 59.

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Barnes, who works in international capacity building and research, was then head of a University of Washington Department of Global Health team doing AIDS outreach in Uganda. During a Seattle training for international partners, Barnes invited attendees to gather at her home on Vashon.

Henry Tumwebaze, a community outreach specialist from Uganda who helped mobilize communities to accept in-home HIV testing, was among them.

As they sat around the table, Swan and Barnes asked Tumwebaze about his plans to further strengthen community at home.

"Henry shared with Ed and me his passion for education, and his commitment to finding a way for children from young ages to have quality educational opportunities, even if they were not from families of means," Barnes said.

More than 40% of children in Uganda lack basic needs and cannot afford school fees and supplies. Tumwebaze and his wife Judith Abenawe shared a dream of opening a school for children whose families could not afford the country's relatively expensive government-run schools.

Swan and Barnes expressed enthusiasm for the idea and were nonetheless surprised to learn only a few months later that Tumwebaze and Abenawe had purchased land in Ntinda and were preparing to construct the first building — of Vashon Primary School.

"It was then that we realized that this is a couple with a mission," Barnes said. "Ed was a community organizer, both in his former profession and as just part of who he was. He was intrigued by Henry and Judith's innovative idea to offer a barter system around paying for school tuition."

Barnes and Swan mentored the couple and eventually donated funds for building and educational materials.

In 2014, Swan and Barnes were honored guests at the school's grand opening, where they were celebrated among hundreds of families and community leaders. They were greatly impressed by what Tumwebaze and Abenawe had achieved in three short years.



The school makes every effort to not turn away prospective students for lack of funds, negotiating with parents to find ways for them to barter time or give materials to pay school fees. Every week, the school hosts a lively community market, where families help cover the cost of their children’s tuition by selling garden produce, poultry, milk, crafts, firewood and building materials.

The school also regularly hosts a health clinic where students and their families receive basic primary care, including immunizations and other routine preventive care. The school is unusual in that it has no religious affiliation and accepts students of all religions.

Today, more than 300 young people, ages 3 to 15, attend Vashon Primary School year-round. To date, the school has graduated 43 students, all of whom have gone on to higher education.

The pandemic was hard on education in Uganda, where for two years it was illegal for schools to operate. That’s why it was especially noteworthy when earlier this year, school teachers and students passed rigorous testing requirements giving Vashon Primary School the prestigious distinction of being a Ugandan government-certified school.

“This is a very competitive and highly robust certification program,” Barnes said. “For the teachers and students to achieve those scores coming out of the pandemic is an especially huge accomplishment.”

Tumwebaze and Abenawe are effusive in their gratitude to Barnes and Swan, and have a strong bond with Vashon Island, which they consider to be a model community with a “peaceful nature.”

“We are so thankful to Ed and Linda,” Tumwebaze said. “Linda keeps inspiring us, providing overall strategic guidance and shaping our Vashon School mission to offer affordable quality education to communities in Uganda.”

To learn more about Vashon Primary School and how to support this effort, contact Linda Barnes at lindasbarnes@comcast.net.

Kathryn True is a freelance writer living on Vashon.

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NEWS

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By [Elizabeth Shepherd](#) • April 1, 2023 6:56 pm

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