

Goll Farm Elementary School Report

May 5, 2016

Editor's Note: Steve Keenan and Jackie Venner, long-time supporters of the Goll Farm Elementary School in Suakoko, Liberia, have recently returned from a visit to the school. They brought with them many photographs of the amazing progress being made by the students and the faculty.

Thanks to Steve and Jackie for making their pictures available to illustrate this report, and for providing current information on the daily routine and the long-term future of the school to supplement the regular reports we receive from The Rev. Prince Wreh and Relhetta Wreh.

Working to Finish Castellanos Hall



With 224 students enrolled at the school, work began last year to build an assembly hall large enough to accommodate school meetings. The new building is named Castellanos Hall, in memory of The Rev. Kermit Castellanos, an Episcopal priest who was a major figure in the history of the school. Even though it had not been completed, the assembly hall was rushed into service for training of volunteers in the battle against the ebola virus. With ebola now under control – although not eliminated – the school has been reopened for classes, and construction work on Castellanos Hall has resumed.

The other school buildings have skim-coated walls and floors, so that the walls – inside and out – can be painted, and the floors can be swept daily to keep the school clean. The school's operating budget does not have funds for the window bars that are

essential to the security of the building, nor for the completion of the floor and walls. Formal estimates by local workmen indicate a need for \$1,340 to buy and install window bars, and \$1,665 to skim-coat the floor and walls, and to paint the inside and outside of the walls.

The exterior walls of the other buildings – the main classroom building, the pre-kindergarten classroom building, and the bathroom building – are all painted in a matching red design. The color is also reflected in the pupils' uniforms, giving the children a sense of belonging to a unified whole, and eliminating the bias that could come from their usual clothing – in some cases little better than rags and in other cases quite fancy.

In the accompanying photograph, below left, students and teachers are shown in the half-finished Castellanos Hall conducting a game similar to “Jeopardy,” designed to push their desire to learn.

The use of the assembly hall is an important part of the long-term future of the school. Wanting to get away from the “handout” economy that has built the school in its early years, Fr. and Mrs. Wreh are continuing to move toward self-sustainability. Most of the students come from circumstances in which money is simply not available. Their parents are subsistence farmers, and some work at tapping the thick white sap from rubber trees. It's a very low-paying job, made even more precarious by the falling market for natural rubber and resulting falling prices.

But the Goll Farm School is located near Phebe Hospital and Cuttington University. Phebe is a regional medical center and referral hospital with an excellent reputation. Cuttington and the University of Liberia are friendly rivals for the honor of being the top university in the country.

Phebe and Cuttington both have large paid staffs of educated people, ranging from professors, administrators and medical doctors to maintenance and clerical personnel, and janitorial employees. In contrast to the Goll Farm School pupils, these people have a little bit of disposable income, and entertainment venues are few and far between in the rain forest.. By devising events in Castellanos Hall to which the general public can be invited for a small fee, the school is starting to build a sustainable financial base. “Movie Nights” with DVDs and a television set are very popular, and the big hall, about 40 by 60 feet in size, can be rented for birthdays and

family celebrations. “Game nights are also very well attended. To supplement the rental income, the school sells refreshments at such events.

The completion of Castellanos Hall, so that it can be made secure with window grates and can be painted to look appealing, is an essential part of the long-range financial stability of Goll Farm School.

Looking Toward the Future With Long-Lasting Construction

Many school buildings in the rain forest villages of Liberia are built with mud blocks, or with wood sticks supporting mud walls. That kind of building is inexpensive and quickly constructed, but termites and rain make short work of such construction. At Goll Farm School the decision was made at the very outset to build for the future – the future of the pupils and the future of the physical school itself. As a result, all of the school buildings are made with concrete blocks, which cost more than mud construction, but will last many decades without needing frequent maintenance.



The road that leads to Monrovia passes near the school grounds, and when that road was widened and paved the government road crew had to demolish a school building that was in the wider right of way. As much of the material from the building as possible was saved so that it could be reused. In addition, the national government paid compensation to the school for the loss of the building. With these two sources of income, plus donations, it was possible to replace the razed building with a new structure, shown at left with the red roof in the photograph.

To the right in the picture, with the blue roof, is a new house built by American educator Dr. James Gray and his wife, Lyn, as their Liberian retirement home. Looking to the long-term future, when they decide to return to the United States they plan to give the building to the school. One possibility is to use it as an income-producing guest house. The Grays have lived in Liberia for decades, and their desire to make their home at the school is a great vote of confidence in the work of Fr. Prince and Relhetta Wreh in building and operating the Goll Farm School.

Building a Bridge to Get to School



Something that would never occur to most people in the United States has resulted in a major project for the benefit of Goll Farm School children. Many of the school’s students come from a nearby village, but there is a small river between the village and the school. In the dry season, roughly equivalent to the North American winter months, the children can cross the stream by walking on a big log, shown in the photograph above, which happened to fall in the right place.

In the rainy season, however, the stream becomes a river, and the log is below the surface of the water. Crossing the river on the submerged log through the rapidly moving water becomes very dangerous – particularly for the smaller children who could be swept away in the current. Parents were understandably concerned for their children’s safety, but they did not want to forbid them to cross on the log in the rainy season. That crude “bridge” was the only way to get to school, which they value highly.

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Building a Bridge, continued

Taking action on their own, rather than waiting for “somebody else” to help them, a group of men from the village began construction of a better bridge. They cut down big trees from the forest to make the deck of the new bridge, which is elevated so that it will be above the water level even during the rainy season. Even this bridge, which is shown in the photograph below as was coming close to completion, is considered temporary by its builders. Even as this bridge is going up, the villagers are working on plans for a more permanent structure for their children.



In a very tangible way, the construction of the basic, almost primitive footbridge demonstrates the appreciation of the real value of education by the people of the village. Many of the parents of the Goll Farm School pupils are illiterate themselves, and have had no education in even the most basic arithmetic. But it is only the lack of education that holds them back. They are very intelligent, and like all parents

from every culture all over the world, they want something better for their children.

The parents see what a good education can do in material terms when they look at the higher standard of living enjoyed by the educated employees of Phebe Hospital and Cuttington University. From their mud shacks the parents see well-dressed people in fine cars passing on the newly improved highway. In the regional center at Gbarnga, about ten miles away, there are many government offices, as well as other facilities, all run by people who went to school.

This is educational motivation at a very basic level, and this is village brilliance! If all that stands between our children and Goll Farm School is a river, then we shall make a bridge over the river! Cut down trees, carry logs, whatever it takes so that our children can go to school!

Student Council Has Important Role



Members of the Student Council are shown in the accompanying photograph, with their faculty advisor.

At the Goll Farm School, the involvement of pupils in the school’s Student Council is an integral part of the whole educational program. Taking part in the Student Council is not merely a status symbol. It is a living lesson in civics, leadership, government, responsibility, and the decision-making process.