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La Follette School News

Sustainable friendship: Alumni Thurmaier, Kazeri collaborate to aid school in Tanzania

What started as a trip to celebrate a 25th wedding anniversary by visiting an old friend in Tanzania has developed into a new partnership for alumni Kurt Thurmaier and Leo Kazeri.



Kurt Thurmaier, left, waits to receive a brick from classmate Leo Kazeri as they move bricks as part of a project to build a dormitory at Nyegina Secondary School in Tanzania. Thurmaier and Kazeri met during a statistics course they took while they were public policy and administration students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Center for the Study of Public Policy and Administration, Kazeri from the Center for Development.

Twenty-five years after they graduated, seeing firsthand what Kazeri is

Thurmaier and his wife, Jeanine, visited Kazeri in Musoma, a district in northern Tanzania near Lake Victoria. Kazeri is a Catholic priest who serves as development director for his diocese, director of a secular economic development organization and business manager for Nyegina Secondary School, a boarding school near Musoma with 500 students.

Both men hold 1983 master's degrees in public policy and administration from precursors of the La Follette School of Public Affairs, Thurmaier from the

accomplishing and the great need that remains in the region was a life-changing experience, says Thurmaier, who is director of the Division of Public Administration at Northern Illinois University.

Kazeri shared his daily life with the Thurmaiers as he ministered to his parish, networked with community leaders and advanced plans for the school. "He told us, 'You will sleep where I sleep, eat where I eat and go where I go,'" Kurt Thurmaier says, recalling the invitation to celebrate their anniversary in the village of Nyegina. "Leo goes nonstop from 4 a.m. to 10 p.m."

The experience was so powerful that the Thurmaiers and friends started a nonprofit organization, Tanzania Development Support, to raise money to help the 2,880 people of Nyegina emerge from poverty. Supporting the school is the first goal, Thurmaier says.

"There is so much need in so many ways in one place," Thurmaier says. "At the same time, the generosity of the average person there is just overwhelming. So you have this contrast between abundant need and abundant generosity. It's a paradox that makes you say to yourself, 'The world is different than I thought it was.'"

Kazeri and Thurmaier met when they were students in a statistics class taught by Jack Huddleston of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning. They spent many a long night in the computer lab processing punch cards to conduct their statistical analysis. "We found ourselves helping each other," Kazeri says. "He learned I was a Catholic priest, and his girlfriend, Jeanine, whom he later married, was Catholic, although Kurt is not, and he was very much interested in theological issues. That did pull us together. He also recognized I was a foreign student struggling to put my head afloat in a different culture. So, while we assisted each other, we came to be attached to each other, and we never parted ever since. He became one of my families in the USA."

Kazeri helped to officiate at Kurt and Jeanine's wedding in Madison after the two men graduated from their respective centers. Kazeri also earned a master's degree in 1984 in planning before heading back to his home in Tanzania to become development director of the Musoma diocese of the Catholic church. Before he left, he baptized the Thurmaiers's first child.

Thurmaier shares experiences

La Follette School alum Kurt Thurmaier was in Madison on Tuesday, March 23, to talk about his experiences with [Tanzania Development Support](#) at the La Follette School Seminar.



Leo Kazeri



Kurt Thurmaier

They kept in touch and saw each other once when they both were in Amsterdam in the 1990s. While on a three-month sabbatical, Kazeri visited the Thurmaiers in DeKalb, Illinois, in 2007 when they were pondering how best to honor their upcoming 25th wedding anniversary, and Kazeri issued his invitation to celebrate in his parish.

"Our friendship took a different turn after that 2008 visit with the creation of Tanzania Development Support and our partnership," Kazeri says.

The Thurmaiers returned to Tanzania in the summer of 2009 with nine NIU students and a dozen volunteers. They spent two weeks helping to construct a girls dormitory at Nyegina School. "Together, with community volunteers and students at the school, we poured concrete floors and passed about 12,000 bricks along work lines to begin building the dormitory walls," Thurmaier says. "It was a fantastic, unforgettable experience."

In addition to supplying volunteer labor, Tanzania Development Support is raising money to help fund the dormitory's design and construction. "Thanks to our generous donors, we raised \$40,000 to pay for the design of the building, to buy construction materials, and to pay for mafundi (skilled workers) to mix concrete for the floors and walls and to lay the bricks," Thurmaier says.

The secondary school is comparable to an institution with grades 7 to 10 in the U.S. educational system. Most of its 500 students sleep in overcrowded dormitories, Kazeri says. "They need more classes, laboratories. They are hungry to have computer laboratories so that they are part of the modern technological world."

To that end, the community's strategic plan is to expand the school to six years to prepare students for university or teacher training. "Tanzania has a huge shortage of teachers, and education is essential for economic development," Thurmaier says. "The key for making it a high school is to have strong science and English. Tanzania Development Support is focused on enabling the school to reach its objectives by raising the money they need to make the necessary enhancements to the school."

"Leo and I learned early on at UW that integrated development is essential," Thurmaier says. "Leo actually does it and has been doing it for 15 years. It is exciting to see him in action and to be able to contribute. Integrated development must be sustainable — we emphasize personal connections that will sustain relationships between Nyegina, DeKalb, Madison and elsewhere long after Leo and I are gone."

La Follette School students are invited to join the Tanzania study-abroad trip to Nyegina sponsored by Northern Illinois University. The summer trips to Musoma in 2010 and 2011 are open to any students, while any volunteer can join the 2011 venture. The 2010 trip will involve installing solar panels on the secondary school, learning about the role of nongovernmental organizations in development, and traveling to the University of Dar es Salaam. Both years' include a two-day camping trip in the Serengeti and a visit to Zanzibar. For information, contact Kurt Thurmaier, 815-753-0311, kthur@tdsnfp.org.

[Thurmaier applies management, development expertise locally, globally](#), March 15, 2010, La Follette School News

[Kazeri aids community in reaching development goals](#), March 15, 2010, La Follette School News

Kazeri's experience in Madison also showed him what women could accomplish. "I could see what women could do if given equal opportunity and my culture so far cannot offer that. Today, when I look at the community I live with at Nyegina, I see men are really endangered species because most do not care about life. It is only women who work."

These realizations and observations prompt Kazeri to emphasize educating girls — 300 of Nyegina school's 500 students are girls. That approach makes sense to Thurmaier: "The single most effective way to fight poverty is to provide secondary education to young women," he notes. "That's true in the United States as well as in developing nations.

"A woman who has a high school education is more likely to choose a better mate, have fewer children and have a higher income, and her children are more likely to meet higher health measures," he adds. "In other words, the household has a better chance to succeed."

Thurmaier's students will return to Nyegina in the summer of 2010, led by an NIU engineer professor. "We will be working with Engineers without Borders to begin a five-year project to install solar energy panels and take the school off the undependable electric grid," he says. "We are looking for public affairs students to join us to complement the engineering students and stress sustainability in a social and cultural way, not just technical."

Kazeri looks forward to a few students from La Follette visiting his village and helping to build the school and the electrical system. "We are all excited as our network expands," he says. "That gives me great hope. With Tanzania Development Support, Engineers without Borders and perhaps some La Follette School students, I believe we can reach great heights."

A version of this story appeared in the [spring 2010 La Follette Notes](#) newsletter for alumni and friends.

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