



A VISION FOR CHANGE THROUGH EDUCATION

From a small village in West Africa comes a visionary whose nonprofit is dedicated to changing lives on a global scale by Elizabeth Renfro

This summer, CSU, Chico honors student Koudougou Alfred Koala traveled with 14 North State volunteers to help the 4,000 residents in the village of his birth. This was his second humanitarian trip to Thyou, in Burkina Faso, where residents often have no clean water to drink and starvation is common. Along with sharing much-needed aid—including medication, oxen, and a state-of-the-art well—Koala and members of the nonprofit organization Feeding Nations Through Education shared their joy in the successful beginnings of what was perhaps the most important part of the plan: providing Thyou's children with an education.

In such dire circumstances, it might seem odd that Koala would emphasize the children's education. But he firmly believes this will help his village, and others like it, the most. "Education is gold," says Koala, who soon after his arrival in Chico in 2007 began making plans to help his country through both donations and education. His efforts began in Thyou but have resulted in a highly successful, multifaceted nonprofit with a wide-ranging plan to help not only his village but also the others in his home country and beyond.

Realities and vision

Of his life in the world's third poorest country, the 31-year-old states matter of factly, "Yes, I have gone through suffering—like any other child." Less than 20 percent of Burkina Faso's land is arable while 80 percent of the population relies on subsistence agriculture, and the illiteracy rate is 74 percent. His family's village, like most, had neither clean water nor electricity, and with a three-month growing season and limited farming implements, villagers regularly face starvation. Malnutrition and lack of clean water across the country result in an infant mortality rate among the highest in Africa: nearly one in five Burkinabe children die before reaching the age of 5. AIDS, too, has left thousands of orphans—140,000, according to the 2010 UN Global AIDS report—in this small country of fewer than 17 million.

Individuals and governments in the United States and elsewhere have heard these facts and responded by sending food, medicine, and agricultural equipment that, says Koala, has saved lives. However, he adds, this crisis aid comes from givers who know about the conditions in rural Burkina Faso but who do not really know the people, the culture, and the country itself. Thus little long-term change is achieved. Once the bag of rice is eaten, hunger returns. When the equipment wears, no one knows how to maintain it; once it breaks, no one knows how to fix it. Nothing has changed except that "there are many

pieces of broken equipment lying around." And, adds Koala, "this must be painful for the givers to see."

Another common form of aid aims at helping the thousands of orphans by building orphanages or through long-distance "fostering" of individual children with monthly stipends to provide food (and sometimes schooling). Unfortunately, those monthly monies may arrive irregularly or only for a limited time, and then a child who has been singled out is left suddenly adrift. Building orphanages does provide roofs over children's heads and food for starving bellies, but schooling is not always incorporated. Even more significant, says Koala, is that rural children placed in city orphanages lose the connections, the strands of belonging that are part of village culture in Burkina Faso. There, a child without parents will be taken in and made part of a neighbor family, no matter how little they have. At 16 or 18, says Koala, children "leave the orphanage for where? They have no education for work. They have no community to go to, no one to help them on their way. They have only the streets."

"People like you" don't ...

Koala's own childhood and formal education in Burkina Faso involved challenges and deprivation that he met with determination and grace (see sidebar, next page). Things didn't get any easier when, as a 24-year-old part-time student at the University of Ouagadougou, he dreamt one night that he was boarding a plane, off to study at an American university. For weeks afterward, he relates, he struggled to make sense of the compelling vision. Someone like him studying in the United States? A "village boy who did not know anything" (including English)? Someone who didn't have enough money to even eat regularly? Koala had already been told many times that "people like you" don't learn mathematics and physics, that "people like you" don't get university degrees, can't change the world. However, he was convinced that this was what he was meant to do.

What followed was a year of labor, from washing dishes to tutoring children (in math and physics), sleeping where he could and eating when he had enough money. That year included hours snatched whenever possible at the U.S. Embassy library, teaching himself English. During this period, he also made dozens of trips to the Embassy offices, making his way through a stack of student visa forms, painstakingly translating and filling out each using a French-English dictionary. One of these forms required he state the specific school at which he planned to study. Knowing nothing about the United

States, nor about any of its universities, Koala looked on a library computer, saw the name “California State University, Chico” at the center of the screen, and chose it. He had no idea where it was.

After wrestling through and dispatching another stack of forms (and fees), Koala was accepted by CSU, Chico’s American Language and Culture Institute (ALCI) to study English prior to university admission. An uncle, who had formerly accused him of lying about his plan to study in America (“People like you don’t ...”), presented him with a one-way ticket to America. In March of 2007, Koala, dressed in a lightweight jacket and thin shoes, flew from the triple-digit heat of summer in Burkina Faso into snowbound JFK Airport, with one suitcase, his ALCI paperwork, his passport, and \$733 in his pocket.

After a night and day wandering the airport and then parts of New York City itself trying to discover just where California State University, Chico was—and how in the world to get there—Koala boarded a Greyhound for the last lap of the

journey. On the third day of the five-day trip, a fellow traveler befriended him, shared food (the first Koala had eaten since New York), and in Sacramento helped Koala phone ALCI to arrange to be met in Chico. A few hours later, he found himself in Craig Hall, where “they usually have a spare room for crazy people like me.” Later, after settling in with the first of the host families who would become part of his extended Chico family, Koala began his American college experience.

Making new connections

Completing the ALCI program in July, Koala started at Butte College in fall of 2007. One of the first friends he made was the International Students Club advisor, Tom Grothe (BA, Organizational Communication, ’90). Grothe, who teaches cross-cultural communications at both Butte and CSU, Chico, says Koala is himself compelling, in part because “his heart is so huge.” The strong connection he makes with people was evident when, in fall of 2008, word got out on campus that

Koala’s father had died. Butte College’s associate dean of Recruitment, Outreach, and Student Life, Peggy Jennings-Severe (BA, Psychology and Social Sciences, ’76; MA, Counseling Psychology, ’84), began organizing a fundraiser to buy Koala a plane ticket home for his father’s funeral. “Just about everyone at Butte College got involved,” says Grothe.

But when he was told of the plan, Koala said he would rather the money raised be used to help his village—and he just happened to already have a modest and practical plan to suggest, a sustainable aid approach with education at its core: \$1,650, he explained, could supply a family with two young, vaccinated oxen, a simple plow, and training in their care and use. With this start, plus 220 pounds of rice to supplement their own diet for the first year, the family could raise enough grain to not only feed themselves but also fund at least one child’s schooling. Later, when the oxen were fully grown, they could be sold and four new oxen purchased. The cycle could continue and expand, providing independence and a sustainable way to improve more and more Burkinabe lives.

With this new goal, yard and bake sales and other efforts by various groups at Butte College raised close to \$8,000 in just a few months. By this time Koala, Jennings-Severe, Grothe, and his wife, Kerstin, realized that the modest beginning had already grown to something bigger. With the addition of CSU, Chico art history professor Asa Mittman, the group met to brainstorm ways to transform a one-time event into an ongoing operation. When Kerstin suggested naming their new organization “Feeding a Nation Through Education,” Koala was quick to suggest a slight modification. “Koala thinks globally,” says Grothe. “He told us, ‘Not a nation but *nations*, because we are going to change the

A Journey to Make a Difference

Education, like food and clean water, is hard to come by in the impoverished villages of Burkina Faso. Koudougou Koala’s formal education began at 9, when the government built an elementary school in his village of Thyou. Schooling costs about \$100 per child each year, though, a fortune to the 90 percent of the country’s population who are subsistence farmers and rely on every family member’s help during the brief growing season. Nonetheless, Koala’s father decided they could afford to send one of their 10 children, and middle child Koala was chosen because, his mother later told him, “I didn’t argue, I answered respectfully, I was obedient,” he says.

The three-mile trek alone to the new school was frightening, but “I wanted to go. I like to discover things.” The obedient 9-year-old did what his teachers required—including learning French, the country’s official language—and his insatiable curiosity “about everything” overcame his shyness and fears.

After elementary school, however, continuing his education meant moving—again alone—to another village, Sabou, for middle school and then to Koudougou, still farther from home, for high school. Disowned by his father for converting to Christianity during this time, Koala worked at whatever jobs he could get. Sometimes he was taken in by people in the villages, but he often lived on the streets with other homeless children, attending school when he could.

At 24, upon graduation from high school, he moved to the capitol city, Ouagadougou, hoping to attend the country’s one university. Once again, however, Koala could take classes only intermittently. When he was able to earn enough to pay the fees, the choice was often between eating and going to school.

What does Koala remember most from those times? Those with whom he shared the toughest experiences. “I miss the people I starved with,” he says. “I miss them. I miss them a lot.”



world.” Feeding Nations Through Education (FNTE) was born.

By the time Koala transferred to CSU, Chico as an accounting student in 2009, he had already made his first trip back to Thyou to provide five families with the oxen, tools, and training funded by FNTE. The families were selected because they had, despite their poverty, taken orphans into their homes, and each family made a commitment to save enough to send at least one of their children to school within three years.

Determined to make change

At CSU, Chico, while maintaining honor-student status, working numerous jobs, and earning scholarships and awards from both campus and community, Koala has kept his focus on helping those in need. Besides working directly on FNTE projects, Koala makes presentations in classes and other forums, sharing his firsthand knowledge of the need in Africa and of his vision for change.

Koala's is a persuasive voice. While FNTE board member Mittman calls himself “basically a New York skeptic,” he says he was drawn by Koala's core belief that people sincerely want to help, a belief fueled by “a deep hope, something that is fundamentally Koala.” Despite all he knows and has endured, Mittman continues, “Koala doesn't filter out possibilities.” CEO of the North Valley Community Foundation Alexa Valavanis (BA, Journalism, '99), puts it another way: All you have to do, she says, is “just talk with Koala, and you know you are in the presence of a visionary.”

CSU, Chico accounting and management information systems professor Ray Boykin has worked closely with Koala. “As a professor,” says Boykin, “you can only hope that you leave an impact on your students and that some of them will ‘pay it forward.’ Then there are those professors who are fortunate enough to have a student make an impact on them.” When Boykin, who has himself worked in villages in Sierra Leone, told Koala that he found him “courageous and empowering,” Koala says he felt overwhelmed. “To have someone like him say this to me, that is amazing. If people think I am empowering, I tell myself, ‘I have to get serious.’”

That he is. Just this past June, Koala spearheaded another outreach group, this time through City Light Church in Chico. Fourteen people traveled with him to Thyou, bringing a grain mill, rice, medicine, 1,200 pairs of eyeglasses, and school supplies, with backpacks for the top students in each grade. They also helped build a replacement well, this one to specifications Koala himself developed in response to problems he knew had plagued previous wells constructed in his village. Through his design, the village now has a separate but attached trough for watering the oxen. The work of FNTE, not even three years in existence, also continues, this July providing a second set of five families with oxen, plows, and training. And just a couple of months ago, two years earlier than scheduled, five children from the first set of families started school.

But as the “s” in “Nations” proclaims, Koala's aim for FNTE is



Top: Koudougou Koala and an elder celebrate Thyou's first clean water well. At far left in a red head scarf is Koala's mother, Sakassida Koala-Kabore. Next to her is Chicoan Jacky Hagberg (BS, Biological Sciences, '68). Bottom: Koala arrives in Thyou in June, welcomed by 150 villagers half a mile from town. Photos courtesy Koudougou Alfred Koala.

to feed more than just one village, and with more than just crops. Drawing on his business and accounting training, Koala is currently at work on feasibility studies analyzing conditions in Togo, Chad, Ghana, and Mali. His plan to formulate sustainable support and education programs tailored to each is ambitious, but as CSU, Chico President Paul Zingg says, “Koala has that rare ability to make a vision both compelling and practicable.”

About the author

Elizabeth Renfro (BA, English and German, '72; MA, English, '75) taught for 35 years at CSU, Chico in English, Honors, and Multicultural and Gender Studies. She has written dozens of chapters, articles, and academic papers and two books, one on writing and one on the Shasta Indians. Renfro retired professor emerita in 2010.