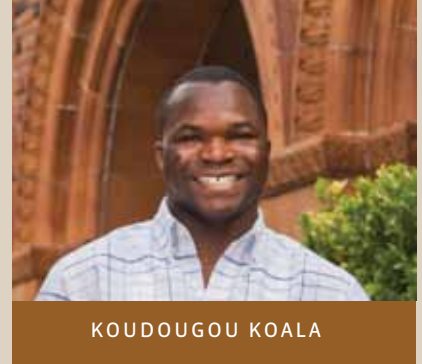




BURKINA FASO, AFRICA



KOUDOUGOU KOALA

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Feeding Nations Through Education

Against all odds, accounting student Koudougou Koala, a native of Burkina Faso, Africa, is on track to complete a bachelor’s degree in 2011 from Chico State. His is an extraordinary tale of endless hardship, unbelievable courage, and deep compassion for those he left behind.

➔ Like most families living in Burkina Faso, West Africa, Koudougou Koala’s mother and father are subsistence farmers. With a growing season of just three months, families living in Burkina Faso are among the poorest on earth — earning an average of just \$440 per year. Drought and poor soil make farming difficult, and a lack of modern agricultural tools results in very low yields.

“In our village of Thyou, each family has some land and they have to cultivate it in three months,” explains Koala, a Chico State accounting major. “They don’t have the equipment they need to make sure production is high enough to feed their families for the full year. They have only their own hands.”

A lack of formal education contributes to the difficulties faced by Burkinabe families. While school is currently considered free and compulsory until the age of 16, many villages have no school facilities. In villages that do have formal schools, fees for school supplies and the opportunity costs associated with sending vital child farm laborers to school keep more than two-thirds of school-age children at home. Of those children who do enroll, only about 40 percent complete primary school, and very few go on to high school and university programs.

Koudougou Koala is an extraordinary exception to the law of averages. When he was 9 years old, the government of Burkina Faso built the first elementary school in his village. His father, though struggling to feed his family, sent him to the newly established school. Koala recalls sadly, “After me, my father saw that there wasn’t enough millet to sell to pay for education, so it was only me that got to go to school.”

Understanding the high cost his family paid to send him to school, Koala was determined to make his education count. He worked hard to complete his first six years of school and then continued his education by relocating near a village school that was situated 15 miles from the family farm. He relied on the kindness of other poor Burkina Faso families for a roof over his head and what little food they could spare for him.

Koala completed primary and secondary school, and eventually traveled to the capital city of Burkina Faso to attend the University of Ouagadougou, the country’s first institution of higher learning. By working many jobs and vigorously applying himself to his studies, he earned admittance to the American Language and Culture Institute (ALCI) at California State University, Chico. The ALCI offers short-term intensive

English language instruction, serving as a bridge for international students who want to enroll in U.S. college and university programs. Within four months of enrolling, Koala completed the ALCI program and in 2007 enrolled as a student at Butte Community College where he earned an associate’s degree in business administration. In 2009, he transferred to Chico State and, in 2010, completed his first year as a business major with an option in accounting.

While studying in the United States, Koala hasn’t forgotten his family and the many others who struggle to survive in Burkina Faso. While at Butte College, he was invited to speak at a conference about the importance of education. Says Koala, “I was telling about my background and my dreams for what I can do with my education.”

Koala talked about his ideas for increasing agricultural yields to provide greater security and better futures for Burkinabe families. He explained to his instructors and fellow students that \$1,650 will purchase one pair of oxen, vaccinate them against diseases common to West Africa, and outfit them with harnesses and other necessary cultivating equipment. Explains Koala, “Selected families could be provided with oxen and equipment so they can significantly increase production. The families will not only feed themselves, but by doubling or tripling their production, they can sell the surplus and send one or more of their children to school. Every six to seven years the donated oxen will grow to maturity and, as a result, be less suited to farming. They can then be sold for a profit and the money can be used to purchase a new pair of oxen and the remaining funds can be used to finance more children’s education.”

That conversation led to a series of bake sales and yard sales to secure support for the effort. Initially \$2,700 was raised and, as word of Koala’s effort spread, total support neared \$8,000. Five families were selected, oxen and equipment purchased by a trusted colleague in Burkina Faso, and the families began to increase production on their small farms. And so the Feeding Nations Through Education program was officially launched. “It would take a family 10 years to earn enough income to buy a pair of oxen and farming equipment,” says Koala. “This is something they can’t afford. This changes their lives.”

Koala is very optimistic about the program’s impact on his home country. “I’m using my education to help out as much as I can — not to store it in myself but to make it practical. If we give families (in third world countries) something tangible and teach them how to use it, I’m sure that there will be a significant change.” ■

If you would like more information about the Feeding Nations through Education program, write to kkoala@mail.csuchico.edu