

Unificationist Beverly Berndt Builds Bridges to Gambia, West Africa

Krista Karjalainen
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Justin Noll, a college senior representing Engineers Without Borders,, greets his newfound Gambian friends.

On Beverly Berndt's thirteenth visit to the Republic of The Gambia in West Africa, she prayed at a fresh-water well she financed, facilitated interfaith dialogue, facilitated the planning of a bridge through Engineers Without Borders, sponsored school children, and visited a historic former-slave fortress as part of her 15-year humanitarian mission.



On her thirteenth visit to Gambia, Beverly Berndt took part in the "turning over" or dedication of the well from the project sponsors to the villagers of Sambouyang, Gambia.

Berndt, a Unificationist, wife and mother of four from Bowie, Maryland, traveled in early July 2013 to Gambia for two weeks with four other Maryland Unificationists and two college seniors from an Engineers-Without-Borders' chapter of Binghamton University, State University of New York. Three of the five Marylanders, and Justin Noll, one of the students, are Unificationists.



Berndt, second from left, and Joy Morrow, (wearing straw hat), the principal of New Hope Academy, prayed together with the Sambouyang villagers during the well “turning-over.”

What started as missionary work for her church in 1998 has become an annual mission to Gambia as part of “Side-by-Side,” a 501c-3 project she started and which is now under New Hope Academy, a multi-denominational school founded by Unificationists in Landover Hills, Maryland. “Side-by-Side is a group that works ‘not at or for’ the people of Gambia, but rather works side-by-side with the students and local people of Gambia,” Berndt told Unification News in an interview. “ This year, there were more than 100 young Gambian Side-by-Side members who took part in the volunteer projects.”



Noll and Kyle Nedlick, from Binghamton University’s Engineers Without Borders, surveyed the land, took measurements, and made a plan to return the next summer to build a bridge for automobiles over a flood plain..

In February 2012, Berndt received the “Shining World Compassion Award” of \$10,000 from the Supreme Master Ching Hai International Association, an international Buddhist movement of Quan Yin Method. With her award money, Berndt financed a fresh-water well in the village of Sambouyang in the beginning of December 2012. In July 2013, Berndt, together with Maryland Unificationist Joy Morrow, the principal of New Hope Academy, attended the “turning over” or dedication of the well from the project sponsors to the villagers.



Dr. Omar Jah, the vice-chancellor of the University of Gambia, held a briefing for Gambian students to lay the foundation for a Muslim-Christian dialogue conference the following year.

Side-by-Side conducted other service projects, too, such as village-wide street cleanings, making jewelry to sell for funding of other village projects, working at a maternity clinic, and sponsoring young students in high school. According to Berndt, New Hope Academy supports her work in Gambia through the Parent Teacher Organization’s Gambia committee, which holds fundraisers to cover secondary-school Gambian students’ annual school fees of \$75 to \$100.

“Joy Morrow thinks broadly, and she advised that we visit the Ministry of Education to discuss how to help high-school- and secondary-school-graduates find jobs or attend university,” said Berndt. “We [New Hope Academy and friends] have supplied about 450 scholarships to Gambian students, and many have graduated. However, even though they graduated, many cannot find jobs nor can they afford university in hopes of finding jobs.”



Berndt takes the blood pressure of a new mother at a local maternity clinic.

While in Gambia, Berndt shared with students about the possibility of receiving government scholarships that could help fund their university education.



Pictured in the background is the slave stockade and fortress on the island called Kunte Kinte.

The two Binghamton college seniors, Justin Noll, and Kyle Nedlick, representing Engineers Without Borders, surveyed the land, took measurements, and made a plan to return the next summer before the rainy season to build a bridge for automobiles over a flood plain that floods every year” Berndt said.



The Kunte Kinte Island tour guide emphasized how forgiveness is necessary, according to Berndt. He said, “We must forgive but we must never forget. We should not hold resentment and make sure that slavery in any form does not happen again.”

Also on this trip, Berndt held an organizational meeting to sponsor interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians. “I met with Dr. Omar Jah, the vice-chancellor of the University of Gambia and a well-known Islamic and Arabic scholar, and he was very concerned about stopping religious conflict before it begins, by furthering mutual understanding of shared common values,” Berndt said. “He was very animated and excited to work together to hold a kickoff for annual programs about interfaith dialogue.”



Villagers brush sand off a buried sidewalk as part of the service projects Berndt helped organize.

At the end of the trip, Berndt visited Juffure, Gambia, the birthplace of Kunte Kinte, an ancestor of novelist Alex Haley, who wrote *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, based on his family's colorful history tracing back to Gambia. She then visited the slave stockade and fortress now called Kunte Kinte Island, which used to hold slaves awaiting transport on slave ships. "The visit to the fortress was a highlight of the trip, and it is something that we will now feature every year on our mission trip," said Berndt. "I feel that the value is great. The tour guide emphasized how forgiveness is necessary. He said, 'We must forgive but we must never forget. We should not hold resentment, but make sure that slavery in any form does not happen again.' Our group conversed about human trafficking today, and we agreed that it was a form of slavery and should be brought to an end."

Berndt recounted her visit to Gambia at a worship service in Landover Hills on Sunday, Aug. 4, 2013. The title of her sermon alluded to a speech by Rev. Sun Myung Moon in 1973 titled "The Significance of July 1st, 1973 (My 21 Year Course)," in which the founder of the Unification movement references David and Goliath in the Old Testament. "There are many 'Davids,' who have gone before me," Berndt explained. "Based on Father Moon's speech from July 1, 1973, like the biblical story of David and Goliath, there have been many people, including Barbara Beard, Margaret Ohr, Anne and Od Inge Ulvestad, Lisa Take, my husband, Randy Berndt, and six Japanese sisters, who have gone before, like David, to conquer Goliath. Because of the foundation of the people who went before me, all these projects we have done have flowered, and we are now able to have successful programs in Gambia."