

Unificationist Teacher Beverly Berndt Wins Cash Award for Africa Mission

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Berndt shares a tender moment with a Gambian boy.

Come Sunday, a Sunday-school teacher in the Maryland Unification Church will be getting a long overdue reward. On November 14, 2011, Beverly Berndt, a respected pioneer of the Unification Church in America, was recognized by the Supreme Master Ching Hai International Association, an international Buddhist movement of the *Quan Yin Method*, and was presented the “Shining World Compassion Award” and \$10,000 for the volunteer work she has been doing in Gambia for the past decade. She will receive the award on February 19, 2012.

“I’m really grateful to Rev. Sun Myung Moon for this experience; it’s been amazing. And I feel as if the culture that Rev. In Jin Moon has been building is one that really promotes the investment of young people. Everybody wants to help, and even if they can’t go [to Africa], they are still helping. It’s inspiring,” said Berndt.

Maryland-resident Berndt has acquired an impressive list of titles such as 40-year member of the Unification Church, medical missionary, Sunday-school superintendent, New Hope Family Church Board member and activist with Lovin’ Life Ministries and elementary-school teacher at the New Hope Academy in Landover Hills, Maryland. In 1996, Berndt and her husband, Randy Berndt, were assigned by Rev. Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church to be missionaries in Gambia, a small country in West Africa. The following year, the couple began their missionary work there.

Berndt, who lives in Bowie, currently teaches algebra to high-school students at New Hope Academy. She’s also a youth advisor for the youth ministry at her church and regularly houses foreign-exchange students from China, Korea, and Gambia.

In 1999, Berndt traveled to Gambia with her eldest daughter, Krista Takashima, at the time 17, and with Pure Love Alliance, a service group that teaches character education to youth. Little did she know that the experience of visiting such a country would change her and countless communities across the United States.

Since that initial trip in 1999, Berndt has worked with Pure Love Alliance to bring small groups to Gambia for weeks at a time. In 2007, she initiated a summer program called Side By Side, which allows individuals over the age of 17 to help with various service projects for Gambian communities in need for

three weeks. During the last five years, 40 young men and women have attended the program, which Berndt calls “the ultimate peace-keeping mission.”



Beverly has worked with service projects Side By Side and Pure Love Alliance in Gambia for over ten years. Pictured are some participants of those programs.

“The kids who go grow so much. Several people have gone more than once because they just had such an unforgettable, amazing experience,” said Berndt.

In 2001, Pure Love Alliance participated in an interfaith forum in which two Muslim imams and two Christian ministers from Bangul, Gambia discussed their beliefs on marriage and family. To the surprise of those on the trip, the imams and the Christian ministers had many of the same underlying values. Despite meeting but once, Berndt developed such a bond with one of the imams that after the World Trade Center was struck on September 11, 2001, he expressed his condolences, emphasized that the attacks in no way represented Islam and sent sincere wishes to Berndt and her family. It was after such a conversation that Berndt realized the importance of developing peaceful relationships between different cultures and religions.

“It’s really important to realize that we are the face of the United States when we go to another country,” said Berndt. “It’s important to know that the imams to whom we connect will never choose radical Islam because they know us personally.”

Berndt’s ongoing drive in organizing these overseas programs and traveling back and forth between Gambia and the United States has inspired many others to take on similar projects overseas.

In Gambia, elementary school is free, but middle-school- and high-school tuition is roughly \$75 to \$100 a year. While this seems like a minor fee to most Americans, many families in Gambia cannot afford it. In response, Berndt initiated a program through New Hope Academy to provide scholarships to Gambian students, raising funds for the scholarships by selling 10,000 meals of Korean *bulgogi* for New Hope Academy and her church at Sunday services. More than 500 youth in Gambia have benefitted from these scholarships.

Side By Side also promotes character education for the Universal Peace Federation, as well as participate in service projects that clean up streets and villages or staff baby clinics. Berndt is working on a plan to help teachers and other employees find financial stability.

“When we work in clinics, we take blood pressures, give vaccinations, weigh the babies and do other things to make sure their health is good. This clinic has brought down the mortality rate of mothers and babies to zero,” said Berndt.

“I see us as ambassadors for Rev. and Mrs. Sun Myung Moon, or True Parents, for the Unification Church and for the United States. We’re not doing service for them, but with them. It’s our attitude of respect, love and friendship that speak so much more than the programs.”



Emerson Lykes, a Unificationist from Maryland who was part of a service project in Gambia with Berndt, greets one of his newfound Gambian friends.

Berndt plans to continue her service work in Gambia every year. On October 7, 2011 she was featured in the *Bowie Patch*, a community-news web site and was honored on October 10, 2011 as “Greatest Person of Day” by the *Huffington Post.com*. On November 14, 2011, she was recognized by the Supreme Master Ching Hai International Association, an international Buddhist movement of the *Quan Yin Method*, and was presented the “Shining World Compassion Award” and \$10,000 for her volunteer work in Gambia. The award ceremony is scheduled for 11:30 a.m. at New Hope Academy in Landover Hills Maryland, February 19, 2012.

The Supreme Master Ching Hai International Association is a non-profit organization with 20,000 worldwide members from all cultural backgrounds. For more than two decades, *Quan Yin Method* meditation master Ching Hai and her International Association have devoted considerable efforts toward providing humanitarian relief to disaster victims and the less fortunate, as well as supporting lifestyle choices such as meditation and veganism.