

INTERWEAVING CULTURES

Kenyan pair to study health services at RVCC



Jacinta Adongo Otsembo, *left*, and Miriam Daffodil Mumuli, *right*, are studying nursing at River Valley Community College in Claremont. Native to Kenya, the two aim to get Associate's Degrees and work in the health care field in Kenya.

By BRIAN DUNHAM
Staff Writer

Transitioning from an eastern African climate to New Hampshire's seasonal New England temperatures is one of the many adjustments Jacinta Adongo Otsembo and Miriam Daffodil Mumuli are making during their two-year stay in the United States. Studying health sciences, the two Kenyan girls are staying with host families in Claremont while attending River Valley Community College. All smiles and friendly disposition, Otsembo, 18, and Mumuli, 19, are becoming accustomed to New Hampshire, even admitting to a little bit of culture shock.

"We thought the U.S. was all cities," Otsembo said.

"We came to know there's also the country," Mumuli said.

The girls are staying in the states through the program *Wenzi kwa Afya*, meaning "Alliance for Health" in Swahili, started by Lewis Greenstein and his wife Susan in 2009. The goal is to financially support a partnership between RVCC and St. Cecilia Nangina Girls High School in Kenya. Otsembo and Mumuli were selected from a group of 40 that applied, based on their performance in school and a volunteer internship they took at a Kenyan hospital.

Greenstein and his wife had been teachers in Kenya before starting the program, seeing an opportunity to help women pursue education in the health care field. With Kenyan families often investing their limited funds in their male children's futures, helping women seemed to be the better priority, Greenstein said. The program focuses on the health care field because health care is underserved, Greenstein said, and there are high incidents of HIV, Malaria and a high rate of infant mortality in Kenya.

Otsembo and Mumuli are in the preliminary stages of their education at RVCC, taking general studies courses at the school. During an interview yesterday they alternated between speaking English, which they speak fluently, and their native Swahili with Greenstein, who admits is not quite as fluent as he had thought.

"No one used to correct me," he said.

They say schooling is quite different in the United States, while students participate in the learning process here, they say the teacher dominates classroom time in Kenya. There are also many other things that surprise them, they said.

When they ask people about traditional American food, they say they get mixed responses, but most people say 'hamburgers.' They also said they're not used to the way Americans spice their food.

Surprised to find that America is not entirely made up of cities and large buildings, Otsembo and Mumuli also said they didn't expect to see large animals, such as cows, in the United States.

The girls are keeping in touch with their families in Kenya through e-mails and international phone calls, they said. They call home when they can and won't be making any return trips during their two-year stay in the United States, though they both said they enjoy staying with their host families in Claremont.

"It's great, they're good people," Otsembo said. "They're eager to know about Kenya."

Part of the goal of *Wenzi kwa Afya*, Greenstein said, is to help bridge the cultural gap between Kenya and the United States, as well as correct some mutual misunderstanding about each other's culture. While Mumuli and Otsembo will bring back a wealth of knowledge about the United States to Kenya, there's also much they can teach Americans about Africa. They said they were a little surprised by the lack of knowledge about Africa in New Hampshire.

Despite the stretches of warm weather we've been experiencing, Otsembo and Mumuli said our temperatures are actually quite cold in

comparison to Kenya. They admitted to being not quite ready for the upcoming winter season.

“When I first came here I was freezing,” Otsembo said.

Mumuli looks forward to bringing home a college degree and said she does have concerns about learning American medicine. For one, she said, the college may lack educational resources about tropical diseases, so RVCC may be just the beginning of their education.

Asked if they plan to do any traveling in the United States before heading back to Kenya.

“I can’t go back to Kenya without visiting New York,” Mumuli said.

For more information about Wenzi kwa Afya, visit www.wenzikenya.org.

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