

► Houghton

Visit restores connection with West African nation

By Tyler Briggs
Olean Times Herald

HOUGHTON — Africa may be thousands of miles away, but one local college is lending a helping hand.

Houghton College has announced a commitment to a long-term, multidisciplinary partnership with Sierra Leone after 10 faculty and staff members visited the West African nation in May.

Already, the school has raised nearly \$50,000 to rebuild schools and other buildings in Sierra Leone badly damaged by a civil war that broke out in the country in the 1990s.

Other assistance will come through programs in the areas of economics, education and political science.

Houghton professor Dr. Ronald Oakerson will teach a decentralization course for select students to travel to the country and work with Sierra Leone ministers. The students will work hand-in-hand with the nation's officials to try and solve problems facing the West African nation.

"The government needs subsequent help in learning how to govern, learning how to make hard decisions," Daniel Minchen, an associate professor of communication and business at the school, said. "Electricity is not standard. Water is not standard. Neither are traffic lights. There are farming deficiencies throughout the countryside. The new president comes to

face this. It's tough to figure out which to do first."

A microfinance course is also under development for professors and students to work with and guide local nationals to improve efficiency.

"When you start putting money in the hands of the people, you've got to account for it," Mr. Minchen said.

Another way the school is assisting is by sending teachers and students to the country to help with teacher training.

The Houghton-Sierra Leone connection isn't new, school President Dr. Shirley Mullen said, dating back to the late 1800s. The ties were severed when civil war broke out in the 1990s, however.

The opportunity to help arose when Sierra Leone President Earnest Bai Koroma came to power, Dr. Mullen said. The new president shares the same denomination as the Christian-based college.

The school, although it has ties to other nations, shares a special connection with Sierra Leone.

"The moment for opportunity for involvement with Houghton is very wide open," Dr. Mullen said.

"What makes this distinct is we are trying to build long-term commitments, with integrated involvement on campus. It's interdisciplinary and college-wide involvement in this particular country."

Getting students involved in Sierra Leone and attempting to solve real problems is

beneficial, Dr. Mullen said.

"It really deepens the real-world connection," she said. "Sometimes it's easy when you're sitting in the classroom to be a bit removed from the implications of real-world issues. It deepens a sense of human connection with us and people halfway around the world."

School officials wanted to stress that Houghton's involvement is a partnership.

"(The goal) is to work alongside Sierra Leoneans and to provide knowledge we have," Mr. Minchen said.

"Sierra Leoneans we found were anxious to learn. They want to make the most of themselves and to learn from people who have experience."

"We are really trying to see this as a partnership," Dr. Mullen said. "We're not trying to go over there with all the answers. There are very wise, very committed Sierra Leone leaders working with us. This is very much a partnership."

The civil war took its toll on the country, according to Mr. Minchen, who was one of the 10 to travel to the nation

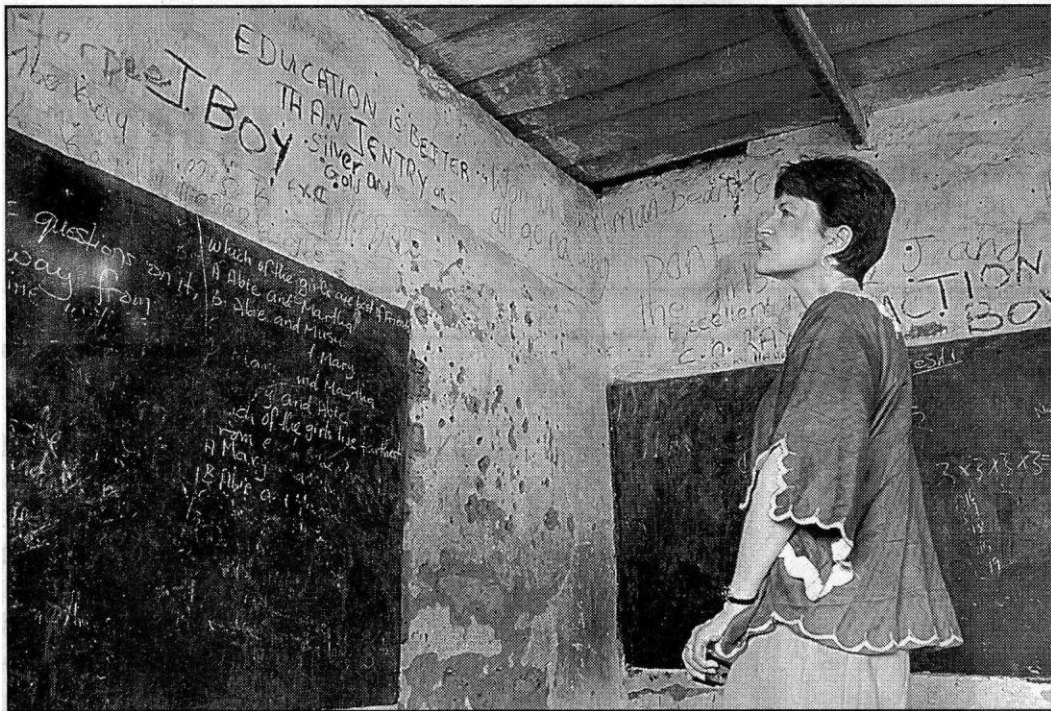


Photo submitted

Dr. Shirley Mullen, president of Houghton College, looks at the remains of a former school room during her visit to Gbendembi, Sierra Leone. The school has committed to a partnership where students and faculty will work with Sierra Leone officials to solve problems facing the nation ravaged by a civil war in the 1990s.

last May.

Mr. Minchen, who had traveled to several countries as a former Xerox employee, said significant damage was done to the infrastructure as a result of the war.

"(The civil war) was brutal. Everything was in its target range. I had never seen a nation this impoverished," Mr. Minchen said. "This country was truly broken."

Despite all the damage that the civil war caused, there is a sense of optimism, Dr. Mullen said.

"It was my first time in

Sierra Leone," Dr. Mullen said of her trip. "It was really very energizing. It was inspiring and very moving to see people who are deeply committed to rebuild a country after a civil war. This is a moment of great hopefulness for the country."

The energy was contagious, Dr. Mullen said, and helped the school make its commitment to the nation.

"The excitement motivated us to commit and to be supportive in any way we can," she said. "We really are committed to working alongside

Sierra Leone."

The next trip for students and staff is a political science and research project planned for May. The college will continue its partnership with the country as long as it's mutually beneficial, Dr. Mullen said.

"This kind of involvement is something we both want," she said. "We want (students) to see one person in one small college can make a difference."

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