



Evans Nwankwo, president of Megen Construction Co., plays building role here, rebuilding role in his native Nigeria. **Story, CS**

Mason contractor plays building role here, rebuilding role in his native Nigeria



Evans N. Nwankwo, CPE president/ CEO of Megen Encore Construction, has worked on some of Cincinnati's major landmarks with a display of Fernald Preserve Visitor Center in background. The Enquirer/Joseph Fugala II

A constructive life

By Amy Howell
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You don't have to look far to see the mark that Evans Nwankwo has made on Cincinnati. The president of Megen Construction Co. has managed the construction of some of Cincinnati's most prominent landmarks: Great American Ball Park, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, the Reds Hall of Fame Museum, Crossroads Community Church and the most recent Fountain Square renovation.

But here and halfway around the world, the projects that hold special meaning for Nwankwo are those that build on the educational opportunities that he and his family hold dear.

"If it wasn't for education, I definitely wouldn't be doing what I'm doing," Nwankwo says. "Good education may not necessarily be the formula to fixing everything, but it levels the playing field. So from that standpoint, I get excited when we're doing things that expand the educational environment."

Born in Nigeria

Nwankwo, who lives in Mason with his wife, Catherine, and their three children, was born in Nigeria in 1958, one of 13 children, and raised in the small village of Awa.

In the farming town, the school system was owned by church missions and wealthy individuals.

"Good quality education and a moral upbringing were imparted to children," says Nwankwo's older brother, Hezekiah, who still lives in Awa.

But that changed when the Nigerian Civil War erupted in 1967 and the government took control of the schools.

"Religion was relegated to the background ... and exam malpractice became the order of the day," Hezekiah says.

The result was a "bully system" of education that offered few choices, Nwankwo says.

Their father died when Evans was 9. Despite the hardships of war, his mother put all the children through college, and Nwankwo was able to come to the United States and graduated in 1982 from Texas A&M University with an engineering degree. Along the way, he developed a hard-earned appreciation for the sacrifices and potential of education.

While a large part of Megen Construction's business, which Nwankwo started in his basement in 1993, deals with commercial and government buildings, he feels a particular dedication to the 20 or so local schools the company has helped construct or expand. It has built gymnasiums, music wings, media centers, computer and science labs and art rooms that broaden students' perspectives.

"He loves kids and sticks with the project even after the job is done, and that's not true of a lot of people," says Fred Pensinger, construction manager for the Princeton City School District, who worked with Nwankwo on the construction of three new schools and the remodeling of another.

Turning back to Nigeria

Four years ago, Nwankwo turned his attention to Awa, where his mother and brothers Hezekiah and Solomon live, and created the non-profit NuWay Foundation.

The small town of mostly poor subsistence farmers is largely overlooked by government, Hezekiah says by e-mail from Awa, and faced rampant waterborne disease, inadequate medical care and a shortage of teaching supplies, as well as teachers.

After addressing the community's basic

Foundation help: \$340K

When Evans Nwankwo of Mason started a non-profit organization to improve the living conditions in his childhood village of Awa, Nigeria, he knew to build on the basics before helping to educate and empower children and help adults find jobs and improve their lives.

"These are things that you think are so basic," says Nwankwo, the president of Forest Park-based Megen Construction Co.

In the four years since Nwankwo created the NuWay Foundation, more than \$340,000 has gone to projects such as providing safe drinking water and accessible medical care in the small village, where contaminated streams and rivers were the only source of water, and babies were often delivered by candlelight in the health clinic.

Through support from Mason-based Self-Sustaining Enterprises, Back-2-Back Ministries and NuWay's annual "bianu" fundraiser - scheduled for Sept. 26 at the Oscar Event Center at Jungle Jim's International Market - five wells have been drilled to date, with seven to go, Nwankwo says.

The organization provided medical equipment and a generator for the health clinic and funds weekly supplies of diesel fuel and the salary for a doctor - something that even health centers in government headquarters don't have, says Nwankwo's brother, Hezekiah, who lives in Awa.

"The poor, the less privileged, widows and orphans still cannot believe what they are seeing," Hezekiah says via e-mail. "They still say that they are in a dream, that this cannot be reality in Awa."

The next stage, expected to progress this summer, is helping families start small businesses and working with local subsistence farmers to develop their land to be able to sell and trade their crops. "We want to leave them in a state that they can continue to build on," Nwankwo says. "When that is done, we move on to the next village."

— Amy Howell

Contractor: Builds structures, lives

From Page C5

needs for clean water and accessible health care, the organization provided supplies like books, uniforms, paper, soap and ongoing pay for three teachers at each of the two primary schools, which should have nine teachers each but had only four per school, and three teachers for the secondary school, which needed nine but only had three.

Science classes returned to the curriculum and loitering during school hours dropped went way down. While many parents used to pay a fine in order to send their children outside Awa for school, the system now attracts students from neighboring towns, Hezekiah says.

"Without NuWay, the schools would have closed," he says. "They have come back to what they were during our own time. There is effective

teaching and learning."

Hezekiah, who serves on the NuWay advisory board and offers on-site direction, sees his brother's work as a continuation of the family's legacy of philanthropy.

Their late grandfather was chief of the village and their father was president of the tribal Ibo Union in Gusau, the capital of the Nigerian state of Zamfara. Both were known for their dedication to education, from training people for vocational work to providing scholarships to help people learn to read or afford a college education overseas, Hezekiah says.

"I am not surprised that Evans and his wife founded the NuWay Foundation," Hezekiah says. "Our late grandfather and father have a very big reputation in the town, for their kindness and good works for fellow human beings...This has been the path of the family."