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Generous Homecoming

Immigrant uses success here to help Nigeria

By **Justine Reisinger**

Evans Nwankwo's success story could have ended a long time ago and would have been quite fulfilling in itself.

Born in Nigeria the seventh of 13 children, he lost his father and nearly his entire family as a child during the country's civil war. But family perseverance put each of the children through college and brought Nwankwo to the United States at age 19 in 1987.

Success in construction engineering enabled Nwankwo, who lives in Mason to start Megen Construction Co. in the basement of his home. The firm's projects have included the Fountain Square revitalization, the Cincinnati Reds Hall of Fame and Museum and the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

Happily married with three young children, Nwankwo refuses to submit to contentment or complacency. He recently founded the NuWay Foundation to "enhance education, promote cultural exchange and to provide micro- and macro-economic development" in Nigeria.

After "shying away" from Nigeria, Nwankwo decided to return for a visit in 1993. He was disappointed with what he saw.

"I would expect things to get better, but they would get worse," he says. "The population actually suffering has nothing to do with those with money, and I started to think about ways to help."

In Nigeria, one of the world's largest oil producers, 90 percent of the country survives on less than \$2 a day, with a life expectancy of 43 years, according to NuWay Foundation.

Witnessing the decay of the country over time inspired Nwankwo to help. The NuWay Foundation has partnered with Self Sustaining Enterprises Inc. and Back2Back Ministries, incorporating the groups' experiences in Nigeria.

"Once the NuWay Foundation formed, we knew there were already existing organizations in Nigeria doing something similar to what we were doing," Nwankwo says. "Most people start competing, and that's not any of our goals. If we work together, we can help each other out."

Self Sustaining Enterprises created a micro-business model. In one project in northern Nigeria, the organization made an interest-free loan of \$100 each to 12 AIDS widows. They used the money to purchase a water pump that not only



Photo By Rick Mason

Catherine Nwankwo (L) and Evans Nwankwo (R) give an award" to James Bonaminio for his support.

allowed them to irrigate a larger amount of land but also feed their families, buy seed for coming crops, pay back the loan and start a tailoring business.

"We have a proven model," says Chuck Proudfit, CEO of Self Sustaining Enterprises and a member of NuWay's board of directors. "We're already doing this, but we're going to take our success in the north and place it in the south. We want to make sure we have good return in our investments."

Proudfit says partnering with other organizations has allowed Self Sustaining Enterprises to grow much faster and will benefit NuWay as well.

"With NuWay, they're looking to serve Nigeria, where we've been for years," he says. "I've worked with Evans for years and know his heart for Nigeria is on the same philosophical page. ... He can take proven models we're already using."

The NuWay Foundation has raised nearly \$160,000, and plans to begin the work in Nigeria are underway. One of the first steps will be constructing a facility in Nwankwo's village of Awa to be the base of operations for educational programs, community building and economic development. Americans on mission trips will stay there.

"One of the things we wanted to do was use (this) facility as a way to provide safe, clean facilities for Americans to feel comfortable to go -- not just missionaries that are used to roughing it but people with means," Nwankwo says. "We wanted them to feel comfortable so they will keep coming back."

Evans and wife, Kathy, partnered to help start the foundation. Kathy Nwankwo, born in the United States, provides the perspective of potential donors.

"My wife grew up here and then understands how you need to present this to Americans so they can understand it," Evans Nwankwo says. "You have the two people who understand both cultures and both are essential to making it a success."

Partnership is a resounding theme within the foundation and its partners.

"Usually people want to do their own thing, and in order to truly make an impact on the needs of the world around us, organizations of the future have to come together and work together instead of being individualistic," says Jeff Greer, president of Back2Back Ministries. "Hopefully we can create a model that can be used in other places."



Photo By Rick Mason

Woyingi African Drum & Dance performs at an event benefitting the NuWay Foundation, which is about to begin work in Nigeria.

For more information about the NuWay Foundation, call Kate Walls at 513-742-9191.