



Lawrentians dig deep to help children in West Africa

By Tom Ziemer

"It's funny how one little thing can basically change the whole course of your life."



Sarah Ehlinger '11 (left) was a sophomore at Lawrence, balancing a geology major with her exploits on the soccer field as a playmaking forward for the Vikings women's team. And on this particular fall day, she was in a Student-Athlete Advisory Committee meeting over lunch when a professor from the government department stopped by.

Claudena Skran was looking for a student-athlete to join her and a group of students on a volunteer trip to Sierra Leone over the following year's winter break.

Ehlinger imagined the possibility of raising money and delivering soccer equipment to children in the impoverished West African country. More than a year later, she was on a plane back home after three weeks in Sierra Leone—and raring to go back.

"I was entirely seduced by this amazing experience," Ehlinger recalls, more than six years later. "I wanted to *really* get involved and return."

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Ehlinger is one character in the story of Lawrence's relationship with one of the world's most impoverished countries. She is part of a group of more than 50 alumni who spent a winter or spring break in Sierra Leone distributing scholarship funds, conducting research or working on a number of other activities during their time at Lawrence. Many, like Ehlinger, remain connected to Lawrence's ongoing efforts in the country.

Then there is the dedicated group of current students, most of them members of KidsGive, the educational and development-focused student organization that has grown out of the trips.



ABOVE: Alex Kurki '16 and Berenith Martinez Wolberg '18 pull on a rope that is part of a government-run pulley system that brings vehicles across a river to the main road.

LEFT: Lawrence students Berenith Martinez Wolberg '18 (kneeling, left), Wesley Varughese '16 (kneeling, center) and Katherine Ling '16 (standing, right) and Professor of Government Claudena Skran (standing, center) with school leaders at Conforti Community Primary School in the eastern part of Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital.

PREVIOUS PAGE IMAGE: Alex Kurki '16, left, and Wesley Varughese '16 are surrounded by students at Fawe School in Matru Jong, Sierra Leone. (Photos courtesy of KidsGlobal)

At the center of it all, though, is Skran. The Edwin & Ruth West Professor of Economics and Social Science, professor of government and a Lawrence faculty member since 1990, she has built a development operation in Sierra Leone from scratch. Under her direction, Lawrence students have raised thousands of dollars to support schools and children in Freetown (Sierra Leone's populous capital), as well as in rural regions. They have carried out field research for *Senior Experience* projects that cross disciplines and prompt new inquiries.

Now Skran and her students have partnered with an Appleton service club to take on their most ambitious project yet: bringing clean water to a community in Freetown. The Appleton Downtown Rotary Club, with support from its Rotary District and Rotary International, is funding the construction of a solar-powered well at Conforti Community Primary School in eastern Freetown. The well, which should be completed later this year, will provide a water tap system for the 500 children

at Conforti and their families. It will replace a shallow, hand-dug well that lies about 15 yards from a septic tank.

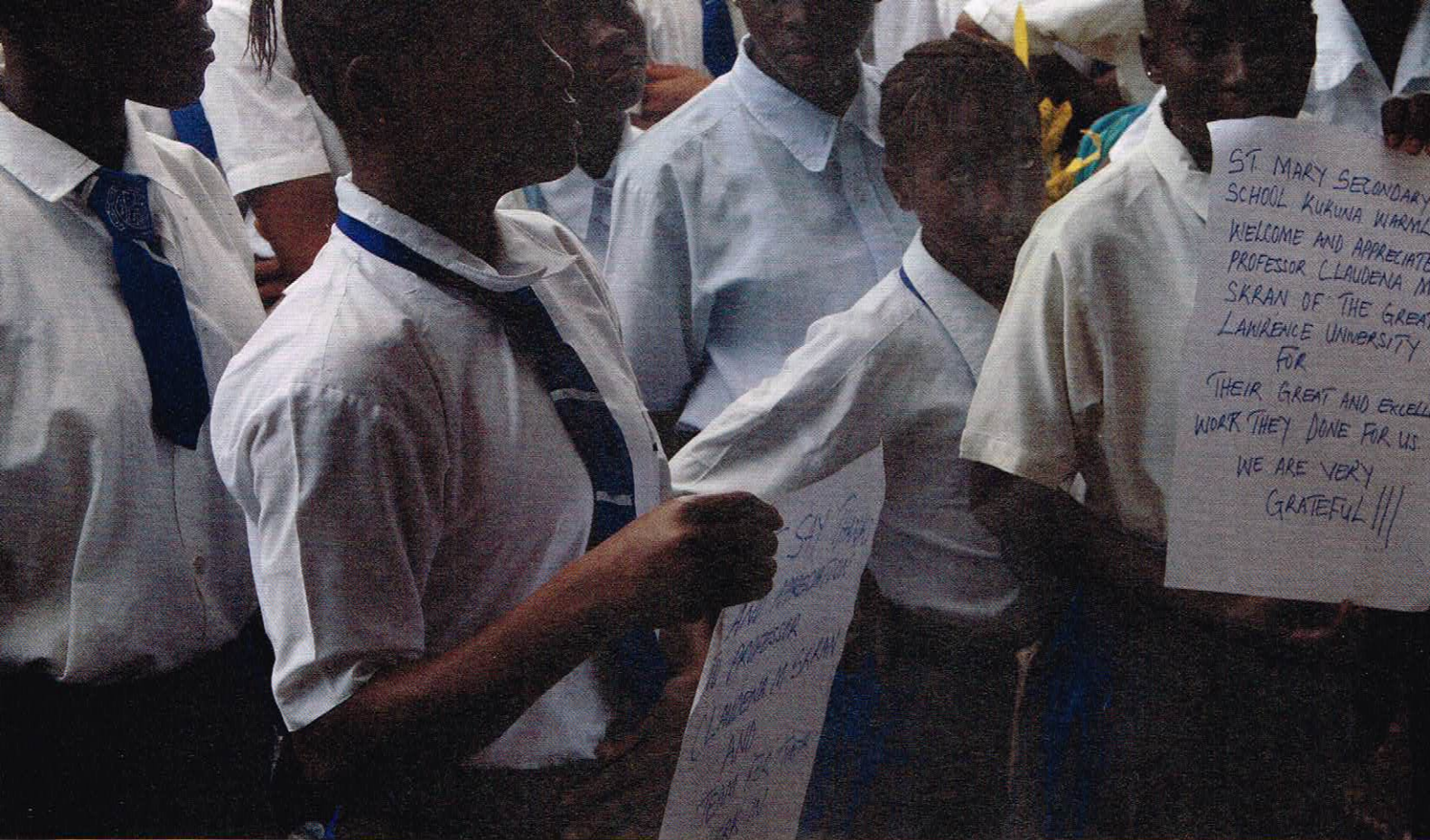
"It could change everything at the school," says Ehlinger.

And when the first stream of water emerges, it will be the culmination of more than a decade of work.

"This project is a long time in the making," says Skran.

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Skran first traveled to Sierra Leone on Oct. 31, 2005 ("It was Halloween, so I remembered," she says with a smile). She was the first researcher with a Ph.D. to visit the country through the Fulbright Scholar Program following the country's civil war, a bloody conflict that raged from 1991 to 2002, killing more than 50,000 and displacing millions.



Students at St. Mary's Catholic School in Kambia in Sierra Leone's northern province show their appreciation for Professor Claudena Skran and Lawrence.

For Skran, who had always held an interest in issues affecting refugees, it was a natural fit.

"Refugees are amongst the most vulnerable people in the world because when they leave their country, they usually leave their economic life support, their legal protection," she says. "They're sort of thrown out into the wider world that's often indifferent and hostile to them."

"For me, it's also an interesting theoretical problem because we live in a world where everybody's divided up by nation-state, where people are linked to a country by citizenship. But a refugee throws that whole thing out."

Skran went to study the sustainability of aid projects, which led her to schools across the country. A few days before coming home in April 2006, she visited Conforti, a school in a poor area heavy on returning refugees and whose students performed well despite socioeconomic hardships. The school's leaders were looking for help; Skran returned later that year with scholarship money she had collected from friends and a few Lawrence alumni.

She was hooked.

In 2007, she brought her first group of Lawrence students: **Julian Hector '08** and **Ayse Adanali '07**, along with Skran daughter and a student from New York University. Skran kept coming back, year after year, bringing students and scholarship funds with her each year between 2009 and 2013. And each year, the experience evolved—thanks in part to assistance from alumnus **Momodu Maligi '04**, a Sierra Leonean who had come to Lawrence to study government in the midst of his country's civil war before returning to help his homeland's recovery efforts.

"We can create a kind of new model of Engaged Learning, where we do research, but in a social context."

—*Claudena Skran,
Edwin & Ruth West Professor of
Economics and Social Science*

The growth in the Lawrence student experience began with the 2009 crew, which included Ehlinger, **Mariah Mateo Sarpong '12** and **Will Meadows '12**. In addition to starting KidsGive as a program of another student organization (Students' War Against Hunger and Poverty), the small cohort of students began dreaming up ambitious projects for return visits. Ehlinger, the geology major, wanted to examine heavy metal contamination in the soil around Freetown for her *Senior Experience*. Conforti became a hub for not only development and volunteer work, but also student research.



The well at Conforti Community Primary School, shown in 2014 during a water shortage. It will soon be replaced by a solar-powered well.

“The students began to develop these academic projects out of the trip, and that got me thinking: ‘Hey, we can combine these. We can create a kind of new model of *Engaged Learning*, where we do research, but in a social context,’” Skran says.

In the process, the students turned their attention to water. **Amanda Dwyer '13**, a biology and environmental studies major who's now working on her Ph.D. at Northeastern University, tested the areas around Conforti and found high levels of the bacterial disease cholera. Meadows, another environmental studies major, interviewed community members, assessed area wells and conducted a geological survey. He proposed installing a new well at the school.

“This gave me an opportunity to really lead,” says Meadows, who's now pursuing a master's degree at the Institute of Design at Stanford (also known as “the d.school”). “I know I want to be in leadership positions and I want to have the ability to be a change-maker. Dena (Skran) just had the confidence that students could do it—that we could get out there and do it.”

“What you find about all the students is they wanted to make a difference,” Skran says, rattling off career paths of alumni that range from studying public health at Columbia University to working for the World Bank. “And I think that probably describes the experience.”

LAWRENCE STUDENTS IN SIERRA LEONE THROUGHOUT THE Y

Leah (Drilias) Boudreaux '99
Nicole Dubruiel '03
Rhea Alert '04
Ayse Adanali '07
Julian Hector '08
Lindsey Ahlen '10
Natalie Grattan Dale '10
Sarah Ehlinger '11
Kaitlyn Esula '11
Driftner Martinez '11
Chelsey Sand '11
Laura Streyle '11
Shin Wei (Angela) Ting '11
Erica Asbell '12
Peter Brengel '12
Samuel Lewin '12
Mariah Mateo Sarpong '12
Will Meadows '12
Leah Miller '12
Kyu-po Pyun '12
Kyle Simon '12
Hava Blair '13
Amanda Dwyer '13
Adam Kranz '13
Hashim Morad '13
Patrick Pylvainen '13
Kwaku Sarpong '13
Samantha Schilsky '13
Babajide Ademola '14

Gabor Bukszar '14
Alexander Causwell '14
Inanna Craig-Morse '14
Emily Crowe '14
Nestor Dominguez Jr. '14
MacKenzie Dwyer '14
Huma Hakimzada '14
Raena Mueller-Dahl '14
Helen Noble '14
Daniel O'Mahoney '14
Kelsey Priebe '14
Kate Siakpere '14
Jonathan Stombres '14
Alyssa Villaire '14
Thomas Vogel '14
Steven Wasilczuk '14
Elizabeth Barthéls '15
Anna Bolgrien '15
Aubrey Lawlor '15
Daniel Martinez Zambrano '15
Kara Vance '15
Caitlin Zuehlke '15
Alex Kurki '16
Katherine Ling '16
Wesley Varughese '16
Delina Abadi '17
Tamanna Akram '18
Berenith Martinez Wolberg '18

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In 2013, Maligi joined Sierra Leone President Ernest Bai Koroma's cabinet as minister of water resources. That same year, Skran began hunting for funding for the well at Conforti.

She talked with Gary Vaughan, an Appleton businessman and an integral part of Lawrence's Innovation and Entrepreneurship (I&E) Program; Vaughan brought another Downtown Appleton Rotary member into the conversation: Tom Boldt, the construction company CEO whose wife, **Renee '85**, is a Lawrence alumna and a member of the university's Board of Trustees. Boldt and Vaughan hired Ehlinger, then a graduate student at the University of Ghana, to conduct a feasibility study and to write a grant proposal for Rotary International.

“And then Ebola hit,” Skran says.

The outbreak, which killed nearly 4,000 in Sierra Leone according to the World Health Organization (more than 11,300 died across Sierra Leone and its West African neighbors Guinea and Liberia), slowed the well project, even though Rotary had agreed to fund it.

Finally, after Sierra Leone was declared free of Ebola transmission in November 2015, Skran was able to return

REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE

- Named by Portuguese explorer Pedro de Sintra in 1462; “Serra Leoa” means “lion mountains” in Portuguese
- Established as a British settlement in 1787
- Gained independence in 1961
- Total area is slightly smaller than South Carolina
- Population: 5.8 million
- Capital: Freetown
- Languages: English (official but only spoken by minority), Mende, Temne, Krio
- Life expectancy: 57.79 years (204th out of 224 countries)
- Infant mortality rate: 71.68 deaths per 1,000 live births (11th highest in the world)
- Internet users: 1.5 percent of the population

Source: CIA World Factbook



to the country with her students. This March, she and six students reconnected with Conforti, visited a computer lab installed by the 2013 cohort at Njala University in the country's southern province, distributed books at several schools and delivered scholarships and money from a KidsGive Ebola orphan fundraising campaign. **Wesley Varughese '16** says the children in Sierra Leone aren't shy about showing their gratitude.

"You'll be walking in the street and they'll be holding your hands the entire time," says Varughese, a veteran of the 2013 and 2016 trips and co-president of KidsGive. "You'll have 10 kids surrounding you, not wanting to leave."

The Rotary funding will cover the construction of the well by a private contractor. KidsGive is handling the educational side of the project; Lawrence students have collaborated with Philadelphia-based Healthy NewsWorks to produce videos on

water and sanitation to use at Conforti. The Lawrence team will also help form a social system to manage the well. As Skran notes, "It's very easy to build a well. It's a lot harder to keep that well going."

KidsGive—now part of the Lawrence I&E program as an outlet for social entrepreneurship—plans to make yearly visits to Conforti to monitor and measure the effectiveness of the well with the help of Maligi and the water ministry. It's also hoping to scale up the project by hooking up toilets and hand-washing stations. Ideally, Conforti's system could serve as a model for other communities in the country.

It's the kind of big idea—created by strategically placed aid—that drives Skran.

"I think universities should realize their potential as development actors," she says. "There's so much that a



LEFT: Members of the 2011 trip (from left): Patrick Pylvainen '13, Hashim Morad '13, Professor Claudena Skran, Amanda Dwyer '13, Katie Croake of the National Democratic Institute, Babajide Ademola '14, Peter Brengel '12 and Kyle Simon '12. (Photos courtesy of Claudena Skran)

TRANSFORMATIVE TRIP

By Alex Kurki '16

This past spring break, I was one of six students who went on a KidsGive volunteer trip to Sierra Leone organized by Professor Claudena Skran. It was much different from and more transformative than any other spring break I had experienced.

KidsGive is a Lawrence-affiliated nonprofit run by Professor Skran and a small group of students that provides education-related aid to students in Sierra Leone. During the volunteer trip, we monitored the progress of a well project at Conforti School in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. We also distributed educational scholarships to underserved kids and subsidized the cost of teacher training at four schools.

The nature of the word “underserved” in this context is more severe than most people living in the United States can imagine. At the schools we work with, the average cost of yearly tuition is about \$50. This can be a prohibitive cost for most families in a country where half of the population lives on less than \$1.25 a day. Many of these children come from homes—and go to schools—lacking things that we take for granted in the U.S., such as running water and electricity. This is the nature of life in a country recovering from the effects of a decade-long civil war as well as an Ebola outbreak, and it cannot be conveyed properly in words. It must be seen to be understood.

This volunteer experience taught me about the nature of true perseverance and hope. The people we met with did not wear their trying life experiences on their sleeves. Instead of ruminating about difficult past and present situations, they emphasized the importance of working to build a better future for their country. Gaining this perspective was the most transformative experience I have had during my time at Lawrence, and I will never forget it.

► **Hear more from Lawrence students about their March trip to Sierra Leone:**
go.lawrence.edu/SLvideo



ABOVE: Part of the 2009 group (from left): Mariah Mateo Sarpong '12, Lindsey Ahlen '10, Sarah Ehlinger '11, Momodu Maligi '04, Kaitlyn Esula '11, Natalie Grattan Dale '10, Ismael Yankuba (their Sierra Leonean guide), Laura Streytle '11 and Chelsey Sand '11.

coordinated effort by institutions can do in a particular area, just by visiting the same places, supporting the same places, connecting with communities.”

The effect can be just as powerful on the students doing the work. They form lifelong friendships. They discover or further embrace professional interests. They learn how their work can make a difference in the world.

“This project is the reason why Lawrence is an amazing school,” says Ehlinger, who now works for Endpoint Solutions, an environmental consulting company in Franklin, Wis. “It gave so many opportunities for students who were willing to grasp them and really learn their disciplines firsthand. That’s just the best way to learn. Get your hands dirty. Take responsibility. Design a project. Learn from it. Ask questions. Be confident.

“This project is so Lawrence.” ■