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Bringing Awa Home

Elon natives fight to obtain visa for adopted daughter

Ashley Barnas
News Editor

They went to Elon Elementary School, began dating during their senior year at Western Alamance High School, stayed together through college, got married, joined the Peace Corps, traveled to West Africa and adopted a child. But that's where their problem began.

After more than five months of not seeing their daughter, Lori and Michael Russell are struggling to obtain a visa to bring her home to Durham. Not all overseas adoptions fall under the same rules.

"She's not an orphan — that's the problem," Lori Russell said. "The United States says that unless the child's an orphan, she cannot have a visa."

In November 2007, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services returned the adoption application filed by the Russells because of a missing translation of their daughter Awa's birth certificate. Caseworkers included a letter stating that if the Russells "insist on filing this petition, it will be denied" because Awa has two living birth parents.

"I can understand not separating children from their parents, but in our case, it's very distressing," Lori said.

For the Russells, there are only two options. The first is also the worst, Lori said.

She would have to leave law school at Duke and move back to Togo with Awa. Michael would need to stay in North Carolina at his job at Duke Global Health Institute to support his family. In order for Awa to obtain a visa, the Russells need to have had physical custody for two years. While in Togo, Awa

lived with the Russells for one year.

The second option is humanitarian parole. It is a "very discretionary visa that's given in situations where the parolee does not qualify for any other visa," Lori said.

"If they decide to give her a visa, we would go back to Togo," she said. "They're ready for us [in Togo]. We would get on the next plane out there."

Awa currently lives in Togo with an American friend of the Russells, making it easy to call Awa a few times each week. But their friend's visa expires in April, potentially leaving Awa without a caretaker.

Meeting Awa

On a Peace Corps mission to Togo in June 2005, the Russells had no idea that they would do more than plant trees and help develop small businesses. One month after arriving in Mango, the "poorest, driest and sparsest" city in Togo, they met Awa, then 5 years old.

"We bonded immediately," Lori said. Awa would hang out at their house nearly every day, and they would make her boiled eggs and peanut butter sandwiches.

"Everyone knew that Awa wasn't being taken care of," she said. "Her father is 73 and he's been ill for a long time, and her mother is over 40 years younger and not happy about the marriage in the first place."

Awa's mother would leave the house at dawn and not return until after dusk, the Russells said, leaving Awa to roam the streets. Her family's income is no more than 35 cents per day.

The Russells took immediate action. From August 2005 to September 2006, they treated

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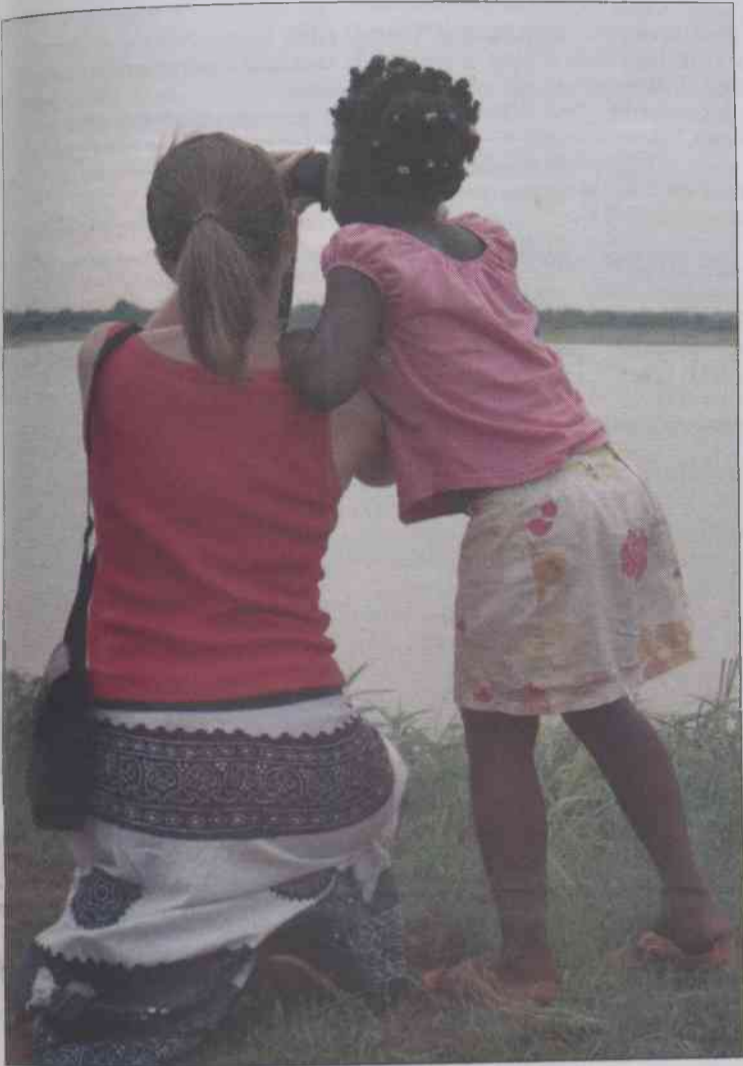


Photo submitted by Lori and Michael Russell

Awa and her mother, Lori, watch hippos swim in a lake three miles away from their home in Togo. Though Lori and her husband Michael have officially adopted Awa, they have not been able to bring her back to the United States because she does not qualify for a visa.

Construction set to begin on meditation garden

Megan Lee
Reporter

Chris Wood strolled through the curving paths guided by purple painted lines, in a room engulfed in the whispering of meditation music. Eleven tea candles illuminated the outskirts of a canvas covering two-thirds of McKinnon Hall.

Wood, a sophomore music theater major, along with several other students, faculty members and staff, took 10 minutes out of his day to walk the labyrinth that laid out for three days last week in the Moseley Center meeting room.

This was probably the last time students like Wood will find themselves in pensive poses at an indoor labyrinth in McKinnon.

Almost every year, Elon's Truitt Center for Religious

and Spiritual Life brings "Walking the Labyrinth" to campus for three days. Guiding the event is Truitt Center's Program Assistant Rene Summers and a couple of student volunteers.

"Even though it has been difficult to reserve this location, it has benefited so many students that we continue to have it," Summers said.

This spring will bring an end to the difficulties of reserving McKinnon Hall. With all of the positive feedback the center has received, Elon is planning to construct a meditation garden and labyrinth on the north side of Holt Chapel. The location has been approved and will be funded by the gifts in honor of 1952 Elon alumna Helen Jackson Lindsay.

Thomas Flood, Elon's superintendent of landscaping and grounds, will build the new addition to campus in an organic design different from the canvas in McKinnon. It will consist of aggregate stone in cement, and in the very center of the labyrinth will be an Elon oak tree.

"The labyrinth represents a journey that you travel, by becoming reshaped by the experience in the center and bringing it back to the world

you live in," university Chaplain Richard McBride said.

For the six years that this event has been held, a rented white canvas with rich purple paint would expand across the McKinnon Hall floor.

The pattern's hand-painted design resembles a six-leaf clover within a gear that has several teeth. Its calming atmosphere was set by dimmed lights and Asian-influenced music played on a loop.

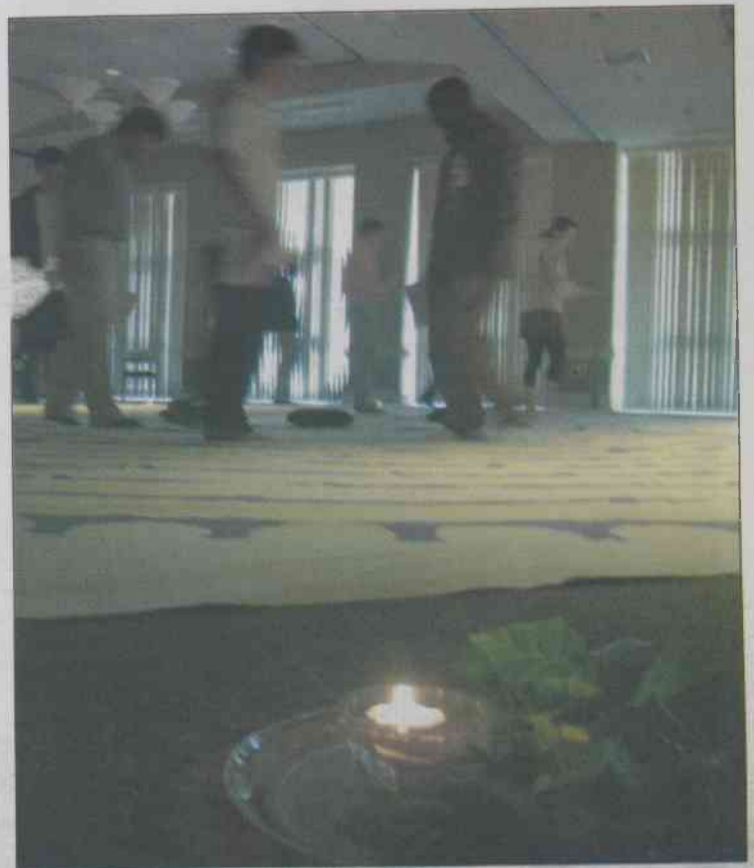
"I liked the feeling after sitting in the center and then getting up after my reflection," Wood said. "I focused on Christianity and getting closer to God when I first started, but then thought about a lot of things once I sat down."

Placed in the center of the clover-like destination were three eggplant colored velvet pillows, a box of facial tissues and a basket of words to help jumpstart visitors' reflection as they sat and contemplated.

This quiet stroll and secluded area sends the message to slow down and take the time to think about things.

This form of interfaith exploration has received a wide range of responses.

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MEGAN LEE | Photographer

A group of students from a health and wellness class walk the labyrinth in McKinnon Hall. The labyrinth is a spiritual tool that many use to symbolize a personal or spiritual journey. Elon plans to construct a labyrinth on the north side of Holt Chapel on south campus.

