

# Russells eager for family and friends to meet Awa

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Awa for symptoms of neglect.

Edward Perry, a close friend of the Russells from the Peace Corps, took immediate notice to Awa's constant presence at his friends' home. Her physical and scholastic growth was overwhelming.

"Little by little, Lori would work with Awa on her words and forming sentences," Perry said.

It was not long until Awa was sitting down trying to read.

"Awa is a type of person that when you see her, you know she is smart, but due to Lori's ability to connect with children and Mike's patience and humor, Awa flourished in their home," he said.

In October 2006, Awa's mother came to the Russells' home and asked if Awa could live with them. "We said we would think about it," Lori said. Awa's mother left and didn't come back for a few weeks.

By November, the Russells were in contact with Awa's parents, the U.S. Embassy and a local judge to discuss an adoption. In March 2007, they were granted legal custody of Awa, and her parents agreed to pass on full parental rights to the Russells. The adoption was fully recognized in Togo in June 2007 and in the United States three months later.

It's not common for Peace Corps volunteers to adopt a child, Perry said, because it's "quite a task" on top of their daily responsibilities within the community.

"For a couple of people who lived and worked as hard as they did during their service, to then take on a child is crazy talk," he said. "But I realized that by the nature of their characters, they are meant for this sort of dedication."

Upon first meeting Awa, Perry was floored by the Russells' open arms to her. He was also concerned about the day when they would have to leave Togo, and Awa.

"But later on, I saw that they weren't intent on leaving her at all," he said. "I was even more scared about that. So were they, but the Russells used their fear in a different direction."

Despite all the rejection and repeated process of starting over, the Russells continue to fight to

bring Awa home. Their struggle with bureaucracy frustrates Perry.

"Even our own country is being slow to understand that yes, the Russells are serious when they say they love this child and are not intent on 'trafficking' her to a foreign land."

Whenever Perry saw Awa, she was often "incoherently enthusiastic" about something and jabbering away in French or Hausa, a West African dialect. Most of all, he said, "She always wants to play on Mike's arms and be comforted by Lori's."

Like Perry, Jenny Gorseger also met Lori and Michael in 2005 during pre-service training in Togo. Though she met Awa only once, Gorseger recognized how close the Russells were to their daughter.

"As Lori shared story after story about Awa and her daily adventures: discovering running water for the first time and washing her clothes every day because they were new, her face would light up in a way that only a mother's can," Gorseger said.

The Russells' courage and commitment to bringing Awa home is a statement to how much they love Awa, Gorseger said.

"Lori is a planner," she said, "and when all of these adoption procedures threw loops in her game plan, she took them in stride because of this noble ambition to give Awa a life filled with opportunities. Michael sacrificed time with his family and friends in the United States to stay with Awa in Togo, even after more than two years away."

## Helping to Bring Awa Home

On their Facebook group, "Bring Awa Home," the Russells have posted a link to sign a petition. They said it was the best thing to do to help their situation.

"It's a great way for us to have all that support in one place," Lori said.

Michael said he recently printed out the database and it was 39 pages long. "Putting that in a senator's hands will really make a difference," he said.

Lori said that letters and e-mails help the North Carolina politicians realize their situation more clearly.

Elon junior Scott Russell, Michael's younger brother, said Michael and Lori's situation is heartbreaking.

"It will truly be an injustice to this little girl as well as my entire family to not allow her to live with the parents that love her," he said.

He has faith that Elon can make a difference, and he knows that he will love her when he finally gets to meet her.

Though Scott has never met his niece, he said, "Through my family, I am convicted to love her."

Scott and dozens of other Elon students have joined Awa's Facebook group, including Elon Volunteers! in a public bid to support the Elon natives.

## A Jubilant Young Girl

Now 8 years old, Awa is attending private school in the capital city, Lome.

"She's very behind because she didn't get a lot [of education] before," Lori said. "Awa is having difficulty trying to read. As bright as she is, it's difficult for her."

Awa is fluent in French and is getting better at English.

"She loves 'Blue's Clues,'" Lori said. "Michael's mom and my mom would send DVDs all the time." The shows helped her learn English. "She would wake up in the morning and say, 'Good morning, good morning!' just like in 'Blue's Clues.'"

Lori would often draw "Blue's Clues" characters, Awa's favorite, and have her color-by-number to teach her math.

"She's hilarious," Lori said. "She has the best sense of humor as anyone I know of as a kid."

Awa really wants to "come home," Lori said. "She asks all sorts of questions about her room and about her family."

When they bring Awa home to Durham, the Russells are looking forward to the stability for Awa and for themselves. They can't wait to introduce her to their families, get her into a good school and just have normal lives including swimming pool outings and laughter.

"She's my baby, she's so incredible," Lori said. "You just can't help but fall in love with this kid."

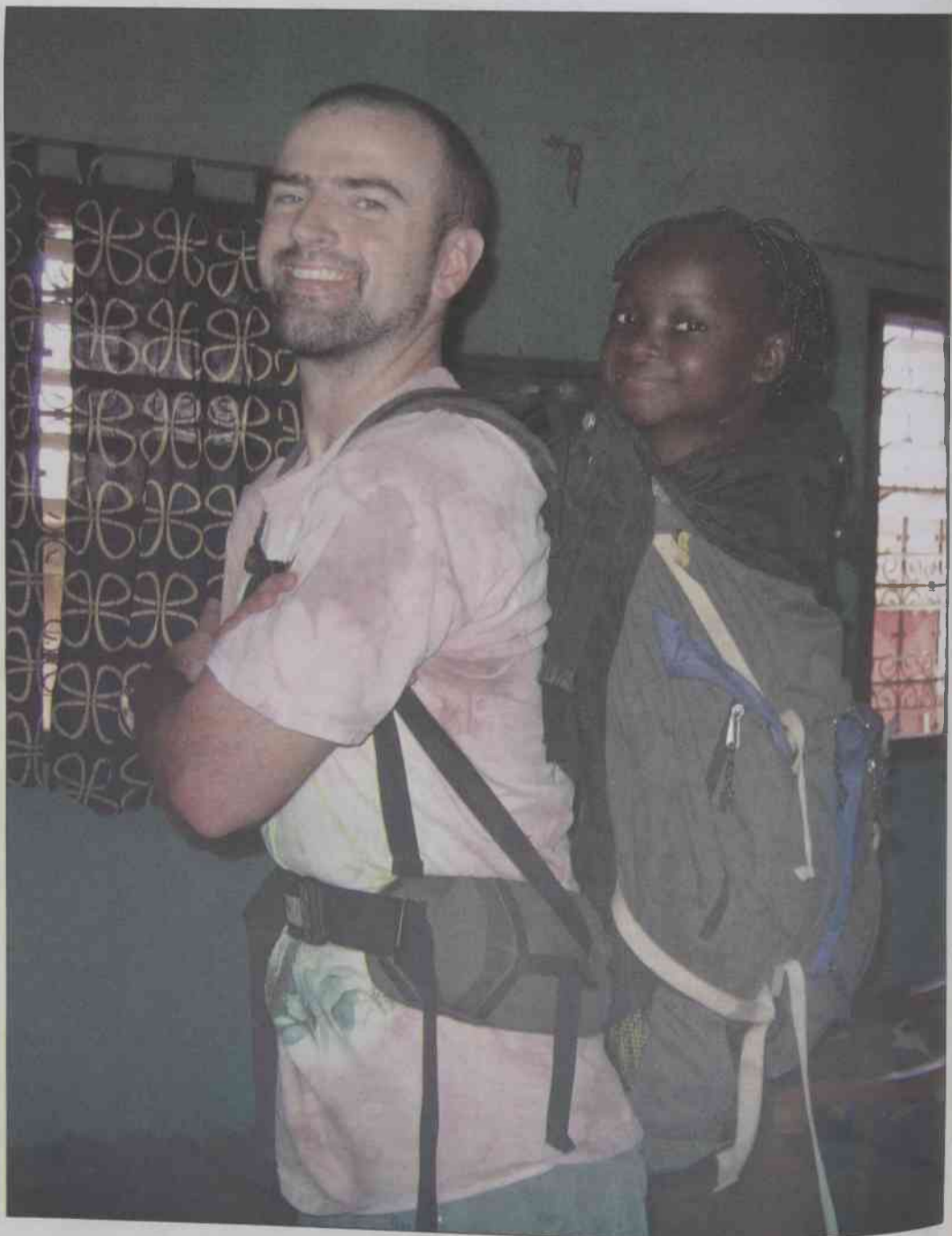
Photos submitted by Michael and Lori Russell



Awa and Lori wear their matching pagne, handmade outfits that are specially tailored. Awa got to pick out the fabric and was very excited about her new outfit – she wears it all the time. It means a lot to Lori that her daughter wants to match and be like her.



Awa, 5 years old at the time of this photograph, lies in a hammock outside the Russells' home when they lived in Togo. "It was probably the first week we met her," Lori said.



"Portable Awa" is content to sit in Michael's backpack. "Just them goofing around on a regular, old day," Lori said. "Awa is such a goofball, so she probably initiated it. She's a nut – she does anything for a laugh."