

WINNEBA ANGLICAN PRIMARY SCHOOL

‘It feeds my soul’

Retired UMass Lowell professor leads effort to donate thousands of books to school in Ghana



In January 2025, a group of UMass Lowell students led by professor Robert Giles, and with them retired Professor Jesse Heines and African Community Center of Lowell Founder Gordon Donkoh-Halm, went on a trip to the African country of Ghana. While there they visited the Winneba Anglican Primary School, which Heines would be inspired to help by leading an effort to donate thousands of books to the school and fund a renovation of its building. COURTESY GORDON DONKOH-HALM

BY PETER CURRIER
PCURRIER@LOWELLSUN.COM

LOWELL >> When Gordon Donkoh-Halm was growing up in Ghana in the 1960s and '70s, he remembers both the camaraderie and the struggle that came with getting an education in his home country.

At the Winneba Anglican Primary School in the town of Winneba, where Donkoh-Halm grew up, he was able to learn alongside other kids his age, but they had to make do with fewer resources than one might expect at an elementary school in the U.S.

One such missing piece was actual classrooms, with Donkoh-Halm and his classmates instead gathering under the shade of a tree surrounded by rocks to sit on until a wooden structure was eventually built for them.

"When it rained, it was a hard day for us," said Donkoh-Halm, noting that this situation was not atypical for a school in Ghana at the time. "We didn't really have much, but we did have each other."

When he was older, Donkoh-Halm eventually moved to the U.S. and obtained his citizenship, following his wife to live in Greater Lowell, where he has been for about 30 years. He would go on to found the African Community Center of Lowell to help immigrants like himself get started on life in the Greater Lowell area, and to this day he serves as the organization's executive director.

In January, Donkoh-Halm joined a group of UMass Lowell students led by Professor Robert Giles on a trip to Ghana, and along with them was Professor Emeritus Jesse Heines. While on that trip, the group took some time to visit Winneba, Donkoh-Halm's old school and his home. At the school, Donkoh-Halm said there was a celebratory environment around their visit, with a great deal of dancing around the school's grounds, but after they returned Donkoh-Halm and Heines met for breakfast in Lowell, where Heines noted the lack of books of the school in Ghana.

As Heines put it, he got it in his head to collect age-appropriate books to send across the Atlantic Ocean to the young students after collecting the books from family and friends.

"And the thing took off like a rocket," said Heines.

The number of donations became overwhelming with the books adding up to thousands of pounds, which would be expensive to ship through most companies. As luck would have it, Donkoh-Halm knew another man from Ghana in the U.S. who could ship the books for \$20 per box regardless of the weight.

“I spoke to him, and then I first shipped two boxes just to see if they would actually get there, and they did, lo and behold,” said Heines.

Then he shipped another nine boxes of books, and another nine after that, and more and more books were being given to Heines to send to the African country to support the young kids and their education. A good friend of his who is a teacher in Lowell was even able to divert old books their school was going to recycle to instead be sent to Winneba.

“They filled up two large SUVs three times with all of those books,” said Heines.

On June 26, he shipped 33 boxes, and then another 60 on Aug. 28, which he said weighed a ton by itself. While the books are being donated for free, Heines said shipping costs still add up, so he set up a GoFundMe page so family and friends of his can help out if they wish.

Beyond books, Heines said he took note of a lack of shelves and other typical school infrastructure and also helped with more than \$10,000 to fund the renovation of the ill-equipped schoolhouse, which has since been completed.

“I still think they haven’t built enough shelves,” said Heines.

Heines spent 32 years at UMass Lowell as a computer science professor and said he has led “a really fortunate life.”

“I’m 77 years old; I’m just trying to give back. I saw this place and thought it was the perfect place to give back. I know exactly where my money is going, it feeds my soul. As you get older, these are the things you want to do,” said Heines.

Donkoh-Halm said the headmistress of the school called him and told him the students had returned from a three-week break to find their school totally transformed.

“They have really done something to give these kids opportunities,” said Donkoh-Halm. “I was a schoolboy there myself, and you never know who is going to come out from there and excel.”

Now, both men identified electricity and lighting as the next target for an upgrade to the Winneba Anglican Primary School, while Donkoh-Halm said the school has expressed interest in hosting interns to teach the young students English or how to work a computer.

In the meantime, Heines said as long as people are still willing to donate books, he is still willing to send them to Winneba. He said anyone wishing to donate should contact him at jesse@jesseheines.com.

Both men have said they wish to return to the country within the next year and hope to see the progress at the school.

“It’s an ongoing project. Quite frankly, in this troubled world we live in, I can’t do anything about this or that, but there is a saying that if you save one life, you save the world. This is something I can do, and I [am fortunate to] have the financial resources to do it,” said Heines.

Sources:

<https://www.lowellsun.com/2025/10/29/it-feeds-my-soul-retired-umass-lowell-professor-leads-effort-to-donate-thousands-of-books-to-school-in-ghana/>

<https://enewspaper.lowellsun.com/html5/reader/production/default.aspx?pubname=&pubid=bdcce531-ebed-4a75-890d-29d20858c81b>



Students at the Winneba Anglican Primary School in Ghana perform a local traditional dance during a visit by UMass Lowell students in January 2025. Since that visit, retired UML professor Jesse Heines has undertaken an effort to donate thousands of books to the school and has funded a renovation project for the building. (Courtesy Gordon Donkoh-Halm)



Retired UMass Lowell professor Jesse Heines carries boxes with some of the thousands of donated books he has been sending to the Winneba Anglican Primary School in Ghana this year, an effort he began after visiting the African country with UML students in January. COURTESY JESSE HEINES



Students at the Winneba Anglican Primary School in Winneba, Ghana celebrate the arrival of shipments of what has amounted to thousands of donated books sent to the school in an effort led by retired UMass Lowell professor Jesse Heines. (Courtesy Jesse Heines)



Students at the Winneba Anglican Primary School in Winneba, Ghana celebrate the arrival of shipments of what has amounted to thousands of donated books sent to the school in an effort led by retired UMass Lowell professor Jesse Heines. (Courtesy Jesse Heines)



Students at the Winneba Anglican Primary School in Ghana sit at their desks in a classroom before the building was renovated through a donation by retired UMass Lowell professor Jesse Heines. (Courtesy Jesse Heines)



The exterior of the Winneba Anglican Primary School in Ghana before it was renovated thanks to donated funds from UMass Lowell professor Jesse Heines. Heines joined a group of UML students visiting the country in January and was inspired to start a campaign to donate funds and thousands of books to help the school afterward. (Courtesy Jesse Heines)



The exterior of the Winneba Anglican Primary School in Ghana after a renovation was completed thanks to more than \$10,000 donated by retired UMass Lowell professor Jesse Heines. (Courtesy Jesse Heines)



African Community Center of Lowell Founder and Executive Director Gordon Donkoh-Halm, left, and retired UMass Lowell professor Jesse Heines during a trip with UML students to Donkoh-Halm's home country of Ghana in January. Heines was inspired by the trip to start an ongoing effort to donate thousands of books to Donkoh-Halm's old primary school. (Courtesy Gordon Donkoh-Halm)