

Letters for Hope

By Melina Glusac & Chris Elliott
STAFF REPORTERS

They walk miles to get water. They have little to no technology. Their education ends at middle school, and society expects them to get married at 14. They are Flore and Flabie of Namtenga, and they're trying to change that for themselves.

"The country is Burkina Faso, and it is in Northern Africa. They only speak French; that's their main language. They do have their own tribal language, but that's (French), what most of Northern Africa speaks," sophomore Hope Haynes said.

Haynes has been a penpal of the Namtengan sisters for almost three years through handwritten letters – a process that requires a few months per note.

"My mom's boss actually does know fluent French, so he translates the letters. That's probably also why it takes so long, too; like out of his busy schedule, he takes the time and translates my letters. He translates their letters, too, before I get them," Haynes said.

The beginning of Haynes and the sisters' written relationship traces back to her mom's boss: Mike Lavoie, a lawyer who was previously in the Peace Corps and stationed in Namtenga.

"He used to go to Africa and help build wells in cities that didn't have access to water and stuff like that, and he became really good friends with this brother and sister who were probably teenagers when they met them, and they stayed friends throughout the years," Haynes said.

The brother would grow up to have two daughters: Flore and Flabie. Inspired, Lavoie established a program at his own daughters' school, Cranbrook, that gave all people in the village a chance to communicate with a student in America. When Flore and Flabie still needed a pal, Lavoie asked for Haynes' help and she rose to the occasion.

The program at Cranbrook went beyond correspondence and grew into a fellowship of sorts, according to North art teacher Susan Forrest.

"Cranbrook went and set up a weaving studio, so that the women would have a livelihood, something to do. Classrooms (in Namtenga) are of 90 students in elementary school, and out of those 90 students, maybe 20 go on to middle school," Forrest said. "The rest go out, they herd animals, they scavenge the countryside for firewood, they do what's necessary for living. Young ladies have been often married off, because they're 'a burden' to the family. So, by coming up with the idea, which was generated from the people in Namtenga, they (wanted) a livelihood for the women, and that's exactly what happened."

Now, Flore, Flabie and the Weaving Sisters of Namtenga sell their art in Africa and America, earning more respect from their families and, potentially, scholarship money.



"I also think it's self-esteem to an extent. It's something to be proud of: 'Look, I've done this, I've helped my family, I've helped my village,'" Forrest said.

When Forrest was contacted by Cranbrook inquiring if she would like to host a presentation with the Weaving Sisters of Namtenga themselves, she seized the opportunity.

On April 12, the group came to the North library and discussed the culture and challenging daily life of Namtengans. Art classes, a higher level French class and Hope Haynes were present.

"It was the first time meeting them. I've known them for so long now, and actually getting to meet them ... was awkward because we don't speak the same language," Haynes said. "They know some English, but you can't really like go up to them and have a conversation. So I was just kinda like 'I'm happy you're here!' It was cool, though."

Norseman struts with chin up as Nordstroms intern

By Rachel Cullen
STAFF REPORTER

She didn't dream of becoming a princess, an actor, or a teacher, like her classmates so often did. She dreamed of creating designs that she and others could wear. Senior Kyndall Echols dreamed of being a part of the fashion industry.

"I have been around fashion all my life," Echols said. "Fashion is the family business on dad's side of the family. Everyone, even the men and boys, knows how to thread a needle. There are five generations of models, stylists, designers, tailors and seamstresses."

Given that fashion runs in the family, it's no surprise that Echols had an early start trying her hand in the business.

"I caught the fashion bug when I used to help my grandmother make my costumes for my plays when I was younger. It was a big deal for me, being five years old and putting ribbons on costumes," Echols laughs.

Echols may have been 5 when she began learning the basics of sewing, but it was three years later, when she was 8, that the interest truly blossomed into something substantial.

"I was at work with my mom one day, and I saw one of her coworkers sketching an outfit and I thought it was the coolest thing ever. So, on her lunch break she taught me the basics of sketching and for the rest of the day I worked on my first fashion catalog," Echols said.

Echols' mother, Weslia, remembers that very first catalog her coworker helped Kyndall create.

"The first thing she did was create a catalog – a full catalog – in second grade, with all of these outfits, and she always talked about how she was going to be able to make them one day, and sell them," Weslia Echols said. "When she got older I saw that they had classes at the College of Creative Studies for drawing and illustration, and I signed her up for classes at their summer program. She really liked it and she really excelled, and after she learned how to draw as a fashion illustrator she went back to the fashion catalog she made way back in the second grade, and she redrew and upgraded all the designs."

After being enrolled in more classes at CCS, Echols expanded her interest with sewing enrichment classes, in-

ternships and even camps to perfect her craft.

One such internship is the Nordstrom BP Fashion Board, which Echols joined in 2011. She describes the internship as a chance for teens aspiring to pursue careers in the fashion industry to get a real world outlook of the fashion industry. They learn about the history of fashion and design, trend forecasting and different careers in the industry. The board's monthly meetings involve unique themes, guest speakers, lessons and assignments.

"One thing that I like the most about being on the fashion board is meeting new people. I am a social butterfly. I love it when we have events, and I get a chance to network with the different managers throughout the store and meet new customers," Echols said. "Another thing is the board member discount. I am a huge shopper, and every meeting board members get a discount on their purchases."

Echols' fashion industry plans will continue in college. She'll be majoring in Fashion Design and Merchandising at Kent State, a university in Ohio whose fashion school is ranked third in the country. She plans to move to New York City one day, citing its status as the heart of the fashion world and its cultural diversity as her motives. Beyond college, and even beyond moving to a new city, Echols is set on one day creating her own fashion line – which she will, fittingly, name Kyndall or Kyndall Lee.

Weslia isn't worried about her daughter's future in fashion.

"I believe that as long as she's doing what she's passionate about, as long as it brings her joy, she'll be successful at it, no matter what it is – it just happened to be fashion for her," Weslia said.

Kyndall's younger sister, Kynadi, also supports Kyndall's aspirations.

"I'm really proud of her," Kynadi said. "She's been so determined about it. When it comes to her designs she's always really intent on finishing them. Her mindset is really inspiring, and she's inspired me to keep doing what I love, to achieve my dreams and never give them up, because she has never given up."

"I also know that for her, fashion is a way to inspire and encourage other people, especially young girls, and I know that that's something she cares about. That's inspiring. Not a lot of people have connected to their purpose so early, but Kyndall has," Weslia said.



COURTESY OF ECHOLS FAMILY

Kyndall is currently designing her prom dress for this year. "I won't say much about the dress itself, because I want it to be a surprise. I designed it and my cousin LaTonya Williams is making it. LaTonya is a fashion designer in Chicago, and she owns Elizabeth Smith Fashions. Elizabeth Smith is the name of my cousin's clothing line, which she named after my great-grandmother (who I was very close to)," Echols said.