

outbursts

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Student project sows hope for Haiti

Former LCI student wants to give back to his homeland by reintroducing native seeds

By Rich Mathieson

The *mayi tchaka* Junior Beauvais eats when he returns to the rural Haitian village where he was born tastes nothing like the flavorful corn and bean stew his grandmother used to serve.

The recipe hasn't changed. What has, he says, is the quality of the corn and beans.

For generations, farmers in the mountainous village of Fondwa, a narrow strip of a community about two hours southwest of Port-au-Prince, provided food for their community by growing heirloom corn, peas, and sorghum.

Starting in the 1980s, though, the region was flooded by genetically modified seeds distributed free by nongovernmental organizations. Taking advantage of the cheap seeds, Fondwa's farmers quickly sold off their heirloom seeds and planted the modified ones.

According to Beauvais, this switch has had negative long-term consequences. The modified seeds, unsuitable to the terrain, aren't nearly as productive as the heirloom



At the Language and Culture Institute, Junior Beauvais improved his English and prepared to study at an American university. He's now enrolled in the Agricultural Technology Program in Virginia Tech's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

varieties. Crop yields have dramatically decreased, wrecking Fondwa's economy and creating health problems and malnutrition. In addition, the hybrid crops don't produce seeds that can be saved, forcing farmers to buy more each season.

Those who have tried to switch back to the heirloom seeds, however, have found that they are nowhere to be found. Beauvais had an award-winning idea to change that.

FROM FONDWA TO BLACKSBURG

The 26-year-old has seen the effects of the loss of local seed production firsthand. For years, he helped his grandfather work the land and watched as the old man struggled. He resolved to find some way to help his village. A chance encounter with three Virginia Tech professors provided the first step.

Virginia Tech's international recruiter

Each year, the Language and Culture Institute participates in more than a dozen recruiting fairs in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, China, Taiwan, and South Korea to help attract more international students to Virginia Tech and increase international brand awareness of the university.

Students enrolled at the institute work on improving their English skills while also gaining the study skills needed to succeed at an American college or university. After completing their studies in the institute's Intensive English Program, many go on to enroll in undergraduate or graduate degree programs at Virginia Tech.

The institute also works to develop linkages with international universities.

"Exchanges through cross-border university partnerships help create more globally aware, and globally responsible, citizens on both sides of these relationships," Director Don Back says. "Moreover, by creating 'home bases' abroad for students and faculty, these collaborations open gateways for joint research into fundamental, universal problems, such as poverty, conflict, and climate change."



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Nancy McGehee, head of the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management in the Pamplin College of Business, met Beauvais while she was touring Fondwa four years ago with Max Stephenson, professor of urban affairs and planning in the College of Architecture and Urban Studies, and Laura Zanotti, associate professor of political science in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences. Beauvais was teaching English to children in the village and working as a translator at the University of Fondwa.

“He and I hit it off immediately,” McGehee says. “One day, he sat down beside me and started talking about the agricultural challenges they have in Haiti, and you could tell he was intent on making a difference.”



Nancy McGehee

After returning to the U.S., the trio decided they had to help Beauvais study in America. With their assistance, Beauvais was able to secure a scholarship to the Language and Culture Institute and a job working with its other international students. He arrived in Blacksburg in late 2013.

He says the institute helped him improve his English skills as well as polish the academic skills needed to study in the U.S. “The teachers were so welcoming,” Beauvais says. “They help you learn techniques for making presentations and writing reports, as well as helping you learn what American university life is like and what professors expect of you.”

This spring, after successfully completing studies at the institute, he started classes in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences’ Agricultural Technology Program. But always, his mind was on Fondwa.

A BOOST FROM BARILLA

Working with another former Language and Culture Institute student, Fang Wan, a Chinese student in the College of Architecture and Urban Studies, and Enel Delice, a student at the University of Fondwa, Beauvais developed an idea to reintroduce native seeds in the region. He called the project the Haitian Heirloom Seed Bank.

The seed bank, the first of its kind in the region, will purchase heirloom seeds from areas where they are available and sell them to farmers at a reasonable price. It will also retrain those farmers on how to plant,



Junior Beauvais and Fang Wan talk about their Haitian Heirloom Seed Bank project during the final round of the Barilla Good4 competition in Italy.

Hardship in Haiti

Haiti is the poorest country in the Northern Hemisphere; more than two-thirds of its population lives on less than \$2 per day, according to the United Nations. In rural areas such as Fondwa, almost 90 percent live below the poverty level and basic services such as electricity and running water are practically nonexistent.

Although agriculture is an important sector of Haiti’s economy, the country fails to produce enough food and imports more than 50 percent for the needs of its population.

maintain, harvest, store, and sell the seeds.

“Having such a seed bank will mean there will always be a place for Fondwa farmers to sell seeds while making them available for those who need them,” Beauvais says.

With guidance from Zanotti and an instructor from the institute, Christina Zaverucha, the team entered their idea into a competition sponsored by the Italian pasta company Barilla to recognize innovative projects in the food sector that foster sustainable development.

After giving a presentation before the contest jury, they were named winners of the Barilla Good4 international contest during a ceremony in Parma, Italy. They won 15,000 euros (about \$16,500) and six months of mentoring for their idea.

“What struck us was the passion they have for their ideas and the desire to change and improve their world,” says Paolo Barilla, vice chairman of the Barilla Group.

Don Back, director of the Language and Culture Institute, says Beauvais’ commitment to helping his homeland is inspirational. “I am deeply moved by Junior and those many other international students at our university like him who are so committed to the future prosperity of their countries that they would learn another language, adapt to another culture and way of life, and face the intellectual challenge of study at a top-tier university such as Virginia Tech,” Back says. “I hope his example inspires others to broaden their horizons to do more to make a positive difference in our world.”

Beauvais says winning the competition is a good first step to making the seed bank a reality, but hurdles remain. “It’s my mission to return to Fondwa to help people there,” he says. “We want to eradicate the genetically modified seeds in the area before things become worse.”

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