Benedictine University has a special connection with three inspirational nuns who came all the way from Tanzania to Lisle to study and obtain skills to improve the lives of women and children in one of the poorest countries in Africa.

Two of the nuns—Sr. Beatrice Kayombo, O.S.B., and Sr. Afra Mgwama, O.S.B.—have already earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Benedictine. The third, Sr. Fausta Mtweve, O.S.B., is taking courses at Benedictine while living at Sacred Heart Monastery.

Sr. Beatrice and Sr. Afra came to Benedictine in 2003 to study tuition-free under an arrangement with the University and their home convent, the African Benedictine Sisters of St. Gertrude, Imiliwaha. While at Benedictine, they received free room and board, clothing, school fees and occasional airplane tickets to Tanzania from the Benedictine University Board of Trustees. The two made plans for Sr. Beatrice and Sr. Afra to travel to the United States and stay at the monastery, study at Benedictine and eventually return to Tanzania as highly skilled professionals with strong backgrounds in medicine and education.

When Sr. Beatrice and Sr. Afra arrived at Benedictine, they did not know the full extent of the challenges that awaited them.

Born in Mlangali, Tanzania, Sr. Beatrice grew up in a small village without running water or electricity. School was a 1.5 hour walk in both directions and their classrooms lacked many commonplace materials like textbooks and lab equipment.

Tanzania is renowned for the majestic Serengeti National Park, Mount Kilimanjaro and abundant wildlife. But for the people who live there, it is a country that lacks many skilled professionals and the vital resources necessary for providing quality education and health care.

Before coming to Benedictine, Sr. Beatrice was the only medical professional in her village. As a registered nurse and midwife, she saw many women die in childbirth.

\n\n“A doctor was needed in most of the work I used to do,” Sr. Beatrice said. “I would think about this and wish I were a doctor so that I could help more. But how could I become a doctor? I did not know.”

Her prioress reached out to a group of Benedictine sisters and made contact with Sr. Judith Ann Heble, O.S.B., a former prioress of Sacred Heart Monastery and current member of the Benedictine University Board of Trustees. The two made plans for Sr. Beatrice and Sr. Afra to travel to the United States and stay at the monastery, study at Benedictine and eventually return to Tanzania as highly skilled professionals with strong backgrounds in medicine and education.

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“It was very difficult for me to catch up at Benedictine,” Sr. Beatrice said. “I had to work so hard to learn, especially in the laboratory. Our first classes were so challenging. Every time I cried and thought, ‘I am not going to make it,’ I thought of going back home. But because of Sr. Afra, we were two. We empowered each other to keep going.”

Eventually, the hard work paid off. Sr. Beatrice earned a Bachelor of Science in Health Science in 2009 and completed the final requirements for a Master of Public Health in 2014 while earning a Doctor of Medicine from Poznan University of Medical Science in Poznan, Poland, the same year.

Today, she is a certified medical doctor at a hospital in Mwanza, Tanzania. In three years, she hopes to become an obstetrics and gynecology specialist.

Encouraged to provide more educational opportunities for underserved young women and girls, Sr. Afra earned a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Elementary Education in 2009 and a Master of Education (M.Ed.) in 2011 from Benedictine.

At the urging of her prioress, she returned to Tanzania in 2012 to oversee the start of a new elementary school in Sumbawanga, Tanzania.

“She insisted that if I didn’t, we would lose the piece of land that we had for the school because the government wanted to take it back,” Sr. Afra recalled. “It took a while for me to say ‘yes’ to my prioress because there was zero money to begin with, and I had no idea what to do.” She soon found support from the Friends of Imiliwaha in Lisle, who had encouraged both her and Sr. Beatrice to complete their studies at Benedictine.

Today, the school houses 85 students in four classrooms. However, there is still more work to do and many students who could be served by the school, she said.

“This is just the beginning,” Sr. Afra said. “We will need to continue to build more classes up to seventh grade. Our goal is to empower women and to see the girls we educate today continue their studies to the University level.”

Back in Lisle, Sr. Fausta continues to work toward a B.A. in Elementary Education and hopes to pursue an M.Ed. so that she can support Sr. Afra with the growth of the school.

The Friends of Imiliwaha includes Margarete Roth, Ph.D., Benedictine professor emeritas; Alice Sima, director of Pre-Professional Health Programs at the University; and other supportive faculty, alumni and friends of Benedictine.