

QUICK LINKS:

- Home -

GO

- @St. Norbert September
- First Annual SNC Day
- Under the African Sun
- Retirement Challenge
- Relationships Gone Digital
- TKE Service Award
- Issue Archive
- How To Subscribe



Adam Van Fossen (right) in Africa

*Van Fossen, a communications major with a minor in art, has studied photography with **Shane Rocheleau** (Art). For a photo record of Van Fossen's trip, [visit this gallery](#).*

September 2009

SHARE

FACEBOOK

TWEET THIS

PRINT

## Under the African sun

On a sweltering afternoon in Ghana, under a high African sun, **Adam Van Fossen '10** found that the lessons he had learned half a world away in a cool, carpeted classroom at St. Norbert College were coming into sharp focus.

Van Fossen traveled to West Africa this June to work with other volunteers launching a humanitarian project in Togo.

He made the trip to help begin construction of a youth soccer complex, he says, and to experience another culture so that upon returning home to Wisconsin he could raise awareness of how other people live.

What he found when the big 757 that carried him from London to Ghana landed in the muggy midnight heat was so different from his own world as to be disorienting – even for the educated and well-traveled Van Fossen, who calls himself a “culture junkie.”

“It was so hot and sticky,” he says. “It smelled like people.”

One day, as he sat in an open-air cinder block church on the side of a cliff, eating lunch with an extended African family whose many members live together in the same compound, Van Fossen remembered something he had learned the previous summer at St. Norbert.

He had taken a popular course on intercultural communication taught by **Jim Neuliep** (Communication and Media Studies). The professor holds forth on the subject in a tidy second-floor classroom with gray tweed carpet and neat rows of plastic chairs. The hushed hallway just outside hums peacefully with refrigerated vending machines stocked with all manner of modern treats. It's a long way from Togo.

But something Neuliep had said in that classroom clicked as Van Fossen sat eating under the hot African sun.

“They're a collectivist culture,” Van Fossen says. “They eat meals together. They grow up in families and live in these large groups. That's something we talked a lot about in class.”

Neuliep, who has written a popular textbook on intercultural communication used in classrooms around the world, often hears from former students that what they learned in his class helped them while traveling abroad, but such feedback never gets old.

"It makes you feel like a million bucks," Neuliep says. "It's nice to know you've had an impact.

"I remember Adam really well. He was always very outspoken and involved in class."

While Van Fossen was in West Africa, an idea took root, one whose seed had been planted early in life and then nurtured at St. Norbert, a college dedicated to service and steeped in the humanitarian traditions of the Norbertine order: the idea of helping people less fortunate.

Generally speaking, Americans have it pretty good, Van Fossen realized. Though already aware of that to some degree, he found the notion crystallizing during lunch in the African heat, as he watched fishermen below labor to ready their boats.

Van Fossen, who delayed starting college so he could travel, has an open-minded and compassionate worldview born of working the gold mines of Nevada, lending a hand at a Japanese dude ranch and visiting many places in between, he says.

So as he used a machete and shovel to help clear a field of maize and plant the eucalyptus trees that would mark the new soccer field in Togo, part of him took it all in stride – and another part changed forever. Here was a worthy mission with which he could identify.

The project was sponsored by [Vapor Sports Ministries](#). The Christian organization, based near Birmingham, Ala., and named for biblical references to the brevity of life, builds sprawling sports complexes in the slums and poor rural areas of Third World countries.

The aim of those complexes: to provide humanitarian aid and "sustainable life-change," founder Micah McElveen says.

The organization traces its beginnings to a day 12 years ago when McElveen, then 14 and an avid athlete, suffered a catastrophic surfing accident that temporarily rendered him a quadriplegic.

In 1999, after more than two years of rehabilitation, McElveen was able once again to use his legs, though his arms remained partially paralyzed. So he started kicking around a soccer ball and in a few years was captain of his college team.

Later, on a trip to Africa, McElveen saw poverty he never imagined. But he also saw children and teenagers playing soccer with homemade balls fashioned out of trash and guessed correctly that the pull of soccer could be leveraged to expose youths to fellowship, education and humanitarian aid. Within a year, Vapor had built 11 soccer fields on five acres of land.

When McElveen and his wife, Audrey, who were living out of a compact car with a boogie board lashed to the top, visited Green Bay in 2006, the pastor at Green Bay Community Church arranged for the couple to stay with Van Fossen's family.

The first members of the Van Fossen household to travel abroad as Vapor volunteers were Adam's mother, Kat, and his younger brother, **Joel '13**,

who went to Kenya in 2007.

Next, and most recently, was Adam, who traveled to Togo this summer while his mother was returning to Kenya for a second time. (En route, the pair happened upon each other briefly in the London airport.)

Van Fossen landed in Ghana on a Saturday, after 24 hours of air travel, excluding layovers and connections, with four other Vapor volunteers.

The field of maize and corn in rural Togo that they would help clear and mark off – tribal land handed down for generations – was barely ready for them when they arrived. It had been purchased only four days earlier for \$100,000.

The volunteers marked off the 14 acres on which the soccer fields will be built by planting 1,500 eucalyptus trees, McElveen says. Eventually the site will hold three regulation soccer fields overlaid with 11 smaller youth fields, he says. It's the third of 40 such centers Vapor plans to build worldwide.

Van Fossen and his family will do their part. This sort of work energizes Adam Van Fossen. He doesn't like to do "the tourist thing, where you're in another culture but still in your own, inside a bubble," he says.

When Van Fossen flew to West Africa this summer, he was ready for something raw and different, he says. He got it.

"We met voodoo chiefs in mud-hut villages. A lot of the people never had seen a white person," he says.

During his 11 days in Africa, Van Fossen rode in a taxicab that was chased by rogue cops seeking to shake down the driver; endured two fender benders within an hour of arriving in Africa; crossed again and again a brackish lake in a homemade canoe piloted by men pushing the boat with long palm branches; and took only three showers.

The car chase, Van Fossen says, was "totally out of my comfort zone."

He was more blasé about the almost daily 30-minute boat rides across Lake Togo made necessary by visa problems that had to be cleared up repeatedly at the U.S. Embassy in Ghana.

By the end of the trip, he says, "I was pretty ready to come home." He craved air-conditioning. But he had enjoyed his journey.

For Van Fossen, traveling to West Africa had enriched a multicultural perspective and compassion that had its genesis in earlier travels – and in the lessons learned in a faraway classroom at a Catholic college on a bend of the Fox River.

"You go to Africa to change Africa," McElveen says, "and Africa ends up changing you."

#### Office of Communications

Phone: (920) 403-3557

Fax: (920) 403-4010

E-mail:

[communications@snc.edu](mailto:communications@snc.edu)

