

LEARNING: N. American waste hard to stomach for African teacher

Exchange opens eyes of Ugandan visitor, Stouffville students

BY SANDRA BOLAN
sbolan@yrmg.com

Benard Yiga learned to write in the dirt with a stick. His school house had six classrooms that were so overcrowded, classes were moved outside on nice days. He and his five younger siblings walked a total of 14km to and from school everyday.

Mr. Yiga, 25, grew up in the Musaka Bukoto Village in southern Uganda where before school he fetched water and fed the animals that would eventually land on their dinner table.

"My family would not even be considered to be average," he said. "Very impoverished."

Needless to say, when Mr. Yiga arrived in Whitchurch-Stouffville last summer to work as a teacher's

assistant at Willowgrove, he suffered from culture shock.

"It was hard for me, even still now," he said.

Before returning home last month, Mr. Yiga was overwhelmed by the very things North Americans take for granted: Walmart, McDonald's, snow and computers.

While he was all too happy to learn how to surf the web and eat a Big Mac, the one thing Mr. Yiga could not wrap his head around was our wastefulness.

"Here, people have too much supplies," he said, noting only some of the wealthiest students in Uganda would have textbooks. Younger students learned how to write in the dirt — so as to not waste paper and pencils — and exams were rarely, if ever photocopied.

Instead, the questions were written on the chalkboard and students would have to write their answers on whatever pieces of paper were available.

"It's so hard to imagine," said Gerald Reesor-Grooters, junior/senior kindergarten teacher at the McCowan Road school.

Mr. Yiga spent the last year assisting in Mrs. Reesor-Grooters class.

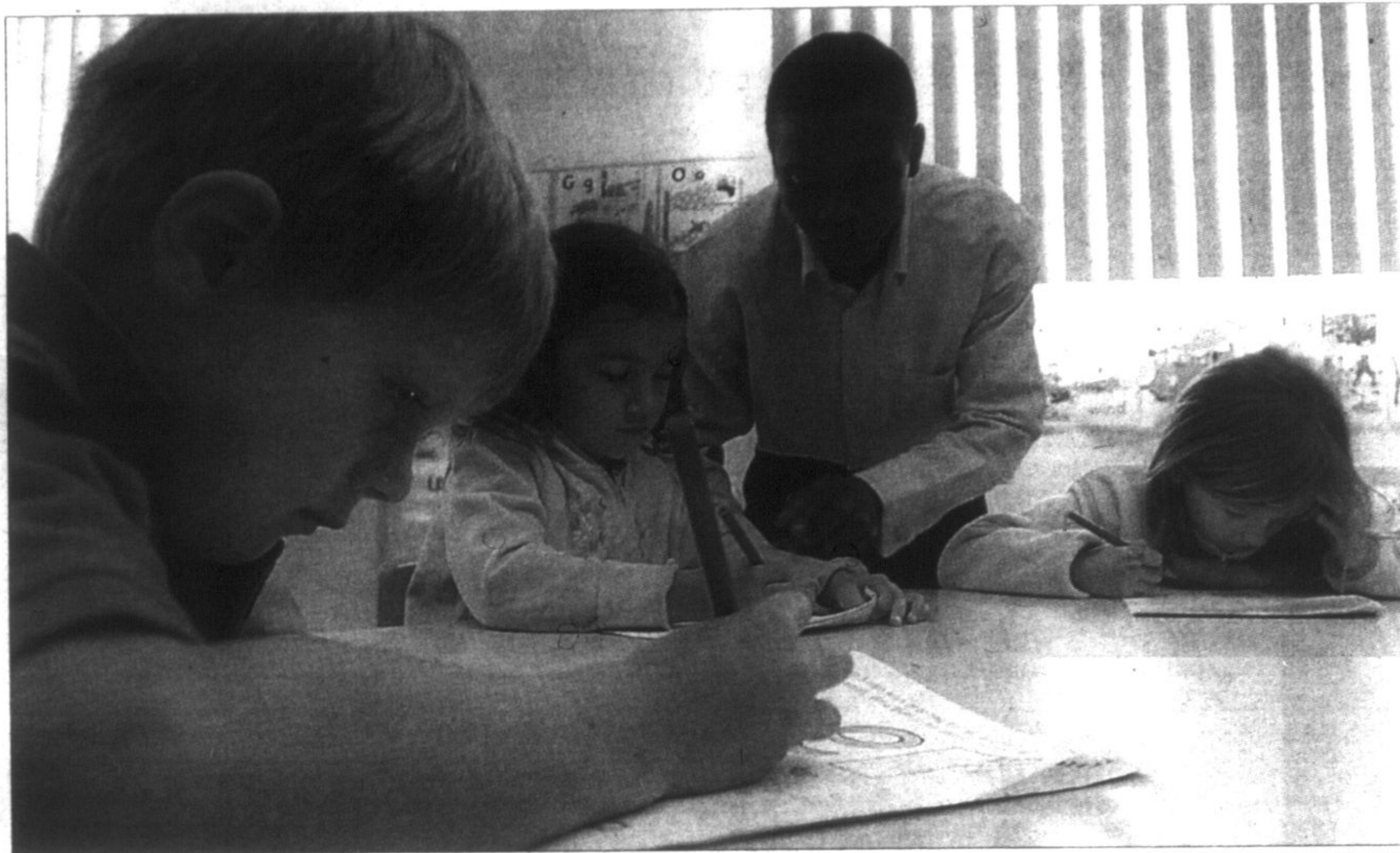
"For me personally, he was so helpful," she said. "He jumped in with both feet, even though he doesn't teach this age."

In Uganda, Mr. Yiga teaches math and science to students in grades five through seven.

Mr. Yiga arrived at Willowgrove through the International Volunteer Exchange Program, which is a vocational and cultural experience for 18- to 30-year-olds.

While Mr. Yiga learned a lot about the North American educational system, he also taught the students at Willowgrove a lot about life in Uganda.

"The kids here now can speak Luganda, count from one to 10 in the tribal language for Banganda and they can dance my cultural dance very well," he said.



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Benard Yiga works with children at Willowgrove School in Whitchurch-Stouffville earlier this year.

"We should see value in how they do things as well," Mrs. Reesor-Grooters said.

Already a recycler and one to reuse materials where possible, Mr. Yiga's presence at the school made Mrs. Reesor-Grooters even more conscious about how wasteful our society can be.

LAW SCHOOL COSTLY

For example, arts and crafts with macaroni no longer takes place.

"That's food and here we're stringing them together to make necklaces," she said.

Despite Mr. Yiga's impoverished childhood, he had big dreams and knew what it was going to take in order to fulfill them — an education.

Those dreams initially had Mr. Yiga in the courtroom, like his uncle.

But then reality came crashing down. His family could barely afford to put food on the table each night and pay for the education of

their six children, let alone send the eldest to law school. In Uganda, people have to pay for all of their education, whether it be in the public or Christian systems.

So desperate was Mr. Yiga, and his parents, to have him educated, the family approached their church for some financial aid.

The church, according to Mr. Yiga, provided bursaries to orphans who wanted to attend post-secondary school. But as both of Mr. Yiga's parents were alive, the family had to request an exemption. It was granted.

However, the bursary was not enough to pay for all of law school — just half. But the Yiga family could not come up with the other half.

The church's bishop suggested Mr. Yiga pursue another career path — teaching. In conjunction with assistance from the church, the program only required students to come up with a quarter of the cost.

"He guided me and told me if I take that course, in the future, I'd be able to join any other course," he said.

Mr. Yiga has no plans to change careers, as he knows the value of a job in Uganda, despite their educational system's challenges. For example, at any given time, a teacher can have 100 students.

FOOD, NOT CRAFTS

"There is no way the teachers can help each student," he said.

Of those students who make it all the way through grade school, only a fraction of them will take and pass the government-sanctioned exam required to move on to high school. The success rate is better in the Christian-based school system, but not much, Mr. Yiga said.

Without "papers", or a diploma, according to Mr. Yiga, people can't work and must therefore, rely on labourer jobs, which are low paying and scarce.

Stouffville students buy desks for African school

Every December, Willowgrove students participate in a giving project in which they raise money for a charity.

Last year, the students decided they wanted to raise money for desks at Uganda's St. Jude school, where Benard Yiga teaches.

Each student had a jar and every day they were asked to contribute to it. For example, one day they were asked to put a penny in the jar for every stuffed toy they had at home. Another day they were asked to add a dime to their jar for every bed in their house.

At the end of the campaign, Willowgrove raised more than \$1,000, which purchased about 20 desks that will be used by 70 students.



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