



Changing young lives worlds away

Story by Brianna (Martin) Patterson '03, M'07

“You have two choices: you can be an asset or a liability ... I promised myself that no matter where I am, I want to be an asset – never a liability.”

John Solomon, who received a bachelor's degree in education from the University in 1999, was first presented with that choice by his high school basketball coach. He made his choice and now shares it with his students – all 4,000 of them in Costa Rica, Ghana, Lithuania, Kenya, Congo and Uganda.

Solomon is founder of Project Global Village (PGV), an organization that provides education and technology to underserved children worldwide since 2004.

Solomon has lived and worked since 2006 in Costa Rica, where he owns and operates The Playhouse Café. A portion of the café, located in a modern shopping center, serves

traditional Costa Rican coffees, teas, pastries and cakes and has wireless Internet access for patrons. The other portion of the café is equipped with activities for children ages six months to six years.

Through the café, Solomon collects donations of school supplies and uses profits from the business to support himself and to purchase school supplies and technology equipment for a number of schools. PGV also receives some private donations.

“I believe education should be free in the public school systems, no matter what country,” he said. In the places Solomon is working, students may drop out of school because parents don't have money for books, uniforms or fees.

Solomon began his work in Ghana, Africa, where he went from home to home talking to parents to try to convince them to send their

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children to school. Many were choosing between school and sending their children to work so the family could afford food. Solomon helped some students by purchasing new clothing and food for their families in exchange for perfect attendance.

The Rapid Academy, located in a small village in Ghana, was Solomon's first PGV project. He initiated building a library, donated school supplies and continues to do so from his home in Costa Rica. Solomon also saw potential in several of the students there and has financed their education through high school. One will likely attend a university in Europe, with Solomon's help.

More recently, Solomon has been working in Sarchi, Costa Rica. At Escuela San Rafael de Alajuela, Solomon recently completed the installation of the school's first computer laboratory. The school had never owned one computer.

At Escuela INVU Las Canas in Alajuela, Costa Rica, Solomon secured funding to replace the leaking roof, which was at the top of the school director's list of priorities. Approximately 1,200 children attend the school, which is located in a poor area with a high crime rate.

At Al Niño Con Carino, located in the mountains of Alajuela, Solomon makes monthly visits to drop off school supplies. The school houses 30 girls, ages 1-14, whose parents are unable to care for them full time.

A project especially close to Solomon's heart is the Foundation Hogar Maños Abiertos. Though not a school in the traditional sense, the organization cares for children and adults with several disabilities and terminal illnesses. "The children there were abandoned completely. Their parents couldn't or wouldn't take care of them," explained Solomon, who delivers donations of clothing, medical supplies and medicines monthly, though the organization needs so much more – such as physical and occupational therapy – that they just can't afford.

Solomon hopes to open the first PGV-operated school outside Nairobi, Kenya, and also has plans to build a medical clinic on site. Malaria and AIDS are common. Funding for the project, which will include purchas-

ing a piece of land, likely will come from franchising or selling the café in Costa Rica, which has been successful.

Entrepreneurship and creative financing are nothing new to Solomon. In high school, he describes his family as being poor, so Solomon owned and operated both a disc jockey business and a kids' party company. During the summers, he traveled with his father to Puerto Rico, where his dad worked in a family business, and Solomon became fluent in Spanish.

Upon high school graduation, Solomon says he packed his truck and moved to Myrtle Beach, S.C. He enrolled in college and to pay for his first two years of school, boxed in tournaments and competed in Tough Man contests on the weekends. He met a friend from Akron, Ohio, while living in Myrtle Beach and eventually moved to northwest Ohio to be closer to her.

Solomon chose to complete his bachelor's degree at Findlay because the small class sizes appealed to him. "I don't think education is best in large groups," he said. "When I do open a PGV school, I'll stick with the small-group philosophy. It's the best way to learn."

Solomon credits the late James Schmidt, who taught a math for educators class at UF, with his own success in the classroom. "He was the only person who was a mentor that I ever went back to for advice and for help ... He'd always return my messages, even after I graduated."

After receiving his degree from UF, Solomon taught school in North Carolina and then moved to Pembroke Pines, Fla., where he taught at Glades Middle School. Solomon won a national award for his creative use of technology in the classroom and was named teacher of the year in 2004-2005.

Solomon also appeared for two seasons on the Travel Channel's series "Get Packing" and was able to use money he earned from that to start PGV.

Of his initial decision to move to Africa to launch PGV, Solomon said, "... there was something inside of me that wasn't fulfilled. I wanted to focus on my project and the foundation."

To learn more about PGV, visit www.projectglobalvillage.or.cr.

