

'Going Back to Fetch It'

Educator Uncovers UCM Legacy and African Roots

By Kathy Strickland

Ekuwah. It's a common name in Ghana, her father's native country.

In the Akan culture of people living mainly along Ghana's coastal regions, babies are often named for the day of the week they are born. So Ekuwah (also written as Akua) shares her name with thousands of other Ghanaian girls born on a Wednesday.

In Warrensburg, however, her name was an anomaly.

Growing up in Warrensburg R-VI public schools, Ekuwah Mends Moses, '01, was often asked by teachers if she had a nickname.

"I told them I did not, and politely taught them how to say my name," the now 44-year-old University of Central Missouri College of Education alumna writes in her first nonfiction picture book. "I like my name. It is me. I do not want my name changed or erased."

Going Back

"My Name Is an Address," published in 2021, explores the meaning of Ekuwah's

name and follows the roots of her father's family back to Cape Coast, Ghana. Albion Mends III left Ghana in 1971 on a track scholarship to Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

After a year living in a climate he describes as unbearably cold to a native of Ghana, Albion transferred to Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU). There he met Ekuwah's mother, Carolyn Coffield, who was a graduate student teaching the Africana Studies class he was taking as an undergraduate.

Carolyn's roots are harder to trace, as her ancestors' indigenous names and heritage were stripped from them when they were brought from Africa as enslaved people. Ekuwah related to her maternal ancestors' sense of disconnection in grade school.

"I felt lonely, embarrassed and ashamed of my name," she writes. "My parents talked to me and helped me boost my confidence. They told me to be kind and remember our family values."

Education is one of those values. Ekuwah's parents graduated from ENMU, married and moved to Warrensburg in 1974 so Albion could pursue his graduate degree at UCM.



After graduating from Eastern New Mexico University in 1974, Carolyn and Albion Mends married and moved to Warrensburg so Albion could pursue his graduate degree at UCM.



Young Ekuwah Mends practices writing her name.

"Central is the center of hope for present and future generations. Keep the vision and serve well."

— Mrs. Carolyn Mends, from her UCM farewell reception

He earned his master's in Sociology in 1976, the year Ekuwah's older sister, Effuah (meaning a girl born on a Friday), was born.

Carolyn, who had earned a bachelor's in Art and a master's in Secondary Education, became an artist in residence at UCM. She painted students' and faculty members' portraits in the student union, designed flyers and posters for university events and created art on commission.

She was soon hired as an academic advisor and served in that position for 22 years, despite deteriorating mobility due to multiple sclerosis. Carolyn passed away on July 13, 2017, and Ekuwah published "My Name Is an Address" on that date in her honor.

Bringing It Back

The word "sankofa" can be translated from the Akan language as "to retrieve" or "to go back to fetch [something]." In Ghana it is often represented in art, decor and clothing as an Adinkra symbol of a bird turning its head backward to retrieve an egg, which symbolizes something from the past that can be helpful in the present.

Ekuwah has been doing just that — going back to discover her family's history through the process of creating nonfiction picture books. As an elementary school engineering teacher and former literacy specialist in the nation's fifth largest public school district in Clark County, Nevada, she recognizes the need for students to see themselves in the literature they are asked to read.

"I notice a girl who is Black like me," she writes in her second book, "Mama's Portraits and Me," released on Mother's Day 2022. "What inspired

Mama to paint her portrait? Was it her unique green eyes? ... Is she quiet and shy like me? So many questions flooded my mind. I want to go back in time and ask Mama about this portrait and other pieces of her work."

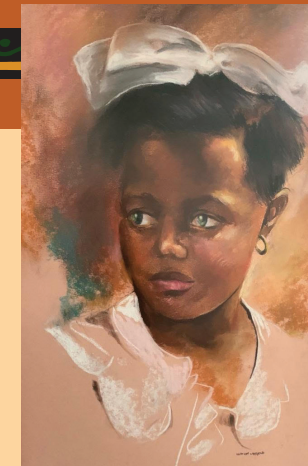
A key resource in Ekuwah's research was her father, the third of his name, who retired in 2021 after teaching Africana Studies, Religious Studies and Modern Languages at UCM for 14 years.

"It's her contribution to education," Albion says of his daughter's books, which include pictures of cultural artifacts he used to bring to the schools Ekuwah attended in Warrensburg to educate her classmates about Ghana. "If you have history, geography and culture, then you are full. You can appreciate who you are. A lack of knowledge of your history makes you question your contribution to the world. ... He who tells your story defines you. So we've got to tell our own story."

Ekuwah was glad her grandfather, Albion Mends II, got to see his family's story published in "My Name Is an Address." He moved from Ghana after the death of his wife, Georgina Isabella Sagoe, in 1981 and lived in Warrensburg until passing away at the age of 103 in January 2022.

Going Home

After both of her books were published, Ekuwah took a trip to Ghana with her two teenage children in the summer of 2022.



"Green Eyes" won first place in the 1990 Mid-Missouri Artists' Painting and Drawing Exhibition.

It was their second time visiting and Ekuwah's fifth. The first trip Ekuwah remembers was in 1993, when she was around the same age her own children are now. Effuah, '99, '02, had to pack her little sister's bags for her because Ekuwah did not want to go.

"There's that whole miseducation that we went through and a very narrow view of what Africa is and what it has to offer," Ekuwah says of her mindset then, despite her

parents' influence. "Yes, there is poverty, but there's so much more than that. We just were never shown."

Ekuwah donated copies of her books to a school library in Ghana during her latest trip. She has created learning guides and activities aligned with Common Core State Standards and National Core Arts Standards for other educators to use. Above all, she hopes her stories will serve as an example of Black excellence and inspire children and adults alike to research and share their own family legacies — the stories of their own names.



In summer 2022, Ekuwah visited the house where her father grew up in Cape Coast, which is pictured in her first book.



Remembering Mrs. Mends

Alumni in Higher Education Profession Took Inspiration From Quiet Advisor

Daryl Duff, '89, was a music major from St. Louis, newly married and living in Hawkins Hall, when he met Carolyn. He walked past her office to get to his own academic advisor's room and sought Carolyn out as a role model.

"There was not a large population of Black students, and Mrs. Mends was one of those people that students gravitated to," Daryl recalls. "She was the quietest, sweetest woman I've ever met next to my Mama. She was soft-spoken, but she was a powerful force."

Carolyn served as an advisor to the Association of Black Collegians and would bring her young daughters to hear Daryl sing in the ABC Gospel Choir. She followed his career as he joined the U.S. Navy Band Sea Chanters chorus, where he served for 23 years.

Carolyn passed away in 2017, the same year Daryl re-entered higher education as an assistant professor of Commercial Music and Voice Studies at Liberty University of Music in Lynchburg, Virginia. When mentoring his own students today, he remembers the influence Carolyn had on him.

"Though she was frail in body, it did not match her personality nor her spirit," he says of Carolyn, whom

he remembers as always walking — at her own speed — but always going somewhere.

Kathy Humphrey, '84, has similar memories of Carolyn. Kathy was introduced to the university as a middle and high school student participating in a music camp on campus, led by Professor Emeritus Wesley True. Her older brother and sister, Ernest Wilson, '81, and Lois (Wilson) Malone, '71, attended UCM before her.

Four years after graduating with a degree in Speech Communication and Theatre, Kathy returned to campus to work as a resident assistant.



Alumni who were students when Carolyn Mends was an advisor at UCM remember her as frail in body but strong in spirit. She is pictured with her husband, Albion.



Alumnus Daryl Duff visited with Carolyn when he came back to campus during the 1994–95 academic year with his young daughter to sing with the Warrensburg Community Band.



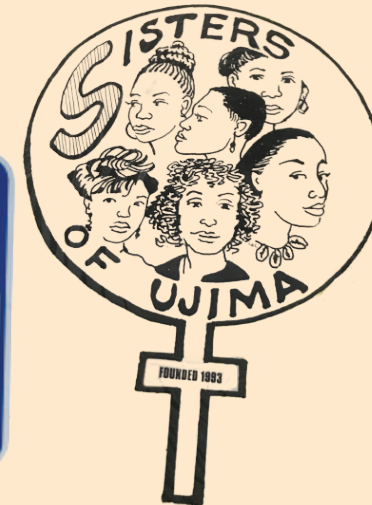
Alumna Kathy Humphrey, president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, looked up to Carolyn while she was a student and resident assistant at UCM.

Soon after, Greg Roberts transitioned from director of residential life to assistant vice president of student affairs. He and Carolyn became African American role models for Kathy, who aspired to a career in higher education.

"I got into this business because I didn't see very many people who looked like me, and we need it; I needed it," says Kathy, who went on to become the first Black president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "These students are very important to me because they have my profile. I was Pell eligible, a student of color at a predominantly white institution. There were people at Central that cared enough for me to help me learn."

Kathy came from a failing district in the heart of Kansas City. She says UCM gave her the extra support she needed.

"Most of my early education is really from Central," Kathy says. "As you look back in your life and you see the places of impact, Central is one of those places. I continue to try to be a place of impact."



Known in America as one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa, the word "ujima" means "collective work and responsibility." Carolyn Mends helped establish the student organization Sisters of Ujima at UCM in 1993, with the mission to "build, uplift and empower" women on campus. She created the above illustration for the group. Delia Gillis, who was a graduate student in the early 1990s, contributed her research on UCM's first recorded female African American student to the naming of the UCM Alumni Foundation's Sisters of Ujima Helen Guyton Warren Scholarship.

UCM Establishes New Study Abroad Opportunity in Ghana

Tourism to Ghana increased in 2019, deemed the "Year of Return" to mark the 400th anniversary of the first recorded arrival of enslaved Africans in the 13 Colonies. The Ghanaian government encouraged African Americans to return to the "Motherland" and discover their roots. Trips by celebrities and the release of the first "Black Panther" movie in 2018 fueled the initiative.

UCM Africana Studies Professor Delia Gillis was serving as director of the Missouri Africa Program (MAP), a statewide consortium housed at the University of Missouri–St. Louis. Gillis had led seven successful UCM study tours to Jamaica and had a faculty-led trip to Ghana slated for November 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic halted travel.

Gillis was determined to offer this cultural experience to UCM students again. After much research and several alumni referrals, she brokered an agreement between UCM and Webster University's WINS (Webster International Network Schools) program in spring 2022. Starting this June, undergraduate and graduate UCM students are able to be part of an eight-week study abroad experience on Webster's campus in Accra, Ghana's capital city.

Learn more at ucmo.edu/africana.