

## Opening New Worlds for Girls in Cameroon

**I**n 1998, a survey by the global watchdog group Transparency International ranked the West African country of Cameroon as the most corrupt nation in the world. That same year, in Douala, the country's largest city, Florence Tobo Lobe '69 opened a science-and-technology school for girls.

With a handful of girls, the opening of the Rubisadt Foundation marked an educational journey come full-circle: As a young Cameroonian chemistry student, Florence had chosen to attend Wellesley after a rare recruiting visit by the director of admissions in 1965, part of a broader US effort to educate top students from newly independent African nations.

But for Florence, building a school was more than just an effort to give back, or to address a gender imbalance in a country where the little savings families have to go to educate boys. It was also a personal strike against her homeland's deep-rooted culture of corruption—the bribery, cronyism, and abuse of power that are not only ways of life, but often the only means by which young people can advance. With thousands of talented students unemployed in the country, Florence—the daughter of a postal worker and dressmaker who reached the top of her class and found her way to an elite college—is determined to show young Cameroonian women that education can be a path to success.

"I think the best legacy I can offer is to really train girls in the science field. And the main reason I remain so involved is that this is a long-term battle," says Florence. "The level of training here is very

low, and students don't want to work hard, because the environment does not encourage them to work hard. They know that people don't succeed mainly because of education, but because of corruption. . . . Cameroonian society does not encourage boys or girls, but especially girls, to really know that their future relies on their own efforts. That their future really rests with them."

So far, under her leadership as president of the school, the foundation has trained about 150 girls, many of whom go on to study in medicine, agriculture, and other scientific fields, as well as in the humanities, at universities abroad and in Africa. Several Rubisadt graduates were admitted to the first class of a new medical school that opened in Douala two years ago.

With a select group of well-trained teachers, Florence's school emphasizes work in the lab and has partnered with elite universities in France and Canada,

whose faculty provides tailored video lectures. And Florence's model for education, built on the liberal-arts tradition she says was Wellesley's greatest gift to her, seeks to foster students' development as future leaders. Students not only learn the fundamentals of biology and chemistry, but also how to start difficult conversations with relatives about sexuality and AIDS.

Today, the school is thriving, mostly by word-of-mouth, with 30–60 girls attending each year. But a decade ago, convincing parents to send their girls was no easy task, Florence says. Many Cameroonian families, even poor ones, were quick to dismiss the school because it required little or no tuition. (The school, funded by Florence for the first seven years, is now supported by state and international grants, and by the United Nations.) And the parents who were undeterred by that were soon scared off by the pillars of Florence's philosophy: a high level of parent involvement, and a total rejection of the old-school model of rote memorization upon which much of the country's education system is built.

"A girl in Cameroon can have an A or an A-plus in a subject, but when you talk to the girl the next day, she may not be able to talk intelligently about it at all, because she was just passing a test," Florence says. "Parents were reluctant, because I told them, 'I am not taking your daughters to have them repeat things. Forget that. I am going to teach them how to acquire a scientific mind.'"

*Francie Latour*



Lee Orloff reports that she has been enjoying life in Paris since 1991. A retired clinical psychologist, Lee has been studying Japanese, traveling to Japan, and teaching English to the blind.

**Dorothy Dubose Scherr** and I both attended the Democratic conventions in our home states as Hillary delegates. Although neither of us made it to Denver, we are proud to have stood up for our classmates in Texas and in Maine.

A snapshot from our class survey: 58.3 percent of respondents smoked during college; only 1.6 percent smoke now.

### 1970

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**Ann Connolly Tolkoff** wrote, "In line with Ida Cox's song, 'Wild Women Don't Get the Blues,' **Wende Frutchy Gray** sent out a 1970 challenge encouraging classmates to eschew the Wellesley tea and take on white-water rafting, not to commemorate, but to celebrate turning 60. To 'just do it,' we flew [to West Forks, Maine], from Louisiana, drove up from Boston, or motored on over from Vermont and Maine. We arrived on Sunday evening late enough to avoid any hike in the woods, with its SUV-sized flies. We got right down to the wine and cheese and late-night discussions of us then and Hillary now. For this group, 'name your poison' still means an excess of peppermint-fudge pie. Recipe of course provided on request. Big Day. The Magic Falls 'dorm staff' provided breakfast. The guide company furnished fashion-show entertainment with wet suits, life jackets, and helmets. We were wet, wild, cold, and knocked out of the boat (in Class IV or V rapids). We paddled, screamed, swam, and gave Wellesley cheers to the bus on return. We shared leftover food with the other rafters who, flatteringly, could not believe we were 60. . . . We did not all know each other at Wellesley, but we did trust that with Wende's leadership and **Susan Shea** and **Laurie Gutman Jensen** handling any advice on anxiety, we would survive anything New England could hand out and survive with élan." Also enjoying the rafting at this mini-reunion were **Linda Helland Bowsher**,



Adventurous '70ers took a raft trip near West Forks, Maine, this summer. Pictured are Wende Frutchy Gray, Linda Helland Bowsher, Anne Wallace, Ann Connolly Tolkoff, Alison Parker Kenway, Susan Shea, Ellen Bruce, and Sheri Ryden Larsen. Also attending were Laurie Gutman Jensen and Nona Olson Boyink.