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Greer High language teacher Mona Simon helps build bridges through literacy

Written by Cheryl P. Allen

Greater Greer News

Mona Simon fondly recalls how refusing to read was not an option growing up. “My dad was a pastor. My mom was a teacher and we just had to read,” she said.

That was OK by her. It was an enjoyable outlet. She and her siblings read the Bible, devotionals and other literature. Simon especially liked books that made her laugh. “I always liked comedy,” she said.

Today, she works to help children reap that same literary joy she experienced as a child. These are children who live in a remote area of one of the poorest countries in the world. It’s a place located not too far from where she grew up.

Simon, a French teacher at Greer High School, is a board member for Partners in Literacy Haiti, a coalition of volunteers, organizations, schools, cultural and civic groups working to develop and expand educational needs and library resources in Central Plateau, Haiti. The nonprofit was started in Greenville two years ago and is under the umbrella of Rotary District 7750 Rotary Charities Inc.

Goals for the literacy project include building a quality and self-sustaining village library by collecting primarily French books and resource materials, providing more modern computers and developing school programs that stimulate children’s interest and appreciation for reading and learning.

Proceeds from an upcoming concert will go toward the effort. The show featuring French singer and songwriter Eric Vincent will take place Nov. 2 at First Baptist Church of Greenville’s Fellowship Hall. A separate show for students will be Nov. 7 at Greer High. This will be Vincent’s second performance at the school, said Simon, who was able to book him with the help of a local cultural group, the Alliance Francaise.

“(Vincent) wrote a song about Haiti after we had the big earthquake and I think that kind of attracted me to his work a little bit more and I thought that it would be a very interesting cultural experience for the students,” Simon said. This time, she invited French teachers throughout Greenville County and from other districts to share in the experience.



Partners in Haiti Literacy

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“Simon is an asset to the school and the community,” said Dr. Sara Mansbach, project adviser for Partners in Literacy Haiti.

Simon, who grew up in Hinche, Haiti, has been involved with the project from the beginning, Mansbach said, noting how she assisted with translating 26 picture books into Creole.

Her students are also involved. Many of them, for instance, made paper bag animal puppets for 20 preschools in Haiti’s Central Plateau. And according to the project’s website, the puppets will be used with a French ABC book of animals.

This literary project is just one of many Simon has been involved in as part of her efforts to rebuild Haiti and nurture its people, said Marion Waters, principal at Greer High.

“So what I think our students take from that is we do have responsibilities for our brothers and sisters throughout the world,” Waters said.

That passion for helping others is reflected in the classroom, Waters said. “She is a native speaker so she is super fluent and ... she has a big heart.” Simon and other foreign language teachers play a crucial role in education as the world becomes more global, he said.

“The world is a smaller place now,” Waters said. “When you can think about being able to speak and think and organize your thoughts in a foreign language, that’s a whole other set of academic skills.”

After leaving Haiti, Simon lived in New York, Michigan and Florida before settling in the Upstate. She is a member of the American Association of French teachers and holds two masters degrees: French teaching from Andrews University and academy counseling from Western Michigan University. Her decision to become a teacher was influenced by the fact that she’s the eldest of five siblings.

“In Haiti, being the first born gives you a lot of responsibility,” she said. And that ability to nurture and help take care of others, especially the youth, was a natural instinct.

Simon stood poised before a group of young faces one recent morning. Once students step inside her classroom decorated with foreign memorabilia, expectations for conversation are set. While French didn’t roll off the tongue of every student, she encouraged a spirit of participation with polite gestures and a welcoming smile.

Learning a foreign language is not just about memorizing vocabulary, she said. It’s about conversation, finding similarities and gaining a global perspective.



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She also coordinates summer trips to Europe for students and is developing an exchange program with a teacher from Southern France.

“I think I bring them a different perspective,” said Simon who often shares stories about Haiti and her international travels with students. “With me, they learn that French is not only France.”

There are a lot of countries in the world where people speak French, she said citing Canada, Senegal and Martinique as examples.

“It’s not as foreign as you think.”

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