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He's making his mother proud

When he was a boy, his mother carried him on her back, wrapping strips of cloth around her body to hold him tight.

When he started school, she carried him to and from his lessons, a half-mile there, a half-mile home.



**CINDY
LANGE-
KUBICK**

She reminded him: *Education is the path to a better life.*

So Konan Blaise Koko finished primary school in his village in Africa's Ivory Coast and when he grew too

big for his mom to carry, he walked on his polio-weakened legs with the help of a stick.

Pain shot through every step and the boy couldn't cross the street without resting. The bigger he got, the harder it became to pull his legs along.

But he listened to his mother. He left home and attended middle school and high school and college, where he got his first wheelchair — shared with two fellow members of his wheelchair basketball team.

He tried to be last on the court with the chair, he joked Wednesday. "So I could take it home with me."

Koko was 3 when polio swept through his village. He became a power lifter after college, bench-pressing 370 pounds and becoming a champion in both his country and the continent and winning medals in the Paralympic Games.

Please see **LANGE-KUBICK**, Page A2

Lange-Kubick

From A1

For the past two years, he's lived in Lincoln, studying nutrition at UNL on a Fulbright scholarship.

Shortly after he arrived, the native French speaker began taking classes to improve his English and his teacher suggested joining a club to practice his skills.

He chose Rotaract, the college version of Rotary. It was a way to make friends, he said, and to perform service.

"And, I knew already what Rotary was doing in my country to provide vaccinations," said Koko, 40, now treasurer of the UNL club.

He had his own mission — the survivors — a perfect complement to Rotary International, the Gates Foundation and the World Health Organization's goal to eradicate polio.

The thousands of children in his country who couldn't walk and didn't have the means to buy wheelchairs. Students like him, carried by their mothers and fathers.

"People there cannot afford to have a wheelchair. I have to find a way to help them," he explained.

In 2016, the new UNL Rotaract member suggested a project to his club — Wheelchairs for the Ivory Coast.

"It was something he was passionate about," said Andrew Musil, club president. "And because Rotary is pretty involved in trying to eradicate polio, we tried to put a polio spin on it."

The small, but growing, chapter set a goal to raise enough money for one wheelchair that first year.

Koko visited Lincoln's Downtown Rotary club No. 14, explaining the project and the plight of polio victims in his country.

He challenged members to a match of "hand wrestling," \$5 apiece. He added

the \$35 to the wheelchair fund.

In July, with the money in his pocket, Koko went home. He drove 200 miles to Nigeria to buy the chair, presenting it to a young woman selected by a government agency for those with disabilities. A crowd of dignitaries gathered. Government officials, members of Ivory Coast Rotary clubs.

Afterward, Koko emailed a message to his friends in Lincoln: *It was an emotional moment. She was so happy because she is a freshman and the wheelchair will be very important for her on campus. Like me, her mother has been carrying her most of the time in her life.*

This fall, Koko made presentations at two of Lincoln's three clubs; afterward a member came forward with money for one chair. And then he pledged money for four more at \$290 apiece.

The Rotaract club members added their own muscle, holding bake sales and tackling yard work, earning enough for a sixth chair.

Thursday night, they'll bus tables at Pizza Ranch at 84th Street and Lexington Avenue, where 10 percent of sales and all tip money will go to the project.

Rotarians will be out in force, said Keith Larsen, a member of No. 14, and the liaison to UNL's Rotaract chapter. But the entire community is welcome, and contributions — beyond pizza — are tax-deductible.

The Rotaract club has set a goal: 10 chairs.

One wheelchair changed his life, Koko said.

At school, he'd felt ashamed that he couldn't walk like the other kids. "I sat in my corner, and it made me feel very introverted."

He felt isolated. His legs ached constantly. After three years in college, when he finally got a chair to call his own,

he gained confidence. Through sports he forged friendships, he applied for — and earned — scholarships. He transformed.

“I do not feel ashamed to approach people,” he said. “And that changed people’s perceptions of me.”

It’s why the project is so important to this strong man who hopes to get his Ph.D. in America and return to the Ivory Coast to help improve his people’s health.

Koko’s father died when he was 11, but his mother who carried him on her back for so many years is still alive.

“I always said one of my inside desires is to make my mom be always proud of me and achieve my goals,” he said. “So she will not ever feel she has wasted her time or effort.”

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“It was something he was passionate about. And because Rotary is pretty involved in trying to eradicate polio, we tried to put a polio spin on it.”

Andrew Musil, club president

Wheelchairs for the Ivory Coast

WHEN: 4:30-8 p.m. Thursday

WHERE: Pizza Ranch, 8420 Lexington Ave.

WHY: To help buy wheelchairs for polio victims in the Ivory Coast.

HOW: 10 percent of all food sales and all tips will be donated to the UNL Rotaract Club.



COURTESY PHOTO

Konan Blaise Koko takes on Pat Birch in “hand wrestling” to raise money to buy wheelchairs for polio victims in Koko’s home country of the Ivory Coast.



ERIC GREGORY, JOURNAL STAR

UNL Rotaract club members Konan Blaise Koko (left) and Andrew Musil are helping raise money to buy wheelchairs for polio victims in the Ivory Coast, where Koko grew up.

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YOUTH DIGEST

Briggs is student of the month

COLUMBUS — Columbus Noon Rotary announced Cailin Briggs as its Student of the Month.

Briggs, a senior at Lakeview High School, is involved in FCA, National Honor Society, FBLA, basketball, track and Impact Youth group at Highland Park Church. She is also a teacher's assistant at Shell Creek Elementary and works at the YMCA.



HOMEcoming 2017

DISTINGUISHED ALUMN

**Sydney Norris, UNK Alumni
Student Writer**

The 2017 UNK Alumni Association's Distinguished Alumni Awards went to Col. (Ret.) Jan R. Frye '72, LeRoy Swedlund '69 and Shannon (Welch) Vesely '77, MAE '79. The Jim Rundstrom Distinguished Service Award went to

Six alumni recognized during UNK homecoming festivities.

Brenda (Snodgrass) Christensen '83 and the Distinguished Young Alumni Award went to Dusty Reynolds '04. The International Alumni Award, which is awarded for the first time, went to Francisco Hildago-Suarez MBA '80.

Distinguished Alumni Awards

Col. (Ret.) Jan R. Frye '72 of Woodbridge, Virginia, was appointed as the deputy assistant secretary for acquisition and logistics at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in 2005. Frye manages and oversees the development and implementation of policies and procedures for department-wide acquisition and logistics programs supporting all VA facilities.

A native of Chester, Frye entered the Army in 1973 as a distinguished military graduate from the University of Nebraska at Kearney Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program.

In 2011, Frye was appointed to serve as a member of the committee for purchase from people who are blind or severely disabled. Prior to his current VA

appointment, Frye served as the chief of contracting for the U.S. Department of Transportation in the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

A retired U.S. Army Colonel, Frye served in several senior acquisitions and logistics positions during his 30-year career. His numerous military awards and

decorations include the Legion of Merit.

Frye earned his education degree from Kearney State College in 1972. He also holds degrees from Florida Institute of Technology and the National Defense University. Frye is also a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the Defense Systems Management College and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. He holds the acquisition professional development program's highest certification in program management and contracting.

LeRoy Swedlund '69 is an independent, small business/start-up business consultant in Omaha. Involved in his business role, Swedlund has worked at IBM and AM International. He was the vice-president, general manager and CEO for Information Systems, Inc. Swedlund is currently engaged with H4 Technology in Omaha.

Swedlund is an active volunteer with the Presbyterian Church USA and The College World Series. He has also served on the Omaha Rotary Club board and as the chair of the Omaha Rotary Operation Hippocrates committee, a healthcare relief organization dedicated to providing

cardiac screenings for children living in impoverished areas. For more than 25 years, he has been a part of the hands-on coordination of pediatric cardiac medical missions in Belize. Swedlund has had the opportunity to travel each year for the clinics to help screen for congenital heart diseases and arrange for care in the U.S.

Swedlund, a graduate of Hastings High School, earned his business administration degree from Kearney State College in 1969.

Shannon (Welch) Vesely '77, MAE '79, from Bloomfield, Iowa, currently serves as a literacy and instructional consultant for Iowa schools after 40 years of serving as an educator. Vesely has taught English in Spring Green, Wisconsin; Bloomfield, Iowa and Ottumwa, Iowa. She was an English professor at Buena Vista University-Ottumwa Center and Indian Hills Community College, both in Ottumwa, Iowa. Vesely also served the Ottumwa Community Schools as the director of school improvement.

Because of Vesely's passion for students and her school district, Vesely nominated the Ottumwa Community School District for the first-ever awarded School District of Character from The Iowa Character Counts program through Drake University.

Vesely has worked diligently with educators from many states to design national assessments and create curriculum for public schools. She has worked with Iowans for Higher Standards

to promote, defend and implement the Iowa Core Standards in Iowa public schools. Vesely's passion for students drives her to continually improve school systems in every way she possibly can.

Vesely, a Kearney native, graduated from Kearney State College with a Bachelor's degree in 1977 and Master's degree in 1979, both in English.

Business Journal Young Entrepreneur of the Year. Reynolds is a graduate of Logan View High School. He graduated from UNK in 2004 with a degree in industrial distribution.

Christensen, a Wood River native, graduated from Kearney State College in 1983 with degrees in business administration and home economics with a fashion merchandising emphasis.

Jim Rundstrom Distinguished Alumni Service Award

Brenda (Snodgrass) Christensen '83 of Minden is a key account manager with CenterPoint Energy Services. She previously worked as a manager for Seminole Energy Services, an account representative with Super-Valu Foods and

an account manager with Hallmark Cards. Christensen has won many awards and served on several committees and boards, including the UNK Gold Torch Society mentor and board member, UNK College of Business and Technology board, woman of the year award for the Mid-Nebraska Advertising Association, Super-Valu Foods district of the year award member and Hallmark vanguard sales award winner for five years.

Christensen served on the UNK Alumni Association Board for ten years, including serving as president and past president. She is active in and around the Minden and Kearney communities, as well as with UNK.

International Alumni Award

Francisco Hidalgo-Suarez MBA '80 of Longboat Key, Florida, currently serves as the managing director of Latin America for Kybora Emerging Markets in Sarasota, Florida. Hidalgo-Suarez has more than 34 years of experience in the pharmaceutical industry. He has held positions with Procaps, Bristol-Myers Squibb and Schering-Plough Corporation.

Hidalgo-Suarez received his Bachelor's degree from Fundación Universidad de Bogota Jorge Tadeo Loranzo, Bogota, Columbia, in 1978. He received his MBA from Kearney State College in 1980. ▀

Distinguished Young Alumni Award

Dusty Reynolds '04 is the CEO of RaceNote in Omaha. RaceNote is a motorsports management platform that works to improve the technology for race teams to make quicker and better decisions. In 2004, Reynolds co-founded D&T Shirtified, before starting the Sababu Conscious Clothing in Mali, West Africa, in 2009. The focus of the company was to manufacture clothes in an effort to help alleviate poverty through sustainable employment. Reynolds also served as the director of entrepreneurship and innovation for the Greater Omaha Chamber before starting RaceNote. Reynolds has received numerous awards for his entrepreneurship and leadership roles, including the 2016 Midlands



**Brenda (Snodgrass)
Christensen '83**



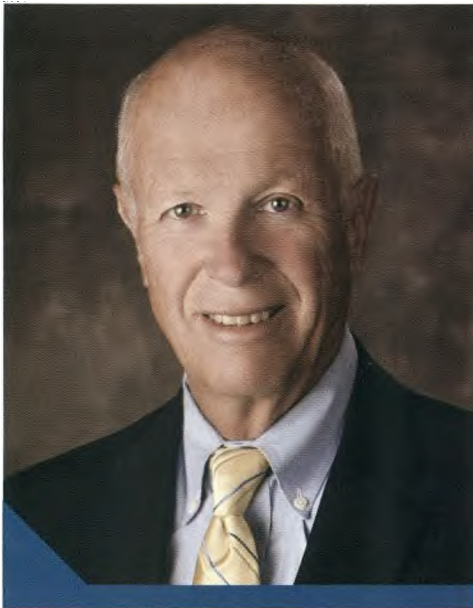
Dusty Reynolds '04



**Francisco Hidalgo-
Suarez MBA '80**



**Col. (Ret.)
Jan R. Frye '72**



**LeRoy
Swedlund '69**



**Shannon (Welch)
Vesely '77, MAE '79**



Members of the Falls City Rotary Club recently distributed dictionaries to the third grade students at South School and Sacred Heart School. F&M Bank donated the pens for students to write their names in their books.