

MIAMI-DADE

Trip to Rwanda proves to be educational for all

*SHARING, FROM 3

parents and community leaders — come together at one school in a "village assembly" that, organizers say, "focuses on the holistic development of every child."

Ighodaro said the school district is establishing sister-school partnerships and student exchange programs with schools in Africa. So far, the exchange program links the Forum for African Women Educators in Kigali, Rwanda, an all-girls high school, with Carol City High.

Rwanda, a country that experienced genocidal tribal conflict in recent years, seems an unlikely choice for an exchange program. But a new spirit of peace and reconciliation, along with renewed focus on education, makes it a good starting point.

Carrington Bester of Carol City High was impressed.

"It was exciting. I learned so much from the culture. The biggest lesson was that we're not so different, even though the Atlantic divides us," he said.

Youngblood, the Carol City Elementary teacher, also liked what she saw.

"I totally loved Rwanda,"

Youngblood said. "The people were really nice, and the girls were taking high-level classes such as physics and chemistry at ninth- and 10th-grade level."

The biggest difference, Youngblood said, is the availability of equipment. Technology, which is taken for granted in U.S. schools, is almost nonexistent in Rwanda. "We are blessed with the school facilities we have here," she said.

In an effort to help, Carol City Elementary has adopted a school in Rwanda and is helping to pay tuition fees for some of the students. It costs the equivalent of about \$1 to pay fees for a child at Rimeria Primary School in Kigali. Carol City Elementary students raised enough money to pay the fees for 300 students for a year.

High school fees are much higher, at about the equivalent of \$150 for a year, and three organizations are jointly sponsoring 23 students at the Forum for African Women Educators school. They are Allen Chapel AME Church in North Central Dade, of which Ingram was pastor, as well as the Foundation for Democracy in Africa and the Opa-

locka Rotary Club, headed by Patrick Kunkelm.

Ighodaro, who has been Ingram's aide since his election to the School Board in 1998, was the president of the Rotary club last year when it sent \$10,000 in books to the Rwandan school.

"It's rewarding for me," said Ighodaro, who is originally from Nigeria and, like Ingram, sometimes wears formal Nigerian dress at work.

Also like his boss, Ighodaro sees a vital role for education in making people more knowledgeable.

He recalls how surprised Jennifer Kayitesi, a student from Rwanda, was when she came on an exchange visit last year at the number of black people in the United States. She left with a better knowledge of African Americans and a spirit of kinship, Ighodaro said.

A spiritual connection already exists with Africa, he says, symbolized last year by an 82-year-old Rwandan parent who greeted Alvester Walker, a teacher, on last year's trip to Rwanda, by saying, "This is the relative I have been waiting for."

Walker said the trip was the experience of a lifetime;



HELPING EDUCATION IN RWANDA: Erhabor Ighodaro, an administrative assistant to Robert Ingram, was the president of the Rotary club last year when it sent \$10,000 in books to the Rwandan school.

she too was amazed at how similar many things were. She was impressed by the nation's effort at rebuilding after the genocide of 1994 in which between 500,000 and 800,000 Rwandans were killed in less than two months of civil war.

The next trip to Rwanda is scheduled for June and will be followed by a reciprocal visit from FAWE students in November.

As the children build their relationships with the continent, so too do the adults.

Rivers of African Reconnect grew up, like Ingram, in Overtown. Her involvement in Kwanzaa sparked her interest in her heritage.

"We had to be some hell of a people to survive slave ships, slavery, the Civil Rights Movement," she said.

Her trip to Ghana inspired her to find ways for other African Americans to experience the motherland.

One opportunity arose in 2002 when 17 Nigerian businessmen came for a conference hosted by the Port of Miami. Rivers organized a "cultural extravaganza," bringing together African Americans, Afro-Brazilians, West Indian Africans and others in the diaspora for a celebration that featured the different traditional cultural foods, religions, art, song and dance.

She, too, was surprised at how similar the cultural practices were, despite the centuries of separation from one another and from Africa.

The Nigerians were so impressed they invited Rivers to visit their country and she went with Bernadine Abu mere Bush, president of Diaspora Arts Coalition, in December 2002.

Bush and Rivers experienced village life in Benin and Nigeria, including fetching their water from wells, bathing from buckets and joining in traditional ceremonies.

During a naming ceremony in Benin, Rivers was given the African name Ihinosen — "one who brings the community together." The honor bestowed by a chief, recognized her role in bringing the cultures closer.

Last year, the akran or king of Badagry province in Nigeria, on a visit to Miami, made Rivers an official chief of culture for the province during an Africa Reconnect meeting at the Caleb Center.

Rivers is especially proud of her African name Ihinosen and well she should be according to UM history professor Abaka.

Names in Africa, he said, carry special meaning as they are a means of keeping track of family trees, family origin ancestors and traditional beliefs.

Taking African names Abaka said, is now becoming special to many African Americans who feel "denied the right to be homesick, the right to point to a specific village or town" and know it as their place of origin.



JARED LAZARUS/HERALD FILE PHOTO

A SPECIAL HONOR: Sandrell Rivers, right, area-wide supervisor of the arts for Miami-Dade Parks and Recreation Department, was named an official chief of culture for the Badagry province of Nigeria last year. Rivers formed Africa Reconnect in December