Out of Africa: Oakridge youth off to Tanzania with Scholarship

By Malachi Barrett
mbarret@mlive.com

MUSKEGON, MI — McKenna Whipple will travel to Africa next summer to volunteer with The Rift Valley Children's Village, a privately funded orphanage in the Karatu region Tanzania.

Whipple and Savana Cooper were awarded $3,000 from a unique scholarship this year by demonstrating a well-rounded philosophy in regard to global awareness, community involvement and independent travel.

It's all part of a unique scholarship program that sends Oakridge High School graduating seniors to various locations around the world. In the hopes of "Building A Better World," Oakridge seniors write competitive essays to earn a grant for the upcoming year, generally two for college tuition and one for travel.

PASSION FOR CHILDREN

The oldest of 22 grandchildren in a family of teachers, Whipple said she was inspired to follow her passion to work with children across the Atlantic Ocean.

"I'm really excited to be able to teach others about (my trip) and learn techniques of what they use in their school system then bring it back," she said. "I want to bring back some of the culture, then share and spread it."

The village is a service of the Tanzanian Children's Fund, founded in 2004 as a home for marginalized children. Whipple will work in a classroom as a "Momma" for three weeks, teaching the orphans and living alongside them. She was inspired to apply for a volunteer position after watching an episode of "60 Minutes" dedicated to the organization. She applied later that night, and was undaunted when the 12-page recruiting packet told her about the lack of hot showers and other American luxuries.

"One of the main reasons I want to do it is to learn about new cultures and experiencing not only a way to help people but also throw myself into a new culture," she said. "That is the experience you wouldn't get if you stayed in the United States."

Whipple has been trying to learn Swahili to prepare for the culture shift, but also wants to bring some of her culture to Tanzania. She was a member of the Spotlight Dance Academy in Grand Haven for 12 years and hopes to teach the children ballet.

Whipple will travel with her aunt, a Grand Rapids nurse who will work in a rural medical center, and her father, who will help with care taking and chores.

INSPIRED BY TEACHER

Though her scholarship isn't given for travel, Savana Cooper won the Global Awareness Award for her expanded perspective. She is using the prize money to fund her college education at Western Michigan University, where she plans to study abroad, possibly in Germany.

Cooper said Oakridge High School teacher Bob Wood is her favorite teacher of all time.

"Mr. Wood is biggest inspiration he is my favorite teacher all time and my professor at MCC in my political science class," Cooper said. "He wants to make people awake. So do I. I want to be awake to issues going on in the world looking out our front door."

Wood began the Building a Better World scholarship in 2003 with three modest $300 scholarships funded by a few teachers from Oakridge and Wood's mother. Thirteen years later, 36 scholarships have been awarded for more than $40,000. Oakridge graduates have voyaged to across the United States and to Europe and Asia.

"It was such a grassroots thing," Wood said. "Teachers and kids donate, and so do businesses, the Oakridge Education Association and past winners. It's a big community scholarship."