

THE LOOP OF THEIR LIVES

By Jeff Rude

During economic strife and political turmoil in his native Ghana in the mid-1980s, Michael Akuamoah bolted west Africa with the hope of finding a better life in the United States. At different times over the next decade, his wife and two young sons joined him in a Southside Chicago apartment, and the transplanted family grew with the birth of a daughter.

While Michael worked as a waiter in a downtown hotel, children Albert, Stephen and Annehellie excelled as students, caddied during summers and earned Evans Scholarships to Big Ten universities. The plan worked. The Akuamoahs not only found an enriched life but continue to send aid to extended family members lacking basic necessities in Ghana.



Annehellie Akuamoah

Albert Akuamoah, now 29, calls their moving story a fairy tale. "And it's still going on," says the computer software developer. "Now I see the world (my father) wanted for us. He was one of the lucky ones to come here."

The Akuamoah children are among the countless successful faces of this prominent golf charity, funded in part by the Western Golf Association's annual PGA Tour stop, next week's BMW Championship, formerly the Western Open. The WGA's Evans Scholars Foundation oversees one of the nation's largest privately funded



Western Golf Association directors Peter Mone (left) and Tom Mallman (an Evans alumnus) flank brothers Albert and Stephen Akuamoah at Skokie Country Club.

college scholarship programs. Since 1930, when the program was founded by golf great Charles "Chick" Evans, more than 10,000 deserving young caddies have earned four-year tuition and housing grants. Today, more than 850 Evans Scholars, including 23 percent female, attend college. They matriculate primarily in the Midwest, residing in 14 Evans fraternity houses.

"The program offers a tremendous opportunity to take charge of your life," said Albert Akuamoah, who majored in computer engineering at the University of Illinois, where his 18-year-old sister is a freshman. Albert estimates the average salary of a college graduate in Ghana at \$400 per month and can't help but think of what might have been. "If I had stayed in Ghana," he said, "I don't know if I'd have made it or not."

For a couple of years, brother Stephen spent \$10 a day for a four-hour roundtrip commute to caddie at Skokie Country Club in Glencoe. He took two trains and a bus each way,

FOR 80 YEARS, THE EVANS SCHOLARS FOUNDATION – A BENEFICIARY OF NEXT WEEK'S BMW CHAMPIONSHIP – HAS PROVIDED DESERVING CADDIES A SHOT AT COLLEGE. THEIR STORIES PERSONIFY THE AMERICAN DREAM.

with no guarantee of making \$20 for a loop. It was worth it. Stephen, now 27, attended Northwestern on an Evans, majored in chemical engineering and works as a financial trader in Chicago.

"Caddying opens up a whole new world, and the Evans Scholarship grants an opportunity to enter that world," said Jeff Harrison, an Evans alumnus in his third year as the ESF's vice president of education and his 21st year in that department. "It changes your life and your family's life – through generations."

Despite an economic slump, a decrease in rounds and loops and a reduction in caddie programs, the ESF had a record number of applicants last year. Of the 720 applying during this time of greater financial need for students, 215 received scholarships.

"It's more competitive than ever before," Harrison said. "And the quality of the applicant continues to get better."

The WGA has more than 500 member clubs and 400-plus directors. The increase in directors from 72 two decades ago helps explain why the program has gone from no endowment to one of about \$25 million today, said John Kaczowski, the WGA's chief executive. Evans alumni have donated more than \$50 million overall, including \$4 million last year.

Options trader Tony Saliba, a 1977



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE WGA

Estefania Vigil (left) enjoys a laugh with Bob Webster, a WGA director from Colorado.

prominent teaching pro Mike Adams.

The program's tales of personal triumph are countless and grow daily, Harrison says.

Keith Anderson, a 1991 Michigan State graduate in psychology, grew up in an impoverished area of Detroit amid drugs, poverty, gangs and crime. Now in a successful career as an OnStar consultant, he credits golf, caddying and the Evans Scholarship for changing his path and keeping him from being a sad statistic like many neighbors who ended up in prison.

The second youngest of nine children, Estefania Vigil was born in Mexico, moved to Colorado at 10 and grew up there in a three-bedroom trailer-park unit that housed nine extended family members. Daughter of a technician apprentice and housekeeper – both now unemployed – she caddied at Roaring Fork near Aspen and earned a scholarship to Colorado, where she had a 3.75 grade-point average last year as a freshman.

"Coming from a huge family, I didn't know what it was like not to be cramped," Vigil said. "The trailer park was mostly Hispanic, and that's how we all lived. I thought it was normal, that my childhood was normal."

That was then. This is now.

"Caddying opened my eyes to a whole new world," she said, "and helped me grow as a person. It opened a world where I could build relationships with important people. I learned manners and work ethic. I got paid and I got a workout. And I got an Evans Scholarship.

"What else can you ask for?"

Editor's note: Golfweek senior writer Jeff Rude was an Evans Scholar at the University of Missouri, graduating in 1976.

Indiana graduate, in 2008 pledged the largest alumni gift, \$2 million.

Coffers also have received a boost by the tournament's move from a Tour stop in July to a FedEx Cup playoff event with a better field, to be held Sept. 9-12 at its usual spot, Cog Hill in Lemont, Ill. The move three years ago has meant about an extra \$1.4 million, Kaczowski said. He cites an increase in hospitality and pro-am sales as a primary reason.

The program has spawned countless

successful businessmen, including several CEOs and entrepreneurs in virtually every line of work. The list includes CEOs Sam Allen of John Deere, Thomas Falk of Kimberly-Clark and Timothy Schwertfeger, former longtime chief of Nuveen Investments.

Alums also include former "Dating Game" host Jim Lange and several golf professionals – David Glenz, Bob Lohr, Tom Woodard and Rob Rashell on the PGA Tour, Jo Ann Washam and Karen Weiss on the LPGA and