



Why Africa?

How the Cranwell Family Foundation Is Living Its “Locally Grounded, Globally Minded” Ethos

As the Cranwell Family Foundation (CFF) continues to grow in impact and clarity of purpose, we regularly reflect on the “why” behind our philanthropic priorities and the organizations that are part of our philanthropic portfolio. One of those “why” questions is: **Why Africa? Why is CFF engaged with and supporting organizations in Africa?**

For a foundation rooted in southwest Virginia, with deep local connections, it’s a fair question. But the answer is both profoundly values-driven and surprisingly simple: **our commitment to unlocking opportunities and unleashing potential knows no borders.**

In recent years, CFF has cultivated a small but meaningful portfolio of partnerships in Africa, with a particular focus on expanding educational access for young people who face systemic barriers to opportunity, especially **refugees and students from underserved communities**. These efforts are not a departure from our core values; rather, they are an extension of them.

From Appalachia to Africa: A Shared Commitment to Access and Opportunity

Across all our work – whether in Virginia, Kenya, South Africa, or Switzerland – we seek out communities that are often overlooked, underrepresented, or underserved. We focus on education not just as a means to a degree, but as a pathway to dignity, stability, and hope.

Two standout examples of this global engagement in Africa are our support for [Elimisha Kakuma](#) and the [African Leadership Academy](#).

Elimisha Kakuma: Investing in Refugee Education

Located in northern Kenya, the [Kakuma Refugee Camp](#) is one of the world’s largest refugee camps – home to more than 200,000 people displaced by conflict and crisis. While basic needs such as shelter and food are vital for refugees in the camp, education provides the pathway to enduring recovery and expanded opportunities.



ELIMISHA KAKUMA

[Elimisha Kakuma](#) (EK) is a refugee-led organization that has been at the forefront of championing access to higher education for displaced youth since its founding in 2021. Founded by refugees from Kakuma Refugee Camp, Elimisha Kakuma combines grassroots

leadership with a tailored, community-driven curriculum that prepares students not just for academic success, but for long-term impact. The organization delivers a rigorous college-access, college-preparatory, and mentorship program to high-achieving secondary school graduates in Kakuma, providing college-level coursework, guidance through the college application process, tutors/mentors, and ongoing support during college.

With a mission rooted in the belief that education is a lifeline, the organization has successfully placed dozens of students in top universities across the globe, unlocking over \$20 million in scholarships. Their work has been [recognized by UNHCR](#) and celebrated by Duolingo, which [honored Elimisha Kakuma with the DET Social Advocacy Award](#) in 2022 for its groundbreaking efforts in creating educational access. Through every student,

Elimisha Kakuma fuels a ripple effect where access to higher education becomes a catalyst for transformation across entire communities.

Since its operational launch in 2023, the Cranwell Family Foundation (CFF) has been deeply engaged with [Elimisha Kakuma](#) (EK) and its affiliated partner, the [Center for Refugee, Migrant, and Displacement Studies](#) (CRMDS) at Virginia Tech, in building **sustainable pathways to higher education for refugee students**. What began as early catalytic support has evolved into a multi-year, strategic partnership grounded in shared values, long-term commitment, and a focus on lasting impact—the “ripple, not the splash.”

At its heart, this work is about people and possibility. It’s about students like Ajier, Nyanlueth, and Ruun (learn more about these students below), and the families, communities, and futures they represent. Through trusted partnerships with CRMDS and Elimisha Kakuma, CFF has helped build a durable pathway from Kakuma to Virginia Tech that will continue to serve future generations of refugee students.

Supporting a small, refugee-led nonprofit like Elimisha Kakuma is more than funding a single organization – it’s **investing in generational transformation**.

Overview of CFF Engagement with EK (and CRMDS)

2023: Launch of the Partnership with CRMDS and EK

Following CFF’s operational launch in May 2023, CFF provided early funding to CRMDS at Virginia Tech to support its application to the US government’s *Welcome Corps on Campus* (WCC) program. The application was successful, positioning Virginia Tech as one of the inaugural higher education institutions in the United States to participate in WCC and establishing a formal pathway for refugee students from EK to pursue undergraduate education in the US.

2023: Scholarship Support for Two EK Students at Virginia Tech

In 2023, CFF committed to providing scholarship support for two refugee students from EK to enroll at Virginia Tech beginning in fall 2024 through the WCC program. CFF’s initial investment was supplemented by the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Pamplin College of Business, and the College of Science at Virginia Tech, resulting in fully funded undergraduate scholarships for both students: **Ajier Ajuong** and **Nyanlueth Mayom** (see related *Virginia Tech News* feature: [“Two students use unique college prep course, U.S. State Department program to come to Virginia Tech”](#)).

2024: Initial Site Visit to Elimisha Kakuma

In April 2024, Cranwell family members Nikole Branch and Jodie Ireland joined the Executive Director of CFF for an initial site visit to Elimisha Kakuma in the Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya. This transformative experience affirmed the strong alignment between EK and CFF and reinforced CFF’s commitment to creating a meaningful and sustained “ripple” through our philanthropic engagement.

2024: Strengthening and Scaling the Partnership

- In May and June 2024, CFF provided direct support to EK.
- In August 2024, Ajier and Nyanlueth arrived in the United States from Kakuma and began their undergraduate degree programs at Virginia Tech.
- In October 2024, CFF formalized a five-year commitment to CRMDS to support scholarships for EK students coming from the Kakuma Refugee Camp to enroll in undergraduate degree programs at Virginia Tech, significantly strengthening the institutional and financial foundation of the partnership.

2025: Continued Engagement, Support, and Storytelling

In 2025, CFF contributed additional support to EK. CFF also provided support to [Buzz4Good](#) to facilitate a *Buzz Live!* event featuring EK and to produce a full [26-minute Buzz documentary episode on EK](#). The episode premiered at The Lyric Theatre in Blacksburg, Virginia, and aired on Blue Ridge PBS, expanding EK’s visibility and helping share its story with broader audiences.

2025: Continued Scholarship Support and Strategic Stewardship

In December 2025, CFF contributed to CRMDS for year two of its five-year scholarship commitment. The EK student who enrolled at Virginia Tech in fall 2025, **Ruun Samatar**, was awarded a full [Stamps Scholarship](#)

through the [Honors College](#) at VT. This eliminated the need for CFF scholarship support in her case and allowed those funds to be stewarded in a way that extended their impact to additional EK students.

African Leadership Academy: Cultivating Pan-African Changemakers



African Leadership Academy
Developing the next generation of African leaders

Located just outside Johannesburg, South Africa, the [African Leadership Academy](#) (ALA) is a world-renowned institution dedicated to cultivating a new generation of ethical and entrepreneurial leaders for the African continent. Drawing students from over 40

countries across Africa, ALA selects exceptional young people with a track record of leadership, a passion for Africa, and a drive to create positive change.

Since its founding in 2008, ALA has pioneered a unique, [two-year pre-university diploma program](#) that blends rigorous academics with intensive leadership and entrepreneurship training. Students engage in real-world problem solving, design ventures that address social needs, and build lifelong connections with peers and mentors across the continent and around the globe. Beyond the classroom, ALA's strong alumni network and university guidance ensure that graduates not only gain access to top-tier higher education worldwide, but also return to lead transformative initiatives in their home countries.

ALA has produced more than 1,600 alumni who are studying and working in over 100 countries, many of whom have founded social enterprises, led policy initiatives, and driven innovations in sectors from healthcare to technology. Its graduates have collectively earned hundreds of millions of dollars in university scholarships and have been recognized by organizations such as the Rhodes Trust, the Obama Foundation, and the African Union. Through every young leader it develops, ALA advances leadership, collaboration, and innovation far beyond ALA's campus to impact the entire continent and, indeed, the world.

For nearly five years, dating back to 2021 and thereafter with the operational launch of CFF in 2023, the Cranwell family has been deeply engaged with ALA, building pathways for pan-African students to attend ALA and amplify their impact. What began with a scholarship for one ALA alumnus to attend Virginia Tech (VT) has evolved into a multi-year, strategic partnership grounded in shared values, long-term commitment, and a focus on lasting impact – the “ripple, not the splash.”

Our investment in ALA reflects our belief in **long-term, transformational impact** – supporting the development of principled leaders who will shape Africa's future and work across languages, cultures, and borders to solve shared global challenges. CFF is excited about what the future holds for the growth of this partnership and the students whose journeys anchor this work.

Overview of CFF Engagement with ALA

2021–2022: Launch of Scholarship at Virginia Tech

CFF's partnership with ALA began in 2021 with the selection of **Barakaeli (Baraka) Lawuo** (Tanzania) as the inaugural recipient of the **Bill and Ellen Cranwell Scholarship for International Students** at Virginia Tech, starting fall 2022 (see related VT News article, [“Trailblazing from Tanzania to Virginia Tech: Barakaeli Lawuo is the first recipient of the scholarship for international students endowed by the Cranwell family, namesakes of the Cranwell International Center”](#) and ALA article, [“African Leadership Academy Alumnus Barakaeli Lawuo's Extraordinary Journey to Virginia Tech”](#)).

2024: Initial Site Visit to ALA and Strengthening of the Partnership

In April 2024, following CFF's operational launch in May 2023, Cranwell family member Jodie Ireland joined the Executive Director of CFF for our first visit to ALA's campus in Johannesburg. This was a transformative experience that affirmed the strong alignment between ALA and CFF and reinforced our commitment to creating a “ripple” (not just a splash) in our philanthropic engagement with ALA.

2024: Scholarship Support for Two ALA Students

Later in 2024, CFF provided support to ALA to partially fund scholarships for two students enrolling in [ALA's two-year residential Diploma Program](#) (the same program Baraka completed before coming to VT): **Fida Fekadu Fufa** (Ethiopia) and **Salma Ismail** (Egypt). This gift was matched by the Brakeman family, doubling CFF's support to fully funding both students for both years.

2025: Continued Scholarship Support

In 2025, CFF continued its support to ALA, which the Brakeman family again matched, providing another full two-year scholarship for a third ALA student: **Fatima Tarig Osman Abdalla** (Sudan/Egypt).

2026: Strengthening and Scaling the Partnership

CFF has committed ongoing support for ALA in 2026, but the Brakeman family will no longer match gifts except from new donors, so CFF is considering an increase in this commitment to ALA.

*ALA submitted a proposal on December 11, 2025 requesting a **multi-year scholarship commitment from CFF**, starting in 2026, that builds on CFF's impact and bridges a critical period until ALA's current endowment becomes more available for scholarships in 2030. The proposal is currently under consideration.*

Locally Grounded, Globally Minded

So, what does all of this have to do with the Cranwell family?

Everything.

As a family foundation, we are rooted in a deep commitment to the well-being of our local communities. But we also recognize that we are part of an interconnected global community. We see our work in Africa not as a shift away from our roots, but as a bold extension of them. In a world that is increasingly interconnected, our giving must be both **place-conscious and globally aware**.

Our work in Africa reflects that philosophy. It's not about being everywhere; it's about **being where we can make a meaningful difference**, guided by trusted partnerships and shared values.

What's Next

Looking ahead, CFF plans to sustain its engagement in Africa, remaining focused on education and opportunity. We'll continue supporting partners like ALA and Elimisha Kakuma while exploring new relationships with organizations that align with our mission and approach.

We'll also continue to invite input from family members who may have ideas, experiences, or connections that can inform this work. After all, this is the Cranwell family's collective journey!

Final Thought

Africa is not a single story. It is a continent of 54 countries, with more than 1.4 billion people, and countless languages, cultures, and traditions. It has the fastest growing and most youthful population in the world. By 2050, it will have a larger workforce than China and India combined. With more than 60% of Africans under the age of 25, investments in education and leadership development offer unprecedented potential for long-term impact.

The Cranwell Family Foundation wants to be a part of unlocking this immense human potential. And our engagement with and support for organizations in Africa like ALA and Elimisha Kakuma (and its US partner, CRMDS) have demonstrated that **modest investments, thoughtfully deployed, can change lives and have generational impact**. By including Africa as part of CFF's philanthropic portfolio, we honor our values, amplify our impact, and position CFF as a small foundation with a **bold, global heart** that is focused on the long-term ripple, not the short-term splash, and that is committed to being locally grounded and globally minded in all that we do.