Childhood friends and Marshall High School graduates Andrea Carrow and Catherine Hansen have a passion for helping people, not just in their community, but throughout the world.

Hansen was among six College of St. Benedict and St. John's University students who traveled to Uganda for three weeks in January to make a documentary on children who have become the head of the household after they have lost their parents to poverty and disease. Hansen and the CSB/SJU students were in Uganda as part of the organization, Extending the LINK, which was founded by Carrow, a CSB graduate. The documentary is scheduled to come out in April.

Carrow said Extending the LINK was founded with the intention of empowering students to share global stories and catalyze action.

Hansen said she supported Carrow during the development of Extending the LINK but didn't become involved until Carrow was looking to pass on the organization's leadership. "Our discussion started with our visions for propagating social justice at our school and in our local community," Hansen said. "We shared so many of the same passions, taking on Extending the LINK just seemed like a perfect fit."

And Carrow was glad to see another person from Marshall taking the reins of an organization she felt strongly about. "The current scope of the LINK is astonishing, incredible," Carrow said. "It's super great to have another Marshall graduate in the forefront of the organization...having grown up with this firecracker (Hansen) I know that her subtle blend of high-achieving success and unwavering commitment to others will produce a killer project."

Hansen said the documentary shows how children, who are the head of the family, survive from day to day. "Although the term is uncommon here, it is part of an increasing problem in certain areas of Africa," Hansen said. "When children lose their parents to poverty and disease, often AIDS, they are left to fend for themselves and raise their younger siblings. Everyday necessities like clothing, food, shelter and fuel come at such a great cost. Often these children sacrifice their own education to work or farm to support their families."

Hansen said CSB and SJU have close ties with an organization known as Uganda Rural Fund. The branch of URF that the students worked most closely with is a school, Hope Integrated Academy.

The kids were the amazing part of the whole documentary experience, Hansen said, how just staying alive in Uganda takes so much energy and the kids face it with enthusiasm. "In the child-headed families, most kids wake up very, very early so they can work in the garden, cook, and clean before school," Hansen said. "Some walk as far as 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) to get to Hope Academy. After school, in addition to homework, they cook, look after their younger siblings, and try to earn a living."

Even the small necessities don't come easy. Hansen said the group met one girl who walks 15 kilometers in the dry season just to fetch water. Another boy started a brick-making business with fellow students to try and earn extra money for school fees.

"Hardly any of the kids get enough food," Hansen said. "Yet, despite their difficulties, they pour so much energy into their school work. We met students who want to be doctors, lawyers, engineers and
journalists. I helped one 15-year-old boy with his chemistry homework, and even though I excelled at university-level science, some of the problems were difficult for me."

The group will premiere the documentary at the CSB/SJU campuses in early April. Hansen said they also want to schedule other showings in conjunction with local schools, churches and other organizations and will enter several film competitions.

"It is our hope to generate many meaningful discussions both on campus and in the community," Hansen said. "Through the showing of the documentary and other fund-raising events, we will establish a 'teacher fund' for teacher salaries at Hope Academy. By raising money for teacher salaries, we can help many students by reducing their school fees."

Extending the LINK wants to shed light on the social conditions that lead to such devastating conditions, such as the lack of medical care and education, hunger and disease, Hansen said.

"These factors are all interrelated and and lead to a vicious cycle," Hansen said. "The issues are rooted in a turbulent history and of course, are far bigger than we could hope to resolve in a 20-minute documentary. However, we hope that the viewers will ask challenging questions about the causes. We also hope that people will critically examine the value of their own education and see education as a tool for combating poverty."