

Tanzania's Faraja Primary School Celebrates 25 Years of Educating Children with Disabilities Near Mt. Kilimanjaro

Faraja Primary School Celebrates 25 Years of Transforming the Lives of Children with Disabilities in Tanzania

CHICAGO, IL, UNITED STATES, July 14, 2026
/EINPresswire.com/ -- Tanzania's Faraja Primary School Celebrates 25 Years of Educating Children with Disabilities Near Mt. Kilimanjaro

Faraja Primary School, Tanzania's first residential primary school dedicated to serving children with physical disabilities, is celebrating 25 years of providing education, healthcare, rehabilitation, and hope to students who might otherwise have been excluded from school altogether. It's the only school in the Kilimanjaro region offering the complement of services.

Data shows an estimated 29 million children live with disabilities in Eastern and Southern Africa with over 600,000 located in Tanzania according to reports from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF).

For thousands of children with disabilities in Tanzania, access to education remains one of the greatest barriers to realizing their potential. Many face stigmas, social isolation, poverty, inaccessible schools, and limited access to healthcare and rehabilitation services. As a result, countless children are often hidden away and denied the opportunity to learn, develop their talents, and participate fully in society.

Proudly referred to as "The Miracle by the Mountain" by locals, Faraja was established in 2001 by Don and Joann Tolmie of Rock Island, Illinois who, in their seventh decade, visited Tanzania for the first time.



Faraja Chair David Tolmie and Faraja Students

A modest couple with a deep sense of social justice, they were deeply moved by the desperate situation of children with special needs. They promised to return to the United States and raise the funds to build a specialized school on land donated by Tanzania's Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, which oversees the school's operations.

What began as a school for just 15 students has grown into an internationally recognized institution serving more than 100 children each year from some of Tanzania's poorest villages.

"Faraja is much more than a school," said Dave Tolmie, Chairman of the Faraja Fund Foundation. "It is a place where children who have often been overlooked discover their strengths, develop confidence, and build a future for themselves. For 25 years, we have watched students arrive with significant challenges and leave as capable, educated young adults ready to contribute to their families, communities, and nation."

Children who couldn't walk crawled into the school or were carried long distances on the backs of their parents to attend Faraja. From its inception, all students' graduate mobile with the life skills for independence in a country where all too often disabled children are considered a burden.

Today, Faraja provides a comprehensive, child-centered environment where students live on campus, attend modern classrooms, receive nutritious meals, and access services that are rarely available to children with disabilities in rural Tanzania. These include physical and occupational therapy, orthopedic and medical care, assistive devices, computer education, and psychosocial support. By addressing both educational and physical barriers, the school enables students to build confidence, independence, and academic success.

Faraja's impact extends far beyond the classroom.

The school has consistently ranked among Tanzania's top-performing primary schools, and its graduates continue their education in secondary schools, vocational training programs, colleges, and universities. Many alumni have become professionals, entrepreneurs, teachers, lawyers, healthcare workers, and advocates who are helping reshape perceptions of disability throughout the country.

A recent survey of 200 Faraja alumni found that 42 percent are self-employed and operating their own businesses. Others are employed as nurses, welders, social workers, information technology professionals, accountants, educators, and healthcare providers. Their success challenges long-standing assumptions about disability and demonstrates what is possible when children are given equal opportunities.

One such graduate is Emmanuel Makala, who completed his studies at Faraja in 2012 and later earned a bachelor's degree in social work from Kairuki University in Dar es Salaam.

"I am where I am today because Faraja Primary School saw ability where others saw limitations," said Makala. "The school taught us that our disabilities do not define our future. My gratitude comes from experiencing life-changing love, support, and encouragement every day at school."

As enrollment grew and the school expanded its services, supporters helped transform Faraja into a fully accessible sprawling campus that now includes a library, indoor and outdoor therapy facilities, computer laboratories and dormitories.

To sustain this work, the Faraja Fund Foundation was established in 2006 to support the school's operations and student sponsorship program. Through the generosity of donors, sponsors, and volunteers, every student receives the educational, medical, and emotional support needed to reach their full potential.

The school's impact has been made possible through the dedication of supporters across the United States, Tanzania, Germany, the United Kingdom, and beyond. Families, churches, civic organizations, and individual donors have sponsored students, funded facilities, purchased wheelchairs and medical equipment, and traveled to Tanzania to witness firsthand the transformation taking place.

Although Don and Joann Tolmie passed away in 2020 and 2022, their vision has become a multigenerational commitment embraced by their children, grandchildren, and an international community of supporters.

"Our parents made 37 trips to Tanzania, beginning when they were in their early seventies," said Tolmie. "They believed deeply in the potential of every child they met. Twenty-five years later, the achievements of Faraja's students continue to prove that disability should never be a barrier to education, opportunity, or hope."

Faraja Primary School will mark this milestone year with its 18th graduation ceremony on September 13, 2026, where 16 students will receive their diplomas surrounded by parents, government officials, church leaders, sponsors, donors, alumni, and supporters. The event will celebrate not only the accomplishments of the graduating class but also 25 years of breaking barriers and creating opportunities for children with disabilities across Tanzania.

You can see Faraja Primary School B-roll [here](#).

About Faraja Primary School

Faraja Primary School is Tanzania's first and only residential primary school dedicated to serving children with physical disabilities. Located near [Mount Kilimanjaro](#), the school provides education, healthcare, rehabilitation services, and holistic support to children from underserved communities, empowering them to become independent, productive, and confident members of society.

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