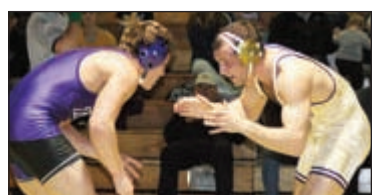


## NEXT LEVEL

Fate, Johnson find home at Southwest Minnesota State University. **SPORTS**



## FIRST BOX

Local Girl Scouts kick off cookie sale. **PAGE 7A**



# PIONEER

**FRIDAY**  
Jan. 14, 2011

Big Rapids, Michigan

www.bigrapidsnews.com

\$50/1.00 weekend



COMPUTER LAB: Six South African children make use of the Tsogang Sechaba Community Project in September 2009. Around 300 youth currently use Infinite Family's mentoring services, Amy Stokes said. (Courtesy photos)

## GEO jobs posted online

■ Company offers paid training for more than 70 positions to be filled

FROM STAFF REPORTS

WEBBER TWP. — GEO Group has posted all of the currently available job titles and corresponding job descriptions for the North Lake Correctional Facility in Baldwin.

That brings the total number of job titles to more than 70 with the anticipation of hiring staff in the near future, with some coming on board as soon as the end of January.

"It is very exciting that job seekers can now see so many of the available job titles they can apply for," said Michelle Herron, business services director at Michigan Works! West Central. "From chaplain to correctional officers, to food service managers and licensed social workers, there is a wide variety of positions available, which means greater opportunities for job seekers to obtain a good paying position in the region."

A full medical benefits package is available for employees as well as other fringe benefits including a flexible spending account, 401(k) plan and paid time off. Additionally, the GEO Group provides paid training to help acclimate new employees to working in a correctional environment, which can take from 80 to 160 hours.

See **GEO JOBS** page 6A



GRIFFITH: "They're going to be hiring from now through the next year and a half. This will have a huge impact on the region."

Apply for a job with GEO Group at [www.geogroup.com/northlake-careers.asp](http://www.geogroup.com/northlake-careers.asp).

## CNN'S FIRST HERO OF 2011

# An infinite hero

Big Rapids native creates program that allows mentors all over the world to interact with children in Africa

BY NICO RUBELLO  
PIONEER STAFF WRITER

Amy Conrad Stokes will be recognized by CNN today for her humanitarian work abroad, but the Big Rapids native has been a "hero" to hundreds of South African children for more than four years.

Stokes, 44, a graduate of Big Rapids High School, is the founder and executive director of Infinite Family, an organization linking adult mentors around the world with South African youths using innovative Web technology.

For her efforts, the Yonkers, N.Y., resident was named the first CNN Hero of 2011. A broadcast tribute to Stokes will begin airing on CNN stations today.

See **CNN HERO** page 8A



INTERNET: A satellite helps bring the Internet to a place where phone lines cannot go, according to Amy Stokes' Facebook profile.

### 2011 CNN HEROES: AMY STOKES

A special broadcast tribute, "2011 CNN Heroes: Amy Stokes," will air at the following times today and Saturday, though it could be bumped due to breaking news:

**Today**  
CNN: (\*8 a.m. likely) 2 p.m.  
HeadLine News: 6:30 a.m., 6 p.m. (\*8 p.m. likely)  
**Saturday**  
CNN: 3 p.m., 10 p.m.  
HeadLine News: 2 p.m.

A tribute to Stokes also is viewable online at [www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cnn.heroes/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cnn.heroes/index.html)

— Source: Infinite Family



## Treasury to offer some tax refunds on debit card

MCT NEWS SERVICES

WASHINGTON — The federal government wants to say goodbye to the paper tax-refund check, and on Thursday it launched a pilot program to let some people receive their money on a debit card.

Next week, the Treasury Department will send letters to 600,000 low- and moderate-income taxpayers, offering them the option of signing up for a special MyAccountCard Visa pre-paid debit card. There are two goals: save the government the expense of mailing paper checks while providing taxpayers without bank accounts quicker access to their refunds.

In 2010, the Treasury Department said it spent \$40 million to mail approximately 45 million paper tax-refund checks, money that could have been saved if the payments were made electronically.

See **TAX REFUNDS** page 6A

# CNN HERO

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1A

"It's a surprise and an honor; I'm still kind of in shock," said the mother of three on Thursday. In 2010, the CNN Heroes campaign received more than 10,000 submissions from more than 100 countries.

Stokes said the idea for Infinite Family (the name is derived from its goal of providing an extensive support network for youths in need) struck rather suddenly a few years ago on a trip, with her husband, to adopt her son from South Africa.

What she quickly realized was that many African youths grow up where HIV/AIDS and poverty has deceased much of the adult population, leaving children to grow up in troubled areas with little or no guidance from older community members. There are 55 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa.

"What became very clear to me was all the advantages I had growing up – parents, mentors and teachers who took an interest in me – they don't have those," she said. "(Big Rapids) was a very nurturing place to grow up. When you know how lucky you are to have grown up in a caring community, and then you see that it doesn't exist for many millions of children, we couldn't just walk away."

Stokes founded Infinite Family in 2006, but her history of community service started long before. Her mother, Rita Conrad, of Big Rapids, recalled her eldest daughter as a student council president and tennis player.

"She wanted to do her best to



HELPING HERO: Amy Conrad Stokes, founder and executive director of Infinite Family, smiles with a few South African youths. Stokes, a 1984 Big Rapids High School graduate, recently was named as the first CNN Hero of 2011. (Courtesy photo)

save the world, and now she's saving (it) one kid at a time," Conrad said. "She was known, I think, as very determined."

For instance, as a teen, Stokes began visiting with an elderly shut-in for a church project, Conrad recalled. She kept up visiting her friend long after the project ended.

"I started visiting her, thinking I was helping her," Stokes said. "In the

end, came to realize I was gaining so much more in our conversations."

She points out that many of Infinite Family's mentors say the same thing: They started mentoring, thinking they were the one giving the help, but quickly learned otherwise.

"They say things like, 'I'm gaining perspective that I had lost,'" she added.

Stokes' group uses a unique

technology platform, developed by combining existing software into a new one, that allows mentors and some 300 South African youths to interact like they're in the same room, despite being half a world away. The platform allows everything from video chatting and working on homework to taking virtual tours and researching job opportunities together.

"Unlike writing a check, our mentors are part of the (youths') week-to-week lives," Stokes said. "We wanted to prove you could play a direct role, no matter where you lived in the world."

One mentor even learned how to sew with her youth by finding instructional videos on YouTube, Stokes explained.

Using Stokes' business background and staff members working in Africa, Infinite Family partners with already existing nonprofits to set up and maintain computer labs. There are four such labs in use today.

Stokes travels to Africa about three times a year. It's a challenge, she said, to set up Internet, test the technology and build relationships with communities. Since starting, however, she is backed by a number of staff.

For the foreseeable future, Stokes said Infinite Family could branch out its services into other African countries.

In the meantime, the group continues to help mentor youths in South Africa, some of whom report that they have turned down drugs so as not to disappoint their mentors.

"If somebody cares about you and asks how you did on a spelling test or helps you with homework, then you start to care about it as well," Stokes added. "You start to invest in yourself because someone else is investing you."

The Top 10 CNN Heroes will be selected later this year by a panel including humanitarian celebrities.

To apply to be a mentor or to make a donation, visit Infinite Family's website at [www.infinitefamily.org](http://www.infinitefamily.org).