

# Democrat & Chronicle



[Gary Craig](#)

[The Democrat and Chronicle](#)

As State University College at Geneseo emeritus professor Bill Cook sought contributions for construction of a new school in South Sudan, he turned to his high school classmates as they prepared for their 60th reunion this fall.

Charlene Swankie, also an alum of Arsenal Technical High School in Indianapolis, was perhaps the least likely to lend much financial help. At 77 years old, she was living carefree in her 2006 Chevy Express Cargo van, traveling the country as the whims moved her, deciding that she did not need much in the way of income to enjoy life. Simply give her a forest for a spot to park her van, perhaps some towering redwoods for cover, or a nearby expansive bay for her kayak, and she was perfectly content.

Hoping to add a sixth and final classroom for the high school for Sudanese girls, Cook told his alumni friends through Facebook of his work. Swankie, like Cook, a 1962 graduate of Arsenal, saw the post.

“I expected 50 bucks or 100 bucks (from individuals) and all that does help,” said Cook, an emeritus distinguished teaching professor in history at the State University College at Geneseo. Then he got a private message from Swankie,

“I get this message from Charlene: ‘Oh, I’ll send you \$10,000,’ “ Cook said.

Unbeknownst to Cook, Swankie was one of the break-out stars in the Oscar-winning film ‘Nomadland,’ in which actress Frances McDormand, playing the character ‘Fern,’ takes up with a traveling caravan of people who live out of their RVS and vans, picking up odd jobs here and there, and experience life at its simplest. Like many others in the cast, Swankie did not come from the ranks of Hollywood. Instead, she essentially played herself, as do others in the cast who live the same lifestyle. Swankie (her name is the same in the film) becomes a mentor of sorts to Fern on the road, helping her learn how to survive in the different and distinctive world while keeping her aging van intact. Her role, in which she often ad libs, provided the real-life Swankie with a payday that she didn’t necessarily desire.

“I didn’t need anything,” she said in a recent telephone conversation in which Cook joined. “I needed a new radiator. That doesn’t cost a whole lot.

“The only thing (the film) gave me that I didn’t have before was a sense of security, so if I do need new tires or a new battery, I have the capability without beg, borrow, or stealing.”

So, when she saw Cook’s request for charitable donations, she figured that was as good a place as any to send a chunk of her rewards from the film.

“The education aspect is so important to me,” she said. “Part of what moved me so much was because in 1970 I became a single parent of two little boy, ages 2 and 4 ... and just had a high school education.” The child support she received was minimal, she said, but she stressed schooling for her kids; now her sons are educated and faring well, and she went on to college and secured four separate degrees, Swankie said.

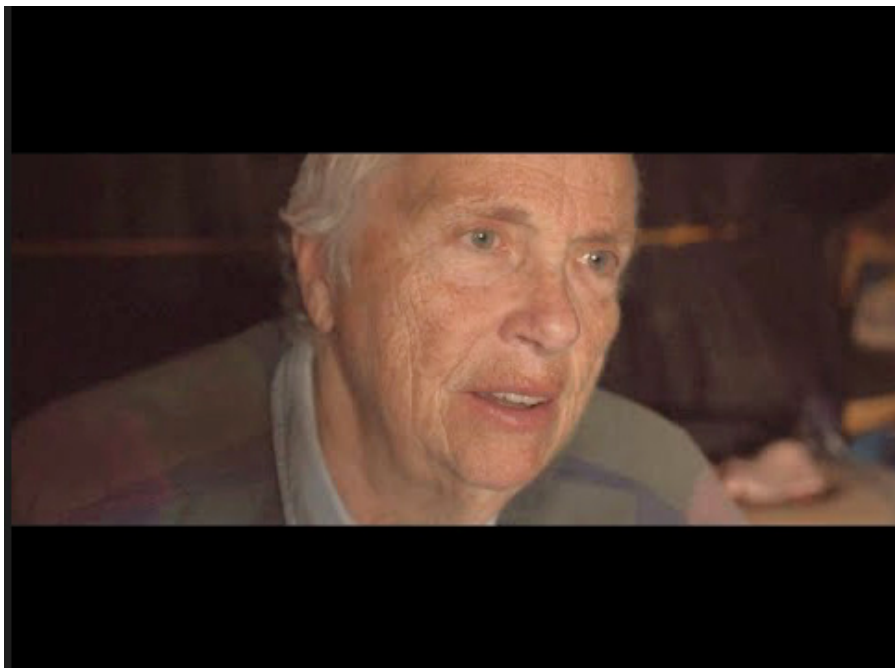
Still, her life now is in her van, just as is the life of her character — again, herself — in “Nomadland.” “I’m in the wilderness. I’ve got nature all around me. I’ve got mountains all around me. I just can’t see where it can get any better than that.”



## Just playing herself

In one scene in “Nomadland,” Swankie poignantly describes the constant beauty of her travels, including a kayaking moment in which she rounded a bend and was in the midst of hundreds of swallows perched on cliffs. That moment, as well as a video used in the film, was directly from her life, she said.

“That’s actually my video I took from my kayak,” she said. “I came around the bend and there they were. I just sat there with my jaw hanging, and thought, ‘I can die now.’ “



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For the telephone conversation, Swankie is where she has been for much of the winter — on Bureau of Land Management wilderness land south of Quartzsite, Arizona. Dozens of like-minded wanderers stay there each year for weeks on end, and the community was featured in ‘Nomadland.’

When one sees the film, it’s difficult to imagine that Swankie, in her tenderly moving role, is not a schooled actress. But, she said, she was largely playing herself.

(Spoiler alert for next paragraph)

There is one significant difference with her role, Swankie said: “The only thing that wasn’t just really totally 100 percent me was the part where I’m sick, dying and dead because I’m not. Everything else is pretty much right on.”

As a woman whose life is separate from the frenetic pace of communication, she had no clue who Frances McDormand was.

“I’d never heard her name before,” Swankie said. “I’d never seen any of her movies. Someone had to point her out to me.

“I went up to her and told her, ‘I don’t know who you are.’ She loved it. She squealed when she met me like I was the movie star. I was confused.”

The morning after filming completed, Swankie said, she was preparing to drive away from a hotel for the cast, and she had not seen McDormand since the filming ended. Then, the actress came dashing into the parking lot.

“She came running after me in her night gown and she handed me a stack of DVDs,” Swankie said. The films included McDormand’s. “She said, ‘Here, you have something to watch when you’re out there and you don’t have a TV signal.’ “

That was Swankie’s take-away from the film, a heap of films from the four-time Oscar-winning actress and some money that she largely didn’t need. So she turned to Bill Cook.

# In need of a super hero



Bill Cook Provided Photo, Bill Cook

Cook's charitable work, through the eponymous Bill Cook Foundation, helps build schools and provide educational opportunities for poor children around the world, including New Guinea, Cambodia, and Ethiopia. For Cook, Swankie's contribution, which helped complete the sixth and final classroom, was especially meaningful. "This was particularly important because we go back a long long time," Cook said. "We started high school 64 years ago. "The other people who donated classrooms were wealthy people who could have built the whole school 10 times over and not noticed any difference in their budgets. This was such a different source with such a different story and it also was the one that completed the school."

Cook this year was named Alumni of the Year at Arsenal Technical High School — a fact he did not mention but Swankie did in an email after the interview.

In the telephone interview, Cook said that in his Facebook post seeking help he wrote that "I need a superhero."

Swankie ended up being that person. Now she is back to the nomad life, thinking that she may be able to return to Indianapolis for her 60th high school reunion. And Cook wants her and other donors in South Sudan for the school's grand opening.

Swankie says she plans to get to Africa, leaving behind her van/home for a while.

"Africa — I absolutely will go," she said in an email.

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Sebastian Maroundit, a Rochester resident and co-founder of Building Minds in South Sudan, shown at the right working on construction of a South Sudan school. Maroundit, one of the "Lost Boys" refugees of Sudan who was uprooted by civil war, collaborates with Bill Cook. Bill Cook