



# BRIDGING CULTURES

By Kristin Senty

## LEADING STUDENTS TO EXPAND KNOWLEDGE AND WORLDVIEW

**S**he'd been sporting a short Afro, and then showed up in class one day with 500 shoulder length braids woven into her hair. For Ebby Luvaga, a native of Kenya, Africa, the dramatic change in hairstyle was nothing unusual. But for a classroom of Iowa State University freshman, many from small rural Iowa communities, the shift was totally unexpected.

"For some students I may be the first person of color they've interacted with," says Luvaga. "In this case, I remember the students were silent and just stared." So she opened her class time with a discussion about black hair care, letting stu-

dents ask the questions they had on their minds. It was a practical and teachable moment—the kind that Luvaga employs regularly in her economic development class and as an adviser in the economics department. "I want students to feel comfortable asking me about my differences."

The sense of her own differences was something that hit Luvaga the moment she arrived in New York City as a young college student in 1983, fresh from the small Kenyan village where she'd grown up. "I stepped off the plane and didn't think twice about carrying my suitcase on the top of my head. It's just how we carried things

Senior lecturer **Ebby Luvaga** is known among students for her enthusiasm and her tough love. "I hold students accountable and expect them to live up to their potential," she says, "but I also want them to feel comfortable enough with me to be open and honest."



Photo: McClanahan Studio

#### IN HER OWN WORDS: LUVAGA ON LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Ebby Luvaga's agricultural business learning community is award-winning. And, most importantly, the retention rates for her first-year students have reached 90 percent and higher. Hear her talk about student/faculty connections in learning communities in a video online. Visit [www.cals.iastate.edu/stories](http://www.cals.iastate.edu/stories).

in Kenya," she laughs. "I kept wondering why no one else was doing the same."

The daughter of a school principal and a teacher, she was always encouraged to seek higher education. So when the opportunity to study in the United States presented itself, her parents were naturally supportive.

Luvaga graduated from Ohio University with a master's in international affairs and a doctorate in economics education. "I always knew that I wanted to work closely with students," she says. When a position that combined student advising, teaching economics and leading study abroad programs opened at Iowa State in 1997, she felt it was an "ideal" match.

Her role at Iowa State is a diverse one. She serves as a learning community adviser for the agricultural business major, working with 75 to 80 students each year. Luvaga recently won recognition from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences for her ability to create a welcoming environment for students and increase their participation

in the learning community process. She also teaches a class in economic development and leads study abroad courses to such places as Argentina, Spain, Australia and Panama.

Over the years, she's developed a reputation for working enthusiastically with students, but also with a firm hand—a balance that reminds her of her father. "I hold students accountable and expect them to live up to their potential," she says, "but I also want them to feel comfortable enough with me to be open and honest."

Tory Mogler, a 20-year-old sophomore serving under Luvaga as a learning community peer mentor, agrees that she can be "a bit of a stickler" when it comes to students doing things right. "But she has her heart in the right place," he says. "I'm never hesitant to talk to her about things, and she always takes her role with students seriously."

Coming from a small rural town in Iowa, he also remembers being one of those freshmen who hadn't had a lot of

exposure to diverse cultures. "Ebby sets herself out as an example and lets people ask her questions. She encourages curiosity. She helped me feel comfortable with her differences to the point where I don't feel that we have them," he says.

Luvaga sees herself as a "bridge," helping the increasingly diverse range of students at Iowa State continue to expand their perspective. With her roots in Africa and her home now in Iowa, the sense of being part of a global community is central to Luvaga's identity—and it's what she imparts to her students. ■