Walking the Road to Bethlehem

Thousands of miles away, in a place flourishing with people and noise, I served at an orphanage in Ghana, West Africa in spring of 2013. In a discussion with my Advisor, Dr. Susan Smith, I learned of this international field opportunity and emphatically replied, “I wanna’ go!” The vision came out of dialogue that Professor Wayne Pollard had with our Field Instructor, Beth (Dorsey) Okantey about developing an international field program; providing a global, transformative, intercultural exchange that enhanced both micro and macro social work. Beth moved with her family to Ghana after living in Malawi working with the US Peace Corps. Her passion for Africa, coupled by her love for teaching and serving others, is truly what drew me to this experience. Our placements were made possible after six months of coordination. We could choose whether to work with children, teens, adults and families within the areas of education, public health and child welfare, both at the individual and community level. Beth collaborated with her former Peace Corps Supervisor to provide cultural and logistics training upon our arrival; 24/7 support, weekly one-on-one supervision, which consisted of group processing, guest speakers and field trips. She was excited to witness first-hand the insight, growth and transformation in students while living and working in Ghana.

Staying with Ghanaians would help me experience the country’s incredible hospitality and culture directly. I settled into life with my host family, Dr. Sylvia Deganus and her daughter, Eurame. Sylvia runs a women’s clinic at an underfunded hospital in the inner-city, and teaches at the U. of Ghana. She is an Ambassador to the W.H.O. and collaborates with the Ministry of Social Welfare to help improve governmental health care and policies country-wide. She became my humble mentor, teacher and friend! The first morning I sat with Sylvia on the front stoop chatting until 9:00am. I quickly learned - Ghanaians do relationship very well. They don’t pay mind to “time” which was a huge relief for someone who has been bound by the rigors of the western world. As I said, “Wow, I’m going to be late!” Sylvia laughed out loud and said, “Tell ‘em you’re on GHANA time!” What a huge paradox with the realism of the country’s incredibly slow pace.

Quickly, I found things don’t work as efficiently as in the US; the lights went out, we took “bucket” baths, there was no concept of customer service, time was of little essence, but life remained relatively uncomplicated, peaceful, and relationships took precedence. What is not to love about spending so much time with people who long to be with you?

My field practicum placement was spent at a Ghanaian-run orphanage in Ashaiman, about 40 miles outside the capital city, Accra. I walked miles a day, hailed “tro-tro’s” (minibus taxis) to work, and trudged up a trash-ridden road to practicum. The community, however impoverished, was home to many. Each morning, I’d practice the local language, Twi, as I befriended shop owners and children along my route. In walking the “road to Bethlehem” people cried out daily in welcome, “Obroni! Obroni! (white person)”, became my community; like family to me. I worked to practice and embrace a respect for diversity within a starkly disparate cultural context.

Save Them Young takes in orphans, runaways, abandoned or lost children. There were five caregivers to manage over 75 children; the “house” was in critical need of decongesting. The staff came with little or no training, which made for many ambiguous planning days. Relocation back to the children’s family or guardianship was the ultimate goal; however, due to lack of financial assistance or familial means, reunification was
difficult. One semi-working toilet was communal, and only 12 mattresses were shared in the boys/girls dorms. It was a breeding ground for infection. Conditions were hardly decent. The kids’ ages ranged from 2 weeks to 17 years. Our eldest matriculated out just prior to me arriving. Many of the children had special needs. Two teachers came to the orphanage to instruct in Math, English, and Religious Studies, however, the training was sporadic and age groups inappropriately mixed. Rote memorization is a primary means of instruction. Critical thinking is discouraged. I created space in the library to provide one-on-one group work, counseling and informal education. The language barrier was my biggest challenge; however, they longed to know English and were excellent at word association. The children would fight out their differences, and corporal punishment as witnessed, was widely used. In Ghana, this is an acceptable form of discipline.

As Social Workers we aim to promote the general welfare of society, the development of people, their communities and environment in which they live. It is our job to advocate for adequate living conditions, conducive to the fulfillment of their basic rights and needs. As I settled into life at the orphanage, I learned that rapport building often meant washing and cooking with the children. We spent time playing games and trying to get others “healthy” in the midst of chaotic days. I expected to work primarily as teacher, librarian, liaison, but soon realized just meeting them where they were that day was often most valuable. As time passed, I did my best to create new policies and bridge the gap to very scarce resources. I established routine and used my Social Work skills to provide basic care, support, informal education (they loved Geography and Bible lessons!), and ensured the safety and well-being of each child. I intervened when necessary, and was able to see that many of our children made it to the hospital for well-checks and medications. Each day brought new challenges and situations that needed attention and oversight. I assessed their needs, developed care plans, general health practices and improved counseling and group work with students. At Save Them Young and within the surrounding community we worked with very limited resources to help improve the social system, but more importantly, to help provide a better, more hopeful future for many of these children. My prayer is that it is sustainable.

I appreciated my time and the energies spent with our “clients” — and the range of problems we addressed. At the end of my days, I left exhausted and filthy; however, my spirit was incredibly full. Developing rapport, and forging relationships with the Ghanaian’s filled my days with meaning and significance and as Beth said, “Appreciating their way of life surely confronts discontentment and the desire to want more.” I admire the resiliency of many of these children, and I am forever grateful to those who allowed me to work, grow, and journey in their midst. I learned flexibility, adaptability, to find music and joy in the midst of chaos and strengths within the stressors. The interaction with others, the cultural immersion, and most importantly, the direct involvement with these children helped me to experience the truly global and international importance of Social Work as a profession. I felt empowered to break away from cultural and personal boundaries which truly changed the way in which I view the world. I have a deeper understanding of what it means to be a part of the worldwide community as I witnessed first-hand the strength of the human spirit. In the face of adversity, glaring poverty, and neglect of a nation and its people, many chose to fearlessly fight to find gratitude and hope in God, in themselves and in each other.

– Stefanie Johnson, WWU BSW graduate, June 2013