

R.E.L.A.Y. - Rotarians Enhancing Learning for African Youth Project

A Vacation of a Different Kind

While many people spent Boxing Day either figuring out creative ways to serve left-over turkey or crafting reasons why unwanted holiday presents had to be returned, we were embarking on a journey to Africa that we will never forget.



Our adventure began in Accra, Ghana, where we spent 2 days with the contractor we had hired to repair the school, Kweku Anno, and his family. In Accra, a city of about 2.9 million people, there are people selling their wares literally EVERYWHERE! Men, women and children run between the cars trying to sell items ranging from water to squid to toilet paper to electric razors. Most of the women carry their wares on their heads. We were amazed that we didn't see anyone get hit, but we were told that it does happen quite often. We made a trip to the bank to change some US money in cedis to purchase some textbooks. We were instant millionaires! The exchange rate is 9100 cedis to \$1 US, and the largest denomination is 20 000 cedis. We practically needed a duffel bag to carry all of our cash! Besides the heat and humidity, what overwhelmed us on our first couple of days in Ghana was the poverty. Many of the street vendors and porters also live on the street, some with young children.



We were excited to get to the school as soon as possible, and after a few delays and a very rough ride over some terrible roads, we finally arrived! And what a reception! Over 400 students lined the sides of the road to the school, dressed in their school uniforms, singing and playing the drums. This was during their holiday break, so they were not required to be at school. Teachers, parents, and parish priests were also there to greet us. We were given bouquets of flowers then led up the road in a procession of teachers and students. It was quite overwhelming, but certainly gave us an indication of how grateful they were for our help. We started painting the very next day. Some of the masonry and carpentry work had already been started, and one coat of white paint had been done, but there was still so much to do! We spent two days painting green on the bottom portion of the building and painting the doors and shutters. Everyone seemed very surprised that we wanted to do the painting ourselves, and we always had an audience as we worked. We were the first "obrunis" (white people) that many of the children had seen.



We were picked up by Rotarians from the Sekondi-Takoradi Club, who brought us to Takoradi for New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. We stayed with Rotarian Nikoi Amasa and his family, who brought us to church on New Year's Eve to experience a traditional "Watchnight Service". This 4 hour evangelistic marathon was quite an experience!

We returned to Anomabo and spent the next couple of days painting again. The school was really being transformed and no longer looked like a 70 year old building. We were looking forward to the durbar which was to be held on January 4th. A durbar is a very traditional celebration which includes the village chiefs and other dignitaries, and often receives national media coverage. This durbar was being held in our honour and would be the time when we would present all of the books and other items we had brought, and we would officially open the "new" school. The morning of the durbar was beautiful and sunny, and there was a lot of excitement and activity around the school and church. Several hundred students, parents, and teachers were in attendance, as well as several dignitaries including the Deputy Minister of Tourism, the school



board director, and the District Chief Executive. The chief of Anomabo arrived with his entourage, adorned in a gold crown and heavy gold jewellery. The durbar was a two hour event, during which time there were several speeches made to thank us and the Rotary Club of Windsor-St. Clair for our help. We were also given the opportunity to speak and to present all of our "gifts" to the school. There were audible "oohs" and "aahs" from the audience as we unveiled the items that we had brought and purchased for the school. These items included 180 new library books, 480 curriculum textbooks, 1500 pencils, 500 "4 Way Test" bookmarks, volleyballs, soccer balls, flag football games, 120 t-shirts and more. We were presented with beautiful ceremonial cloth to



thank us, then we had an official ribbon-cutting ceremony. The durbar was covered by various media, and our story appeared in the Daily Graphic, a national newspaper, and was featured by one of the TV stations.

After the durbar, we spent the remainder of the day doing leadership activities with some of the students and teachers and instructing them in volleyball and football. Before we headed back to Accra the next morning, we went to the Christian Eye Clinic in Cape Coast to deliver the 1200 pairs of used, cleaned and graded eyeglasses we had brought from Windsor. The doctor and his staff were very pleased with the donation, and they promised to do an outreach program in Anomabo so that the students and teachers at St. Mary's could also benefit from the glasses.

Finally, it was time to return to Accra to prepare for our long flight home. Although we were tired, we felt very proud of what we had accomplished in such a short time. We were already thinking ahead to when we could return though. We hadn't realized before the trip that there are actually three schools in the St. Mary's compound – the primary school which we fixed up, and also a nursery school and a junior secondary school. Both of these other schools need a lot of help as well. The buildings need repairs and renovations and they need textbooks and supplies. The entire school compound is in dire need of a decent toilet facility.



This "vacation" has had a significant impact on us. Neither of us realized the level of poverty we would see, and the poor living conditions of many of the people in Ghana, specifically in Anomabo. We were shocked at the poor condition of the schools, and marveled at how learning could be taking place in such run-down buildings, without textbooks and required materials. We were amazed, that despite these conditions, the people in Anomabo and other parts of the country seem to be happy. The people we met were so friendly and welcomed us into their homes and their lives. We have learned to be much more appreciative of how much we have. We have a better appreciation for the many conveniences we take for granted, such as clean water, electricity, proper sanitation, and 3 good meals to eat each day. We have so much here, and we can do so much for the children in Ghana, by helping them to improve their education, which in turn, will improve their quality of life. We'll now put our energy into the next phase of R.E.L.A.Y. and return to Ghana in



December 2006 to finish what we have started. For Phase II, we will be accompanied by at least 20 volunteers, Rotarian and non-Rotarian, who are also excited about making a difference in the lives of the children in Anomabo, Ghana.