

Student Mobility Fund – Trip Report

By Chantel Smiechowski and An Minh Vu

In January of 2007 we left Canada to spend a life changing four and a half months as volunteer research affiliates in Ghana, West Africa. We were given the opportunity to design a semester abroad that would allow us to be involved in both research and volunteer work. Within this semester we were not only able to explore an amazing country while learning about a very different culture, we were also able to choose the organizations we wanted to work with and become involved with groups of individuals truly trying to make a difference in this developing country. As we flew into Accra, Ghana's capital, we really had no idea what we were getting ourselves into, but thanks to some incredible people who wanted to help us as much as we wanted to help them, we were able to accomplish more than we ever thought possible.



Traditional performers welcome students at the University of Ghana

Our work in Ghana was divided into three components. The first came from the longstanding relationship between the University of Ghana's Adult Education Department and Simon Fraser University's International Development Department. Currently the two universities are working on designing and administering an adult education program entitled *Reducing HIV/AIDS Stigmatization Through Education*. Part of our work was to help the director, Reuben Aggor, with the project in any way that we could. Reuben was our main contact upon arriving in Ghana and wound up practically adopting us as his Canadian daughters while we were there. Reuben helped us with everything, from playing tour guide to explaining the cultural differences and making sure we were eating properly. He even brought us a rope and buckets so that we could do our laundry. Without him our stay in Ghana would have been nowhere near as enjoyable.



Manye Nartekie and some of the children at the building of the new community centre in Odumase Krobo, Ghana

We worked with Reuben and his office staff at the University of Ghana on the *Reducing HIV/AIDS Stigmatization Through Education* program helping to edit text while sitting in on education seminars. The program was created to teach adults about HIV/AIDS in hopes that by educating people there will be a reduction in the stigmatization that the disease carries in the country. We were blown away by the lack of correct information available about how HIV/AIDS is contracted and spread, but were also impressed by the number of adults who wanted to educate themselves about the disease and who, in turn, hoped to educate others. It is hoped that in the future the project can be expanded to other regions of Ghana and that also a similar program for teenagers can be developed (both projects that we plan to remain involved with).



An and Chantel with the Director of Adult Education from the University of Ghana, Reuben Aggor

The second component of our project was doing volunteer work for the Odumase Krobo Queen Mothers Association (QMA). We had first learnt about the Queen Mothers Association in the Fall of 2006 when SFU hosted the *Focus on Africa Symposium*. The Queen Mothers are a community group made up of women who are responsible for the health and well-being of women and orphaned and vulnerable children in their community. They also work together to help build up their communities and provide trade and life skills for young women. We worked with the deputy paramount Queen Mother, Manye Nartekie, who welcomed us into her village and was instrumental in our education on Ghanaian culture. Because the main income of the QMA is the sales of locally produced beaded bracelets and necklaces we worked with the women to increase their sales by improving quality and expanding to new markets. We also spent time in the village with the children, wrote proposals for funding and other necessities while offering insight on how this community group could sustain itself for the future. We have maintained a strong tie with the QMA and will continue to work with them, proposal writing and hopefully importing some of their bead products to Canada for sale by the end of 2007.



Members of the Queen Mothers Association work on beading in the village

The third part of our project we left pretty up in the air when leaving Canada, but quickly developed upon arriving in Ghana. For this we wanted to experience as much of Ghanaian culture and get involved with any possible volunteer experiences, while networking for future volunteer opportunities while we were there. We were able to travel around a fair bit and connect with many different people, whether locals looking to make a difference, or foreigners like us, looking for ways to help. From this we learned the value of reciprocal research, while we were helping and volunteering with different groups and organizations, the Ghanaian people were teaching us about their culture while allowing us to experience their day to day life with them. We learned so much and had a blast every minute of it.



An and Chantel celebrate Ghana's 50th Anniversary with members of the community

One of the volunteer experiences that we had in Ghana that impacted us the most was when we went to an elementary school in a city slum. A friend of ours regularly volunteered there and she encouraged us to come. We had only planned to go to the school and observe and possibly play with the children but we both ended up teaching classes because the school was so desperate for any form of outside support. Anani Memorial International School is literally built over a gutter in a back alley in one of the worst parts of Accra. Despite being schooled in barely standing buildings, with no supplies and up to 6 kids sharing a pencil or pen, this group of children is still made up of some of the most upbeat and grateful of any we have ever met. They have absolutely nothing, yet still are so eager to learn. We are currently looking at setting up a project that will link up children from schools like Anani in Ghana with children from schools in BC in order to establish a pen pal program and to provide some support to the Ghanaian schools in the form of school supplies etc.



**Chantel and An with Manye Nartekie and a member of the Adult Education staff
At the Ghana at 50 Celebration**

The only downside to our trip was having to leave Ghana knowing that there was so much more we wanted to do there. It is very rare in life that you can see the direct impact of your actions on the people around you, but in Ghana we really felt that we were making a difference and could make so much more of a difference with more time and resources. We have been back in Canada for a few months now and the feeling of wanting to go back as soon as possible has not left either of us. As we write this we are in the middle of working on plans to get back to Ghana, as well as Uganda and South Africa, within the next year. Going to Ghana was an experience that has changed our lives and we would like to thank Simon Fraser University's Student Mobility Fund for supporting our trip.



Chantel and An spend time with children in Northern Ghana village