

Holly Graham – Report on Ghana Sept 2007

My three-month stay in Ghana in the autumn of 2007 was, in several respects, unlike anything else I've ever done. I arrived in Ghana in September and it was the first time I had ever been to Africa. Having had some experience of the culture, the climate, the smell of a country like Ghana would have been good preparation, but was by no means necessary. Ghana is different in almost every way from other sub-Saharan countries and discovering the continent for the first time in the way I did – actually living my life there and experiencing the culture as part of daily life – is an excellent introduction to, as Emmanuel our project co-ordinator loved to call it, 'African life'.

I was working in a primary school in Kakumdo, a small village outside the colonial capital of Cape Southern Ghana. We combined teaching, alongside the paid and qualified Ghanaian teachers, to dig the foundations for a new school building into which they hope to extend in the near future. one which was founded in 2003 by the CEJOCEP (Centre for Job Creation and Environmental



Coast in
with helping
The school is
Protection)



team and is growing rapidly – thanks to the ambition and hard work of the CEJOCEP team.

When we arrived in Ghana it was certainly a culture shock. Having spent the last three months helping to dig foundations, I can quite literally imagine what a ton of bricks – or at least a ton of cement – would feel like and admittedly, it didn't hit me that hard but it was more different than any place I had ever been. The heat and the smell and the power cuts or water shortages are the easiest things to cope with by the end, but at the beginning they ambush your senses and don't let you forget you're far away from home. Consequently, you feel like a tourist; pale and sweating with your backpack and your passport pouch and with every Ghanaian stopping to shout at you and make you feel even more out of place. But this all goes away and you start to become part of the furniture – you know you've settled in when you can make a two-minute walk with out hearing 'bruni, how are you?' (Fante for white man) although this remains rare.

Africatrust and CEJOCEP give volunteers two weeks at the beginning to acclimatise and prepare for working. At the beginning this seemed



excessive, a strange easing in strategy from the comfort of Western existence to life in Ghana, but in retrospect it was probably very sensible. Those two weeks are there to get used to the language and the heat and the food (because you can't teach or dig or even get out of bed – or the toilet – when you're ill.) They also mean that when you start to help teach, the children know you a bit, and you aren't just new white people for them to jump on. We did start to help with the manual labour (which quickly became affectionately known as 'man lab') in the second week and this was good too; it meant that it wasn't too shocking when we had to do it properly. During this two weeks there were five of us, and this separates it in my memory from the rest of the working time too. At

the end of the second week two of the volunteers, Kathryn and Virginie, went up north to Kumasi to work with TACCO on their projects up there. In addition another volunteer, Helen, who was supposed to stay with us in Cape Coast, got malaria (which also became affectionately known as 'the malaz') and decided to return to England to recover and see her parents. This meant that when we started working properly, there were two of us – me and the



Pete, who also managed to get malaria but recovered enough to get up and give me a hand with manual labour.

project in involved, we both (which I

Originally, it had been planned that we would teach in the mornings and then work on the building the afternoons. However, as the foundations became more important, and we became more we changed this so that I taught all morning and Pete worked and taught (not at the same time) and worked in the afternoons. This worked well because I also became involved in teaching French studied at A-level) to three of the classes and so this meant I had time to do this. Teaching French

was an unforgettable experience. None of the other teachers could speak French, nor could almost anyone in the village, despite Ghana being bordered by three ex French colonies. The children, and some of the adults were really interested to learn and I tried by best to teach them. Teaching was frustrating – often children just wouldn't understand the concept of translation or wouldn't listen to me – but rewarding when they learnt something new. Hearing the children sing 'Bon-jor madam, Comm-on sa va? Sa va bee-an mer-see' was amazing, even if it did take a couple of weeks to pick up. They children at CEJOCEP are so fantastic and so willing to learn and work that teaching them is really great, even if a little stressful at times.

Part of the reason that it is more stressful for us than other teachers is partly the idealism that we arrive with – wanting to really teach the children something – and partly our reluctance, or rather refusal, to use the cane. The cane is widely used in Ghana as punishment in schools and as law-enforcement. When I arrived I found the caning in school difficult to take, but – as I had been told by former volunteers – the nonchalant caning (usually two swipes on the hand) doesn't take long to get used to, mainly because the children take it so lightly. You start holding a cane, even threatening to use the cane – if only (usually) in jest. When the children are mean to each other – stealing a rubber or paper - the favoured response is 'I will beat you' and I found myself replying with 'No, if you don't be quiet I will beat you.' I never meant it of course, and it only ever got a laugh and never silence, but it does show how easily you slip into joking about something which you initially found so morally repugnant. However, while I managed to get used to the methods of punishments used by the school, this was only ever because no-one ever really got hurt and it was never taken seriously.

In addition, all of the things that are difficult to a different culture. They are also the flipside of Living in London, it took me a while to adjust to just how much time and effort they spent on us. This is one another. In addition, the role of the family and were treated as members of the CEJOCEP family, to our project co-ordinator Emmanuel, as well as Lawrence, Theresa and Sly (the founders of CEJOCEP) was genuinely difficult and I miss them and the school already. Being part of such a small volunteer group meant that we had the chance to actually make friends in Ghana rather than just among the British volunteers.



comprehend in a different culture are the things which make it many of the differences which are so much more positive. how friendly people are in Kakumdo, how much they care and something which gets lost in big cities where no-one knows the community in Ghanaian culture is so important, and as we I fostered real friendships while I was there. Saying goodbye

to our project co-ordinator Emmanuel, as well as Lawrence, Theresa and Sly (the founders of CEJOCEP) was genuinely difficult and I miss them and the school already. Being part of such a small volunteer group meant that we had the chance to actually make friends in Ghana rather than just

among the British volunteers. The manual work became much more of a feature than I had imagined it would be – on several levels. Just as we arrived, the CEJOCEP boys had begun their new project to build a four-storey building for the school to grow into. This sounds both an intimidating and unimaginable prospect but the Ghanaian habits of aiming high and doing everything a little at a time – as the money comes in, they build a bit more – is infectious and we got

extremely excited about the at least encouraged, to have would be involved with. necessary funding. From a foundations and as such it became a really important aspect of our work there. People get a lot of flak about going to Africa - or other less economically developed areas - and doing work which people there are capable of doing, especially unskilled labour. In some respects I have always thought that this argument has some value, and I continue to think that if you go to Africa for an experience like this believing that your actions are making a real global difference, you are probably mistaken. However, for a whole plethora of reasons, the work we were doing and similar work which people do all over the world is much more complicated and important than that. The fact that we were helping to dig – and not just having a photo taken digging or painting a wall, but actually getting stuck in – meant a lot. Not only did we actually make a hole (quite literally) in the work that needed to be done, but it also revealed a lot about the race consciousness in Ghana. Some people genuinely couldn't believe a white man – or even more, a white woman - was digging. People would come and watch. (They could have just been watching how bad I was at using a pick-axe but they assured me they weren't.) One of the best stories about this was that one man said of the other volunteer I was working with: 'A white man is digging. And he's got a degree!' But it's important for people in Ghana to see white people doing jobs that aren't the glamorous ones they see on television. There is quite a warped view of what Western society out the media, and to see white faces outside of that is – a consequence I never thought manual labour guys get up and do it every single day – often for no jobs in England (and I'm sure I will again) but that it's certainly made me appreciate my cushy holiday the most important consequence of all the work I did selfless reason for doing a project like this; the change is personal, but will shape the decisions I make in the future with regards to my career, my



project. At the beginning, neither of us was fully aware that volunteers were expected, or brought with them extra funds with which to pay for materials for the projects which they However, the new project excited us so much that we contacted home in search of variety of sources we managed to procure enough money to really begin the work on the foundations and as such it became a really important aspect of our work there. People get a lot of flak about going to Africa - or other less economically developed areas - and doing work which people there are capable of doing, especially unskilled labour. In some respects I have always thought that this argument has some value, and I continue to think that if you go to Africa for an experience like this believing that your actions are making a real global difference, you are probably mistaken. However, for a whole plethora of reasons, the work we were doing and similar work which people do all over the world is much more complicated and important than that. The fact that we were helping to dig – and not just having a photo taken digging or painting a wall, but actually getting stuck in – meant a lot. Not only did we actually make a hole (quite literally) in the work that needed to be done, but it also revealed a lot about the race consciousness in Ghana. Some people genuinely couldn't believe a white man – or even more, a white woman - was digging. People would come and watch. (They could have just been watching how bad I was at using a pick-axe but they assured me they weren't.) One of the best stories about this was that one man said of the other volunteer I was working with: 'A white man is digging. And he's got a degree!' But it's important for people in Ghana to see white people doing jobs that aren't the glamorous ones they see on television. There is quite a warped view of what Western society out the media, and to see white faces outside of that is there – some sort of poverty-free utopia – as a result of crucial to breaking it down.

In addition, I changed as a result of the work I did there would have. The work is so hard and so tiring and the money or only a token amount. I used to complain about was an experience of what actual hard work is like and jobs a lot more. Aside from the physical work, perhaps in Ghana is that I changed. This is both a selfish and

selfless reason for doing a project like this; the change is personal, but will shape the decisions I make in the future with regards to my career, my

political thought and even
and at least try to give them
flexible, less judgemental and
difficult experience, but when



puts what's important into perspective. Its not as though Ghanaians aren't materialistic – most of the women took far more time over their appearance than me – or money-driven, but living there shows you that, after a certain point, money and happiness aren't all that relevant to each other. I also had a lot of fun – something which people in Ghana absolutely know how to do – and I think that's an important part of entering into any culture.

how I spend my money. To want to do good things, and to meet people worthy of help
some assistance can only be a positive thing. Living in Ghana has made me more
more able to cope when things aren't quite as they should be. In theory, it should be a
you're there, surrounded by people much less privileged and equally if not more happy, it

I had an amazing time in West Africa, living in Ghana and visiting both Ghana and its neighbour Togo and any difficulties were overtaken by how much fun and how rewarding it was. I'd recommend a gap year, Africa, Ghana and – most particularly – Africatrust and CEJOCEP to anyone who was interested.

Holly Graham, Africatrust volunteer

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