

Building Foundations in the Ashanti Region of Ghana

Greg Kremer, July 2006, reflection on the return flight from a 3 week EWB trip

We begin

Worlds apart: separated by distance, by culture, by language
but

with a vision of relationship,
with dreams of engineering a better world,
of establishing a sound foundation
of melding the best of American and Ghanaian ways into an
AmeriGhan culture - technology with heart and hospitality.

We begin

In the big city of Accra, tired from the long trip by land and air,
sweating through customs and immigration,
emerging into a ring of Africans to look for Emmanuel, and
put to sleep by the diesel fumes as we drive through the city,
but

welcomed with spartan rooms and fine Ghanaian food in the Jubilee
Hostel and given great instruction in Ashanti culture and language.

We begin

In a brush covered field,
with one copy of a mystery builder's house plans in Cy's worn notebook,
with a pile of sand blocks a cart ride away,
but
with a vision of a teachers cottage, and eventually a teachers village.

We enter

Into the life of the village,
formally welcomed in the peaceful pink courtyard of the "Royal Palace"
with a 1 hour plus ceremony by the Queen mother and the elders in their
ceremonial dress, with

- welcome drinks and ceremonial schnapps,
- prayers and libations poured out by the eldest elder,
- Kofi the linguist, elaborating and acting as go-between for all communications
- lots of hand shaking and finger snapping and greetings

and no hurry, just hospitality

We enter

The ritualistic way of life

The pervasive poverty

The childrens' consciousness [Obruni Father, Hello, Hello]

The outdoor life [bathing and cooking and washing as outdoor activities]

The heat [Africa hot - day and night, no escape except the mid-day siesta].

We experience

The lack of infrastructure

- Bumping along the "roads" - no paving, no lines, no rules - drivers looking for any path that is passable
- Trucks getting stuck in the washout on the back road to Kumasi - and bags of oranges falling on Cy as we help push it out
- Few refrigerators
- No waste management, and a different concept of "litter"
- Electricity brownouts and blackouts as a daily occurrence
- Buildings crumbling due to a lack of maintenance

The sameness

- of the villages - the same style of cement block houses, the same style of school buildings, the same goods at the markets,
- of the red clay, everywhere
- of the fruit and vegetables - the huge yams and pineapples, the fresh oranges, the fried plantain...
- of the chickens and goats roaming everywhere (who owns them?)

The uniqueness

- All goods sold in open markets with negotiated prices or by street-side vendors with wares on their heads
- Mixed-crop farming in the bush
- The food
 - Fufu, Jollof rice, beef jerky, fish soup, breads (sugar and butter and tea), boiled peanuts,...

The hospitality

- special handshakes with fingersnaps
- the greetings - Wo ho te sin, Me hoy ye paa, Maa chi, Maa ha, Maa adjo
- the gifts and kindnesses
- the smiles and laughter of the children - a universal language that melts our hearts
- visiting the paramount king - posturing and politicizing in the traditional sense
- Joining their community celebration of Mass as guests of the Queen Mother - Locals dressed in their black and white "Sunday Best", the drum and brass band, the whole congregation singing (without hymnals) and waving their white handkerchiefs during the Eucharistic Prayer, dancing up the aisles for the offertory procession [which seems for them to be the high point of Mass, rather than the consecration and Eucharist, which few of them participate in]

The beauty

- Sunsets from Nana's rooftop
- the mighty and stately silk cotton trees, towering above the bush
- The rainforest of Kakum National Park, viewed from the canopy walk
- The clothes and crafts made by the locals
- The beach with the mighty waves and the tiny snails
- The termite mounds
- The birds and butterflies and lizards

The feelings

- of being a millionaire [in cedis]
- of being a minority
- of not knowing the language

The fun (and the funny)

- Playing games like "change your style", "number ready", "fire on the mountain"
- Playing UNO (with Clinton) and Yahtzee and Euchre
- Cy and TJ playing football with Lewanga and the boys in the schoolyard on a Sunday morning, with rocks for goalposts but with dreams of Black Stars and World Cups.
- TJ dominating Lewanga and Tough in armwrestling
- The signs: No tooting, No hunting on campus, God is Good Enterprise - Cement and Hardware, Trust in God Beauty Salon, Repent Furniture Works
- TJs white Gorilla story
- Guy convincing us all to spend a night sleeping with a water sample bottle [since we didn't have a furnace to keep them at 95 F]
- Katie's tight-fitting and bright-colored dress top from her host family
- Osei Kwame's fan clubs
- Jen's big blue bag of fun
- Jeff playing like a big mosquito with the kids
- Greg eating sand [when the builder gave him something from a black bag to check, and he thought he was being offered food], and bending his fork and dropping the dried meat on the floor when trying to stab it at Mr. Boateng's house [and frantically searching for it with his sock feet and picking it up with his toes and slipping it in his pocket without being noticed].

We work

- Clearing the lots and digging the foundation
- Felling a tree with shovels, a cutlass, and ropes...and lots of good teamwork pulling together
- Building the teachers cottage to the lentil level, and learning how construction is done in Ghana [from Nana Ofiri and Mr. Osei the builder]
 - with all manual labor [no power tools]
 - with head pans
 - with low labor costs but high cost for tools and materials
 - conserving the precious water
- Sweating side-by-side with Lewanga, Elvis, Mr. Young and the other villagers
- Taking water samples and spring levels and pump data
- Tracing electric lines
- Brainstorming how to reduce costs and improve building plans and use sawdust and bamboo to help the village

We ponder

- The stacks of blocks throughout the village, the region, the country...
 - like dreams of a home, like dreams of a future...
- The number of partially completed houses, some taking decades to complete
 - are they signs of hope or despair, or just an accepted part of the culture?
- Our role
 - Are we teaching or learning?
 - Are we humanitarians or tourists?
 - Are we engineers or philanthropists?
 - or are we a bit of all of these things?
- Our impact
 - Will what we have built here & now - the relationships and the house - endure and reach fruition, or die the slow death of so many good intentions, shining briefly and promising real change but in the end yielding to the persistent and powerful waves of "the way things are" as we re-cross the ocean to our homes and jobs and families?
- The common complaint from the villagers that "We Africans suffer so much", and the common answer "We need money" when asked "what do you need". Is money really the answer?
- The hordes of children who want our addresses, or anything that says USA
 - do they see the slips of paper bearing USA as magic tickets, as lifelines to another world?
- What would a "new and improved" Maase Offinso look like?
It would be no real improvement to "Americanize" everything, at the high cost of progress
 - to trade their material poverty for our stress,
 - to trade their hospitality for our individualism,
 - to trade their ritual for our skepticism,
 - to trade their greetings for our business-first approach and schedules.How can we help them live more humanely without hurting their spirit?

- What comes first?
 - infrastructure or education?
 - religion or redemption?
 - integrity or experience?

We give thanks (Medasse) for

- The joy and spirit (kra) of the people and the place
- The friends we made, both within our 8-person team as well as with Kwabna and Lewanga and Florence and Kofi and all the people of Maase
- The lessons we learned, about Africa, about poverty, about ourselves...
- The special opportunity to share, if only for a short while, in the life of the village

We plan

- To return, to finish what we started (the cottage) and to tackle the water and waste issues, the school windows, the teachers village...
- To continue building relationships through correspondence and personal contact, and to investigate student exchanges and scholarships.
- To let the Kra of the Ghanian people inspire us to greater joy and generosity and convince us to live as AmeriGhans - putting respect and hospitality before business.