

Abby Selden

From July to October of 2010, Belmont University graduate Abby Selden lived, volunteered and traveled in the West African country of Ghana. Below is her account of this experience.

As I stepped off the plane after an 11-hour flight into the humid but breezy air of Accra, Ghana, I expected to have some sort of epiphany—or at least, some overwhelming sense that I had just entered an entirely different world. But with the obvious exception of being surrounded by Ghanaians returning to their country, nothing about my surroundings suggested I was on an entirely different continent. In fact, I was strangely reminded of a few weeks earlier when I had arrived in Asheville, North Carolina, for my college roommate's wedding. There was nothing but open space around me, and nothing in the airport itself suggested that I was in a different country, except of course for the large sign warning that sexual deviants and sodomites were not welcome in Ghana.



Something changed as I sat in the back of the taxi that was taking me from the airport in Accra to the Akuapem Hills region, about an hour and half north. As the taxi hobbled over the hole-riddled roads through increasingly rural areas away from the city, I laid my head back against the seat and closed my eyes. A sensation came over me—an oddly comforting wave that left me feeling far more relaxed than I thought I would in my first few hours in a country I knew

almost nothing about. I was going to be in Africa for months. I was going to be as out-of-touch with the world as I knew it as I had ever been. To my surprise, this realization brought with it both a physical and mental release, as though a 1,000 pound weight of mostly needless tension built up over years of mostly baseless worries had been lifted. For the first time, I was in a country where I knew nothing about anyone and no one knew anything about me, something that left me in a strange, calmly euphoric state.

For my three months in Ghana, I lived in a village called Kwamoso, where I adjusted more quickly than I expected to life with no electricity or running water. I shared the house with my Ghanaian host family and several volunteers from other countries who stayed for varying lengths of time.



Every morning, I spent half an hour on a tro-tro, which I am confident is one of the most dangerous modes of transportation in existence. A

claustrophobic's nightmare, tro tros are typically dilapidated vans, which are regularly filled beyond capacity. After about a week in Ghana, I had grown accustomed to sitting half-way in a stranger's lap and closing my eyes as my tro tro passed another car on a blind turn. Apparently, fatal head-on collisions are common with tro tros.



For the first half of my time in Ghana, I volunteered with the children of Mt. Zion Orphanage, who stayed at the orphanage all day while on holiday from school. While I adjusted quickly to daily life in the village, adjusting to the lack of structure at the orphanage was much more difficult. Three mornings each week, all seventeen kids gathered in the dining hall, and I tried my best to maintain some semblance of order as I taught lessons on subjects ranging from math and English to art

and geography. This proved to be an incredibly draining task, especially considering that the children had a tendency to start fights with one other when they disagreed. But these were not the kinds of minor squabbles that one probably thinks of when they picture children fighting—the kids at this orphanage had obviously learned from a young age how to protect themselves, and they would lash out at one another with rocks, pipes and fists in a truly alarming way. Needless to say, I was on some level relieved when the kids returned to school and I was asked to continue as their teacher, but in a slightly more controlled environment.



The month and a half I spent teaching at the Mt. Zion School was equally challenging for different reasons. When I first decided to volunteer in Ghana, I had convinced myself that I did not, under any circumstances, want to teach. I was uncomfortable with the idea of teaching because I felt that I would in some way be imposing my own cultural and academic ideas on children of a culture that I hadn't had the time to understand. I realized while in Ghana, however, that I was simply over-thinking this potential situation. This school needed another teacher, and if every volunteer refused to teach, citing some sort of philosophical grounds, a lot of kids would miss out on the chance to receive individualized academic attention.



I may not have been an experienced teacher, but I put every bit of my energy into being the best possible teacher I could be under the circumstances. The language barrier was a huge issue, with half of the kids in my class virtually fluent in English and the other half barely conversational. I taught Computer Science with no computers, English despite the massive language barrier and Natural Science, though the sciences were always my own weakest subjects. I realized in time that the most important message I could instill in my class of seven and eight-year-olds was that learning could be fun and engaging, and that each of them had the ability to accomplish anything they were willing to work for. At



the very least, I hope I encouraged an enthusiasm for learning that the kids will carry with them into the future.



Volunteering in Ghana was an amazing and rewarding experience. But some of my most memorable moments in Africa occurred in everyday village life, and during my weekend travels around the country. One activity I found surprisingly enjoyable was washing my clothes. Of course, everything had to be washed by hand, so once a week, I would pull the large metal washing pan from the kitchen, fill it with water from the well and add Omo (the most popular brand of

detergent in Ghana). Because my iPod had broken within days of arriving in Africa, I spent many moments I would ordinarily have spent listening to music in silence. To my surprise, moments I expected to be dull became meditative. Sitting in silence and performing a task as mundane as rubbing my clothes together in soapy water became something I looked forward to, not something I dreaded. I was surprised by how sitting in silence, alone with just my thoughts for the first time in a disturbingly long time, made me acutely aware of my surroundings, from the slightest wane in the daylight to the smallest shift of the breeze. And this awareness allowed me to achieve a sense of calm I had rarely ever experienced. Of course, sometimes I had company, which was always welcome.



Perhaps more than anything, living and volunteering in Ghana taught me how to let go of what I couldn't control. This lesson was epitomized by a canoe trip with several other volunteers through a lagoon at Keta Beach, Ghana. We realized fairly quickly that the canoes were taking on a lot of water, and none of us would be surprised if they actually sank. But after a brief sense of panic, I realized there was nothing any

of us could do but bail water out of the boat as quickly as possible and try to trust the Ghanaians helping us.

Living in Ghana also taught me how to enjoy the simplest pleasures in life, from kicking a soccer ball around with kids in the village to enjoying Peter's Pizza (the only real pizza place anywhere close to my village). Because there was no electricity in the village, the other volunteers and I had to find ways to entertain ourselves from late afternoon until we went to sleep (we were usually exhausted by 10 p.m.). Sometimes we hung out with other volunteers and locals at a nearby bar, but oftentimes we would stay home and read, talk or play that ridiculous game where everyone has the name of a famous person written on a piece of paper and stuck to their heads, and each person has to ask questions until the identity is revealed.

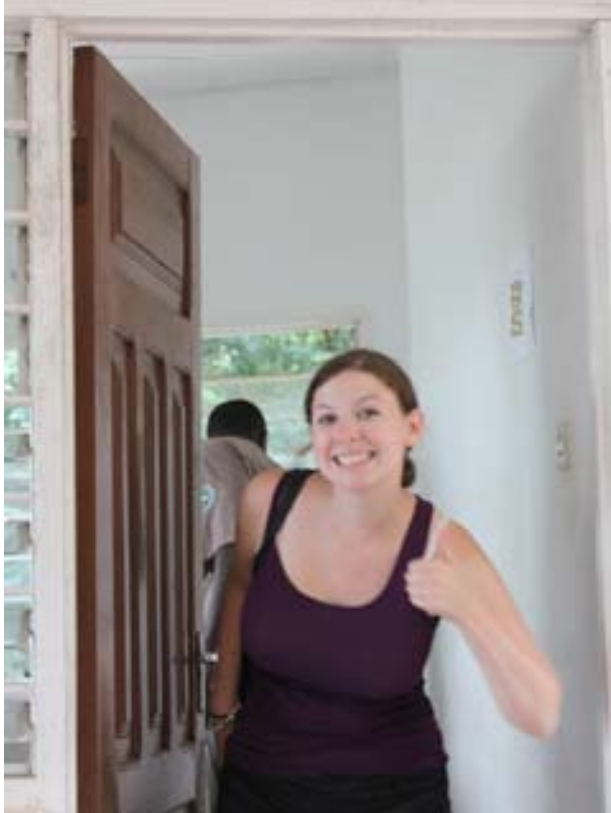
Being able to enjoy the small things in Ghana was also contingent on my ability to let go of minor worries, something that has always been difficult for me. This ability was tested when I was faced everyday with Ghanaians who just seemed to love laughing at me for no apparent reason. I am not exaggerating when I say that these people laughed at me like it was their job. I'm sitting on a tro tro eating an ear of corn? Two women point and laugh, and seem to be encouraging others to join in. I'm quietly washing my clothes? My host family shares glances and starts laughing. I'm wearing shorts? Both yelled and laughed at. At first, I found it irritating. I would turn to another volunteer and ask hopelessly, "Why don't they just tell me what I'm doing wrong?..." I soon realized, however, that being indiscriminately laughed at everyday was something I really needed in my life. I was laughed at on *such* a regular basis that I finally had to give up and stop worrying about why I looked so ridiculous. I had to accept that, ultimately, maybe I did look ridiculous, and that was okay.

Looking back on my college career, I realized I had spent years worrying about so many things that ultimately didn't matter. In the last four years, most of my happiest moments took place at the family homeless shelter where I volunteered with the shelter's children and often made a complete fool of myself, playing dress-up or pretending to be a monster. After a couple of weeks in Ghana, I realized that some of my happiest moments there were also the moments I could laugh at myself. Ultimately, being laughed at by countless Ghanaians was something I probably needed.



Much of my time in Ghana is now a blur of strange but happy memories.

Like when my friend broke her sandal just before a hike through a nature reserve, and subsequently did an amazing makeshift job of repairing it with a camera strap.



Or negotiating down the price for our hike through a nature reserve when we ran out of money.



Or meeting a Rastafarian named "Bunny Eye," who inexplicably insisted on calling me "Olive Oyl."



Or accidentally stumbling upon beautiful Busua Beach.





And a day later watching a Ghanaian fetish priest feed a chicken to a crocodile in a sacred ceremony.



Or wandering through the largest market in West Africa.



And marveling at how much Ghanaians love Barack Obama.

And finally, saying goodbye to all the kids from the orphanage and the school—the creative, inventive, interesting, resourceful, complicated, sweet kids who I had grown to really care about over the last several months.

I now live and work in New York City, which could not be more different than my life in Ghana. While I love both lives, I know that I will eventually return to Africa, whether to Ghana or another country. My time in Ghana solidified my commitment to volunteering as a fundamental facet of my life, sparked in me a desire to continue traveling for the rest of my life and enriched my life with more memories than I can count.

