

A Forester in Ghana: One Biology Student's Experience Teaching Science to African Children

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LFC junior Alex Charron with some of her Ghanaian students

For Alex Charron '09, five weeks in the summer of 2006 provided her with "the most rewarding but, in ways, the most frustrating experience" of her life. Volunteering in Ghana, Africa through Projects Abroad, Alex spent her summer teaching math and science to children at a junior high grade level. The school, attached to the Christ Outreach Orphanage, included 36 orphans as well as children from the surrounding town of Kasoa, which is an hour from the capital. With only one science textbook for the entire class, Alex had to use the book as her guide when teaching the children, frequently drawing out the figures and writing careful notes on the chalkboard for her students—"if there was chalk!"

"Teaching was very nerve-wracking at first, but I eventually figured out what worked and what didn't. The kids were so eager to learn, finishing assigned problems and asking, 'Madame more'. They are so intelligent and catch onto concepts so quickly. I had so much pride in them."

Lack of books, however, was not the only difficulty Alex faced; although there were Ghanaian teachers, they seemed to "show up and teach only when they felt like it". What's more, at least three children a week would become ill due to malaria. Alex frequently carried the sick children to the clinic that was half an hour away; fortunately, the doctor there gave the children free treatment.

"It was extremely frustrating that there was no way to prevent this disease in the orphanage, with no mosquito netting and no fathomable way to pay for the prophylactic medicine."

After school days that often reached above 90 degrees by 8 A.M., Alex and her fellow volunteers at

the school would bring the children toys to play with, such as crayons, soccer balls and picture books. "I loved spending this time with the kids because it was so easy to make them happy." One of Alex's favorite memories is the day that all the volunteers took the orphans to the beach on the bus, called the trotro: "When the trotro pulled up to pick everyone up, the kids screamed like teenage girls do when a celebrity pulls up in a limo."

Living in such a different culture, full of poverty and unique customs, for five weeks could easily sound intimidating, but according to Alex, "Ghanaians were probably the friendliest people I'd ever met. They never hesitate to strike up a conversation while on a trotro or anywhere else. It amazed me how happy and content the majority of Ghanaians are, though most of them have next to nothing." Children often begged the volunteers to buy them water or rice, calling out, "Obruni", meaning "white person". To many, seeing the "Obruni" volunteers was a new experience in itself. When the nephew of Alex's host mother first saw the volunteers, he actually cried because "he'd never seen someone with white skin before."

When searching for her program, Alex knew only that she wanted to volunteer in Africa. She chose Ghana because of the opportunities it provided, such as teaching. After living in the country for five weeks, she found that Ghana had a lot to teach her, not only about a new culture and set of customs, but also about the patience required to deal with days when "nothing is typical and nothing goes as planned." Alex talks about her memories so warmly and eagerly that it is obvious the entire experience has had a lasting impression on her.

"It's hard to describe the ways my time with these children changed me. To fully understand, you'd have to meet them. They deserve so much more than they have, but they remain ever cheerful and mischievous. I've asked myself if I really made a difference in the short time I was there, and the answer is yes. I did nothing monumental, but I know that I made each day for those children a little easier and a little better. Every time I brought smiles to their faces I knew that through all the frustrations, it was worth it. That feeling will stay with me forever."

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