

Kyra Galey

Ghana Awakening

I knew it would be a challenge to adjust.

The moment the plane doors opened in Accra, I entered a new world. I had to gasp for breath in the thick, humid air. As we walked off the plane, I felt my clothes become heavy and damp, my skin moist and sticky. My lungs were tight and my heart was beating through my chest.

Although it was late at night, the city was loud and crowded. People were walking, working,

often running. Some danced and sang to bongo drums while others cleaned—their selves, their clothing, their dishes. The traffic was equally active—people honking, shouting, some cars connecting.

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A small village just outside Kumasi, Ghana, Africa



Kyra holding a 2-year-old girl in the nursery

I sat in silence, unaware of what was to come. I could hardly move. Although I had researched Ghana for months—the culture and the orphanage in which I would be volunteering—I quickly realized that no amount of preparation could prepare me for what I was about to experience.

Throughout the city, giant piles of garbage burned, open rotting sewage lined the streets, and the smell of freshly slaughtered animals hung in the air. I quickly realized that “adjustment” was the first strength I needed to acquire and that would take time.

Stand after stand was selling everything from cigarettes and pineapples to clothes and soap; crowds of people were speaking languages we had never heard. As we walked by, they grew silent and stared at us in shock or they began whispering with those around them.

For the first week, I slept in a hostel: Bed-next-to-bed on an old wooden frame—hardly a foot off the ground—covered by a thin, dusty mattress and a sheet. Days later, I graduated to a regular single bed with mosquito netting and no sheets or blankets. It was far too hot, even for clothes.

Although the food contained strange ingredients, I was able to eat it. A popular dish called Fu-Fu is mashed plantains and cassava, a potato-like vegetable. Formed into a giant, slimy, textured ball, it is served in a spicy goat's milk soup.

We were expected to eat it with our first three fingers—starting at the centre—taking a piece of the mashed plantain and cassava, then scooping it with the soup into the mouth. I always did the best I could to ask for a spoon because clean, running water for handwashing was rare.

My visits to the Kumasi Children's Home in Kumasi, the garden city, made all the adjustments and hardships worthwhile. Every day when I arrived, the orphans would run as fast as they could toward me, jumping up and down, grabbing at me. They longed for love and did everything they could to get it while I was there. I could hold 4 or 5 little hands in each of my hands and loved to pick up the children and hug them.

The orphans had few clothes and the majority wore no shoes. Almost all were covered in cuts and scrapes with no bandages or signs of medical attention.

I spent mornings in the playschool with the older kids (ages 3 to 6), singing songs, pushing them on swings, teaching them games, and setting them up for lunch—definitely the most emotionally stable part of each day. They were served plain rice, sometimes with a tiny bit of sauce on top, and they took turns drinking water from a giant pail.

The women who worked at the orphanage seemed to hate their job and either ignored the children or yelled at them. Each woman carried a whip or a long, thin stick and would randomly hit children who didn't do exactly as they were told.

I thought that was extreme, until I spent time in the nursery in the afternoons. The children varied from day-olds to 3-year-olds—usually 15 to 20 children in total. They were rarely



An infant in the nursery who was epileptic and very ill



The children in the nursery sleeping on a mat along the wall



The playschool at the orphanage that the older children attend each morning. The children wear a uniform shirt. Note the woman with a stick, standing on the right.



Kyra at the playschool, handing out crayons and paper she brought from home for the children



A street near the orphanage in Kumasi



A 2-year-old girl in the nursery eating and reaching for Kyra's camera

allowed outside and seemed to be on a very strict schedule.

When we'd arrive, the children would be sleeping—the older kids on a mat along the wall and the younger ones in a small room filled with cribs. There we frequently found several babies crying.

My first instinct was to pick them up and rock them in my arms until they stopped crying. That was not allowed. I regularly got yelled at for tending to the children that way. The workers would pick up the children, one by one, by an arm, and drag them across the floor to the eating area. If the children cried or resisted, the women pulled harder on their arm.

The children in the nursery also ate rice for lunch. Several needed help. The women would fill their hand with a clump of rice, mush it a bit in their fingers, then jam it into the children's mouths, whether or not it fit. The babies were fed formula out of a cup, achieved by holding the child's head back and pouring it down the little throat. That was hard to watch. The babies would cry because of the roughness of the women or, sometimes, because the milk was too hot.

After lunch was over, the children were dragged to the washroom arm by arm to sit on a little cup with a handle. They were expected to sit there for an hour to go to the washroom. If the child wasn't old enough to sit up, the women would just lean him or her against a wall. When I asked why, the women said the children needed to be potty-trained.

When I was around the orphans, gently helping them through their day and giving them as much love as I could, they seemed happy. Every child loved attention and I always tried to get as many smiles as possible.

The day I left, I was very upset. I was fearful for their futures—angry that they had to live without a mother's love and that I couldn't do anything about it, and sad that I would never see them again.

But most of all, I was grateful to have made a difference in their lives, if only for a couple of months. I showed them love, a caring touch, and hopefully how special they are.

A significant difference in that culture and their way of life is how hard people work. Everyone, even children, is working to survive, working for money, working to prepare food, working to wash their clothes by hand, or working to clean themselves and their family.

Everyone does everything they can simply to get by. Women walk around carrying bowls on their heads and babies on their backs, their arms filled with bags. Men drive cabs, fix cars, or sell food.

What amazes me is how joyful the people are, regardless of the challenges of their lives. They appreciate the simple things in life, like community, a great meal, a beautiful day, and bongo drum music.

As I saw this desire to live, I began to realize how much I admire the social responsibility, community connection, and family contributions of the people of Ghana.

And they love to celebrate life. When music is played, people sing and dance from all around and find great joy in doing so. When it rains, people stop and watch, appreciating the cool air. When the sun rises and the sky is painted in beautiful pinks, purples, and bright light, people feel blessed to be alive.

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Everyone goes to church and strongly believes in God. People have great integrity and are very religious; they are true to their families, to the people they love, and to their word.

My first few days back at home felt strange—like arriving in another world all over again. Traffic was calm and organized, everything was extremely nice and new, the air was fresh and crisp, the food nice and tasty. The city was comparatively quiet.

Living in a large house with my family, sleeping in my own full-size bed, owning a car, drinking from a tap instead of a bag of purified water, and putting on my good watch each morning felt truly luxurious.

Now, when things feel rough or I feel consumed by the pressures and demands of life, I find myself thinking about the people in Africa. I wish that our Canadian culture was as connected to the earth, the community, and God as the people of Ghana are.

I absolutely loved Africa and want to return one day. My trip to Ghana has changed my perspective on life forever. I carry my newly discovered strength of adjustment and humility with me everywhere I go. ▲

Kyra Galey, age 19, is working toward a Bachelor of Science degree in Calgary, Alberta. She aspires to attend medical school. Kyra is the granddaughter of Ron and MaryAnne Galey, Manager of Scotiabank's Global Transaction Banking Group in Vancouver.

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A beautiful 1-year-old on the potty in the nursery, propped against the wall because she is too small to sit up



The children in the nursery eating lunch. The child to the right is being hand-fed.