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From Colorado to Ghana: Both a Neighbor and a Different World

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When I left for northern Ghana in May, it was my first time ever travelling internationally; I was new to malaria and typhoid pills, yellow fever vaccinations, customs, and airplane food. I had the opportunity to experience the difficulties of an intercontinental journey, such as trying to sleep on a flight, sickness from the malaria pills, forgetting expensive gifts by my seat, jet lag, and being hassled by customs. However, the trip was as fulfilling and eye-opening as every cliché claims.

I applied for the Opus Prize student scholar position on the recommendation of one of my supervisors at Regis, even though I wasn't entirely sure what it was. I read about the values of the Opus Prize on the website as well as about previous Opus Prize recipients, but I found myself still a bit confused when the first interview began. When I got word that I was selected for the team, I was honestly surprised. I did not know the exact number of people who applied, but I do know there were only six spots for student scholars; consequently, I was ecstatic that I was selected. Despite being unclear about how I had been so fortunate to receive this opportunity, it was a blessing for me because it made me even more excited to go forth and help others in my future endeavors.

As an individual rooted in psychology and neuroscience, it reinforced for me the importance of psychologists and psychiatrists all across the globe. As I moved forward with Opus, I was touched by both the nonprofits that were recommended, as well as the mission of Opus. When all of the student scholars received the details of the sites we would be visiting, it was inspiring to read about all of these people who were making great differences around the world. I contend that children in America grow up being told they are able to be anything that they want;

however, as they grow older, a more cynical reality tends to set in and begins to convince an individual that he/she is just one person. Working with Opus was a real world reminder that it is entirely possible to change people's lives.

Ghana was very surprising, even to the more experienced travelers in my group. Accra, the capital, was extremely modern. The architecture and technology could have been picked up from a desert region in America, such as Arizona, and plopped down in the middle of Africa. The hotels were gleaming, the banks were in skyscrapers, and the event centers resembled sports stadiums. Aside from the people who roam in between the cars at stoplights, the main town looked westernized. Within Accra, though, it was still evident that there was a struggling population living in the shadows of these huge corporate buildings. It was fascinating and heartbreaking to see a multi-million dollar building set right next to a poverty-ridden set of makeshift dwellings composed of metal and cardboard. This site put the two worlds of Ghana in stark contrast. Moving out from Accra, we drove to Tamale. In Tamale, there was still a significant amount of traffic, but the towering buildings were nowhere to be found. The portions of Tamale that our team had the chance to see were one story buildings mixed in with outdoor shopping areas. After a short time in Tamale, the Opus group moved to Sister Stan's home in Yendi. Within her small area, I experienced the meaning of "rural." It was shocking to see just how many comforts first-world countries take for granted, such as a working ceiling fan, flushing toilets, or education. Most Americans grow up hearing how blessed we are, but it is still eye-opening to actually live, even for a few days, in someone else's reality.

Sister Stan founded the Nazareth Home for God's Children in order to take in the "spirit children" that were being condemned by villagers. The Opus group had the chance to sit and eat dinner in the same room as the children, and Doug Rhea, our photographer, mentioned how they were "53 lives that wouldn't be here if it weren't for Sister." When I really took a step back and thought about it from this perspective, I felt both sad and awestruck. Sister Stan is literally saving lives in a very tangible way. She was also a very present and serene individual to be around. From the initial meeting, she presented as a dependable person who put all of her effort into every single item on her "to-do" list.

Sister Stan managed to be completely focused on our conversations, despite everything else

(doctor's appointments, ill children, staffing problems, money) that she had on her mind.

Although she had a very detailed schedule for our group, she never seemed to be looking ahead to the next item on the list. It was honestly impressive, especially considering all of the responsibilities she has to keep track of and fulfill on a day-to-day basis. In addition, the children very clearly love her; the little ones coming from the private schools leapt into her arms when they exited the van. It was evident in her care how much she adored the children. Essentially, Sister Stan is every bit amazing as one would expect of someone who starts an organization for marginalized children. From start to finish, the opportunity was an entirely original and indispensable experience.



John P. Fitzgibbons, S.J., President of Regis University, presides over the Opus Award ceremonies

Every morning, the Opus Prize team had toast for breakfast. Unlike in the United States where bread comes pre-sliced in a convenient package, Sister Stan and her staff made the bread from scratch roughly 20 feet from the main house. We toured the different stations on the property: a room

where a large tub was used to make the bread, another where the clothes were sewn, and another where the chickens were kept. Some of the food, like mango, came from hours outside of the village where Sister Stan's house was located. While it occurred to me that "first-world" items,

like smartphones, would not be available, it never crossed my mind that something as simple yet convenient as a grocery store would be scarce. In addition, the education system was very surprising to me. I have grown accustomed to elementary, middle, and high schools always being within a reasonable driving distance. In Ghana, a portion of Sister Stan's children were enrolled in private schools where they had to drive for two hours to reach the school. As a result, the children stayed in the city for the week with members of the staff and came back to Sister's house on the weekends. Another portion were enrolled in public schools, and Sister Stan informed us that the students were allowed to run wild while the teacher sat and talked on the phone; the group witnessed this first-hand walking past the school grounds adjacent to Sister Stan's property. The last portion of Sister Stan's children was denied education altogether due to their disorders: epilepsy, autism, and mutism. It was astonishing to find that the parents and guardians had to pay large sums of money simply to place their child in a suitable educational environment.

In addition to a lack of "basic" amenities and services, it was surprising to learn about the culture. The first smaller difference that our faculty member, Dr. Meghan Sobel, pointed out was how calm and collected the children were. The first time we ate with the children, they patiently waited quietly for their food. Once it was served to them, none of them touched the food until prayers were said. During the meal, none of them complained, and by the end, all of the plates were entirely scraped clean with no mess on the table. The manners of little kids no taller than my hip truly impressed me.

A larger culture shock was some of the beliefs that are prevalent. I grew up on *Harry Potter* and *Wizards of Waverly Place*; it was always impressed upon me, especially being in a Christian household, that I was only allowed to watch the shows if I understood very clearly that witchcraft was fictitious. However, in a significant population in northern Ghana, the belief that magic is real and present persists among the communities; so much so that some of their children who do not fit the criteria of a "whole" person are accused of sorcery and suffocated, poisoned, or abandoned. It was

absolutely heartbreaking to hear about these children who were being killed for factors that they could not control. Treatable medical problems such as epilepsy and recognized disorders such as autism, labeled as "witchcraft," are punished in some villages by death. It was very difficult to grasp a reality where people were seemingly comfortable with harming their own children. However, the weight of the fact that these little babies were being murdered for the protection of the village gave all the more emphasis to Sister Stan's work. 卍