

3rd Place Winner for AFS International's "My Different View" Essay Contest

Andrea Bolivar

Biribi Wo Soro

“O Binka Bi” means unity. However, it refers to a unity that exists only in Africa. I somehow knew that this unity existed, and I knew that experiencing it would change my life. Therefore, when everybody doubted that I, a child of struggling immigrants, wanted nothing more than to volunteer in an orphanage in Ghana, I had no choice but to prove them wrong. After working tirelessly at a minimum wage job, fund raising outside of super markets, and applying for every possible scholarship, I found myself, almost suddenly, surrounded by beauty and strength. This was possible because of the DeWitt Scholarship.

It began each morning when I stepped out of my humble host home and into the sweltering sun. The neighborhood children would be screaming, dancing, and singing, “Obroni, Obroni!” They were laughing hysterically at the sight of me. Coffee colored skin and long curly hair; I must have been quite a sight to see. “Obroni” means “white”. It is funny how I am light in Africa, but dark in America. In Africa I am a rich white girl, but in America I am a lower class minority. I greeted the children with equal excitement, joined in the dancing, passed out candy, and touched each of their perfectly round, smiling faces. Each morning it was the same. They never got sick of it...neither did I.

There are some things that words cannot do justice to. My experience at the orphanage is one of those things. I experienced many amazing things in Ghana. I walked on rope bridges over the rain forest. I jammed with Rastafarians. I was exorcised by my

extremely religious host parents. I visited the slave dungeons. But the exact moment that changed my life, was when I first stood up in front of 75 orphans, all of whom were starving in more ways than one. We built the children a bathroom that was very much needed, and we taught them basic English and math.

Although I was the one standing in front of the class, I was the real student and they were the teachers. The children taught me more about life than most full grown Americans will even learn. Kofi is five years old and he wanted to know why all the things the Americans brought said “Made in China”. Kofi will never be able to use his intelligence. At the age of 14 all of the children become servants. They cannot save up for an education, because they work for food and shelter. They are the lucky ones. Many are forced into thievery and prostitution. I have a new appreciation for my education in America. However, not even this is the most important thing that I learned. The children were always smiling, big, bright, honest, whole hearted smiles. I often asked myself, “Why?” and more importantly, “How?” I am nothing compared to Kofi, or Kwame, or Jessica. The little children with swollen bellies and big bleeding hearts are so much greater than I!

When I tell people that I lived in West Africa, they often assume that it was hard. Water shortages? Cockroaches? Malaria? Ha! The hardest part was leaving. I had to explain to the children, that I, like everybody else in their little lives, would be leaving them. I knew that in America there would be no dancing in the streets. In America, heterosexual men do not walk hand in hand. It is funny how the culture shock was greater coming back to America than it was first arriving in Ghana. Although I am incredibly thankful to have running water that I can actually drink, Africa has something

so much greater that America does not have. “Biribi Wo Soro” means hope. The average Ghanaian makes \$420 a year. Yet even the poorest of poor will dance to celebrate a friend’s birthday. I find that in America there is an invisible wall that exists between strangers. In most African countries, there are no walls that separate brother from brother and sister from sister. The bond as human beings is naturally acknowledged. Even I, a Colombian American, was accepted into the culture as “Sista Efia.”

Everyday I think about the children. I have a great appreciation for West African culture, and I sometimes find that I am disgusted by the way some Americans live. My hope is that the children will remember what I taught them about verbs and addition. I hope that one day the money that America donates to AIDS victims will actually get to the AIDS victims. I also hope that I can make a difference in more people’s lives.

There was a tie for third place between Andrea Bolivar and Rebecca LaGrandeur. Andrea is from North Providence, Rhode Island and went on a Team Mission program to Ghana.