

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place Winner for AFS International's "My Different View" Essay Contest

Rebecca LaGrandeur

#### My Different View

I lay in the blackness with the heat and humidity pressing down on me. My eyes fixated on the only picture in my windowless room – one of a polar bear, the irony made me smile. I was silently striving to put the pieces of the puzzle that was my life in Ghana together. I had come to Accra on the AFS Team Mission program to help at an orphanage and live with a host family. Accra is just one developing city of thousands worldwide that you can smell before you can see because of burning garbage and car exhaust, where you have to step over open sewers with fish parts and human feces, and abandoned children roam the streets. It was for these children that I came to Ghana...or so I thought. I was expecting to fall in love with the orphans, the hope of a continent gushing from their smiles, and that I did.

I felt I was accomplishing things at the orphanage; we had attached new mosquito nets, renovated and planted a garden, worked in the classrooms teaching English and math, and just hugged the kids. But something deeper was bothering me. When I was with my host family, they constantly questioned my ability to have the facts right. Whether we were discussing the fact that all races indeed had equal voting rights in America or that learning to speak Japanese in school had value, they constantly doubted and questioned me. I couldn't figure it out, but one evening I experienced an epiphany while watching Shrek. (Not the usual setting for an epiphany...) We normally watched Nigerian movies so that night's film was special. My 20-year-old sisters, Rita and Eva, sat on the couch with me. I enjoyed their lighthearted humor, such as when the power went out (as it did daily in Accra), and they joked that I glowed in the dark like an alien because of my light skin. However, during Shrek they felt compelled to quietly explain the plot to me. When I laughed at one of subtle references to American pop culture, they corrected me and said, "No, Becky, that is not funny". I didn't try to explain how the monster chasing a crowd out of one Starbucks across the street to another Starbucks was humorous. But at that moment the pieces fell together. Over the month or so that I had lived with them, they had evaluated me and decided subconsciously that *I was the one who needed help*. In their minds how could a normal seventeen-year-old not know how to pound cassava root into paste with a long stick, or know how to wash their clothes in one bucket, or believe in voodoo as was reported on the

nightly news. Their frame of reference was such that the things I knew and valued were suspect or insignificant because they were so different from their reality.

The next day I found myself in a different state of mind. I no longer looked into the eyes of these orphans and thought, “Oh, I want to save all the children”. Instead I thought, “How are we as peers of this generation going to solve our world problems when the very reality which we live and our perceptions of the world are so completely different?” As the weeks went on I realized more and more that even the word “perspective” was not an adequate word, for the views run in a swift, silent current deeper than material, traditional, and even cultural differences.

Before I went to Ghana I knew that there were huge world problems requiring international cooperation – malaria, AIDS, equitable land use, and global warming to name a few. However, my experience in Ghana helped me grasp that solutions will not come just with money and the desire to help. There must also be awareness that one’s perspective and values are a part of their culture and integrally embedded in them. I realized that night while watching Shrek, that the definition of the *helper* and *helpee* can become quite blurred. There are many people who want to help, but how do we start when such basic issues as what’s important in this world are defined so differently? To me this is a daunting question. I returned home with more than just the expected love for the orphans, but with this question that runs itself through my mind every day. My youthful idealism of “helping” has been tempered with adult realism. No matter how overwhelming the world’s problems, I still do believe in the ripple effect and hopefully last summer I was able to throw a few pebbles by broadening perspectives, but when I return to Africa I want to have the answers to some of my questions and be able to throw boulders.

There was a tie for third place between Andrea Bolivar and Rebecca LaGrandeur. Rebecca is from Salinas, California and also went on a Team Mission program to Ghana.