

Looking back on my experience as a Global Mamas intern during the past summer, a complex, intriguing portrayal is conjured in my mind, and immediately I am transported back to the nine weeks in which I *lived* Ghana. The sights, smells, and sensations I felt this summer, along with the unbelievable friendships formed and beautiful landscapes visited, have convinced me, without a doubt, that this summer was the most influential and incredible experience of my life thus far.

Before I volunteered in Ghana, I summarized my upcoming journey as an opportunity to learn about economic development and specific business skills. Though as a Global Mama intern I did gain understanding in both areas, the knowledge with which I returned far exceeded that which I expected. I learned not only about the depths of the kindness and intelligence of the Ghanaian people, but also a lot about myself. My summer was not so much about expanding my own knowledge in business, but instead, about experiencing a completely new and exciting culture. In fact, the impact that I left on the Ghanaian people was far less than that which they left on me.

I received my internship assignment before I arrived in Ghana, but once I got out of the taxi in Odamase-Krobo, the small town where the Global Mamas bead office was, my entire understanding of my tasks had changed. My first undertaking was to interview women associated with the NGO and compile financial information for the 2007 Annual Report. This first assignment was one of the most helpful and frustrating experiences in Ghana. Because this job involved delving into Ghanaian women's personal lives, I gained a better understanding of the everyday struggles of these women. Many of the

women I interviewed supported more than five children, including nieces and nephews, struggled to afford basic luxuries like electricity and running water, and regarded things such as health insurance as unattainable and incredible luxuries. Savings accounts were all but non-existent, and many of the women lived life day-to-day. Learning about these bead-makers' personal triumphs and struggles really illuminated the strengths of these fantastic women I met.

In fact, throughout my stint in West Africa, I was overwhelmed by the gracious hospitality of the Ghanaian people, and as time wore on, I came to the understanding that the people of Ghana are the most sincere, generous people I have ever met. This amazing characteristic of the country made my tasks, while sometimes frustrating, very rewarding. Most of my summer was actually spent interacting with the local people as I tried to obtain information for the office.

Currently, Global Mamas is an NGO that exports Ghanaian women's batik and beaded products to the U.S. and U.K., establishing new markets and supplying these women with a fair, consistent wage. I worked primarily in the bead office, which is the newer and more disorganized of the two divisions. Most of the beads that Global Mamas uses there in their products are obtained in the local market, through the market women there who serve as the intermediaries. The ultimate goal is to find the original bead-maker and pay market price to them, and I spent most of the summer traveling, trying to find bead-makers in villages who produced the beads we needed. Though on my original internship assignment, setting up a bead wholesale catalog seemed straightforward, in actuality, all of the background knowledge on these bead-makers needed to be established first.

As challenging as this task was, reminiscent of the ultimate “needle in the haystack” situation, my visits to the villages and towns around all of Ghana really gave me excellent insight into all facets of Ghanaian life. I was able to see both the capital city of Accra and the smallest villages like Sabrino, along with the coastal towns of Cape Coast and Takoradi and the northern Muslim areas, like Tamale. Ultimately, I compiled all of the information I learned and created a central database with every bead-maker’s information, great baseline data for the wholesale catalog.

Though the lack of organization and clarity of my tasks was sometimes frustrating, the Ghanaian people I interacted with every day made all the work completely purposeful. However, one of the greatest aspects of my summer experience in Ghana was the feeling that every day was an adventure. We volunteers would always summarize the day, laughing and sharing all of those moments that only happened in Ghana, and the stories and memories I retain from those nine weeks are incredible and sometimes hard to believe!

My favorite memories from the summer, though, come not necessarily through the work I did for Global Mamas, but from the friendships I sustained with many Ghanaians and other volunteers. Establishing close relationships with the bead-makers, market-women, and the producers of the Global Mamas products was definitely the highlight of my experience, and I hope to keep in touch with them all. In addition, the insights and perspectives I gained while sharing with the other Global Mamas volunteers, other NGO volunteers, and Peace Corps volunteers I met along the way, really enhanced my whole Ghanaian experience.

Looking back on my summer experience, I realize that each day was an incredible adventure, full of lessons and insights to be learned, amazing people to be met, and beautiful places to be visited. There is not one single aspect of my nine-week stint in Ghana that I would change; in fact, I wish I were there now! I know that this summer experience was literally life-changing, as now my entire career goals have shifted. In addition, this summer produced fantastic friendships that will only strengthen as we recall our summer in Ghana. I am so thankful that I had the opportunity to grow while a Global Mamas intern, and I look forward to the day when I can return to Ghana.