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Women in Progress
Odumase, Ghana
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When I first heard that I was going to Ghana to work for Women in Progress, I had no idea what I was in for. I looked up Internet sites about Ghana, checked out books from the library and bombarded Ghanaian students with questions. I poured over the Women in Progress website looking for details about what I was going to experience. I had done everything I could think of to learn about this country, the people and the culture. However, even after all of this, nothing could have prepared me for the experience of a lifetime.

The organization that I worked for is called Women in Progress. They are a non-government organization working for the betterment of the people of Ghana. The organization connects artisans all over Ghana with export markets in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States. While the name may be misleading, Women in Progress works for the achievement and improvement of all Ghanaians – male and female. All they ask is that the worker be dedicated to their quality of work and future goals. The reason that the company operates mainly with women is because it is typically the woman that fits this description. The organization found that when a woman is paid her salary, the money goes to the advancement of her family, while Ghanaian men typically spend the money on themselves first. Women in Progress gives back a great deal to these people, and the success of the organization reflects the success of the Ghanaians working with them. This was the organization that I am proud to say I had the opportunity to work for.

Stepping off the plane in Accra, Ghana, was the first time I had laid eyes on Africa. It was not the prairie fields and roaming antelope of *The Lion King*, and it was definitely like nothing I had ever seen before. The new sites, smells and sounds were overwhelming at first but

would eventually come to feel like home. After several hours in a taxi, I arrived in Odumase. The first day we were given a quick tour of the town and a breeze through the market, and then we got to work.

I was assigned several interconnected projects based on the interests that I expressed to the organization. My assignment was especially fulfilling in that another volunteer was assigned to work with me. I had a partner every step of the way. Every year, Women in Progress conducts interviews with each man and woman working with them in order to evaluate the impact that the organization is having and the general status of the workers. Along with several other volunteers, I conducted these interviews with market women, bead makers, and the women who worked in the Center. After the interviews, I compiled the information to be used in the yearly report. Next, I started on a new endeavor for Women in Progress – a wholesale bead catalog. I worked on taking pictures, organizing beads into categories and a format for the layout of the catalog. Later in the summer, I did much of the legwork for a new bead-making workshop for tourists. I wrote letters to travel guides, figured out the logistics of the workshop and worked one-on-one with a local bead maker who was assigned to run the project. The organization also had a special assignment for the volunteers living in Odumase. The goal of Women in Progress is to give back as much as possible to the actual bead maker or artisan. Currently WIP is buying many of its beads from market women who are not the actual producer but rather middlemen. Our assignment throughout the summer was to go into the surrounding villages and find the bead makers. In addition to these projects I had smaller assignments such as implementing an inventory system, teaching several Ghanaians computer and typing skills and creating a new orientation guide for the Odumase volunteer site.

Women in Progress did an amazing job matching my interests to my summer assignments. I enjoyed working one-on-one with the women during the interviews, traveling to the rural villages to find the bead makers and doing research for the new bead catalog. While it was frustrating at first getting used to the Ghanaian way of business, I eventually came to respect their flexibility. I believe that my research and Excel spreadsheets will be very useful to the organization and future volunteers. The knowledge of the location of the bead makers should especially help all volunteers in their pursuits in Odumase. Even though I know that my work was valuable to the advancement of the organization, I believe that I gained the most from the experience.

My time in Ghana made me realize all of the day -to-day luxuries that I never notice. I do not want to sound like I came back a totally changed person, because I didn't. I am still a rampant consumer who eats preservatives and enjoys a hot shower. It is more the mental luxuries that I have stopped taking for granted. In our interviews with the women, we asked the question, "If you could do anything at all, what would you do?" Many of the women had a hard time coming up with something. They usually answered, "but I have to work." In their world, they do not have the luxury of dreaming of the same lives I can dream of. Their world has tight limits set upon them by their poverty and lack of education. These women could not see past their daily responsibilities because they were never taught how to do so. I now realize that not only do I have material possessions that these women could only hope for, I also have a mental freedom that has never been afforded to them. For this, I am now grateful.

Women in Progress has also reinforced my goals, opened my eyes to new possibilities and helped me to focus my academic career. Before I headed off to Ghana I had a fairly limited view of my choices post graduation. I had dreams of going off and "saving the world," but no

real prospects or plans to do so. Pre-Ghana, I knew I could go to graduate school or join the ranks in the business world, but that was it. I had a vague idea that there were people who did venture off to far away places and did things I had only dreamed of, but this was only a notion. I had never seen it. Ghana let me in, let me see that it was possible. People can travel the world and do the work they love. I could make an impact – slight as it may be. I realize now that I should focus my course work on what I want to do, not what the business school tells me I should want to do. I do not need to work for a Fortune 500. In fact, my plans for the future now include a couple years in the Peace Corps. Not to sound cliché, but this experience really did broaden my view of the world and the possibilities for my future.