

The following report is from Sarah Mackie, a resident of Birchwood who received a grant from Birchwood Town Council towards a trip she made to Ghana in 2005 to help local people renovate a pre-school there.

“I wish to pass on my thanks to Birchwood Town Council for helping to give me the opportunity to go to Ghana. It was an amazing experience.

Thank you

Sarah Mackie”

Some local phrases:

baraca – thank you

ansumma – good morning

essa – and you

njedejenyay – did you sleep well?

murr – yes

nansala – white person

Kaleo na – Chief of Kaleo

In 2004 I was lucky enough to spend six weeks with a group of 12 other volunteers working within a local community in Sri Lanka. The project involved some teaching, but the major part of our time was spent renovating a pre-school. The experience was so amazing that I volunteered to do a similar project in the summer of 2005.

The project I joined, organised by the Lasailian Developing Worlds Projects, was in Kaleo, situated in the remote Upper West Region of Ghana. I was going to be working with a group of twelve other young people from all over Britain, in the 15th year that the project has been running.

We met for the first time at Heathrow Airport and set off on our 16 hour journey, via Nairobi and on to Accra. After a short stay in Accra we left at 2.00 am for Kaleo, where we were to spend the next six weeks. Sixteen people in a mini bus was a tight squeeze. By this time we had gained a few extra people who wanted a lift to Kaleo, with their sacks of oranges, yams and bananas! Our bags went on the roof of the mini bus.

On the way, I noticed all the signs were in English. English is the one language everyone in Ghana speaks, because they have so many different dialects. We stopped to change our money into ‘cedis’. Our leader, Brother John, changed all the money for us. He came out with a rucksack full, and we all got two huge wads in elastic bands!

We slept and chatted excitedly most of the way until about 5.00 am when we left the tarmac and hit dirt tracks. The rest of the journey was bumpy to say the least. When we initially set off we wondered why we had so many spare tyres; naively I thought maybe we had picked them up in Kaleo, until we had our second puncture and all had to get off the bus again while it was repaired. Then a game of musical tyres was played – the least burst tyres were swapped for the worst burst ones!

We eventually arrived in Kaleo. Our accommodation was in the centre of the high school compound – the girls had four bunk beds with wooden slats – no mattress – in one tiny room. The lads had two bunk beds in the same size room and Brother John had his own room with a double bed! Our room was so hot it was like a steam room.

Kaleo itself was very green, not how I expected Africa to be at all, it was more like the Lake District, but it was the rainy season. It may be different in drought season.

We cooked and cleaned for ourselves and used the local pump for washing and for our drinking water. Some ladies within the community brought our water for the showers, which were ice cold. They did this as a kind of payment to us for helping with the project. We also had our own watchman/bodyguard, Peter, who was fantastic. He helped when we ran out of gas and couldn't get the charcoal burner to work; sat and guarded our dorms whilst we went out on a day trip, and protected us from whatever/whoever else!!

As we lived on the high school campus, students were passing us all day. The rest of the community live around the main road, about 10 – 15 minutes walk away, lined with shop huts. The huts for living in were behind those. Everyone 'greet' all day long and if you don't greet every person you pass it is regarded as bad manners. We soon became old hands at it!

On the first Monday we were given our action plan by Augustine, our foreman, which was to build a water tower for the nearly completed primary school. This was going to involve digging about 2.5 metres down for the foundations, then creating six sets of scaffolding and moulds to build the concrete steel reinforced struts for the tower to sit on. Each of the six had to be about 4 metres tall. We were also scheduled to roof the main dining hall, which was in use but only had a shell of a roof, and to slope the land away from the building as when it rained the water ran towards it!

The first day on site we moved giant breeze blocks and weeded trees like they were normal weeds all morning. By lunch my arms were like jelly and my ankles and arms were cut from bushes and blocks, but we got the afternoon off because, they said, they were breaking us in gently – my arms told me a different story!

We soon got into the routine of working though and became quite a team. Towards the end of the project I helped to make the steel reinforcement rods for the septic tank. It was good fun, but hard work.

The locals sometimes turned up in teams. Some had paid jobs and some didn't. They came to work and help on the project for free, apparently because of the example we had set in helping their community.

At the weekends we went on visits to see the local sights. One such trip was to Mount Ombu, on the back of Chief Michael's pick-up truck. We had permission from the local Chief and Elders to walk up it and had to pay the Chief of Ombu a bottle of gin and 2000 cedis (about a pound) to go up the mountain. The Elders and Chief had deliberated for a while before deciding that we were allowed to go with a guide. We were, however, told we were not allowed to urinate on the mountain!

During another weekend, we got up at the crack of dawn to get to the hippo sanctuary. We went in the mini bus; it was so much quicker than the pick-up truck. There was a pretty good chance of seeing hippos on the Black Volta (that was distinctly orange)! It was stunning and so peaceful. We had two canoes and had to keep bailing the water out. We spent two hours floating up and down the river. It was brilliant - but we didn't see any hippos.

We met many British and American volunteers. One volunteer told us about his experience of the education system in Ghana. He was working at the high school where we were staying, and he said that the students and teachers rarely show up before 10.00 am, even though school was from 7.30 am to 2.30 pm! To compensate for this, they have graduate students working in the classes to give the students more assistance with their work. The graduate students do this because they can wait up to a year before they receive their results/degree. They officially get paid for this service, but apparently none of them where we were had ever actually been paid yet!

Children in Ghana seem to have their own independent lives from as young as the age of two onwards. They learn to carry cans on their heads at an early age, as getting water is the official job of the children for the families. Everything is carried on heads, even handbags and suitcases with wheels.

We also went to a primary school to do some teaching, taking all the books and toys we had brought for them. We saw the first school the Lasallian project had built in Kaleo. It was also the first school built in the Upper West region. At the time of our visit it was the school holidays, but most of the children turned up in their school uniforms to meet the 'Nanasalas'. I taught a little girl how to do a magic trick. She was amazed, but she soon got the hang of it before we left. When I gave her the puzzle she was really genuinely grateful and held my hand for ages, she wouldn't let me go; it really touched me.

On the last day I went with Brother John to meet a man called Damian, who had made Brother John a pair of trousers on his first trip to Ghana in 1994. We went out to the main road and asked for 'Damian the Tailor'. We were taken to his house but he was not in; and then to his sister's house; then his daughters found him and took us to him. Whilst we were chatting to Damian a small child started crying, apparently because I was the first 'nansala' she had ever seen and she was frightened of me! Her mother tried to bring her to me but every time she did, the crying got louder.

When our time at the project was over, it was really sad leaving our compound. The journey back to Accra took no time at all on our new bus, christened 'Excalibur'. We arrived in Accra hours earlier than expected having had absolutely no punctures at all.

However, when we got off the bus I could hardly walk. My legs had turned septic with mosquito bites over the last few days, and were extremely swollen. They were really painful. Brother John couldn't believe how bad they were and took a picture when we were at the airport in Kenya, because no one would believe him otherwise.

I have tried to write some of my experience into this report, but it's hard to put what I feel into writing. It was just a genuinely amazing experience. My visit to Ghana was not such a life changing experience in such an obvious way as my first visit to Sri

Lanka, but I think I have learned a lot more about myself; as well as the importance of being part of a closely knit society or family. It has also made me more aware of the things I value and it has confirmed what I want to achieve in life.

The project is a really worthwhile one and although some people may think that we should have just sent the money for the local people to do the building and we should have done more teaching, I know for a fact that if we didn't turn up to the site everyday there would not have been enough labourers to make the site work. There is no machinery in Kaleo – it's all about manpower!

I would like to thank everyone who kept us in their prayers and thoughts and those that contributed to my sponsorship. You may like to know that the first student from the high school in Kaleo has just started university, the village are extremely proud of them. Hopefully there will be many more following in their footsteps in years to come.

PS: My legs are back to their original size!

Sarah Mackie