

## Ghana, Africa Journal

TRIP 1: 2/11/2009 – 2/18/2009

Day One-Two: 2/11/2009 – 2/12/2009

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I wish I could say that the flight to Ghana was uneventful, but then I would be lying to you all. The adventure actually began before we ever left Des Moines, Iowa. As I was walking into the airport I decided I could stuff one more item into my overly packed suitcase. This was not a very good idea because that one extra item must have made the bag slightly overstuffed, and the zipper ripped while trying to close it. I was forced to buy an orange (and if I was really honest, pink) duffel bag for my first trip to Ghana!!

After the bag situation was taken care of it was time to check in and settle in for a long, exciting trip to Africa. But, things would not be that easy. Our first flight was scheduled to fly into Chicago, and we found out it had decided to thunderstorm with wind gusts of 40mph there. So, our original flight was canceled but they put us on the only other flight going to Chicago that day. Since we were scheduled to catch a few other connections throughout the world in order to arrive in Ghana, they had to keep us on track and on time.

Once we finally made it to the gate we were ready to head out. The flight to Chicago was a little exciting as we never were allowed to take our seatbelts off and I thought I was on the worst rollercoaster ride of my life. However, we made it to Chicago safe and sound and we soon would be getting on our connection flight to Frankfurt, Germany and then to Ghana, Africa.

We caught our connection in Germany with time to spare and hopped on the plane to Ghana, or so we thought. After another seven hours of flying we were finally landing, except somehow we were landing in Lagos, Nigeria. Chris Gardner (who was traveling with me) and I looked at each other like “Did we just get on the wrong plane for seven hours?” Luckily the stewardess ensured us we were on the correct flight but we had to stop in Lagos first. She also added that she did not recommend that we leave the plane because Nigeria is not the safest place for foreigners.

We stayed on the plane and waited about one hour and soon we were back in the air off to Ghana, Africa. It was about a 45 minute flight to Ghana and we soon landed and hopped off the plane. To our amazement we were in the middle of a runway and a bus took us up to where we were supposed to pick our luggage up at.

We thought the journey to Ghana was over but to our bewilderment the evening was just beginning. As Chris and I stood around a 16<sup>th</sup> century baggage terminal waiting for our luggage we noticed that nearly an hour had passed and there were no passengers around us. We were alone with NO LUGGAGE. We ventured over to the “Lost and Found” counter and the desk clerks said ‘we hope your luggage arrives

tomorrow' !! At least that is what we think they said. They took our names and said to stop by tomorrow to see if our luggage had arrived.

So, we were in Ghana, Africa with no luggage but I guess who really cared - we were finally there. Pastor Sam was at the airport to meet us and drive us to the City of Ho (which was the former capital of Ghana). Pastor Sam is the individual helping to coordinate our adoption (on the Ghana end of things) of a little 3 year old boy named Solomon. We met Sam and his wife directly outside the airport and after a quick stop at a local convenient store we were on our way to Ho. Chris and I were under the assumption that the city we were heading to was only about 20 minutes away from the airport but soon to our surprise we were on another three hour journey to Ho.

Immediately after leaving the airport in Accra we would begin seeing what Ghana, Africa was all about. To sum it up as quickly as possible, there were people everywhere and every few miles we traveled we went through a new village. There was poverty like I have never seen before with many people living in small clay and straw huts attempting to sell items along the road. As we entered each village there were manmade speed bumps on the road every 100 feet or so. These speed bumps are created by the digging of holes in the road that cover the width of any particular street. There is no speeding through a village and if you decided to try, well, let's just say one of these manmade speed bumps would be sure to flip your car upside down.

After three hours we finally arrived in Ho and our final destination for the day: The Freedom Hotel. We entered our rooms took a shower with ice cold water and we were soon asleep excited for what the next day may bring.

Day 3: 2/13/2009

On Day 3 I was up early with the sunrise, not by choice, but because the rooster right outside my room decided it was time for everyone to wake up. The good news was the rooster was not alone. The Freedom Hotel cleaning staff also decided that west african rap music was best played at sunrise. With the rooster crowing, the music playing, and the excitement I had since today was the day I would meet Solomon, I decided it was time to get up and take another ice cold shower and head to breakfast.

As I went down to breakfast I quickly took in the sights and sounds of a busy village all around us selling every item under the sun. It was quite a shock as I had never seen anything like it before. The poverty that many of the people were living in was unbelievable. As I was taking in the town, Pastor Sam called us in for breakfast and soon Solomon would be arriving with his village's pastor as well as his parents.

We quickly ate our breakfast and finally Solomon had arrived. It was an incredible meeting and I was able to find out a lot of information about him and his situation. His mother and father are both still alive but have turned him over to the social service welfare system in Ho to be adopted. Because of the extreme poverty they come from they are not able to care for him. His father also said that he wanted

an opportunity for his son that he and his wife could not provide, and an opportunity he, himself, had never been given.

We spent the next few hours together enjoying a welcome book of photos Janel had made for him. We also took a trip to the court house which was a small room in the middle of the village to have papers signed. Then we ate a quick lunch before it was our time to leave and for Solomon to return to his village. Once the U.S. Embassy approves Solomon's visa and citizenship into the United States we will be able to return to Ghana and bring Solomon to the U.S. This was no question the most difficult thing I had experienced in a long time...to leave him behind for another couple months until we have received the final approval. I guess all I can do is pray that the Lord looks out for him until we return. The other comfort I receive is that Pastor Sam has taken an active role in Solomon's life. He is actually going to take him in for the majority of the waiting period to help him become accustomed to a more structured life, and to also begin the process of teaching him some English before we come back.

After our visit was complete with Solomon it was time for Chris and I to head to the Right to Dream Academy to begin formulating the vision for the establishment of the basketball academy in Ghana. Pastor Sam drove us about 50 miles into a small village somewhere in the mountains. He dropped us off on the side of the road next to a red tah tah car with two Ghanaians in the front seats. We hopped in the car since it appeared they were going to be responsible for taking us to the academy.

After about another hour we finally arrived at the academy and it was the most remarkable thing I had ever seen. The Right to Dream Academy currently is comprised of 50 of the best futbol (soccer) players in the country. The kids are selected from the various villages around the country to attend the academy which includes a complete education, housing, food, and of course a lot of futbol training.

We were able to watch two of the Right to Dream teams participate in matches against other local clubs. I walked away seeing some of the best futbol players I have ever seen. Even more amazing was the athletic ability each player had.

Following the games we quickly toured the facility which was very simple. The director (Tom Vernon) told us he tries to keep it as simple as possible in order to not overwhelm the kids. Over 85% of the kids attending the academy were used to living on less than \$1 a day in their home villages. Just receiving three meals each day at the academy makes these boys happy. The players would have no chance of receiving an education without being given the opportunity to play and train at the academy. Most of the athletes that first attend the academy between the ages of 10-12 have never had any education and typically speak no English. The amazing thing about the academy is that it began just 10 years ago and today has over 25 kids in the United States at prestigious boarding schools. Many are in schools on the East Coast as they finish their high school education. Some of their graduated athletes are also in colleges such as Stanford, University of California Santa Barbara, Bucknell, and Boston U, just to name a few.

They also have many of their past athletes currently playing in the MLS (which is the professional soccer organization in the United States) and some are playing professional soccer in Europe. I was simply blown away today by what I saw, especially when considering the poverty that these kids came from.

Following our tour we went back to Tom's house (director of Right to Dream) as that is where we would be spending the next few nights. We joined his family for dinner, exchanged ideas regarding the future basketball portion of Right to Dream, and then called it an early night as more big plans were in store for tomorrow.

Day 4: 2/14/2009

Today is Valentine's day, the first time I have been away from Janel on Valentines since we started dating. As I thought through that, and about being so far away from family, I certainly began to realize just how important they are to me and how much I missed them already. But I know that God has me in Africa for a reason and we are going to find out why.

We headed out for another day around 9am as one of the local basketball directors (named Isacc) had scheduled a 17U-18U game for us at a local school in Ghana. Seeing this game would help me to get my arms around the local talent and see just what type of project we were getting ourselves into.

We arrived at the court just as the game was beginning and to my surprise the courts were nothing like the United States. The court was an outside playground court with the hoops so mangled that each hoop only stood at about nine and a half feet.

Despite the court, it was a lot of fun to watch and to see the potential that is in many of the kids. The athletic ability is incredible but the skill level is drastically behind the United States. Most guys were jumping off the wrong foot when shooting lay-ups and other little things that I often take for granted. The other item that must be noted was that the boys participating only came from the local Accra area, which is the current capital, but there were no players from the neighboring villages and towns.

Following the game I had the opportunity to talk with the boys, show them some drills, and provide a few encouraging words. Afterwards we jumped back into the car and headed to the new location for the Right to Dream facility.

The Right to Dream recently purchased 31 acres of land around the Volta River for its full construction of a new school, dorms, cafeteria, futbol fields, and hopefully a basketball training area as well. As we arrived there was a ton of construction going on with the building of dorms and school as well as the leveling out of the soccer fields. The construction process is nothing like that in the United States. Every building is made out of concrete blocks that are made directly on site with the oldest, most primitive tools I have ever seen. It is a very slow and demanding process but it allowed me to get a vision for the location and also allowed Chris to talk with all of the contractors. Chris will be the head guy for the building of any basketball facilities.

After we finished our tour of the new site we decided to grab some lunch along the river at a small, locally owned restaurant. All they had on the menu was fish, fish, and some more fish. So, I ordered some fish that was caught that day in the Volta River. Now, in Ghana they do not make the food look

pretty. They catch the fish, put them on the grill, and then onto your plate. Despite the fish looking at me while I ate him, it was the BEST fish I have ever had.

Once we finished lunch we headed back up the mountain to the current location of the Right to Dream academy to watch a tryout. The tryout was with kids from villages as far as 4-5 hours away. They had roughly 25 kids trying out for three spots. The reason for such a small number being selected is that it costs about \$8,000 per year to put one kid through the academy. So, spots are highly sought because for most, this is the only way to receive an education and create any future for themselves. After the tryout they decided to keep 8 of the kids around throughout the weekend and sent about 17 kids home on a bus back to the village. To see the look on the faces of the kids who couldn't stay just killed my heart. But like Tom said, you just try to stay focused on the fact that you are going to have the opportunity to change the entire life of three young individuals.

Since the full day of traveling around Ghana had finally come to an end we were headed back to Tom's house to shower and freshen up. Then a few of the primary staff from the Right to Dream as well as Chris and I took in a wonderful dinner at an Italian Restaurant in the heart of Accra. I was able to order some lasagna and almost felt like I was back in the United States; well that was until I discovered they put ham in their lasagna. We were able to have some great conversations about working with kids from Ghana and how their lives and early upbringing are so drastically different from what occurs in the United States. Before we knew it the time was a little past midnight and we were all ready to get to bed after a very busy day!!

Day 5: 2/15/2009

Today was a day of rest. Chris and I had been running around Ghana, Africa since we arrived and we figured we might as well get a day of rest. Plus on Sundays the entire country basically shuts down to take a day of rest and attend church and other activities. So, we thought we would embrace the culture and join in, and oh how we did join in! We arose around noon then proceeded to lay on Tom's couch until about 2pm when we all decided to go and see the sights in Accra and get some pizza. Now the pizza might have been the first normal semblance of American food. Well, that was until we reached the Mama Mia's Pizzeria and went to order pepperoni known there as spicy salami. We are not sure it was actually pepperoni but it tasted good and we had no trouble inhaling our food.

Following our pizza, Tom and his wife Helen took us around to see the sights of Accra so we could familiarize ourselves with the town. Seems like a real fun experience until you understand that there are NO street signs, NO stop lights, and really NO real rules. We were in the middle of Accra and a guy came out of nowhere with 12 of the worst looking cows I have ever seen. During our tour we almost ran over 4-5 goats that decided to cross the road when least expected. We nearly had to go to the Ghana police station as Tom got stopped going down a one way road the wrong way. We were nearly killed by a couple hundred runaway taxis and of course we were all car sick for the fourth consecutive day because of the unique speed bumps randomly placed throughout the streets.

All kidding aside, it was great to see the town and we had the opportunity to take a drive along the coast. But, please do not confuse the coast of Accra with that of Monterey Bay. There were some

drastic differences but we will let all of you who read this experience see it for yourself when you have the opportunity to visit some day.

Day 6: 2/16/2009

We were back to the craziness today trying to finalize all of the plans for the basketball side of the Right to Dream Academy. We met up again with Isacc (area youth basketball director) for a tour of the most prestigious courts in Accra. We had the opportunity to visit 7 different basketball courts with only one being partially inside which was located at Lincoln School which is the American school in Ghana. When I say partially inside it had a large roof protecting the courts but the walls were wide open which makes things kind of tricky during the rainy season. The other interesting courts we had the opportunity to go to were at the University of Ghana. Isacc got us real excited about this court as he told us this was the location of the Western Africa National Championships. The only way to accurately describe the court would be to go your local park and that was the quality of the court. It was outside and on the out of bounds lines there was a drastic slope that led you to the grass.

The final court Isacc took us to was the court he said all the boys dreamed of playing on. You have to see the picture of it. Think of the city of New York and the worst hoops possible. This would describe the court the boys dreamed of playing on.

For me it really allowed me to put everything in prospective in particular with relation to the Attack basketball program. What is a dream for one kid is certainly a different dream to the next kid. This might have been one of the most incredible things we did while in Ghana as it just showed us how fortunate we are to have the facilities in basketball that we often take for granted in the United States.

Following our tour of the courts we headed up to the Right to Dream Academy. We watched the boys train for a while and then Chris and I headed to the West Palm hotel which was located in a small village right next to the academy. We got ready to prepare for dinner which would be with a handful of the boys from the academy. I didn't know it yet, but this would be the most eye opening experience of my life.

The boys arrived at 7pm to have dinner with us at the hotel along with the head of pastoral care at the academy named Harry. Whenever the academy has visitors they set up these dinners and select a few different boys to sit around and have conversations in English with adults. They will have to do this when they arrive into the United States, so they are prepared ahead of time.

Chris and I managed to pick up on two of the boys names, Skinny who was only 10, and Thomas who was 13. I could not tell you how to spell or pronounce the other two boys' names other than to say they were incredibly bright, in particular the captain of the team.

The time seemed to fly by that night as the boys shared their stories and told us of their journey to the Right to Dream Academy. We also had the opportunity to ask them many questions and I found some great joy in asking the programs captain many questions. I could see in his eyes the passion for his country and his desire to change it by the opportunity he has been given.

I asked him a series of questions and nothing was more interesting than the answers he gave. I have tried to recap the conversation below.

Question: How do you change the condition of the country and the extreme poverty that is seen in the villages?

Answer: The only way to change the country is from within. There is no possible way people from the outside can come in and change the conditions we suffer from. Individuals can come in and give us opportunities but in order for the country to change Ghanaians will have to be ultimately responsible for it.

Question: Well, what are some primary things that individuals will need from Ghana to make that type of impact?

Answer: No question it is an education. Nearly all individuals from the various villages in Ghana cannot read or write. We need to be educated!

Question: So, if a guy like myself came into your village and built a free school where everyone could attend and provided the best teachers, would it head a village like yours in the right direction?

Answer: That is the problem. The idea of receiving an education is not that simple. If we had a free school in my village that would be awesome because we would at least have something to do during the day. The problem is that it would be so hard to focus because as we are sitting in the school we are just thinking about how we can get some food because it is likely that we had not eaten in a day or two. We need people who can come and empower individuals from the country that will be willing to go back and empower others. Then over the course of time the circle of poverty and lack of education can eventually be broken.

As he finished answering all my questions a couple of hours had flown by and the boys had to return to the academy for curfew. The boys jumped back into the academy's bus, headed back to the place of opportunity that will give them the means to play a small part in breaking the cycle of poverty that they came from.

Day 7-8: 2/17/2009 – 2/18/2009

We woke up on Day 7 and met up with all of the staff from the Right to Dream Academy to finalize the plans for the basketball portion of the academy. After a few hours of meetings and conversation we established a plan and will look at opening the basketball academy on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009. We can only hope to have as great of an impact on lives as the soccer academy has had in Ghana. We know God has a plan for us here in Ghana and we will work hard at using the talents we have been given to develop everything He has desired.

Following our meetings we packed up and headed to the airport as it was finally time to return home. It seems like we just arrived in Ghana without our luggage and now here we were returning home. We can't wait to see our families and eat LOTS AND LOTS AND LOTS OF FOOD!

The only problem is we are 27 hours away from arriving back in the United States and oh how good will that McDonalds sign look!! Last note as we close out the journal from the first trip to Ghana. Whatever you do, if you plan on visiting Ghana, fly direct! Saving a few hundred dollars by grabbing forty different connections just is not worth it!! Can't wait to see what trip two will bring.