

# 2010-2011 Sally A. Webb International Service Fellowship

Autism Awareness Care & Training Center

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**Ghana, West Africa**



In Ghana, on the outskirts of the capital city of Accra, tucked behind nine-foot cement walls, stands the only autism care and support center in the country. Here is where Ghanaian families affected by autism will travel hours to visit in hopes of finding support for their children.

Founded in 1998, by Mrs. Serwah Quaynor, Autism Awareness Care and Training Center (AACT) is a local support and education institute for children with autism. AACT focuses on two primary areas (1) promoting awareness and understanding of autism in Ghana and (2) providing training and education services to children with autism in order for them to function more effectively in society.

Every Wednesday, I heaved myself into three separate tro-tro's (bus transportation system), clung tight as I weaved through two hours of traffic and walked or hopped the last five blocks, to finally arrive at AACT. Even though my "Ask me about Autism" t-shirt was shadowed with sweat, I was greeted by the fearless hugs of children.

I could volunteer at the center only on days I did not have classes because of the travel distance. That turned out to be one day a week, so like most development work, I had to adapt my goals. I had originally planned to use the Sally Webb Fellowship funds to help elaborate and strengthen the center's educational services within the classrooms. Upon arrival, I learned summer volunteers and interns had prepared excellent classroom materials, workshops and training sessions for the caretakers. After a few weeks of volunteering there became a surplus of classroom volunteers. I questioned if my presence, in an already over-stimulated environment, would actually do more harm than good. Further research, observation and discussion answered my question, and I requested to be moved to the office in order to work with on autism awareness campaigning and fundraising.

After 12 years, demands for AACT's services have become larger than the facility can handle and they struggle to meet fundamental needs of families affected by autism. Currently, the small facility is extremely overcrowded and the need for support grows as AACT successfully spreads autism awareness. In light of this, we decided a fundraiser was necessary. AACT's Administrator (Baaba Sam), Art Director (Mahama Ibrahim Mohammed), Administrative Intern, (Patricia Baa) and I worked together to host AACT's first ever arts and crafts fundraiser.

During the three day event, dubbed "*Autism & Creativity: Seeing things differently,*" AACT raised \$500.00, a major success within a developing country. We sold cards, bookmarks, and jewelry made by the students of AACT. Local artists donated additional jewelry, frames for the children's art and T-Shirts. Staff gave a slideshow presentation about autism in Ghana followed by musical performances featuring two local choirs. It was a wonderful first fundraiser with many lessons learned.

The biggest success was not the event itself, but the development and promotion of a sustainable resource for AACT. We saw great potential in the art fair and I decided to use all funds from the Sally Webb International Service Fellowship within the art

department. The Art Director, Ibrahim, and I worked together to use the money as efficiently and effectively as possible. With \$400.00 we purchased paper, paints, (local, acrylic and oil) scissors, paintbrushes, containers (general storage and paint), glue, turpentine, paper-mâché kits and a portfolio to protect the art against mold and mildew. The remaining \$100.00 was spent on project travel and Study Abroad application fee.

With an investment of \$400.00, the children created approximately \$2,000 worth of arts and crafts to sell for profit. Every Thursday, Ibrahim would lead the children through various art activities with supplies purchased through Dr. Webb's funds. Through the investment of the Sally Well Fellowship, AACT further developed and enhanced a sustainable and replicable source of income for the center.

My 130+ volunteer hours with AACT was a whirlwind of challenges and rewards. The challenge of hosting a fundraiser was three fold. First, we had to introduce the concept of "Autism" and dispel the prejudice, then explain how the disorder is an issue within Ghana, and finally why it was a cause worth donating towards. A persistent challenge was to insist I maintained control of the fund money and it was a struggle to communicate the concept of a "fellowship project" to the organization.

While challenges were large, the rewards were larger. I gained unique insight into another culture and the opportunity to work with people of extremely different nationalities and backgrounds while making dear friends. I learned to adapt my previous experiences and use a variety of new skills, which will be of great use in the future, both professionally and personally. On behalf of AACT, thank you to the Center for Service Learning and Dr. Sally Webb for all you have done.

