

MINDING MAMA CHARITY:

*Physical Therapy with
Cerebral Palsy Victims in Ghana*

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After stumbling off the plane into the care of a friendly Ghanaian named Fred I was escorted to sleeping quarters I can hardly remember. I fell sound asleep almost immediately with curiosities about what this strange country could possibly hold for me. Agykwa Hospital is a privately owned bush hospital in Nkawkaw Ghana. It is one of the best in the region, but also the most expensive.

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Ghana

I lived in the nurses' quarters on the premises next door to Auntie Sarah, an elderly nurse who helped with everything from fetching water to not passing out while watching the removal of a fatty tumor. My assigned duties included AIDS tests and stool examinations for worms, but these were not to be the last surprises Ghana held for me. After holding the hand of a 15 year old girl as she died from an attempted "herbal abortion," I knew that this was not the place for me. As much as I would have previously described myself as tough and callous, being surrounded by death and dying was just not something for which I was emotionally ready.

The following week I traveled in typically dangerous, crowded, and slightly odoriferous Ghanaian style to Kybei. Here the government hospital boasted a physiotherapy department with some, actual albeit antiquated, technology. After visiting hospital administrators and the Chief of the village, I was given permission to work as a physical therapist's assistant for the next two months. I strolled into town in search of Mama Charity, a larger-than-life woman who owned a provisions store and was prosperous by Ghanaian standards. She readily agreed to let me live with her for the duration of my visit. She is the most hospitable, caring, and loving woman I have ever met. I credit her completely with the many opportunities I have been able to take advantage of in Ghana, like attending engagement parties, learning to make fufu, and playing endless games of ska with the neighborhood kids. These opportunities gave me real insight into the daily life of Ghanaians.

For the next two amazing months, I began each day with a mile walk to the



hospital for my morning duties of working with our elder patients. Under Mr. Ntem's watchful eye,

I used heat, physical manipulation, exercise, and electrical stimulation to help them try to return function. I spent most afternoons working with several children with cerebral palsy, which was the most fulfilling portion of my work. After weeks of research in the small local libraries of Ghanaian villages and speaking with parents at the hospital I felt that I had a grasp of how cerebral palsy effected the children of Kybei. I invited the families, chief, doctors, and the mayor to an informational meeting and party for the kids. Utilizing a translator, I explained cerebral palsy and how the children had developed the condition then passed out handmade brochures, in both Twi and English, which detailed exercises and techniques for parents and friends. After the meeting and several overly appreciative speeches by parents and townspeople I presented each child with gifts. Kybei had become my home in Ghana. I had a family, friends, a job and a lifestyle yet I was ready for the next challenge.

I moved to Bepong, in the Eastern Region of Ghana where I lived in a small apartment with my hosts Fred and Rebeca and their 8 month old daughter Lola. Each day I would walk to the "charity home," Tomoni in the neighboring village of Oboo. It was an orphanage where 20 children ranging in age from 4 to 18 lived. They attended local schools and came back to do chores, homework, and farm a small plot of land. Daily the children would run to the road to greet



me singing a funny song about "the white lady who spoke too quickly". They had little adult supervision or interaction, so I made it my duty to plan fun, creative, and educational activities for them every day. We played cards, made beads from paper, friendship bracelets from thread and drew in the dirt. Due to the lack of supplies I simply dreamed up ways to use inexpensive things for day long

activities. I had no idea how resourceful I could be when necessary.

For my final day at Tomoni, I wanted the children to experience the joy of being a carefree kid., even if just for one afternoon. Although the explanations of the activities that I had planned were a bit laborious and at times down right comical, it was a success. I designed a massive scavenger hunt, which sent the children all over Bepong looking for



items from can tabs to chicken eggs, filled up dozens of water balloons for relay races and obstacle courses, and was overjoyed to be reminded of the simpler joys in life.

It continues to amaze me that, although my goal had been to learn about a new foreign country and its' medical practices, that I ended up learning so much about myself.

I now know that I can deal with death and fatal illness while entertaining hordes of kids who speak a different language using only string and dirt. I developed the kind of relationships in only a few months in Ghana that in the US had taken me years to develop and for this I will be forever grateful.