

**Title of Project:** Chambers for Peace

**Country:** Ghana

**Student:** Rachel A. McOwusu

**Student's Home Country:** Ghana

**Student's College:** Columbia University

In some areas of Ghana, many women and children are harassed, assaulted, and sometimes even raped mostly when walking alone in the darkness of the night to relieve themselves. This is due to lack of access to proper sanitation in their homes and within their communities. Inspired by the UN World Toilet Day on November 19, the goal of Chambers for Peace aimed to address gender-based violence with personal safety awareness through a 5-day series of workshops within the small village of Kwamoso. To enhance the security and privacy of women and girls, I am proud to say that a toilet facility was also built.

#### *Funding*

In addition to the Project for Peace grant, I received a \$300 grant from Dr. Ernest Ababio. \$300 from Rev. Samuel Okyere Amankwaa, which was used for other incurred expenses while undertaking the project such as transportation, food and calling cards. I also contributed \$200 of my own personal account.

#### *Project Description*

Chambers for Peace was initially supposed to be held in Akropong, Akuapim; however, due to safety concerns, the project was relocated to Kwamoso, Akuapim, a very poverty ridden village in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Kwamoso was an additional thirty-minute drive from the original location. As a result, there were significant delays in construction due to heavy rainfalls experienced in the area, shifts in financial management, adjustment of costs and many logistical obstacles. There were significant budget constraints; because of the instability of the exchange rate of the money in Ghana, prices for essential building materials were inflated, which in turn exceeded my budget. An architect sketched out the plan for the toilet facility. A quality surveyor checked the land and pin pointed the right area within the community where the latrine would be accessible to everyone. The community leader approached me about using the professionals in the village for the project in order to create jobs within the community, instead of bringing in workers from Accra. I thought carefully about it and decided to use the village professionals. In addition to supplying jobs, it would also eventually cut down on overall cost of the project. Being a native Ghanaian, there were no language or cultural barriers encountered.

Two weeks into the project, Rev. Amankwaa's car broke down. Our transportation had now turned into depending on the use of a taxi to commute. Since the commute was an hour and a half long, the taxi fares were really expensive and cutting into the budget. This deficit required us to decrease productivity to visit the site only 2-3 days per week, as opposed to our desired five days a week schedule.

In regards to the workshop portion of the project, we were able to utilize one week. Although I had hoped to start the workshops sooner, high school students were taking their college entrance exams known as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). There was speculation that the exams would be canceled, due to a rumor that the exams had been leaked. The exams were later in fact rescheduled two weeks later, which only afforded one week until the end of their summer vacation. Despite our set back, we finally began the workshops, using what little time we had left. While most workshops were mostly targeted towards women and girls, and boys, some men arrived to participate as well. Day 1 of the workshop series was focused on discussing the topic of gender violence, its prevalence in Ghana and the world at large, how to report any form of abuse and resources available for victims. Day 2 of the workshop focused on sexual and reproductive health. I felt it was best to separate this workshop between parents and students so both groups can have a safe space to discuss and ask questions. Ghanaians are now becoming more open to discussing sex whilst the topic was such a taboo to mention. Since most students were sexually active, I spoke to them about personal hygiene, abstinence and safe sex practices. Some people believe handing out free condoms promotes sexual activities, I

decided to only give condoms out to students who personally approached me and asked. We also discussed sexual assault and its impact on its victims. Both parents and students were educated on what to do when sexually assaulted and how victims of this type of violence can suffer sexual and reproductive health consequences, including forced and unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, and even death. Day 3 of the workshop addressed personal safety. Students worked collaboratively, to come up with safety plans on what to do if attacked and how to prevent being attacked. I included a martial art instructor who came to teach the women and girls rape defense techniques. Day 4 of the workshop was poetry day. Each student was asked to write a poem about something that has affected his or her life, some volunteered to share their poems. The students were very supportive of each other's stories about their struggles and fears. I held a group and individual counseling sessions afterwards to ensure the well being of each student. Day 5 of the workshop series was community day where most students and some parents showed up to partake in the community service project about keeping their environment clean. We spent the day cleaning around the village, and properly disposing of trash. Afterwards, I passed out personalized "Chambers for Peace" pencils and chocolates to the all students.

The building of the toilet facility didn't go as planned. I had originally estimated two months to complete the project but ended up taking three months instead. Excessive rainfall in the village contributed for the main delays in the project. Workmanship was also a contributing factor in the delay of construction because the workers kept delaying the work since I wasn't there to always supervise the project. In some instances, supplies for the building were even stolen, from which, I had to personally compensate for that cost out of pocket. As a result, I was not able to have the official grand opening ceremony as intended because upon my departure back to the United States, the workers were finishing up the back of the building. The whole village, about 200+ individuals benefited from this project especially the students since the latrine is located close to the school. Women and girls will benefit from this project in large part because they require facilities to manage menstrual hygiene instead of relieving themselves in nearby bushes. Chambers for Peace is self-sustainable because it was built to last more than 50+ years. Individuals in the village will take turn maintaining the toilet facility and continue to spread awareness about sexual assault. The long-term impact of this project is sustaining a cleaner environment, providing access to support services, and contributing to a decrease in cases of reported gender-based violence. Many individuals have started building latrines in communities around the world, which proves there is a need for these types of projects, and this is just the beginning.

My definition of Peace is living a healthy and comfortable lifestyle with little to no worries, knowing there is no conflict or harm being done, and everyone doing what they love, being happy and at ease. Chambers for Peace contributed to peace by raising awareness about gender based violence and sexual health, empowering women and children to speak up about sexual assault, and offering ways to protect themselves if and when attacked. The toilet facility gives a private space for women and children at their most vulnerable state, which in turn gives them the peace of mind to a basic human right. Through the project workshop series, I learned that many middle and high school students I worked with were having sex with adults for money due to economic hardships. Most of the students are exploited. They underwent numerous abortions and the hardship of dropping out of school due to unexpected pregnancies, STD(s) and in some cases, AIDS. I also learned many women and girls were victims of rape and sexual harassment. My project made me think about the billions of people around the world that lack access to a basic human right, living their life in fear everyday. I think about the impact having a toilet in their homes or within their communities would make in their lives, giving them the peace of mind the people of Kwamoso, Akuapim have attained. Through this project, I learned that a simple initiative from a dedicated individual willing to make a difference in one's life can have a huge impact on a community.

*"Perpetrators of sexual assault should be sentenced to life in prison along with murderers because not only do you kill your victim(s) emotionally, they are affected physically and psychologically. That horrific act cannot be forgotten; it changes ones behavior, life choices and how they view the world" - Rachel A. McOwusu*

## Pictures



Community Service Day



Day 2: Sexual and Reproductive Health Workshop