



ON COMMON GROUND...

WSMS TEACHERS FIND **Inspiration** AND **Enrichment** IN **GHANA**

“As always with any trip, one starts by thinking, ‘This is the way it will happen. First this, then this, and it will end like this,’” remarks Joan Shisler, master teacher and beloved member of the WSMS faculty since 1980.

Joan was one of seven WSMS teachers to travel to Ghana this past summer for the school’s very first international faculty development trip. She explains, “Speaking for myself, I thought we would come into a classroom, watch children and teachers in their lessons, get to work with the children, show them some

games, sing some songs, and show activities that the donated equipment could be used for.” While some of these events came to pass, nothing could have prepared Joan and her fellow travelers for the extent to which they would be invited into the lives and culture of the Ghanaian people, or for the lessons they would learn as a result. Joan describes the journey as “a thoroughly incredible, exciting, and rewarding trip...that will be etched in my mind for the rest of my life,” and the other teachers—Teresa Chi (Garden), Katherine Fordney (3Wpm), Nanci Guartofierro (1W), Margot Mack (LAP), Marcia Polanco (3E), and Windy Wellington (LAP)—heartily concur.

AN INTERNATIONAL TEACHER DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITY IS BORN

The idea for an international teacher enrichment program grew out of WSMS’s long-standing commitment to providing exceptional opportunities for teachers to expand their horizons, enrich their skills, and share with colleagues the insights and techniques they have gained. In the summer of 2009 two WSMS teachers, Megan Cahill and Margot Mack, accompanied WSMS parent and Sarah Lawrence faculty member Catherine McKinley (Ephrem Davis, ’10, and Shalom Davis, 4W) on a research trip to Ghana. It was the teachers’ first trip to the continent of Africa. Catherine, on the other hand, is a Ghana insider, having worked there for several summers as a Fulbright scholar. Catherine’s wonderful contacts—the “Ghana family,” as Margot calls



them—and her special knowledge made it possible for Megan and Margot to experience the culture and people of Ghana in a way that is typically off-limits to tourists.

“The faces, lives, and roles of children factored heavily in my impression of the continent and culture,” says Margot about her trip last year. “What were the lives of young children like in contrast to the population of children I worked with while teaching? How does one put what she knows nothing of into context? Time? I thought to myself quietly, I will be back, I must.”

After a year of planning, the first international teacher development program in the school’s 47-year history was good to go. All teachers interested in traveling to Ghana over the summer were invited to submit an application. The seven participants were chosen by lottery. Catherine McKinley agreed to accompany the teachers as their guide. As is typical in our community, WSMS families participated in this endeavor as well, providing generously through their contributions of financial support, as well as gifts and supplies for the children and teachers in Ghana.

FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES... COME INSPIRATION AND RENEWAL

Each of the seven teachers, as you will see from the stories below, came away with a personal perspective on her experience. This diversity of ideas added spark to the faculty discussions that took place during the week of preparation preceding the opening of school in September. The following excerpts from the teachers’ travel notes provide a window into the creative and personal process by which excellent teachers become inspired and renewed and in turn become a source of inspiration to others. In addition, their collective experience will serve as a new lens through which to view what we do in the classroom, thus enabling all of us to find ever better ways of providing the best possible educational foundation for our students.

ARRIVAL

When arriving in Ghana last year I remember my brain on overload, awash with color, unfamiliar sounds, sights and smells...I was in love, overwhelmed, and at home at the same time. The energy of the market, the landscape with its deep red earth, the lush green of the tree canopy, and the openness in which I was received from the people I had the great fortune to meet, all had a deep impression on me.

—Margot Mack

My eyes did not know where to look from all the visual stimulation. I saw images that will stay with me forever. I felt the beaming sun on my body and I welcomed the misty rain. I constantly smelled the odor of burning garbage, the open sewage,

and other smells I could not identify. At times, I went to sleep and woke up to the sound of goats and roosters. The food was full of spices and at times too spicy for me to eat.

—Marcia Polanco

We drove around the market area—what a sight to see. It made the crowds of New York look quiet! So many people selling so much stuff! People are carrying everything from carrots to trays of apples to toothbrushes in baskets and bowls on their heads to sell! People set up at tables selling coconuts, people at colorfully painted shacks selling phone cards. It is a sensory feast!

—Nanci Guartofierro

I was not prepared for the absolute physical beauty of the people, and especially the children; glowing dark skin, white teeth, often garbed in traditional costume and barefoot. I saw young children saddled to the backs of children not much bigger than themselves, and children carrying wares on top of their heads either at market, running up to our van as we waited to move along, or just going from one place to another, perhaps home.

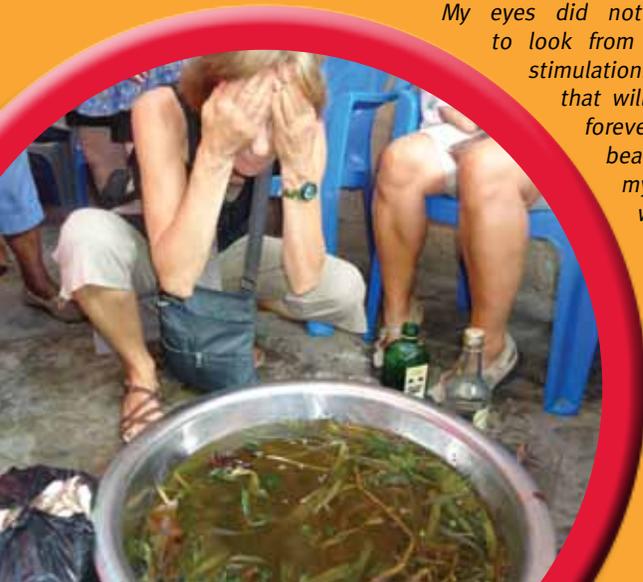
—Windy Wellington

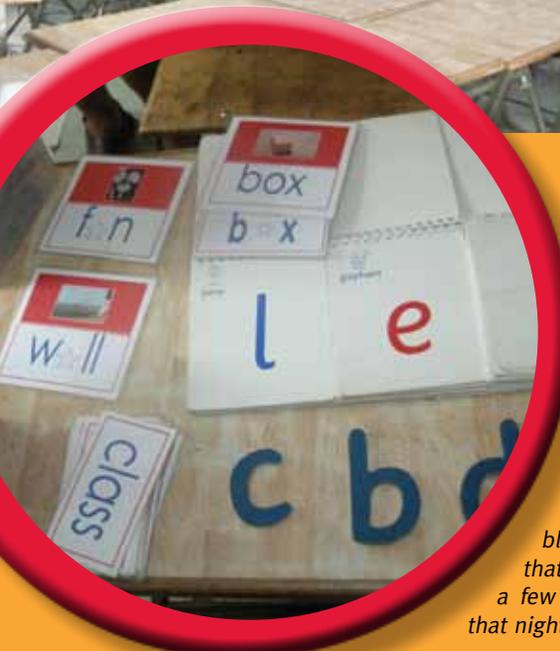
AN EXCEPTIONAL WELCOME

For all of the teachers, one of the most powerful and uplifting experiences was their three-day visit to the peaceful and verdant village of Tysome (pronounced *Shomay*) in a rural area outside of Accra.

We were welcomed into an outdoor meeting room and invited to take a seat in the chairs provided. When the head of the village came, he sat and silently regarded us. Then he said, “You are welcome.” It was remarkable how present this man was; he was calm and relaxed, and it seemed like he had the ability to really see us. After this we shared a drink, which was first dripped on the floor in honor of the ancestors. It’s lucky that we all drank, because afterwards we learned that refusing to drink would have been highly insulting.

The teachers had also gathered, and we sat to talk with them. At this point we offered the donations we had brought. As is the custom, we laid all the things we had brought—art





supplies, sporting equipment, candy, thirty pair of shoes, stuffed animals, gifts for the teachers—in front of them on the floor. The teachers admired these gifts, excitedly picking up and inspecting each thing. They thanked us heartily and gave us blessings. Then they said that they wanted to give a few things to the children that night. They were so excited!

By direction, the children—there were probably sixty of them—lined up and one by one were offered one piece of candy. This was the beginning of a huge exclamation of happiness. When the candy had been given, it was time for the stuffed animals, or chobis. Again, the children lined up and, from youngest to oldest, received their gift.... At one point a stuffed animal fell on the ground. Instead of claiming it, a young child gave it back to the teacher first.... In that moment I understood the respect and patience these young children were able to embody.

—Katherine Fordney



As thanks, the children proceeded to sing, dance, and play instruments for their guests for the next three hours.

I was deeply impressed and humbled watching the children wait patiently

in a double row while the Beanie Babies were distributed. Breathtaking was watching them dance with the Beans atop their heads or shoulders, or held lovingly to their bodies as they celebrated. In many ways, their lives are so rich. How is that instilled?

How does this experience inspire me as a person and educator? Preconceived ideas are just that. This experience magnifies for me the importance and appreciation of our similarities and differences, and of celebrating all.

—Windy

Children's faces that light up when singing or when receiving a small gift or sweet are the same as those of WSMS children. But at the same time the lives of the Ghanaian children are different in a way that is not easily understood by an outsider. What was their experience of us, with our digital cameras and sweets? As we sang "A Rum Sum Sum" under the eaves of a building as rain poured from the sky, the children smiled and joined in with our hand movements, making our connection with them no more complete than when our WSMS children take part...what joy!

We were greeted with the rhythmic drumming, singing, and dancing of young children that went on for hours. Who were we, what had we done to earn such a greeting? My heart ached; tears fell. It is easy to look at the differences in the way that these children are living, but what stood out to me was the happiness and sense of community that their lives seemed so full of, and that we were invited to be part of during our short visit.

—Margot

VALUING TIME, EACH OTHER, AND WHAT WE HAVE

Throughout the trip our teachers saw many similarities and differences between the Ghanaian culture and our own. They were particularly impressed by the importance Ghanaians place on respect, the value of time, and the appreciation for what one has.

For us, the slow, stately pace that people value and follow was a welcome change. The Ghanaian culture makes time for quality social exchanges. It's never just a quick hello; Ghanaians look each other in the eyes, greet each person they meet in a jolly manner....Even in the city, the goal of life is centered not on how fast exchanges can be made, but on the quality of the exchanges. The extra time allotted seems to affect children in a positive way. They seem grounded and settled. They don't seem stressed by their responsibilities; they take life one step at a time.

—Katherine

That said, teachers observed universal similarities as well:

I feel it was the brief time we spent in and on our way to Tysome that furthered my understanding of this continent the most....We were privileged to step into people's lives, to see how everyday folks—farmers, villagers, fishermen—lived, worshipped, existed. Collins, who guided us through these small villages, must have watched us in fascination. What could possibly be so captivating about everyday people living their lives? What became clear to me is that their lives are not lived so differently from ours. Although the structures that people lived in, the clothing that they wore, and the language

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—Margot Mack

that they spoke were different than ours, their existence on this planet is the same as ours. It is something we have heard again and again: we are more the same than we are different. But seeing it and living it are different than just giving lip service to it.

—Margot

VISITING ANOTHER SCHOOL

In Accra, the WSMS group visited the school/refuge at CAS (Catholic Action for Street Children, www.casghana.com), a local NGO whose mission is to assist and educate children living on the streets. Its director and co-founder is an engaging and dedicated Dutch missionary called Brother Jos (pronounced Yoos). CAS offers preschool classes for children ages 2 to 6 whose families live and work on the streets of Accra, as well as life skills classes for older street children.

Brother Jos told us how some of the workers go out to the streets to try to get the kids to come [to school]. Once the kids get there they need education in just some basic life skills, their version of Practical Life. There were kids doing laundry, sewing, and doing wood carvings. Jos said some of them just come to have a place to sleep during the day (they are open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.). Once they get the kids there they try to interest them in the educational aspect and encourage them to attend classes, but no one is forced. They keep track of where the children are so that if they don't come to the center in a while one of the workers goes out to try to find them. Once the children start to take part in these classes and seem motivated to learn, there is a farm where they can go work, and some even get to the point where the center can have them attend a regular school. Sad as the lives of some of the kids are, there was a definite aspect of hope, as some children who go through the program return to work there.

—Nanci

CAS was very grateful for all our donations; they were thrilled at our having brought needed supplies all the way from the United States....What I received from them, however, was tenfold. I had the opportunity to meet a man whose passion and love of children made him give up the “good life” and spend his time far from his native home, helping and protecting people who might not have someone else to protect them. I got to meet children who are trying to change their lives...for an uncertain and hopefully brighter

future. I was fortunate to sit with WSMS colleagues soaking up the information we were given, and then to learn even more from our discussions through the rest of the trip.

—Joan Shisler

OBSERVATIONS TO CHERISH AND GROW ON

Although interaction with schoolchildren was relatively limited during this trip, the teachers came away with a new outlook on larger aspects of life that will undoubtedly have a significant impact on their work in the classrooms at WSMS.

I went there thinking vaguely that I would bring back things to use in the classroom so the children could experience Ghana through objects like musical instruments, baskets, fabrics, etc., but what was most interesting to me was how people use what's available and don't waste....I did get some things for the classroom, but I've also been thinking of ways to just use what we already have. For example, I didn't get an African drum (which they make out of materials available there), but I think the water bottles for the coffee machine at WSMS would make great drums for our classrooms.

—Teresa Chi

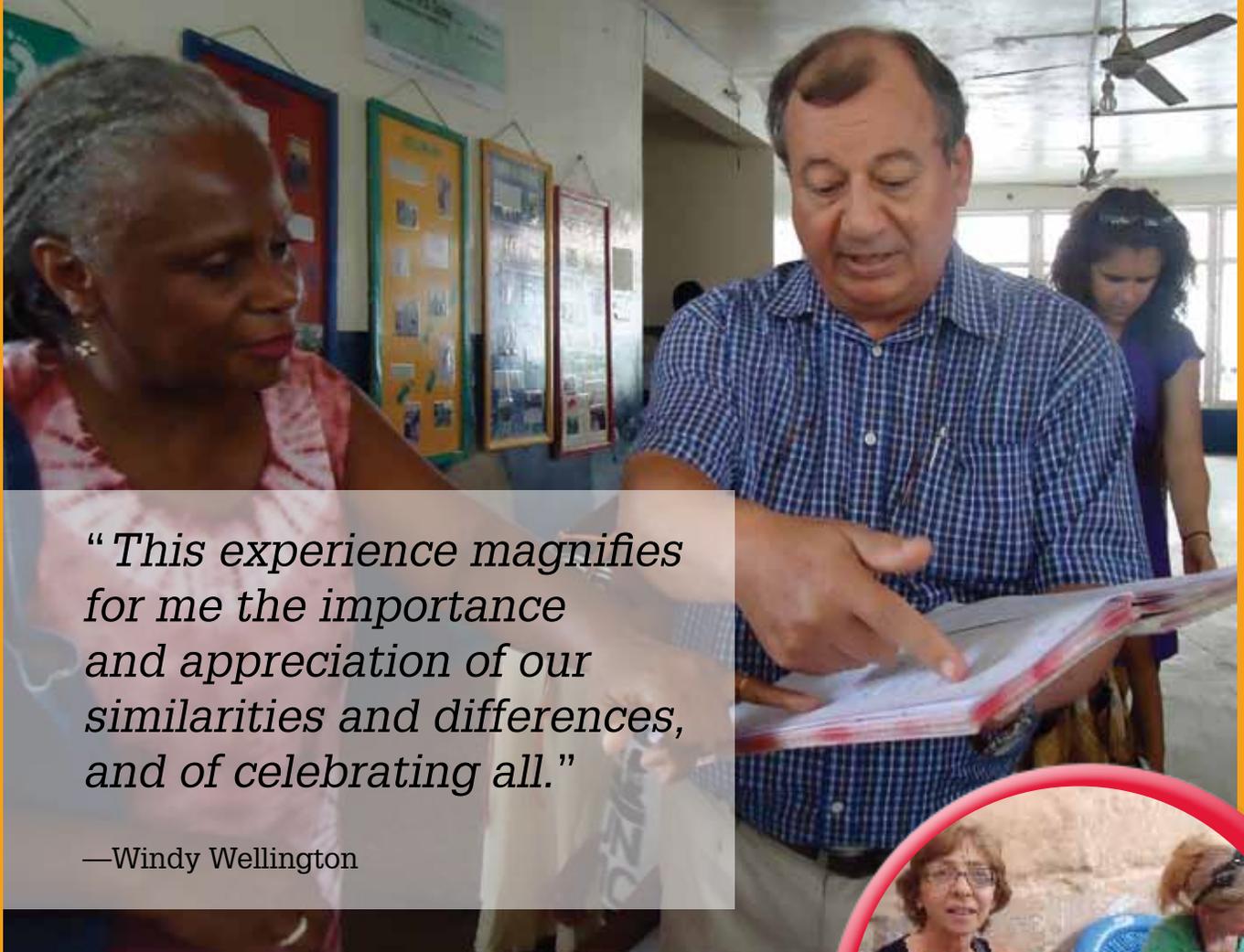
I have been inspired to take more time with children. New York City moves at a fast pace, but we have the luxury and the power to slow things down at WSMS. I saw in the Ghanaian children a peacefulness and steadiness that seemed to result from the lack of pressure to accomplish. Though doing well in school and studying are important to them, the pace allows for more time for socialization.

—Margot

At WSMS we ask children to be open to others whose lives and ideas may be very different from their own. My time in Ghana made me very aware of how awkward this can sometimes feel but how eye-opening it can be when you do try to set your own beliefs aside for a moment and really listen.

—Teresa





“This experience magnifies for me the importance and appreciation of our similarities and differences, and of celebrating all.”

—Windy Wellington

This experience has taught me that you don't need a lot. How easy our way of life has become....We all need to work as a community to help mankind and preserve Mother Nature and stop taking for granted what we have.

—Marcia

A FINAL THOUGHT FROM CATHERINE MCKINLEY, WSMS PARENT AND GHANA GUIDE

In Ghana, I got to experience WSMS from a new angle and fall in love with the teachers in the ways my children have. I simultaneously watched them become “babies” and students of Ghana: employing the skills they ask of their classrooms; experiencing wonder and pleasure; and being comfortably (and sometimes uncomfortably) stretched.

The Ghana group is back at school now, sharing what they have learned with faculty colleagues, children, and families; the planning for next year's international faculty development opportunity has begun; but the mark this first trip has left on the teachers, and the positive impact it will ultimately have on their students and the rest of us, are indelible.

