

Below are all of my emails to people who have sponsored my days in August and September. I have only quickly cleaned them up, so I apologize for any poor grammar, repetition, etc... Enjoy! Mark

From: Mark Abbott
To: Sara Williamson
Subject: 09-30-2010 - Your Day

Hey Sara,

Your day (September 30th) started out a bit frustrating, but turned into an amazing day!

I had been preparing for the big monthly staff meeting since the beginning of the week and I got to work early on the 30th so that I could get the room ready. I had arranged with the District Planner to borrow the District Assembly's new computer projector (the first and only one in the district). The Planner had said he'd be at his office before 8am, but he wasn't. I wound-up going over and getting it from him at 8:10 and having a brief conversation about how Canadians view time versus how it is viewed in Ghana.

It turned out to be OK that the projector was late, because not a single staff member showed up on time for the meeting! In their defense, the meeting date had been pulled up a week on short notice, so I sucked back my frustration. I managed to stay positive and when the Director came in at around 8:15 (even he was late!), we worked together on a few ideas using the projector, which turned out to be pretty productive.

People started filtering in and we finally started the meeting at 10:30am with 11 of the 15 staff present. We decided that we would make up the time we lost by continuing on the 14th. In the intro of the meeting, we introduced new meeting etiquette rules and discussed the value of time. We showed a simple equation that estimated the cost of the meeting at 300 GHC (~\$250), which seemed to impress people. The Director also highlighted the Team Initiatives that he and I have been discussing and told people that we'd be getting everyone involved soon (originally we had planned to get them involved in the meeting, but we had to modify the agenda with the shortened time available).

After the Director's intro, we let each staff member give a five minute update concerning their area, which was a new format for the meeting. I think everyone enjoyed getting to talk. They all focused on recent flooding when talking about challenges in the last month. They didn't seem very comfortable with bringing up successes, but there were a few like when the veterinarian mentioned that we are doing well with disease control in the district.

I Included numerous quotes in the PowerPoint that we used throughout the day from the Regional Director that he made at the recent regional meeting. The Director seemed to like this and it seemed to be effective with the staff. My favorite was "Let us never forget that lives depend on our work."

After the staff updates and a short break (it is a major pain in the ass trying to get people back after the breaks), we launched into an update of the biggest program currently underway - Block Farms. The Director started out with a slightly shortened version of the presentation he gave a couple of weeks ago at regional office, which I had helped him prepare. The purpose of the previous meeting was to present numbers in order to hold all of the districts accountable for the performance on the Block Farm program, and unfortunately this was pretty boring content for our meeting.

When he finished, I gave a presentation about Spheres of Influence and Control and talked about what was required for the second half of the Block Farm program to ensure it is successful. I used a picture of a man loading maize onto a truck and the maize leaking out of the bag, which seemed to really work well with people (post harvest losses in Ghana are estimated at 20%!).

After my short presentation, I broke everyone into three groups with one of the DAOs (managers) in each group. I spread them out between the three rooms that comprise our offices and had them do post-it-note brainstorming regarding challenges and solutions for the remainder of the Block Farm program. When we brought them all back together, each group presented and I wrote summary post-it-notes and stuck them on the wall with the Sphere of Influence/Control graphic projected over top. We then had a group discussion about the importance of turning the things we identify that we can influence and control into action items, so we summarized the action items and included them in the meeting minutes.

In the wrap up, everyone gave their impressions of the meeting, and it was a really good way to leave everything on a really positive note. They liked: the projector (it was the first time they had used one), that everyone contributed, the discussions, that the Director answered many of their questions and didn't talk too much, that it was interesting and nobody slept, the opportunity to learn to present, the nice atmosphere, and the new experience of group brainstorming.

During the day, I showed short clips from the movie Food Inc. and at the end of the day I played the whole movie. Around 8 people stuck around for it, coming in and out of the room. We had some good discussions that got me thinking about the contrast between farming here where it is too much a way of life and not enough a business, and back home where it is too much a business and not anymore much of a way of life for farmers.

After the meeting and movie ended, I went for dinner with one of the DAOs (managers). We had a great chat and connected on a personal basis. I asked him if he was happy (he's a hard guy to read) and he said he couldn't say yes or no – things could be better and they could be worse. He has three daughters and is trying to prepare to retire in eight years (there is mandatory retirement here at age 60), but it sounds like he has some financial challenges. I asked him why he thought I was here and he responded that he thought my government had sent me. I corrected him and tried to explain why I decided to come. 😊

Hope you are doing well. Thanks again for sponsoring me.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott
To: Ray Randall
Subject: 09-29-2010 - Your Second Day

Hi Ray,

How's the mighty CT Mixing project going?

On your second day (September 29th), I was supposed to go to the field with one of the Agriculture Extension Offices first thing in the morning, but he showed up at my quarters on his motorbike just as I was getting out of the shower to let me know that the farmer group wasn't ready for us. So I had a leisurely breakfast of Cowbell (powdered coffee with milk and sugar included) and bread with a chocolate hazelnut spread that I had brought back from Tamale last week. It was a beautiful sunny morning and I enjoyed my breakfast while listening to children at the nearby school sing the Ghanaian national anthem.

During the day at the office, I finished preparing the agenda and PowerPoint presentation for tomorrow's monthly staff meeting (for the Ministry of Food & Agriculture Kpandai district office). I'm pretty excited about the meeting because it will be an opportunity to introduce the ideas that my Director and I have been discussing to all of the staff and start getting their feedback.

So a pretty quiet work day, but that's just what I needed after two weeks out of my district. Keep an eye out for my blog posts on the weekend to find out how the staff meeting went...

Thanks again for sponsoring me. Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott
To: Saiqa Khan
Subject: 09-28-2010 - Your Day

Hi Saiqa,

On your day (September 18th), in the morning I worked for most of the day preparing an agenda for the monthly staff meeting for the Ministry of Food & Agriculture district office at which I'm working. In the afternoon, I jumped onto the back of a motorcycle with one of the Agriculture Extension Agents and we followed one of his farmers out to his field. The trail was narrow and bumpy (I think it may have been made by goats) and we had to ride through several large puddles. We got stuck a couple of times and I had to get off. Luckily I had put on my rubber boots, otherwise my shoes would have been soaked.

When we got to the farmer's flooded maize field, I took pictures for us to use later in reports. I chatted with the farmer about the impact of the flooding. All 5 acres of his maize (corn) were

lost and he was left with 5 acres of yams. So roughly 50% of his income for the year was wiped out by the flooding. So it goes in Northern Ghana.

After work, I went to visit the wife of the local chief. The previous Engineers Without Borders volunteer (Sarah) had stayed at the chief's house and she became quite close with her host mother (the chief's wife). Sarah had given me 20 GHC (~\$18) to give to the chief's wife, who was very grateful. The chief's wife is an elementary school teacher and we had a great chat about her work. I told her that my sister teaches a Grade 2/3 class in Canada and that they are very curious about Kpandai (did you see my post where I answered her classes questions?).

That evening, I went for a dinner of Fufu (pounded yam dough in peanut broth with fish) at a food stall on the side of the main road. I eat at this particular stand pretty often and I'm getting to know the family who runs it. There are three children – a girl around 7 years old, a boy of about 5, and a small boy who is about 2 years old. The 7 and 5 year old are always smiling and dancing around trying to impress me. The 2 year old is apparently scared of white people (I'm probably the first one he's ever seen). This has been a trend over here. Most children are really excited to see me, but the really young ones tend to be scared. Oh well – can't please 'em all! ;-)

After a leisurely dinner watching people saunter by or ride their bikes past on the main road, I wandered home and read for a bit before calling it an early night. The rooster's start crowing pretty early here, so I have not been the night-owl over here that I normally am at home.

As for your challenge – to give a little Ghanaian a big hug – I have almost daily laughing interactions with children, but no hugs. I've begun teaching children the exploding fist-pounding handshake that was popular back home a few years ago. They really like that. I also have a series of cards with pictures from back home that are normally really popular. Richard Hernandez helped me to make them and he may still have a copy in case you are interested. So on your day it took me a while to overcome the awkwardness of actually hugging a little Ghanaian, but I finally managed the attached. This is the 2 year old from the place where I normally eat. I'm hoping eventually he will get over his fear of me. ☺

Thanks again for sponsoring me. Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Aron Bjornson

Subject: 09-27-2010 - Your Day

Hi Aron,

Your day (September 27th) was my first back at work in Kpandai after being away for two weeks in Tamale, which is the capital of the Northern Region. I had a couple of meetings two weeks ago and then last week we were stuck in Tamale because all three of the roads back to Kpandai were flooded. As I describe in my recent blog posts, my extra week in Tamale turned out to be an amazing opportunity to build my relationship with my Director.

So I arrived back at work on the 27th full of ideas and energy. It was great to reconnect with my coworkers and the people around town. I was amazed at how many people asked me where I had been. As the only Obruini (white guy) in town, I am somewhat of a local celebrity. ;-)

I spent most of the day in the office working on an agenda for the monthly staff meeting, which will be on Thursday. I sat in on my first staff meeting shortly after I arrived and this will be my second one. As many of our staff are based in the field, the all-day monthly staff meetings are an excellent opportunity to make progress on initiatives. I've been working hard on the agenda for this one to try to incorporate many of the ideas and initiatives that my Director and I started developing last week in Tamale. As a bonus for this meeting, I am planning to screen Food Inc. after the meeting on the District Assemblies new computer projector (the first and only one in town). I've shown a few short clips to people in the office and I think it's going to go over really well.

My work over here on helping to improve management and leadership in my Ministry of Food & Agriculture (MoFA) district office is very similar to working with Rob and Lorraine back home. It's funny how similar challenges seem to be between different organizations and companies – even in different countries! As I'm sure you can imagine, the shortness of my time over here, having to get used to a different culture, and working in a government ministry all add extra degrees of difficulty, but things are going well mostly because the team I am working with has lots of potential.

As for your challenge to look into the ceremonies of how death of close family is marked and celebrated in my community over here, I haven't had an opportunity to actually attend a funeral yet, but I have passed by a few and have had the opportunity to talk to a few people about them. Northern Ghana is split between Christians and Muslim, and each religion has its own funeral traditions.

For the Muslims, they bury the person right after they die and for the next three days they pray for the person during their normal five daily prayers. Exactly seven days after the burial, they have a one and a half to two hour special prayer session at the mosque that starts at around 8am. There is normally food served afterwards and gifts are given to the family of the departed like rice, oil and maize. If the person was rich and/or well respected, the gifts may include things like whole cows as well (worth around \$600 over here).

Muslim burials are very sedate in comparison to Christian funerals, where there is lots of dancing, drinking and general celebrating. If someone dies in the lean season, the family may decide to wait for a more plentiful time of year so that they can have a proper celebration. The funerals seem to be a mix of religious and local traditions.

Some of the local traditions are good and some are not (at least by Western standards). For example, in some areas of Northern Ghana, if a woman's husband dies it is assumed that she has somehow contributed to his death. As some sort of penitence, all of the hair is shaved off of her body, they will sometimes sprinkle pepper into her eyes, and she may be made to carry hot water on her head to his grave and be locked in the cemetery to fast for several days. Fortunately it

sounds like these sorts of traditions are dying out and that most funerals are now much more focused on celebration.

Christian funerals are a big deal over here and families go all out. I get the impression that many families over-extend themselves financially paying for the burial and celebrations. Sounds like they spend a lot more on funerals than on weddings! Someone also told me that funerals are a common place for single people to meet, which seems kind of strange. Since funerals generally have fairly open invites, there must be a lot of 'funeral crashing' going on!

If I get an opportunity to attend a funeral later in my stay, I will definitely get some pictures and write a blog post about the experience.

I imagine this is a pretty tough time of year for you. Hope you and your family are doing well.

Thanks again for sponsoring me.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Craig Slack

Subject: 09-26-2010 - Your Day

Hey there Slacks,

Jennifer – Happy belated birthday! I hope it was amazing. J

On your day (the 26th), I finally managed to get back from Tamale to Kpandai after being stuck there for an extra week due to flooding (check out my blog for details). I stayed with my Director for most of last week while we were stranded in Kpandai, which turned out to be an amazing opportunity to build our personal and professional relationship.

Over the course of the week, I got a couple of chances to introduce Director to some Obruni (white man) food. The precious evening, we went to a restaurant that serves Obruni food and he tried pizza and spaghetti for the first time. He really liked them. I also picked up a chocolate/hazelnut nutilla-like spread and on your morning we both tried it on bread. Director said that parents in Ghana tell their children that if they eat chocolate, they will grow up to be thieves. I asked him why and he said it is because it is expensive and they will have to steal to get it if they develop a taste for it. Despite this cultural stigma, the Director admitted that he liked it.

As we were going to pick up the District Planner and our new Accountant before leaving for Kpandai, we witnessed a relatively low speed motorcycle accident where one guy layed his bike down in an intersection. Nobody wears helmets over here (this guy included) and I was thankful to see him get back up quickly after narrowly avoiding conking his head on the pavement. Literally a couple of minutes later, we passed a huge billboard at the center of town that shows a

table of motor vehicle accident stats for Ghana and included a message to ‘Wear Helmets – they save lives.’ Maybe nobody pays attention because the sign is in English...

On the 8 hour drive back over bumpy roads, we chatted and joked around quite a bit. I’m starting to feel like ‘one of the guys,’ at least with a few of my coworkers, which is no small accomplishment for the only Obruni in the district. As we arrived in Kpandai in the early afternoon, I realized how much I had missed it. I walked into town to get dinner and was greeted by numerous people along the way who all asked where I had been. It’s strange to think that most people in the 9,000 person town have probably noticed or heard about me, which is way more than I can say for back home. ;-)

Thanks again for supporting me.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Kim Law

Subject: 09-25-2010 - Your Day

Hi Kim,

I believe you picked the 25th because it was your due date? Is the bun still in the oven (so to speak)? ☺

For me, the 25th was a nice lazy day hanging out with my Director at the house he is building in Tamale. I was stuck in Tamale, which is the Northern Region capital, all last week while we waited for the floods to recede and the roads to be repaired back to Kpandai. It turned out to be an amazing opportunity for me to get to know my Director. He invited me to stay with him and we had numerous amazing personal and work conversations over the course of the week,

The Director grew up in Tamale and he showed me around a bit. We looked at the massive soccer stadium that the Chinese donated to Tamale in 2008 for the African Cup of Nations. It looks pretty out of place amongst the basic mud and concrete structures – like some aliens plunked it down from the heavens. ☺

We also ran some errands, like picking up school uniforms for the Director’s 6 and 11 year old daughters. He is a single father and he also has a 16 year old boy. They stay in Tamale with one of Director’s sisters so that they can go to a better school while the Director works in Kpandai. It is about an 8 hour drive over bumpy roads, but the Director makes it just about every weekend.

We stopped at a simple roadside restaurant for lunch and I had Banku, which is basically a ball of maize dough served in a peanut oil soup with a piece of fish. It’s actually pretty good. The restaurant had a small fuzzy TV playing WWF wrestling and I explained to the Director and a few other guys in the restaurant that it was actually not real fighting.

I found out that one of the other EWB volunteers (Erin) got her purse stolen walking home the night before. The Director and I had a really interesting chat about crime and punishment in Ghana. Apparently if a well known thief is caught, communities will often take the law into their own hands and sometimes even murder him! Makes me surprised that there is any robbery in Ghana. The reason is that the police are generally corrupt and sometimes even work in partnership with criminals. I asked why they didn't have some form of Ghanaian internal affairs to police the police, but Director just said that the corruption went all the way to the top.

For dinner I took the Director to a restaurant frequented by EWBers that serves Obruni (white person) food. He had never been there before and he was amused that I was showing him something new in his own home town. He tried pizza and spaghetti for the first time and he greatly enjoyed them both. Another small step for globalization. ;-)

So it was a very nice day and it capped off an incredible week of work and personal connection with my Director. It's amazing how similar the core management and leadership challenges are over here. I have developed a strong respect for my Director and I think we are on the same page about the path forward, which is really exciting.

Thanks again for sponsoring me. Hope all is well with you and best of luck with all the excitement ahead!

Mark

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From: Mark Abbott

To: Catriana McKie

Subject: 09-24-2010 - Your Day

Hey Cat,

On the 23rd (the day before your day), my Director and I returned from Salaga after a failed attempt to get back to Kpandai (check out my blog posts for more details). I spent your day pretty relaxed hanging out with my Director at the house he is building in Tamale. I stayed there with him for most of last week, which was an amazing opportunity to get to know him. ☺

After breakfast in the morning, my Director and I sat in his living room and continued some post-it-note brainstorming that we had started earlier in the week. At the end of the session, we developed objectives for my placement. The original agreement before I arrived was for me to split my time between helping to make EWB's Agriculture As A Business (AAB) program sustainable and developing new Management & Leadership pilot projects. I found out that the Director had a few easily corrected misconceptions about AAB and, after an hour or two of discussion, it sounds like he is going to change AAB from a voluntary to a mandatory program for his staff. For the Management & Leadership work, we came up a plan to 1st improve basic activity scheduling for all staff, 2nd put in place performance metrics, and 3rd tie in performance incentives. We also mapped out roadmap that will get the staff involved in designing the changes. Really exciting stuff!

In the afternoon, I took advantage of the fact that I was still in Tamale to meet with my EWB coach (Erin) in person. I met her at the house that EWB rents instead of at the office because she was suffering from malaria. When I got there, I learned that Brian and Pam from EWB also had malaria despite the fact that all of them had been taking their precautionary meds. Doh! It was great reconnecting with EWBers over the last couple of weeks after being alone in my District for almost four weeks, as it takes a lot of energy to interact 24x7 with people from another culture, as I'm sure you know. ;-)

My Director picked me up from the EWB house in the early afternoon. We had originally planned to go to a restaurant and get some Obruni (white man) food, but it started to rain hard so we decided to pick up some rice and fish from a roadside stand and take it home to eat (we wound up going for the Director's first ever pizza and spaghetti the next evening).

As for your challenges...

Cell phones definitely play a huge role in Ghana. I am working on a post about the cell phone wars. The big companies here are MTN, Vodafone, Togo and Zane. They all advertise like crazy and they all run programs where they offer to paint people's houses and businesses for free, so there are some streets where pretty much every structure is painted with a different companies colors and logos! Most people have at least a couple of SIM cards for different networks and maybe a couple of phones as well.

There are also little kiosks all over the place with boys selling credit on scratch cards. Even just the number of jobs selling credit must have a huge impact on the economy. Cell phone credit is often used interchangeably with money over here and you can transfer credit quite easily between phones.

Cell phones have all of the same benefits to society here as back home, but I think the impact is greater here because of things like bad roads and crappy internet access. I've read some articles about how cell phones will be the way that people in most developing countries access the internet as opposed to relatively expensive computers and I can totally see it.

Your challenge got me remembering an SMS market service site that I found during my pre-departure research called www.esoko.com. I pulled it up on my super-slow Vodafone internet stick in the evening and showed my Director. We actually have a staff person whose job it is to go to all of the markets in the Kpandai District on a weekly basis and send average price information to the radio station so farmers have a better idea of where they can get the best profit. We are going to send an email to Esoko to see if they will start posting Kpandai's data. If they do, we can then consider getting farmers in the district to start using their SMS service. ☺

As for your second question, Kofi Annan is definitely regarded as a hero here. Most people don't seem to have a deep understanding of the details of what he accomplished, but they are all very thankful that he brought Ghana into the international spotlight and they feel that he represented Ghana well. Other than Kofi, most of the other highly regarded international celebrities from Ghana are football stars. Currently the most popular is Essien who plays in the English Premier League for Chelsea.

Miss you and I hope your whole McKie/Short clan is doing well.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Mohamed Jradi

Subject: 09-23-2010 - Your Day

Hi Mohamed and Lamiss,

On your day (September 23rd), my Director and I returned from Salaga to Tamale having been blocked by flooding on the road that prevented us from getting back to Kpandai (the town in which I am stationed). Check out my recent blog posts for more information on the flooding, including some pictures.

After checking out of the guest house in Salaga, we stopped for a breakfast of 'egg and bread' at a stall on the side of the road. Then we stopped off at the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) office in Salaga. There is a MoFA office in each District Capital. East Gonja District's is in Salaga and I work in the MoFA office in Kpandai, which is the capital of the Kpandai District.

While my Director was speaking with the Salaga Director, I flipped through some MoFA reports and learned that the Ministry runs a school feeding program that provides three meals a day to children every day they are in school for less than \$1/day. The meals are all made using local and nutritious food. Not a bad deal! It was also a great chance to observe my Director interacting with another Director and to compare their management styles. I really impressed with my Director. He is an intelligent and capable leader who really wants to help the farmers in his district.

My extra week stranded in Tamale turned out to be an amazing opportunity to build my relationship with my Director. That night when we finally got back to Tamale, we went for dinner at an outdoor food court (collection of food stalls) in downtown Tamale. A Ghanaian version of the TV game show Deal Or No-Deal was playing on a nearby TV. I told the Director that the prize for the US/Canadian version of the show is \$1,000,000 as opposed to the \$60,000 top prize in the Ghanaian version. This sparked a really interesting conversation on money and happiness. From there, we talked about the cost of raising children in Ghana versus raising children in Canada. From there, we started talking about the similarities between parenting and management (in both, you must be firm, but fair – it is not god to be overly controlling or lax).

These conversations on your particular day were part of a string of amazing conversations over the course of last week. We finally arrived back in Kpandai yesterday (Sunday) and today is my first day back at work. Things are going well and I'm excited to start working on some of the things that my Director and I have been chatting about.

On the way out of Salaga, we stopped off at a school to make some photocopies and I wound-up getting mobbed by children! I included a short video in a recent blog post in case you're interested.

Thanks again for sponsoring me and I hope all is well with you.

Mark

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From: Mark Abbott

To: Mark Dickson

Subject: 09-22-2010 - Your 4th Day

Hey Mark and Erika,

Happy belated birthday Erika!

Your fourth day (September 22nd) was my third day stranded in Tamale (the Northern Region capital, which is about 8 hours away from my hometown of Kpandai). I was supposed to head back to Kpandai on Monday the 20th, after having been in Tamale all the week prior for meetings at the Regional Ministry of Food & Agriculture office and then with the rest of Engineers Without Border's (EWB's) Ghana team, but the Ghanaian rainy season forced us to change our plans. Check out my recent blog posts for more details.

On your day, I woke up and had breakfast with my Director. I stayed with him all last week at the new house he is building for his family in Tamale. It was just the two of us and it was an amazing chance to get to know him. After breakfast on this particular morning, I pulled out some post-it-notes that I had bought in town and we brainstormed possible performance metrics for the staff in our office and ways to measure the strength of the farmers and Farmer Based Organizations (FBOs) that we exist to support. I discovered that I love post-it-note brainstorming sessions as much over here as I do back at home. ☺

I also learnt a lot about my Director on a personal basis staying with him last week. He is a single father with a 16 year old son and two daughters aged 11 and 7. He has decided to leave his children in Tamale with his sister so that they can attend a better school while he is stationed in Kpandai for work. Luckily he is able to travel back to see them pretty much every weekend.

In the late morning, Director had to go register his children for school. I took the opportunity to catch up on some work on my computer. When he returned, we packed up the pickup truck and Director, our driver Osman, and our District Planner Ahmed all took off to try an alternate route back to Kpandai that we hoped would avoid the flooding. We drove for about 4 hours to a town called Salaga and stopped there for a snack before getting back on the road to Bimbila and then Kpandai. About two hours out of Salaga, we encountered a massive lake covering roughly 4km of the road, so we were forced to turn back.

We arrived in Salaga at around sunset and we decided to check into a guest house and then go get dinner. As we sat down for Fufu (pounded yams in peanut and oil soup with fish or meat), it began to rain again.

Although this probably wasn't the most exciting sounding day, I really enjoyed it because of the several great conversations I had with my Director. For a bit more excitement, check out the blog post I put up a couple of days later where I got mobbed by a bunch of schoolchildren in Salaga. ☺

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Monica

Subject: 09-21-2010 - Your Day

Hi Monica,

Your first day (September 21st) was my second day stranded in Tamale. I was supposed to head back to Kpandai on Monday after being in Tamale all last week for meetings at the Regional Ministry of Food & Agriculture office and then with the rest of Engineers Without Border's (EWB's) Ghana team. The meetings left me full of ideas and energy, so I was rearing to get back to my district.

On the Monday, I spent a frustrating day trying to connect with my Director. I took advantage of the quiet time to work on my computer, but I really wanted to either hit the road or spend some quality one-on-one time with my Director, as it's been hard to get alone time with him to discuss work and get to know him personally. Finally towards the end of the day, we met and had a great conversation for a couple of hours and decided to meet the next day.

So I woke up on your day hoping the road would be cleared. As the Director had said we'd try to hit the road by around noon, I started the day by walking from the guest house I was staying at to the EWB office at the nearby Regional Ministry of Food & Agriculture (MoFA) office complex to work on my computer for a few hours. I got a call from my Director saying that the road was still impassible. He picked me up at about 11am and we spent the rest of the day together and he invited me to stay at his place that night, which I did.

We attended a meeting at the regional office to review progress on the Community Initiatives for Food Security program. The head of the program reviewed the projects that are underway in the Kpandai district, which included financing a grinding mill for a cooperative, building a water dug-out for an area where you can't drill water bore holes, and the building of market stalls in several towns for vendors to use during market days. I'm going to do a post on the market stalls soon, so stay tuned!

The day turned out to be an amazing opportunity to build my relationship with the Director. His wife died a few years ago and he is a single father raising a 16 year old boy and two girls aged 11 and 7. Fortunately he has help from one of his sisters. He is originally from Tamale (the capital of the Northern Region with about 400,000 people), but he was stationed in four other Northern Region Districts before being made Director of the Kpandai District and moving to Kpandai town, which is about 8 hours away over horrible roads.

The Director's father was a chief and he had six wives and 24 children! His father died ten years ago and his senior (oldest) brother has now taken over as chief, but he has delegated his chiefly duties to one of his younger brothers so that he can focus on his contracting businesses. The hierarchy of chiefs and sub-chiefs for the numerous tribes that cover Ghana wield a great deal of power. Technically the chiefs own all of the land and you must negotiate with them if you want to lease land.

I visited the Director's MoFA provided house where his kids live. They stay in Tamale so they can go to a higher quality school. The Director travels from Kpandai to Tamale in his truck almost every weekend to see him. After checking in with his kids, we drove to the new house that the Director is building near Tamale. As he has now been given an official residence in Kpandai town, he is soon going to have to give up his Tamale official residence, so he wants to build his own personal house for the future.

The house is currently under construction, but it's quite nice by Ghanaian standards. It was just the two of us staying here last night and our excellent conversations went well into the evening. Apparently he leased the land the house is on a few years ago from the chief (I don't think it was his brother – must have been another chief?) for about \$700 for a 99 year lease. Apparently after a few short years, it is already worth around \$2,000. After making his arrangement with the chief, he also had his land registered with the government just to be on the safe side.

The Director has taken out loans on the strength of his government salary in order to build his house. It sounds like it will probably cost around \$15,000 for everything in the end and will be a nice walled complex with two or three structures suitable for his children and a few members of his extended family.

When I originally read your challenge for today about introducing someone in my neighborhood who has made an impression on me, I envisioned someone who is struggling, but who was working hard and making progress. As the son of a chief, I think my Director has had more opportunity than most, but I also think he has worked hard.

Like most successful Ghanaians, he has worked to diversify his livelihood. Apart from his salaried job, he also has his own farmland, livestock, and he owns a tractor that he rents out. He is a hardworking man who is constantly looking for opportunities to improve his family's situation. The more I talk to him, the more I realize that he is also genuinely motivated to help the farmers in his district improve their livelihoods as well.

As I type, I am sitting in his living room on Wednesday morning waiting for him to return from a meeting at his children's school so we can attempt the road back to Kpandai. What started out as

a major inconvenience and annoyance (the road being washed out) has turned into a golden opportunity to cement the key relationship in my placement. And I really like and respect him to boot! ☺

I will try to put up some blog posts of other people in my neighborhood who have made an impression on me soon.

Thanks again for your support. I hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: 'Faye Larsen'

Subject: 09-20-2010 - Your Day

Hi Faye,

Happy belated birthday! Hope you had a great one.

On your birthday, I was supposed to head back to Kpandai after being in Tamale all last week for meetings at the Regional Ministry of Food & Agriculture office and then with the rest of Engineers Without Border's (EWB's) Ghana team. The meetings left me full of ideas and energy, so I was rearing to get back to my district.

I woke up at the Presbyterian Guest House where we had been staying for the EWB meetings. Most people had left the previous evening and the rest left shortly after I awoke. My Director had offered to give me a ride back to Kpandai with him in his truck, which is amazing because the bus is slow and cramped. He had said that he'd call me at around 10am and that hopefully we'd head out after lunch.

I waited until I am doing work on my computer and then finally called my Director. After trying several times, I finally got through and he told me about the road to Kpandai being washed out. He also said he'd be right over to pick me up. I waited for a couple of hours and then tried calling him again, but his line was switched off. So I caught a cab back into town and went to the other guest house that is located closer to the Regional MoFA office complex, where EWB has a small office.

I tried to check into the other guest house, but it was full, so I decided to have lunch at their restaurant. I ate yam fries and vegetables. While eating, I managed to get through to my Director again. I told him where I was and he again said that he would be right over. By the time I had finished, someone had cancelled their reservation, so I checked in to the guest house for \$12, unpacked my things and setup my mosquito net.

Coming out of my room, I bumped into a Catholic priest who I had met on my first visit to Tamale. He is serving as the Catholic church's head councilor in Ghana. Not knowing how long my Director would actually be, I sat down to have a beer with the priest. I was a bit worried

about my Director showing up and finding me drinking a beer, as he is a Muslim and does not drink, but it was 5:30pm by this time, so I figured I was off of the clock.

Sure enough, my Director showed up when I was halfway done my beer, but he didn't seem to mind. A lack of time consciousness is an extremely common Ghanaian trait. Although my Director definitely displays this trait, I have generally been impressed with him. Unfortunately I've had a lot of trouble getting one-on-one time with him, because he is always busy and there's always someone else in his office.

My day quickly turned around when my Director sat down with us and ordered a fruit drink. We chatted for a couple of hours (the priest left after about half an hour) - both about work and personal stuff. It turns out that his wife died a few years ago and he is a single father raising a 16 year old boy and two girls aged 11 and 7. I was in great spirits when he left to go home for the evening. I had received a text message from some of the other EWB volunteers saying that they were meeting for dinner nearby, so I jumped into a cab and joined them for a great evening of conversation.

Yesterday (Tuesday), after working in the EWB office for a few hours in the morning, my Director called and picked me up at around 11am. We spent the rest of the day together and he invited me to stay at his house that night. We had several great conversations and I really feel like we are connecting.

As I type, I am sitting in his living room on Wednesday morning waiting for him to return from a meeting at his children's school so we can attempt the road back to Kpandai. What started out as a major inconvenience and annoyance (the road being washed out) has turned into a golden opportunity to cement the key relationship in my placement. And I really like and respect the him to boot! ☺

Thanks again for your support. I hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Michelle Nicholson

Subject: 09-19-2010 - Aidan's Day

Hi Michelle,

Happy belated birthday to little Aidan! Hopefully his Aunt has started to spoil him already. ☺

Lucky you! Your day (September 19th) was a full day of EWB Team Ghana meetings! I've been in the Northern Region capital of Tamale all week for meetings, first with the Ministry of Food & Agriculture on Tuesday and Wednesday, and then with the other EWBers on Saturday and Sunday. The first day of EWB meetings was for each of the Ghana teams (Ministry of Food & Agriculture and the Government & Rural Infrastructure teams) to coordinate on their own, and

then your day was with both teams together to share lessons learned and discuss ways we can work together more closely.

There were fourteen of us in total and it felt a lot like EWB meetings back home, which provided a big booster to my energy/enthusiasm reserves. Unfortunately there was a pretty big contrast between the optimism and energy at the EWB and MoFA meetings, but then again I'm sure that would also be true if we were comparing an EWB meeting to a Canadian government meeting. ;-)

The EWB meetings were a great chance for me to compare notes with the other volunteers. The two main focuses of the EWB MoFA team and of my placement are first to try to ensure that our Agriculture As A Business (AAB) approach is sustainable in the Districts, and second to explore Management and Leadership improvement approaches.

The idea behind AAB is to help rural subsistence farmers form groups and learn simple business skills. Roughly 90% of the people in my district are farmers and most of them live on somewhere between \$1 and \$5 per day. About half of them go hungry in the lean months of May/June. Most of the farmers are illiterate and see farming as a way of life as opposed to a business. They do not have the training or mindset to consider what investing in different inputs (better seeds, fertilizer, weedicide) or activities (proactive weeding, intercropping, co-marketing their harvest with other farmers) could have on their income/livelihood.

AAB is a series of ten cards that are introduced over ten meetings by the Agriculture Extension Agents from the MoFA offices. Each card introduces a new concept to the farmer group. The total file is too big for me to upload given the horrible internet service in Ghana, but I've attached a sample of one of the cards.

EWB has had great success with the AAB program working in individual Districts and with individual Agriculture Extension Agents, but what we've come to realize is that there are broader Management and Leadership challenges in the MoFA offices that need to be tackled in order to enable AAB and all of the other programs they are trying to implement.

When the Regional Director of MoFA kicked off the meeting earlier this week, he said that "the lives of people are directly affected by our work – let us never forget that." I can definitely see how the AAB program and having better run MoFA district offices can directly affect the lives of the farmers in my district, which is pretty inspiring and helps me to get through the frustrating times.

I've been away from my district of Kpandai for a full week now and I'm getting really anxious to get back there and dive back in. Unfortunately a section of the road has washed out (it's rainy season), and I'm currently stuck in Tamale and hoping to get out tomorrow.

Hope all is well with you. ☺

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott
To: Mark Grindlay
Subject: 09-18-2010 - Your Day

Hi Mark and Paul,

Happy Birthday Paul! As he also did for you other brother Bruce's recent birthday, you're brother has kindly purchased a full day of a 34 year old guy's time for you – just what you always wanted!

He also sponsored my last Tuesday for Tess' birthday. On that day, I attended the first of two full-day Director's meetings at the Ministry of Food & Agriculture (MoFA) in Tamale, which is a city of about 400,000 people and is the capital of the Northern Region of Ghana. Not the most exciting stuff, but one of my work goals over here is to improve the management and leadership at my MoFA District office, so the meetings were a great chance to observe and learn.

Your day (September 18th – the closest to your birthday on the 19th, which was already taken) was the first of two days of Engineers Without Borders Country Team meetings, also in Tamale. There are currently fourteen EWB volunteers spread around Ghana working in MoFA and at District Assemblies. Half of the volunteers are long term (1+ years) and half are short term like me (4 months). I am stationed in Kpandai town (8,000 people), which is the capital of the Kpandai District (100,000 people) and is about an 8 hour bus ride over mostly dirt roads that are littered with rocks, moon craters potholes, and lake sized puddles.

The EWB meetings were a big contrast to the MoFA meetings. EWB is a really energetic and optimistic organization and I've been impressed with pretty much every EWBer I've worked with both in Canada and in Ghana. Unfortunately there was a pretty big contrast between the optimism and energy at the EWB and MoFA meetings, but then again I'm sure that would also be true if we were comparing an EWB meeting to a Canadian government meeting. ;-)

The EWB meetings were a great chance for me to compare notes with the other volunteers. The two main focuses of the EWB MoFA team and of my placement are first to try to ensure that our Agriculture As A Business (AAB) approach is sustainable in the Districts, and second to explore Management and Leadership improvement approaches.

The idea behind AAB is to help rural subsistence farmers form groups and learn simple business skills. Roughly 90% of the people in my district are farmers and most of them live on somewhere between \$1 and \$5 per day. About half of them go hungry in the lean months of May/June. Most of the farmers are illiterate and see farming as a way of life as opposed to a business. They do not have the training or mindset to consider what investing in different inputs (better seeds, fertilizer, weedicide) or activities (proactive weeding, intercropping, co-marketing their harvest with other farmers) could have on their income/livelihood.

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I've been away from my district of Kpandai for a full week now and I'm getting really anxious to get back there and dive back in. Unfortunately a section of the road has washed out (it's rainy season), and I'm currently stuck in Tamale and hoping to get out tomorrow.

Hope all is well with you and your families.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Karen Abbott

Subject: 09-17-2010 - Your Day

Hi Mom,

I'm so glad that everything went so well for your birthday and book launch. Can't wait to celebrate with you in December.

On your birthday, I went with one of the other EWB volunteers who is doing similar work to the work I am doing (Mark Soares) to visit another EWB volunteer (Jason) at the Veterinary College he is working with, which is 30 minutes north of Tamale. It is the same college that my friend Carissa from the Vancouver Professional Chapter of EWB worked with during her placement in Ghana last year.

Mark and I got up early and took a taxi to the town where the college is located. The town is built around the paved highway that runs through it and the taxi just dropped us off on the side of the road, where Jason was there waiting for us. We bought some breakfast from a stall and then walked to Jason's host family's home a few minutes away. There are several brothers in his host family (I never did figure out how many) and they were quite excited to chat.

A thunder and lightning storm began as we sat chatting. It was some of the loudest thunder I have ever heard! We were supposed to attend a class at the college where students were supposed to present their business ideas for the entrepreneurial skills class that EWB is helping

to create, but as the time of the class got closer, the rain showed no signs of letting up. So Jason called the teacher and he said that none of the students had shown up yet either.

Eventually the rain subsided and we jumped over puddles on dirt road in our dress shoes (I wanted to look professional for the students) to get to the college. When we got there, we met with the principal and a couple of the teachers, who were highly educated and articulate. We had a great conversation about the difference in learning styles between Ghana and Canada. In Ghana, it is mostly wrote learning and memorization, as opposed to the more participatory and creative style in Canada.

Much to the embarrassment of the teachers, the students used the rain as an excuse to get out of their presentations. The teachers explained that the students were struggling with the assignment, as presenting a business idea is a much different style of assignment than they are used to. We went for a tour of the livestock facilities instead. The school raises pigs, goats, sheep, cows, guinea fowl, and probably other animals that we didn't get time to see too.

There were some interesting business ideas kicking around the college too. They have some old chick (egg) incubators from the 1960s. The last one recently broke down and all they need is a replacement electrical relay and they can revive a business they had recently running to sell chicks. The machine can handle 20,000 eggs, it takes about 48 days per batch, and each chick sells for about \$0.50. Not a bad little money maker, and all they need is to track down the spare part. I sent some of the info to Chris back home and he is going to try to track it down.

That evening, we met up with all the other EWB volunteers who are currently in Ghana at the Presbyterian guest house where our meetings were held over the next two days. Hanging out with fellow EWBers this week has given me a big booster shot of enthusiasm and I'm feeling good, so no need to worry. ;-)

Love you.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Mark Dickson

Subject: 09-16-2010 - Your Third Day

Hi Mark and Rebecca,

Happy belated birthday Rebecca!

On your day (September 16th), I was in Tamale, which is the capital of the Northern Region in Ghana and has about 400,000 people. I arrived at the beginning of the week (Monday) and spent all day Tuesday and Wednesday in Ministry of Food & Agriculture Director's meetings. Each of the twenty Northern Region Directors had to make a presentation about the status of the Block Farm program in their district, which is the number one priority of the Ministry for the year.

On Thursday the 16th, I had the chance to recover from the boring meetings and catch up on my quiet computer work before the Engineers Without Borders meetings began on Saturday and Sunday (also in Tamale). This week has been a nice break from the limited food choices that I have in my small town of Kpandai, as Tamale has lots of places where you can get western-style food and I have been taking full advantage. J

This week has also been great for connecting with other EWBERs. Part of my job is to pilot new Management/Leadership initiatives in my MoFA office and it's been really helpful to compare observations and bounce ideas off other EWBERs.

I've been fairing pretty well on the health front so far, but unfortunately I wasn't feeling all that great on the 16th, as my body was aching a bit, I had a headache, and some digestive issues to cap it all off. So I went through the list of likely possible causes (malaria, typhoid, stomach bugs or parasites, worms, etc...) and tried not to become a hypochondriac. In the end, I decided to wait and see if things got worse, and luckily I felt much better the next morning.

So September 16th wasn't the most exciting. Here's a story from September 8th that might be a bit more interesting for Rebecca:

My challenge for that day was to interview a 5 year old on behalf of a friend's daughter. I wound-up interviewing a 5 year old named Blessing (front and center in the attached picture) and spending the evening with her entire family. The family does not have a lot of money and cannot afford to buy toys for the kids. Little Blessing's favorite game is to pretend to cook like the older girls in her family and the boys like to play football (soccer).

The kids in the picture are staying with their grandparents, as their father and mother are away in Kumasi, where the father works as a driver. In their small compound lived the grandparents, Blessing, her two brothers, along with her aunt, uncle, and cousins. It is located not far from where I am staying. They invited me to stay for dinner, which I did. We ate boiled yams and fish stew under the canopy of their compound as it started to pour rain outside.

I showed the kids pictures I had brought from home and they asked lots of questions. Then I let Blessing draw for a bit in my notebook, which made her very happy. I don't think she gets many opportunities to draw and colour, as paper and pens are expensive for her family.

The family seemed very loving and they laughed a lot, despite not having much money. As they live only a couple of minutes away, I will probably get many chance to learn more about them.

Hope all is well with you and your family.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Jacqueline Stevens

Subject: 09-15-2010 - Your Day

Hey Cousin,

How did your test go? I was sending good vibes all day, so hopefully that helped. ☺

September 15th was a pretty intense day for me too. After spending three weeks in the small town of Kpandai, I came back to Tamale (the northern Ghanaian capital with about 400,000 people) on Monday of this week to attend meetings. September 15th was the second day of meetings for all of the Ministry of Food & Agriculture (MoFA) Directors in the Northern Region. There are 20 Directors and, with all of the Regional Staff and support staff, the meeting room had about 50 people in it. The meeting was to review the current status of the big Block Farm program, which is the primary focus of the Ministry of Food & Agriculture in Ghana this year and for the foreseeable future. The Government's Block Farm program basically encourages groups of small farmers to work together so they can achieve economies of scale, access to credit, and more efficient interaction with limited MoFA staff. The program provides inputs (seeds, fertilizer, etc...) that the farmer groups are supposed to pay for when their crops come in (last year the cost recovery was only about 44%).

Each of the District Directors had 10 minutes to present their update and then they took 5 minutes of questions. On the first day, we got through 14 of the presentations and the remaining 6 were completed on your day. Most Directors had missed their targets due to a combination of factors: erratic rains, not enough tractor services, late inputs from the government, inability to form enough farmers groups in time, difficulty finding large tracts of land to form into blocks, etc... The Regional Director made the District Directors present their progress as a way of strong-arming them into reporting on time. The meeting was reasonably well run, although going through all of the facts and figures was a bit dry. What really struck me, however, was how almost all of the conversation was on past challenges and very little time was spent on critical success factors for the second half of the program (the maize, rice and soy have been planted, but won't be harvested for a couple of months).

Throughout the two days of meetings, the new Regional Director repeatedly stressed the need for good numbers - including measurement, evaluation and auditing. So maybe there's an opportunity for Accountants Without Borders in Ghana! ☺

In the evening, I went for dinner with a couple of other Engineers Without Borders volunteers. After three weeks in Kpandai, it's great to interact with some fellow Canadians and share thoughts and ideas. It's also great to have food choices, as options are limited in Kpandai (I am working on a blog post on this).

Thanks again for sponsoring me. Fingers crossed for your test!

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Mark Grindlay

Subject: 09-14-2010 - Your Second Day

Hey Mark and Tess,

Happy belated birthday Tess!

I'll start off with what actually happened on your second day, September 14th, and then I'll switch to something from a previous day that Tess might find more interesting. J

After spending three weeks in the small town of Kpandai, I came back to Tamale (the northern Ghanaian capital with about 400,000 people) on Monday of this week to attend meetings. September 14th was the first day of meetings for all of the Ministry of Food & Agriculture (MoFA) Directors in the Northern Region. There are 20 Directors and, with all of the Regional Staff and support staff, the meeting room had about 50 people in it. The meeting was to review the current status of the big Block Farm program, which is the primary focus of the Ministry of Food & Agriculture in Ghana this year and for the foreseeable future. The Government's Block Farm program basically encourages groups of small farmers to work together so they can achieve economies of scale, access to credit, and more efficient interaction with limited MoFA staff. The program includes initial supply of inputs (seeds, fertilizer, etc...), which the farmer groups are supposed to pay for when their crops come in (last year the cost recovery was only about 44%).

Each of the District Directors had 10 minutes to present their update and then they took 5 minutes of questions. We only got through about 14 of the 20 presentations that day and the rest spilled into the next day. Most Directors had missed their targets due to a combination of factors: erratic rains, not enough tractor services, late inputs from the government, inability to form enough farmers groups in time, difficulty finding large tracts of land to form into blocks, etc... The Regional Director made the District Directors present their progress as a way of strong-arming them into reporting on time. The meeting was run reasonably well, although going through all of the facts and figures was a bit dry. What really struck me, however, was how almost all of the conversation was on past challenges and very little time was spent on critical success factors for the second half of the program (the maize, rice and soy have been planted, but won't be harvested for a couple of months).

In the evening, I went for dinner with a couple of other EWBERs. After three weeks in Kpandai, it's great to interact with some fellow Canadians and share thoughts and ideas. It's also great to have food choices, as options are limited in Kpandai (I am working on a blog post on this).

So September 14th was pretty work focused. Here's a story from September 8th that might be a bit more interesting for Tess:

My challenge for that day was to interview a 5 year old on behalf of a friend's daughter. I wound-up interviewing a 5 year old named Blessing (front and center in the attached picture) and spending the evening with her entire family. The family does not have a lot of money and cannot afford to buy toys for the kids. Little Blessing's favorite game is to pretend to cook like the older girls in her family and the boys like to play football (soccer).

The kids in the picture are staying with their grandparents, as their father and mother are away in Kumasi, where the father works as a driver. In their small compound, there's the grandparents, Blessing, her two brothers, along with her aunt, uncle, and cousins. It is located not far from where I am staying. They invited me to stay for dinner, which I did. We ate boiled yams and fish stew under the canopy of their compound as it started to pour rain outside.

I showed the kids pictures I had brought from home and they asked lots of questions. Then I let Blessing draw for a bit in my notebook, which made her very happy. I don't think she gets many opportunities to draw and colour, as paper and pens are expensive for her family.

The family seemed very loving and they laughed a lot, despite not having much money. As they live only a couple of minutes away, I will probably get many chance to learn more about them, so I should be able to tell you more when I see you all again in January.

Hope all is well with you and your family.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Harveen Aujla

Subject: 09-13-2010 - Your Day

Hey Harv,

Unfortunately your day (Monday, September 13th) was not one of my more pleasant. I had to get up at 3:30am and walk down to the main street in Kpandai to get the Metro Mas bus to Tamale so I could sit in on Regional Ministry of Food & Agriculture meetings this week and then an Engineers Without Borders Ghana team meeting, which is coming up this weekend. I head back to Kpandai next Monday.

I'm pretty sure I was the tallest person on the bus and I my legs were squeezed into my window seat with my backpack between them. The little old man sitting beside me had a cold and kept sneezing and coughing into his hankie. I kept my i-pod on for the entire 8 hour ride over moon craters and through small lakes (the road to Kpandai is one of the worst in the Northern Region). At one point we had to get out and help some villagers and people from a bus coming the other way to lay sticks in a rut on the side of the road so that we could get by a broken down truck.

I arrived in Tamale at about 1pm (bus left Kpandai at 5am) and met up with some other EWBERs. They were the first other non-black people I've seen since I was last in Tamale 3 weeks ago. It was good catching up with fellow EWBERs, as it can be a bit draining always straining with language and cultural challenges in Kpandai. It was also great to compare notes regarding our work in the different districts.

I was also super excited to finally get some food variety! There are only about three main dishes in Kpandai and it's pretty hard to find anything else (I'm going to do a food post soon), so I was pretty excited to have a pizza for dinner and apple pie with ice cream for dessert. J

As for you challenge of speaking with an accent all day and not telling anyone why, there weren't too many opportunities on your particular day. However, I've developed a crazy Ghanaian twanged English accent for my everyday speaking over here, so you could say that I've been speaking with a weird accent most of the time. Pretty much all westerners wind-up with this type of accent because by copying the rhythm of the Ghanaian languages (there are numerous languages, but they all seem to have a similar rhythm), it is a lot easier for locals to understand you.

Thanks again for sponsoring me. Hope all is well with you and your family.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: James McPherson

Subject: 09-12-2010 - Your second day

Hey James,

Well, you wanted to know what I have been doing on my weekends, and luckily your second day (September 12, 2010) was a Sunday. ☺

On this particular Sunday, I slept in all the way until 7am until the wailing of the radio of the night watchman at the nearby District Chiefs residence and several persistent roosters finally succeeded in waking me up.

There is a Peace Corp volunteer, Nhial, from Houston Texas in the room next to me at the District Chief's compound. He's the only other foreigner in Kpandai District. He has a pretty amazing story, having grown up in a refugee camp in South Sudan until the age of 11 and then his Mom sent him with his Uncle to the USA staying behind with her other son. He struggled growing up in Houston, managing to get to college on a running scholarship, and eventually met his adopted parents who are wealthy 40-something white Americans (an Investment Broker and a Lawyer). Despite having always struggled for money, after graduating he decided to volunteer 2 years of his time with the Peace Corp. Afterwards he plans to travel to South Sudan and try to locate his mother and brother.

Anyway, Nhial and I have been running 3 or 4 mornings a week, much to the amusement of the locals, and we went for a run at around 7:30am on this day too. We run down a pretty quiet dirt road, but we normally pass several women carrying firewood on their heads and farmers headed to their fields.

After our run, I got cleaned up, jumped on our bikes and headed off to check out the Catholic church service, which we had been invited to the day before. We sat through the two and a half hour sermon. At the end, we introduced ourselves to the congregation of about 200 people – mostly women. I'd started chatting with the Father before his sermon about the possibility of screening a documentary film called Pray the Devil Back to Hell at the church one evening, and

he put me on the spot in front of the congregation saying that the screening would be that night! I quickly corrected that it would be in a couple of weeks.

After church, Nhial and I picked up lunch in town and stopped to chat with several people along the way. After a couple of hours of loitering and conversations, we headed back home and just beat the rains, which started in the early afternoon and went well into the night. Rainy season over here is truly amazing – it just opens up and pours!

As you guessed, how I fill my personal time is one of the bigger challenges with respect to keeping sane. So far I've been doing well with respect to connecting with new people, but it's hard to move past niceties to deeper relationships. Having Nhial around has definitely helped in terms of immediate happiness, but it's probably slowed down my integration into the community a bit. The fact that he's blacker than most of the Ghanaians and they all initially assume that he's from somewhere else in Ghana helps to soften that a bit. Nevertheless, I'm on the lookout for a host family to move in with so that I can integrate into the community better.

How are you enjoying September in Kits?

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Dan Hebert

Subject: 09-11-2010 - Your Day

Hey Dan,

Greetings from Kpandai. Your day (September 11th) was the Saturday of a long weekend for me, as Friday was declared a national holiday because it was the end of Ramadan. Christianity is the predominant religion in the country and in Kpandai, but Islam is a strong second. Twelve of the fifteen people in my Ministry of Food & Agriculture office are Muslim and most of them made it an extra long weekend by heading to Tamale on Wednesday or Thursday to join in with the big celebration early.

After sleeping in and wrestling with my computer for a bit (the internet stick that I have works about 10% of the time), I went exploring around town. I picked up some egg and bread for breakfast at a stall on the street (there are no actual restaurants in town – only stalls on the street) and then sat outside a tailor's shop with a few guys. One of them turned out to be a loan officer from a Ghanaian bank. He was originally from Kpandai and is related to one of the tailors, but he now lives in Tamale. He was in town for a week to promote loans, mostly to people with salaried jobs like teachers and other government employees (there is no bank in Kpandai). He put the word out that he was in town by announcing it at the mosque.

We had a pretty interesting conversation about loans in Ghana. The Bank of Ghana prime rate is 22% and their interest rate on loans to the general public is 25%. Ghanaians are currently

celebrating having recently brought their inflation rate down to 9.5%, the first time it's been under 10% in decades. His bank has a set DIR (debt to income ratio) for its loans. Basically a salaried employee can get 45% of his or her paycheck times the number of months they want a loan for. So if you make 500GHC/month (\$400), you can get 225 GHC * 48 months = 10,800 GHC (a little over \$8,000 Canadian). The guy had made around 10 loans so far, the largest being for 20,000 GHC. Most people in my district are farmers and they don't generally register their farms as businesses, otherwise they would have to pay taxes, so the market for bank loans in Kpandai is pretty thin.

After that interesting conversation, knowing it was your day, I decided to wander into the office where people pay their electrical bills and chat with the rather bored looking guy behind the counter. Shortly after Ghana became the first sub-saharan African country to gain its independence in 1957, they built a massive hydro electric dam, which created lake Volta. It was the largest man-made lake in the world, but it has probably lost that title by now... The project was World Bank funded and was tied in with the creation of an aluminum smelter that I believe was owned by Valco. One of those massively political projects with lots of up and downside, but the bottom line is that there is pretty respectable electrical coverage at the town level in Northern Ghana (villages still typically don't have electricity and maybe not even access to bore hole water).

Similar to BC Hydro, Ghana has the Volta Regional Authority as the main quasi-government electrical company. VRA sells power to the Electrical Company of Ghana (ECG), who is in charge of distribution (like BCTC). Independent power producers can contract with ECG to sell their power. There are electrical meters on every residential building, which are actually almost all mud huts! Homes pay 0.095 GHC/kWhr for the first 50 kWhrs of power and then 0.17 beyond that (it's about \$0.80 Canadian to 1 Ghana Cede). There is about a 15 or 20% government rebate-subsidy on the bill too. I looked at a typical example bill and the person paid about 7GHC for a month.

A few years ago there was a power crunch and the VRA ran a program where they gave out LED lightbulbs to their customers to try to reduce power consumption. LED lightbulbs seem to be just about everywhere, so the program must have been a success. Ghana's version of Powersmart! The guy I was talking to was not sure if the crisis has since been averted.

That evening, I had a beer with one of my non-Muslim co-workers (nobody else in the office drinks), which was once again a great way to learn about my new office and its challenges. On the way home, I was attracted by an excessively loud sound system and a crowd of people. It turned out to be something called a 'jam,' which basically looked like a town dance. There was a wide range of ages of people gathered outside this abandoned building, but nobody was paying the \$.50 entrance fee to go inside and dance. It was only about 9:30pm and I later found out that the party didn't really get going until about 10:30, by which time I was home in bed reading.

So a pretty relaxed day all in all. Thanks again for sponsoring it.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: George Mitchell

Subject: 09-09&10 -2010 - Your first two days

Hey George,

Fittingly considering how much you like being in the field, on the first of the days you sponsored I actually got out into the field and did some real work. On Thursday the 9th I went out with some Ministry of Food & Agriculture (MoFA) representatives to visit some test yam and cassava fields that were being managed by a couple of remote villages about 40km from Kpandai town (I've just put up a blog post with some pictures).

As the only white guy in the entire district of 100,000 people, I attract a lot of attention wherever I go, but it increases even more when I get into the more remote villages. Children come running out from mud huts yelling 'Father, Father!' as I pass by in the truck (most villager's first contact with white people was with Catholic priests and they still call all white people they see 'Father'). At the two farmer group meetings we held that day, both under the shade of mango trees near the villages, the circled people kept steeling curious glances at me as the MoFA representatives spoke to them about the importance of working as a group to farm the test plots of yam and cassava.

As my blog post describes, much to the surprise of the MoFA reps and the villagers, at the second test plot I actually jumped in and started helping to weed and plant the cassava field. It is hard freaking work! I quickly developed some big blisters and was dripping sweat. The chief of the village gave me personal weeding lessons as the men and boys from the village kicked my butt, finishing their rows well before me and then standing at the end of the field and cheering/jeering me on. Although my weeding and planting skills still need a lot of work, getting my hands dirty definitely helped me to build some credibility and strengthen relationships.

The next day (Friday) was the end of Ramadan and was declared a national holiday. It is rainy season over here and it poured rain on and off during the day, so I mostly stayed in reading books and working on my computer. I have to admit that my couple of hours of farming the day before actually took quite a toll on me and I was thankful for the day off. I did manage to get up and wander around town a bit to take-in the end of Ramadan celebration. Like the locals, I have begun to walk much more slowly here and to stop often to have brief chats with people as I walk.

The focus of my work over here is on management and leadership systems to help my Ministry of Food & Agriculture office work more effectively. I must say that the challenges over here make the challenges at Fransen seem pretty insignificant and that I will definitely be returning home a much more patient man!

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Gary Watson

Subject: 09-08-2010 - Ainsley's day

Hey Watsons,

How was Ainsley's first day of school? Pretty exciting, I bet!

Over here in Ghana, school doesn't start until September 20th, but I managed to find a 5 year old to interview on Ainsley's day – September 8th. Her name is Blessing and I've attached a picture of me with her.

Blessing is a bit shy, but I managed to get her to answer a few questions and her grandmother and brothers answered the rest.

Her family does not have a lot of money and cannot afford to buy her toys, but her favorite game is to pretend to cook like the older girls in her family. She just started going to Kindergarten last year and she is looking forward to starting school again in a couple of weeks. There are lots of children for her to play with nearby, but I get the impression she is a bit shy and probably sticks close to home and plays mostly with her siblings.

Her father and mother are away in Kumasi, where her father works as a driver, so she stays with her grandparents, two brothers, along with her aunt, uncle, and cousins all in a small compound not far from where I am staying. They invited me to stay for dinner, which I did. We ate boiled yams and fish stew under the canopy of their compound as it started to pour rain outside.

I showed the kids pictures I had brought from home and they asked lots of questions. Then I let Blessing draw for a bit in my notebook, which made her very happy. I don't think she gets many opportunities to draw and colour, as paper and pens are expensive for her family.

I think that Blessing is lucky to have a loving and happy family. As they live only a couple of minutes away, I will probably get many chance to learn more about them, so I should be able to tell you more when I see you all again in January.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Mark Grindlay

Subject: 09-07-2010 - Your Day

Hey Mark and Bruce,

Happy Birthday Bruce! Your brother has kindly purchased a full day of a 34 year old guy's time for you – just what you always wanted. And I'm in Ghana to boot, so I can't even wash your car or anything like that.

So what did I do on your day? Well, I spent most of the day working in the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) office, which I have to admit is not as fun as going to the field to work with farmers. On the other hand, it's probably in the office where I have the highest chance to have impact.

The MoFA office is small, consisting of two rooms in a building that is shared with the Water & Sanitation department. I alternate between sitting in the Director's office and the other room, which I call the bullpen. Today I sat in the Director's office and had the opportunity to observe and learn several new things.

In the morning, a representative from the District Assembly (the local government) came to visit the Director and he asked him several questions about some seeds that had been delivered to the office as part of a big government Block Farm program. He was grilling the Director pretty hard and I learned later that he is the local representative of the National Bureau of Investigation that audits government agencies. Apparently someone had anonymously raised concern about some missing seeds and this guy was investigating. The Director didn't seem overly concerned, which I guess means he doesn't have anything to hide. Corruption is definitely a big issue here, but with my lack of language and cultural knowledge, it's really hard for me to guess who is crooked. I'm working on a full blog post on this subject, so keep an eye out.

Also in the morning, we had the second half of a monthly staff meeting that was interrupted last Thursday. I had been chatting with the Director before the meeting about setting yield targets for the Block Farm program and he put me on the spot in the middle of the meeting with many co-workers who I had just met for the first time by asking me to speak about it. I managed to dance around a bit and turn it into a discussion about ways that the Agriculture Extension Agents (the office's field staff) can work with farmer groups to help them increase yields on their block farms. The ideas of setting targets and working 40 solid hours a week are foreign here, which is extremely frustrating especially given the fact around 50% of the population doesn't have enough food in the lean months, and our Ministry of Food & Agriculture office is supposed to be on the front lines working on the problem.

The Director had brought the 2nd quarter's fuel allowance with him back from Tamale the day before. The allowances should have been paid three months ago in June and the staff were anxiously awaiting them. The entire staff of the office basically sat around unproductively all afternoon waiting to be called into the Director's office to receive their allowance. The Director had told them during the first half of the staff meeting on Thursday of the previous week that he would not be giving full allowances to people who hadn't been pulling their weight and this had caused a significant amount of anxiety. I sat quietly in the corner of his office trying to work while he brought the staff in one at a time, which was awkward but gave me a great opportunity to observe the Director's relationship with each of his staff.

I later learnt that the staff veterinarian had gone above the Director's head a few weeks ago to the Regional office to complain that he thought the Director was taking their fuel allowances for himself. This got the Director pretty mad and it also highlighted the potential danger associated with using fuel allowances as incentives.

The management issues over here make me long for the now seemingly minor challenges at work back home. One thing is for sure, I will return a much more patient man.

This particular work day was a bit frustrating, but I had a pretty good evening. A local girls prepared Fufu (pounded yam doe in a palm-oil and peanut soup – the standard local dish) for me and a couple of other guests, then I sat around and chatted about politics with a couple of well educated guys from the District Assembly.

Thanks again for supporting me. Check out my blog for more info on what I've been up to over here.

Hope all is well with your whole family.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: 'Sasha Caldera'

Subject: 09-06-2010 - Your Day

Hey Sasha,

Well I have to say that this has been my biggest challenge yet! ☺

Just kidding. I've actually been thinking/acting/and doing more like you since I arrived in Ghana. My brain is working in over-drive trying to understand the various problems and opportunities that surround me and the subtle interconnections between them.

The language barrier often gets in my way. Although most people in the office speak English, different people are at different levels and there are often misunderstandings. However, there are a few excellent communicators who I really enjoy chatting with and with whom I can have deeper Sasha type conversations.

The District Controller (Accountant) is a young guy who's really sharp and he often stops by the barracks that I am staying at in the evening for a chat. There's a Contractor who's a bit more rough and tumble, but who's also a really smart guy, who often joins us. We've had conversations about Ghanaian vs. Canadian politics, dating, economics, sports, etc... I've been having a great time and I'm learning a lot from them.

Working here has made me realize how many assumptions I make about things at home. I'm used to quickly analyzing a situation, coming up with ideas and sharing them. Here the

assumptions upon which I have been basing my analysis are of much lower quality due to cultural barriers and lack of local knowledge. For example, I came to realize that the Agricultural Extension Agents (AEAs) in the office often use work time and resources on their own farms. This seemed like a 'smoking gun' issue and my mind immediately turned to how we could introduce better scheduling and accountability tools to the office. As I learned more, however, I discovered that an AEA's salary is not that high and that they pretty much have to have their own farms in order to make a decent living. And then I found out that working on their own farms is not only tolerated, it's actually encouraged as they want the AEAs to set an example for other farmers.

So it's not the smoking gun that I thought, but I still think there's an issue, as it's kind of hard to tell when people in the office are working. How much time should be allowed for AEAs to work on their own farms? What type of work should be allowed during 'working hours' and what type shouldn't? Is work on their own farms really helping farmers?

Your day (September 6th) was actually by far the hardest I have worked in the office yet, which is a really good thing. Up until today, going to the field with the AEAs was lots of fun, but the office time has been a bit boring. I think this is because most of the staff don't know how to do 'office work,' so productivity when they are in the office is really low. Today I helped the Director (Boss) to put together a presentation for an upcoming regional meeting and I built some spreadsheets to help understand the performance of the big Block Farming program that is dominating the office's attention. There were lots of opportunities to ask deep Sasha style questions. ☺

Not quite yet transcendental, but it's definitely been an amazing experience so far!

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Jeni Dunkel

Subject: 09-05-2010 - Your Day

Hi Jeni,

I've started my investigation into what cancer services prevention is available locally, but I'm hoping to do some more work on it and I'm planning to write a full blog post on healthcare in the Kpandai district soon.

Here's what I've learned so far... I've asked a few random people about cancer to see what their level of awareness is. In the town of Kpandai, it sounds like most people have at least heard of cancer. There are even TV commercials showing people how to do home breast examinations. However, only some people in the town of 8,000 people have access to TV and most of the 100,000 people living in the district don't even have electricity. (the people who have TV

mostly have antennas at the end of long poles beside their houses, so you can tell pretty easily who has it and who doesn't)

If you think you have breast cancer or you are generally sick, you need to travel from Kpandai to Tamale (400,000 people and 7 hours away), or the major cities of Kumasi or Accra (two days travel away). The travelling alone can be quite expensive and I get the impression that few people make the trek.

I asked a group if people die of cancer in Kpandai district. One guy answer that it has been 12 years since someone died of cancer here, but the others quickly pointed out that most deaths by cancer are probably never diagnosed as cancer. Based on what I've heard so far, I think that if the average person in the district gets cancer, it's probably a death sentence. The few more well-off people, however, have a chance to find treatment in one of the bigger cities, but I'm betting that even for them cancer is probably not generally detected very early.

Keeping with the healthcare theme, just this morning (Monday) the security guard at the District Chief's house, whom I have befriended over the last couple of weeks, asked me for money to help his daughter. She is pregnant and is apparently having complications. I think it has something to do with not being able to sleep... Apparently they went to the local clinic and the nurse advised them to go to a nearby town (70km away – 3 hours on a motorcycle) to see the local 'doctor' to get a traditional cure. He put me on the spot first thing this morning and I wasn't sure what to do. Firstly, I don't understand what is wrong with her and I don't believe in traditional medicine. Secondly, I don't want local people to start seeing me as an ATM machine. On the other hand, I figured that even the placebo effect of visiting the local doctor would be beneficial and he was only asking for 10 Ghana Cedes (around \$8), so I gave him the money and stressed that it was a loan and not a gift. I'm still not sure about my decision... Hopefully everything works out.

On your specific day (Sunday), it was pouring rain for half the day, so I was stuck inside reading and working on the computer. When the rain cleared, I walked down to the market and bought my lunch at a stall. I pulled out some laminated cards that I made before I left with pictures and maps on them and attracted around 10 smiling and excited children, so I managed to make a few people smile that day as per the second part of your challenge. (Richard Hernandez helped me to make the laminated cards before I left and he might still have a copy on his computer if you are interested in seeing them).

As for the safari suggestion, there is talk of us (myself and the 3 other volunteers that came to Ghana with me) going to the Mole national park to see the elephants and other animals. Ghana doesn't have as many animals as Tanzania where I visited a couple of years ago, so I'm actually hoping we can visit a Fair Trade Cocoa cooperative instead. ☺

Thanks again for you support. Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott
To: Chandran Thiruchittampalam
Subject: 09-04-2010 - Your Day

Hi Chandran,

Greetings from Kpandai! I'm really enjoying the experience so far and I'm appreciating all of the learning opportunities.

Your day (September 4th) was a Saturday and I mostly relaxed; however, I did start the day with a run and then did my laundry in a bucket outside my quarters. After that I wandered around town and went to the market (it comes to Kpandai town every 6 days). In the late afternoon, I went into work because my Director was working by himself in the office and I took advantage to try to build my relationship with him.

Although there are lots of things that could be improved at the District Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) office, I think that on the balance it is a strong team. Many of their issues seem to stem from late inputs from the Regional/National level. Do you have any suggestions with respect to how a District office can have influence at the Regional level? Examples of the issues they are experiencing include:

- Late arrival of seeds and fertilizer. The rumor is that some politicians wanted to sell their own seed rice, which is why the seeds were late. Because the seeds were late, only half of them could be planted and the rest are still sitting in the store room.
- Lack of tractors. The government used to have mechanization centers and would provide the District MoFA offices with tractors that they could rent out for cost recovery, but they found that the tractors were getting used mainly on the farms of office staff, so they ended the program. Now there are a lack of private tractors available in the district, so the government has started a subsidy program (I am going to post a blog explaining more about this soon). A few different people and groups in the Kpandai district applied for the grant program, but none were successful apparently because there were not enough tractors available from the government for everyone who applied.
- Late fuel money. My District field office just received its second quarter fuel allowance a couple of days ago – almost a full quarter late! This has a big impact on the office, as the staff require mottos to travel to the field.

As I'm sure you can guess, these are only a few of the challenges. It seems like a lack of ability to 'influence up' is a root cause of these and many other issues. If you have any thoughts or insights with respect to this challenge, I'd really appreciate hearing them.

Thanks again for supporting me. I hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott
To: James McPherson
Subject: 09-03-2010 - Your First Day

Hey James,

Sorry buddy – your day was a rain-out! I was supposed to go to the field to visit a women’s farmers group that is participating in EWB’s Agriculture as a Business program (AAB), but it started pouring early in the morning and kept going pretty much all day. The Agriculture Extension Agents (AEA) typically have motorcycles, but the one I was supposed to go with today only has a bicycle due to the office’s tight budget. I bought a bike earlier this week and we were going to ride out together today, but it will have to wait until next week. Not that it would have changed anything if the AEA had of had a motorcycle, as the dirt roads have all turned into mud and puddles.

The rain pretty much shut down the whole office today. The officers and extension agents that showed up (there were about 6 of the 19 total district staff in the office today, although many people are permanently stationed in other zones) pretty much just sat around and even snoozed at times. A few of them worked on paperwork, but none of them seemed overly concerned that the boss would get upset if they didn’t at least look like they were working. Definitely a different work culture over here. The office is pretty small (only two rooms), so when I asked the Director and the Deputy Director if they can spare some time to discuss the AAB program, it’s pretty obvious that they actually do have the time but are just not interested on a Friday afternoon.

So I taught one of the young guys about Excel and personal/financial planning for a while. Then I worked on emails and blog posts. I also continued to review background info from EWB and crunched numbers to help improve my understanding. Stuff like: yield and price per crop, number of AEAs per farmer, salary of an AEA compared to a farmer, etc... You know how much I love data. I even threw together a couple of quick pivot tables. ☺

I will definitely get a chance to use some of my MBA schooling and related experience. Yesterday I attended the monthly office meeting and there’s definitely lots of room for improvement with respect to leadership and management. There are lots of issues that I see potential answers for, but I’m trying to build relationships with the Director and Deputy Director so that the changes are appropriately paced and sustainable. Sound familiar?

My new bike is pretty sweet. Three gears, a bell, basket and wheel generator light for only 50GHC ~ \$45 Canadian. I think it is Chinese made. Good thing for my Brodie Ronin fancy bike that shipping from Ghana to Canada is so expensive and difficult. ;-) I’m looking forward to doing a bit of exploring on it this weekend if the rain lets up.

Glad to hear that you are enjoying the pad. September and October should still be pretty nice. I enjoy the skylights year round, but the deck will get pretty unusable by October unless you are really committed.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Doug Spirig

Subject: 09-02-2010 - Your Day

Hey Doug,

Happy Anniversary! I still can't believe it's been 10 years. Speaking of marriage, everybody I meet over here is surprised that I don't at least have a first wife already. ☺

It would seem that, even when you sponsor a day in Africa, you can't get away from meetings! Today we had the monthly Ministry of Food and Agriculture Kpandai District office meeting. There are 19 total staff in the office and many of them live in distant communities from Kpandai town (up to 70km away on bad roads), but they all come in for the monthly meeting. So today was a good chance for me to get to meet everyone and set a bit of an early tone for my 4 month placement.

Apparently it is supposed to be an all day meeting, but the Director was delayed coming back from a meeting in Kumasi and he didn't arrive until 1:30pm. I asked why we couldn't start the meeting without him, but nobody seemed interested. They sat around and chatted, some worked on personal stuff, and just a couple took advantage to catch up on paperwork.

The cultural differences about time and work ethic are quite pronounced. The secretary often unabashedly falls asleep at her desk and there's rarely more than a few people in the office on a normal day. The Agriculture Extension Officers are supposed to be out in the field working with farmers quite a bit, but I don't think they are putting in anything close to 40 hour weeks and when one of them took me to 'the field' the other day it turned out to be 'his fields.'

After a bunch of mucking around, when the meeting finally start at 4pm there were 13 of us crowded into the Director's office (the office consists of two rooms in a building shared with the Water & Sanitation group). The two hour meeting consisted of about an hour and a half soliloquy by the Director where he switched back and forth between berating and pleading with a healthy dose of obviously misunderstood management lingo like "We are change agents" and "We must work together and be role models for each other" sprinkled in. It was a great opportunity for me to understand some of the issues in the office. For example, it's pretty obvious that not everyone is pulling their weight, but they lack systems for accountability (sound familiar?). There are also more insidious issues like agents taking office inputs for their own farms. Despite all of these challenges, I think the office actually has great potential and I'm looking forward to the challenge of trying to help improve things.

I'm focusing on building relationships and trying to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with the work right now. It's definitely a whole different kettle of fish than I am used to. It's sometimes hard not to just see all of the differences between how things work here and back home as problems, but instead to see the opportunities in the differences as well. In addition, I think a lot of the attitude difference is a result of circumstance as well – i.e. you'd drive yourself crazy trying to keep a tight schedule here with all of the challenges like buses

cancelled, power outages, flooded roads, coming down with malaria, funeral shutting down the office for 3 days, etc...

Anyway, I'm pretty sure I will come home a much more patient man.

Hope you and Rachel get a chance to do something special to celebrate your big milestone.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Carl Abbott; Karen Abbott

Subject: 09-01-2010 - Your first day.

Hey Mom and Dad,

Well – I think I've been settling in pretty well, my spirits are generally high, and my health is great. I am going to start looking for a host family so I can move out of the District Assembly quarters, because I think that will really help me to integrate with the community. It will come at a cost of a bit of privacy and a flush toilet, but I think it will be worth it.

On September 1st, I went out to the field with a couple of the Agriculture Extension Agents (AEAs) from my office and a representative from MoFA in Accra who was visiting town to look at a test rice field that had been planted about a month ago. I learned quite a bit about fertilizer and when/how it should be applied.

On the way back from the field, we stopped at a Leprosarium and I had a brief, but very interesting, conversation with a nurse there. It was originally opened in 1952 and apparently they currently have about 200 patients and they still get new cases! The AEAs were saying that there is quite a bit of discrimination against people from the area around the Leprosarium, many of whom settled there after being discharged. I'm planning to visit there again and write a full blog post when I get a chance.

I also bought a bike for 70GHC (\$56 Canadian) and took my first exploratory ride after work on Wednesday. The weather has actually been quite nice lately – not too hot – and there was a beautiful rainbow out over the fields. Of course, I was greeted by children yelling 'father' everywhere I went (they still associate white people with Catholic priests), which if I'm not careful is going to start giving me a big ego. ☺

Anyway, all is well here and there's nothing for you to worry about.

Love you.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott
To: Kim McRae
Subject: 08-31-2010 - Your Day

Hey Kim,

Quite fittingly, on your day I was looking at piping and flanges! I toured an earthen irrigation dam that was recently built by the District using money from a donor. Basically there is a gravity fed water distribution system of buried PVC pipe that draws water from behind the dam and then distributes it to a series of 20 concrete box culvert basins that are spread around the 20 acres of farming fields.

The idea is that the farmers who will share the 20 acres can now add another crop of vegetables in the dry season (probably okra, tomatoes and/or onions), which will increase their food security and income. In May/June at the end of the dry season, about 50% of the 100,000 people in the Kpandai district do not have enough food, so this seems like a pretty good idea at first blush. However, as simple as the design is, it is going to require some maintenance to keep working properly (there is already a leaking flange on the main isolation valve) and I'm not sure if the farmer group is strong enough yet to organize this. Hopefully I will be able to help a bit in this regard...

The Contractor from Tamale and the Consultant from Accra were both at the tour (I'm not sure if they considered this final commissioning?). It was interesting to hear the complaints of the Owner, Consultant and Contractor – very similar to here. The Owner complained that the Consultant had not spent enough time on site. The Consultant complained that he had to pay his site staff based on how long the construction took and that he does not have any control over how long the Contractor takes to finish the project. The Contractor, with his gold tooth and gold watch, just grinned and quietly agreed with everything that was said. I get the feeling that he did pretty well on this job!

I am planning to write a longer blog post about the dam soon, which will include some pictures, so keep an eye out for it.

So the 31st was a pretty good day for me. Thank you for sponsoring it!

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott
To: Randy Crighton; Lyla Crighton
Subject: 08-30-2010 - Your Day

Hi Randy and Lyla,

Your day was the beginning of my first full week of work in my district of Kpandai (last week I arrived on Tuesday night and my first day was on Wednesday). Things have been going well both at the office and with respect to settling in personally. However, it has become apparent that my learning curve will be steep.

I discovered that it takes most of the people in the office the better part of a Monday to get ramped back up into the work week. The Ghanaian concept of time is much different than back in Canada. People kind of show up whenever, leave to eat whenever, and call it a day whenever they are tired of working. It's probably a bit worse in my Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) office, as the staff are always going out into the field to work with farmers, so it's kind of hard to keep track of them.

On this day, I wound-up going with one of the Agriculture Extension Agents (Mr. Kwame) out to 'the field,' which turned out to be his own field. The previous Engineers Without Borders volunteer in the district had told me that Mr. Kwame had a reputation for spending a lot of time on his own fields and it is apparently well deserved. He seems like a nice guy, but he's got a gleam in his eye like he's always working an angle. Then again, his succeeding on his own fields does set a good example for other farmers...

I rode on the back of his motorcycle out to his fields and we walked through his maize, rice and yams. We spent the most time in his yam fields, which is the main crop in Kpandai. I will probably do a full blog post on yams soon... Afterward we stopped at his house on the way back to the office for lunch and ate Fufu – which is a big ball of pounded yam doe in a peanut oil and fish broth. We also roasted and ate a couple of cobs of corn (maize) that we had brought back from his farm.

Thanks again for sponsoring this day. It feels like forever since I have seen you two, so hopefully we will be able to get together sometime early in the New Year.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Don Dingwall

Subject: 08-29-2010 - Your day

Hi Don,

Your day was my first Sunday in Kpandai town. I started the day off with a cold water shave using a bucket and the side mirror of an abandoned truck that is permanently parked (it has no tires) outside the place I'm staying.

For the rest of the day, I took the opportunity to explore and take pictures (many of them are on my recent blog post). It was a great day to explore the town, as it was market day and people had come from all around the town to buy and sell. I took the opportunity to buy some used

sheets for my bed for 6 GHC (around \$5 Canadian). Up until then, I had been sleeping in an MEC mummy sack that I had brought with me.

Later in the afternoon, one of my co-workers took me to formally meet the main chief of the area (there is a main chief and several sub chiefs). The chief owns all of the land and people must come to him to ask permission to farm different areas. The chief also has the power to kick people off of his land if he doesn't like them. I had been told to bow down low when I met him, which had me thinking it would be pretty formal, but it turned out to just be a few old guys sitting under a tree. I bowed low none the less., but had someone not have brought me, I might have just walked right by never guessing there was a chief sitting there. Anyways, hopefully I have managed to keep with protocol so that things will run smoothly in the future.

It was a good Sunday and it helped me feel more at home in Kpandai.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Mark Dickson

Subject: 08-28-2010 - Your Day

Hey Markus,

So your second day was Saturday – my first day off in Kpandai. The town is definitely RURAL and I'm somewhat of a local celebrity because I am the only white dude in town and probably in the whole district of 100,000 people. I wonder how I'll react to anonymity when I get back home...

Anyway, today I explored the town walking the main 2km or so stretch of road through the center of town (the only paved section in town). I found a guy who was backyard smelting scrap metal to sand cast pots. I met a group who were operating what looked like a cooperative grain milling machine. And finally I visited one of the two local clinics and chatted with a nurse. There are no hospitals and no Doctors in the district – people have to travel at least 60km on bumpy roads in case of emergency. I also learned that there is still a leper colony not far away. I thought that disease had been eradicated long ago! I will write more on health care in a blog post soon.

Hope you had a great weekend.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Vern Walle

Subject: 08-26 & 27-2010 - Your Days

Hi Vern,

Your days – the 26th and 27th – were my second and third days of work in my district of Kpandai. I am getting to know the staff at the Ministry of Food and Agriculture Office (there are apparently about 15 of them, but they're always coming and going and I haven't met all of them yet).

I'm learning a lot through snippets of conversations with co-workers. It's an interesting challenge to try to fit into a new office in another culture. I'm naturally curious by nature and I have hundreds of questions, but I don't want to overwhelm people, so I'm metering them out slowly.

Check out my blog for more info on my first week in Kpandai. I've posted some pictures and an audio file.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Ray Randall

Subject: 08-25-2010 - Your Day

Hi Ray,

Well you picked a great day! It was my first day of work and it was incredibly eventful. In the morning I went out to the field with three of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) office members and we visited several rice farmer groups. They used to grow rice in the district a couple of decades ago, but then stopped for some reason and now the government is trying to encourage farmers to grow it again.

We visited several farms including a 'block farm' where the government encouraged farmers to join together on a big plot of land (20 acres). The government had built an earthen dam and installed a gravity irrigation system so that the farmers could grow vegetables in the dry season and rice in the wet season. It looked pretty good, but we had to chase some goats off the land who were grazing on the rice.

After the tour, we met with a group of around 20 farmers in the shade of a tree at one of the villages. The four of us sat in plastic chairs in front of them and they started by introducing me (I'm the only white guy in the area and I attract a lot of attention). There are about 7 languages spoken in the area and people kept switching back and forth during the meeting and I'm not sure if anyone caught everything.

After the intros, the MoFA guys gave the farmers some feedback. They wanted them to plant in straight rows instead of 'broadcasting' (spreading the seeds randomly everywhere) and they also

wanted them to do more weeding before they gave them fertilizer. The farmers countered that they were having trouble getting everyone to contribute equally, as the block farm had not been set up with areas for individual farmers but rather as a big collective. It was a very interesting exchange. I later learned that the 'farmers' were actually more fishermen and that they only decided to try growing rice because it sounded like the government was going to do most of the work.

Anyway... It was a great introduction to the work I will be doing and some of the complexities and challenges.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Jack Vanier

Subject: 08-24-2010 - Your Day

Hey Jack,

Well I thought this would be my first day of work, but I was delayed in Tamale so it turned out that on the 24th I was travelling from Tamale to Kpandai where I will be stationed. After running some last minute errands in the morning, I headed to the local bus station at around noon. The place was a total gong show, but luckily a 12 year old orphan boy named Jonathan befriended me and helped me navigate the place.

Jonathan was a smart young and he read from my book on Ghana's economy for a bit. Then I showed him some pictures of Canada and attracted a crowd of curious children. Finally the bus arrived and we loaded up. It was jam packed with people and cargo. There were even people standing all the way up and down the aisle!

The grandmother and mother in my row on the bus used me to scare their 2 year old boy into behaving and everyone thought that was really funny. (I was the only white guy on the bus and I'm the only white guy in Kpandai and I get a lot of attention)

Towards the end of the ride, I wound-up sitting next to a young man who was going to a town to do his national service volunteer stint. He is studying rural development at a college and we had an interesting conversation about development. Not quite a full root causes analysis, but it followed a similar logic. I'll have to wait until a bit later in my placement to do a more comprehensive RCA. ☺

My Director's driver picked me up in Wulensi and we took the district's new truck over the last section of road to Kpandai. The road had been getting progressively worse since leaving Tamale, with only the first section paved. The final road was in horrible shape with many puddle/lakes and rocks sticking out. That is why buses stopped going all the way to Kpandai earlier this year and it greatly hinders getting stuff in and out of the town.

We finally got into Kpandai at around 8:30 only to learn that all three guest houses were full, so we had to contact the District Director to get permission for me to crash in their barracks. I slept well that night!

I will be posting more on my blog regularly.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Mark Dickson

Subject: 08-22-2010 – Your Day

Hey Markus,

Greetings from Tamale Ghana!!

After having arrived in Ghana on the 19th and taking a long bus ride up to Tamale, I've just completed a couple of days of in-country sector meetings with other EWB people. Tomorrow I'm heading off on my own to the remote Kpandai district where I will be stationed in the capital (7,500 people in the town – 100,000 mostly rural farmers in the district).

The first of your days (the 22nd) I spent in intensive meetings with my group – team MoFA = Ministry of Food and Agriculture. Lots of good chances to apply all of the great learnings from our MBA. It's amazing how similar group dynamic, management and change issues are between Fransen, EWB Canada, EWB Ghana, MoFA, etc...

I tried posting a voice blog yesterday and if it works I'm going to try to go it weekly, so check it out.

Hope all is well with you. ☺

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: 'Christian Beaudrie'

Subject: 08-21-2010 – Your Day

Hey Christian,

Greetings from Tamale!!

Your day (August 21st) was my second full day in Tamale. I attended the MoFA team in-country meeting with Wayne, Ben Best, Erin E, Troy, Ashley, Robin S, and some new people who you probably don't know. It was a great time and everyone seems great.

I also sponged up a bunch of info from Sarah and McLean – the two student JFs who are transitioning out of the district I am going to – Kpandai (it is a new district that was recently split off of East Gonja in the Northern Region).

Basically I've just been drinking from the fire hose of knowledge for the last couple of days preparing for Kpandai, where I think I will be pretty cut-off due to a lack of internet access and dodgy phone lines. I imagine you've been there and done that. ☺

Although it seems like none of the Ghana staff that you worked with are in-country at the moment, most of them have definitely heard of you. Troy said that your ERT program revolutionized regional data collection for MoFA. ☺

Hope all is well with you!

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Emily Sproule; Chris Goodchild

Subject: 08-20-2010 – Your Day

Hey Chris and Emily,

Greetings from Tamale, Ghana!!! Did you two manage to get this far north during your travels?

Your day (the 20th) was my first full day in Tamale after pretty much 3 solid days of travel from Toronto. The day started with egg & bread + Lipton (tea) served in a plastic bag at a local food stall (we had to take a shared taxi a ways to find one that was open during Ramadan).

After breakfast, one of the long term volunteers led the three of us Pro JFs (professional short term volunteers) that are assigned to the MoFA team (Ministry of Food & Agriculture) through final in-country training, which included a scavenger hunt in the local market.

Other interesting notes from the training included a definition of 'free ranging,' which basically means going to the bathroom wherever you feel like it (sanitation in Ghana is not great).

In the evening I managed to connect with the two student JFs who are on their way out of the district that I am going to. Kpandai is basically an 'end of the road' sort of place that few people visit. The district has about 100,000 people, almost all of whom are subsistence farmers, and the main city of Kpandai itself where I will be stations has about 7,500 people and is around 6 hours from Tamale on a bumpy road. (I will try to post a map showing the district and town on my blog soon).

I sponged up as much info as I could from them and learned that the prognosis in Kpandai in terms of the MoFA (Ministry of Food and Agriculture) office is fairly good. Keep an eye on my blog for more fics about what I'm going to be doing.

Hope all is well with both of you. J

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: 'Kieran Smith'

Subject: 08-19-2010 – Your Day

Hey Kieran,

Greetings from Tamale, Ghana!! Things are going great over here, but I'm sorry to report that your day (August 19th) was mostly consumed by a 13 hour bus ride from Accra to Tamale during which I mostly slept to recover from jet lag. ;-)

I did manage to engage the Ghanaian mother who I sat beside on the bus in a conversation. She was shy at first, but I used some small maps that I printed of Google Earth and laminated to spark the conversation (Carissa's idea). I then fired up my computer and showed her some cached Google Earth images, which she loved. Unfortunately I had a lot of trouble understanding her, so the information was a little one way.

The bus was playing bad Nigerian movies at extra loud volume, which was amusing but did make it harder to sleep.

When we arrived in Tamale, I met several other EWBers. The in-country coordination meetings for the MoFA (Ministry of Food and Agriculture) and GARI (Rural Infrastructure) teams have been scheduled to coincide with our arrival + all of the student JFs are passing through on their way back home, so I am in full on information sponge mode!

Hope all is well with you. ☺

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: 'Cindy Gammie'

Subject: 08-18-2010 - Gammie Family

Hi Rich, Cindy, Danika and Tianna,

Have you had a chance to see my blog post yet about your day – August 18th? The day was lots of fun and it was great for team bonding with my fellow volunteers, but I didn't accomplish much in terms of my work since it was a full on travel day.

The day assignments are a bit arbitrary anyway and I look forward to telling you more about my work when I get back.

Hope all is well with all of you. ☺

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com