

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

From: Mark Abbott
To: Colette Gunson
Subject: 10-31-2010 - Your Day

Hi Colette,

Your day, October 31st, was a pretty quiet Sunday. I woke up feeling a bit rough, but I managed to get up just in time to get ready for church. It turned out to be a special service, as Father Timothy was introducing the two new priests who will be replacing him. People had travelled from all the surrounding mini-parishes and the service was held outside under a mango tree in order to accommodate everyone.

The service had a bit of a celebratory feel, which was nice and it's always fun to see everyone all dressed up. However, it was almost three hours long and I was starving by the end of it! One of the downsides of being the only Obruni in town is that it's pretty much impossible to sneak away early from something without being noticed. J

I went straight from church to my favorite bean and yam lunch place, the one from my What's For Dinner post. After eating, I went home and relaxed for a bit and then Nhial and I rode our bikes over to Madam Marta's. I think I've mentioned her to you before... She's perhaps the strongest female leader in town. She has just retired from being an elementary school teacher and she's opened a pre-school that filled up with kids almost instantaneously. She also leads a thirty women group that's associated with her church. Nhial and I went to chat with her about screening Pray The Devil Back to Gel Hell.

After meeting with Madam Marta, I went down to the office to wait for my Director and representatives from several of the other government ministries to show up to discuss our project plan for the free public screening of Emmanuel's Gift next week. As per usual, half of the people were late, but we finally had around 12 people and we screened the movie and chatted about our plans briefly. I think this second running of Projecting Change could attract more than 500 people...

As for Halloween, nobody here seems to have heard of it. I tried to find out if they wear costumes for any other events, but I don't know if the people I asked understood what I was getting at. I'll keep an eye out for the rest of my stay.

Looks like we're both working on organizing film festivals this week. ;-)

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott
To: Jim Noon
Subject: 10-25, 26, 27, 28, 29 & 30th -2010 - Your Days

Hi Jim,

It was good to be working for you again this past week! ☺

Hopefully you've had a chance to read and listen to my Raising Expectations and Yam Mounds post, which summarizes what went on during your week. Here is a bit more detail.

During the week, my Director and I continued to work on a few office initiatives and then had a meeting with a couple of the District Agriculture Officers in our office (middle managers) to get their feedback and input. The first is an Earned Fuel Allowance system whereby staff will earn their monthly fuel allowance by completing some core activities. Accountability is a huge issue here. I think this is partially because there are so many valid excuses that people get used to making excuses and giving up. Popular excuses include: late fuel money, not enough fuel money, bad roads, inadequate equipment, unreasonable requests from Regional Office, difficulty dealing with their children's schools, malaria, etc... We're hoping that the Earned Fuel Allowance system will provide a solid bedrock of accountability that we will be able to build other initiatives on.

The second initiative is a Calendar of Activity planning and tracking system for staff. This is really important because most of the staff work independently out in the field and currently the Director does not have any way of knowing where they are or what they are doing on any given day. After these two initiatives are up and running, our goal is to move to some true Performance Incentives. I've attached the Excel files in case you are interested along with the PowerPoint for the staff meeting tomorrow where we will be introducing these initiatives to all of the staff.

I've been really impressed with my Director over here, both with his capabilities and with his willingness to self reflect. We seem to be on the same wavelength with things, but the trick now is get everyone else on the bus. Sound familiar? ☺ This week my Peace Corp friend Nhial asked my Director for advice regarding his Director. He works in the neighboring Water & Sanitation office and his Director spends most of the day napping and he isn't very receptive to Nhial's ideas. My Director pointed out to Nhial that his Director did not have much formal education and he is probably a bit scared of a young university graduate from the USA coming in, shaking things up and potentially exposing the things that he hasn't been handling properly. It was really interesting listening to my Director giving change management advice. I am supposed to be helping to develop management and leadership skills with my Director and in my office, but I am learning just as much from him, which is great.

It's been amazing for me how similar the people issues are in my Ministry of Food & Agriculture (MoFA) office over here to our challenges at Fransen. I'd love to see what Lorraine, Rob and Kelly could achieve with a good solid year here! Trying to understand people dynamics in another culture definitely adds a big twist, but I actually think it has been good for me in some ways, as it has forced me to slow down and not make so many assumptions. As always, I struggle with paring down all of my ideas and focusing on executing a few well, but I'm working on it.

I met with a couple women leaders this week after work. Both are school teachers and both lead women's groups. Madam Marta recently retired from being a primary school teacher and she has

opened up a private pre-school that looks like it is going to be incredibly successful. She leads a group of women who focus on community health issues. Madam Francesca is also a primary school teacher. She started a women's group a couple of years ago to help sooth growing tribal based tensions. The tensions still exist and is still a major focus of her group, but they now also focus on helping members develop business opportunities. I met with both women this week to chat about special movie screenings for their members and I also connected Madam Francesca with one of the Extension Agents in my agriculture office so he can help support the women with basic business training. When I asked both women independently what other support they required, they both responded that they would really like tactile learning toys for small children, so I downloaded some plans for simple wooden toys like building blocks and I'm now trying to find a local woodworker who can make a prototype for me.

Sticking with the education theme, a pack of schoolchildren started showing up on my doorstep in the evenings with notebooks and pencils. Actually they normally go to Nhial's place next door to mine, but we both went out and started giving them simple lessons. I showed them how to make a multiplication table and taught them a bit of geography using an inflatable globe that I had brought from home. Nhial has been giving them vocabulary and spelling tests.

After a solid week of office work, I felt the need to get my hands dirty on the weekend, so I went back out to Nchanchina where I previously had my village stay to help my friends Paul and Reuben raise yam mounds. It was exhausting work and it certainly gave me a better appreciation of how hard farming work is. As I write this email three days later, my body still aches!

It was a great week. Thanks again for sponsoring it.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Carl Abbott; Karen Abbott

Subject: 10-24-2010 - Your Day

Hey Mom and Dad,

Hope you two are enjoying the end of your vacation! And that you'll be able to connect with Suzanne and Kris for dinner this Wednesday when you get back into Vancouver.

On my birthday, I was able to take it a bit easy, which was a good thing because I was feeling a bit run down as a result of my village stay running into a big staff meeting running into my mid placement retreat running into a visit to Lonto to see the flood situation... October 24th was my first day off in a few weeks!

I got up early and went for a run with Nhial, which felt good, but then I decided to go back to bed for a while instead of going to the Catholic church service. After resting for the morning, I did go to the office for a short while to help my Director write-up and send a situation report on the Lonto flooding to the regional office. Although it was work, it was pretty casual and my Director and I made coffee and had a good long chat too.

I told Nhial that it was my birthday and we decided to try to make spaghetti to celebrate. It was a big success! We bought onions, garlic and okra in the market and combined it with the tomato paste, olive oil, and spaghetti that I had brought back with me from Tamale. A few local kids came by and helped us cook, so we rewarded them with some of our Obruni food.

It was a nice and quiet birthday – just what I needed. My batteries are now fully recharged, so no need to worry about me. ;-)

Love,
Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Gary Watson

Subject: 10-23-2010 - Your Day

Hey Gary,

The 22nd was a Saturday and I had just spent a couple of days on buses traveling back from Kumasi and Tamale where I had been for my mid placement retreat, but I decided to accompany my Director to take pictures of flooded fields so that we could create a situation report to submit to the regional Ministry of Food & Agriculture office. I hadn't bargained for how long it would take for us to ride out in the truck to the far reaches of the district. We left at 8am and didn't get back until 7pm and I was really tired that night. I was glad I went, however, because I got to see firsthand how bad the flooding is.

I spoke a little bit in my Mid-Placement audio post about the situation in the area. Over the past few days, I managed to gain a bit more information from office staff and from internet reports about the current flood situation in northern Ghana. There's enough food now because it is harvest season, but it looks like the dry season in the first half of next year could be a really tough one for the people in this area. I did a rough calculation of the flood affected areas in our district utilizing census information for the population of villages and info from our Extension Agent for the area. We estimated that 18,000 people might have just lost their primary food source in our district!

Through a combination of sharing the thought process of how we arrived at this estimate and by sharing the internet stories about the situation with my Director (I haven't met anyone else in town yet who has access to the internet, so accessing internet info is a pretty big value add), I have managed to convince him to raise the warning flag with our District Chief so that we can start lobbying for government and development agency assistance.

Director and I also had some really interesting conversations during the truck ride, especially when we drove past a village that Director said had been totally wiped out during the tribal fighting in the mid 1990s. Another was when we stopped for lunch on the side of the road in Salaga and the Director pointed out a compound that had been used to house and trade slaves back when Salaga was a major stopping point on the route that slavers used to transport slaves from the north to the ports on the coast, where they were then shipped to the Americas.

So although it was an exhausting day, I learnt a lot and I'm glad I went.

Hope all is well with you, Jen and the girls.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Monica Rodgers

Subject: 10-21-2010 - Your Day

Hi Monica,

Sorry for the delay in getting this to you. I've been catching up on things all week, but don't fear – I almost have my 'What's for supper?' post ready to go. Keep an eye out for it over the next couple of days...

Your second day (October 21st), was a travel day for me coming back from my mid-placement retreat. The last time I took the bus from Tamale back to Kpandai, I had to get up at 4:30am to go buy a ticket for the bus that leaves at noon. This time when I got to the station at 4:30am, they told me that the ticket salesman for my bus wouldn't arrive until 7am on that particular day. So I went back to my room at the compound that EWB rents in Tamale and slept for a couple of more hours before coming back and purchasing my ticket at 7am.

I took advantage of the morning in Tamale to run some errands and pick up some food items that I can't get in Kpandai, like chocolate spread and olive oil. I arrived back at the bus terminal at noon. The terminal is pretty rudimentary with just some benches outside under a makeshift canopy. Unfortunately my bus was late and I wound-up waiting in the heat of the afternoon for 4 hours!

When the bus finally showed up, everyone quickly piled in. The seats have been modified to cram as many people in as possible: 5 across with extremely minimal legroom. I am normally the tallest person on the bus at 6'-2" and my legs don't actually quite fit, which means I'm wedged in rather uncomfortably for the whole trip. I still fair better than the people who have to stand in the aisle for the whole trip because they didn't arrive early enough to get a seat!

Although the distance is only a couple of hundred kilometers, it took 8 hours due to the condition of the road. Only the first hour or so is paved and then the rest is potholes, rocks and huge puddles. The driver had to make us all get off the bus at around 10pm, take off our shoes, and wade through a large puddle so that the bus wouldn't get stuck! I debated pulling out my white privilege card and staying on the bus, as standing water in Africa can be pretty dangerous due to various diseases and snakes, but the water didn't look that deep so I just went for it.

As my iPod finally ran out of batteries right before we arrived in Kpandai at 11pm, I realized I was the only person on the bus who had anything to occupy their mind for the 8 hour trip, as not many people here have music players and it was far too bumpy to read. So although the ride was one of my least pleasant experiences so far, it definitely could have been worse!

I debated focusing on a different day with more positive experiences, but you did say that you wanted to hear a rant so that you'd know that I'm human. The experience was a great reminder of the numerous little challenges that make progress difficult over here.

With a bit of luck, I will be able to avoid this particular bus ride for the rest of my placement. ☺

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Michael Dorsey

Subject: 10-20-2010 - Your Day

Hey Michael,

Your day (October 20th) was towards the tail end of my mid placement retreat. Earlier in the week, I travelled to Kumasi with some other EWBers so that we could visit Kuapa Kokoo, the big Fair Trade Cocoa cooperative on Monday the 18th. Hopefully you've had a chance to read my post on the visit – it was amazing! On the 19th we travelled back up to Tamale and met up with our individual coaches (each of us short term volunteers has a long term coach).

Our schedule on the 20th wasn't too busy, so I slept in before grabbing egg & bread on the road for breakfast. There was a weaver working on the side of the road by the breakfast place and I watched him work for a bit and then had a great conversation with him about traditional Dagomba tribe weaving and clothing. I want to pick up some hand woven clothing before I go back, but unfortunately there are no weavers in Kpandai, so I will have to try to find time to commission a tailor next time I'm in Tamale.

After breakfast, I went with the other short term volunteer who has a similar assignment to mine (Mark Soares from Guelph) to meet up with our coaches Ben and Erin. We spent most of the day at their place in Tamale reviewing our progress towards our goals and brainstorming ideas for the second half of our placements.

In the late afternoon, Mark S and I took a shared taxi into the center of town for \$0.25 each and wandered around running errands. I picked up some groceries to take back to Kpandai, got a few pictures developed from my village stay that I want to give to my host, and purchased a pair of USB powered speakers so I can have better sound when I show people movies on my laptop in the evenings.

In the evening, Mark S, Ben, Erin and I went to an Obruni (foreigner) restaurant called Luxury on the outskirts of town. Apparently a previous EWB volunteer gave the owner of the restaurant business advice years ago and it's worked out really well. The food choices are pretty limited in Kpandai, so this was my last chance to fill up my stomach before catching the bus back to Kpandai the next morning. I had a salad, pizza, and a chocolate brownie with ice cream. We also split a bottle of the only reasonably good wine we've seen in Ghana so far. It was a pretty amazing end to your day!

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Barbara Agostini

Subject: 10-19&22-2010 - Your Days

Hi Barb,

Happy belated birthday! I think there's definitely a disproportionately large number of amazing people who were born in October. ☺

On the 19th as I sat on the bus from Kumasi back to Tamale to continue our mid placement retreat, I was still buzzing with excitement from my tour of the Kuapa Kokoo Fair Trade cocoa cooperative the day before. Hopefully you've had a chance to read my post about it. Given how big Kuapa Kokoo is and what a large share of the fair trade cocoa supply they currently constitute, there's a pretty good chance that the cocoa in the Fair Trade Halloween treats you are buying came from one of their farms.

By skipping over the 20th and 21st before landing on your second day, you conveniently missed my least favorite activity in Ghana – taking the bus from Tamale back to Kpandai. It currently requires nine hours due to the horrible conditions of the road and it is a bone rattling affair with as many people as humanly possible jammed into seats and standing in the aisles. On this particular trip, the bus left four hours late and we had to disembark at around 10pm, take off our shoes, and wade through a stream so that the bus could get past it. Sigh!

Friday the 22nd was my first day back in the office in Kpandai. I was pretty tired after a busy last couple of weeks, which included my village stay, a big staff meeting, and my mid-placement retreat, so I spent the day quietly catching up on things in the office and had an early evening. I did have a great chance to reconnect with my Director and discuss some of the new ideas that I cooked up during the mid placement retreat. My big focus for the second half of my placement is implementing the initiatives my Director and I identified during the first half of my placement. I think that the best next step is to focus on empowering the middle managers. Happily my Director agreed and we have scheduled a managers meeting for next Thursday.

As I write this email, I've finally managed to get enough down time to fully recharge my batteries. Hopefully you are getting similar opportunities too. ;-)

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Kevin Liu

Subject: 10-15, 16, 17 & 18th -2010 - Your Days

Hi Kevin,

On your days (October 15th through 18th) I was travelling to and attending my mid placement retreat.

I spent the 15th on a bus from Kpandai to Tamale, which is the northern capital of Ghana and the base for Engineers Without Border's work here. The horrible condition of the roads into Kpandai is perhaps the most pressing challenge facing the town and district. The bus ride currently requires nine hours and is a bone rattling affair with as many people as humanly possible jammed into seats and sitting in the aisles. This trip is my least favorite thing about Ghana so far, but the payoff was that I got to reconnect with other EWBers that evening in Ghana and eat Obruni (foreigner) food. The food options in Kpandai town are pretty limited, so this was a big treat for me!

The next day (the 16th), I went with two of the other EWB volunteers from my sending group and our long term volunteer coordinator to catch another bus to take us from Tamale to Kumasi. This ride also takes most of the day, but it is on a paved road in a nice air conditioned bus, so it was a treat after the previous days ride. The only annoying part was the overly loud sound of the bad Nollywood (Nigerian) movies that they blasted for the entire trip. Kumasi is a huge town and I was suffering from a bit of reverse culture shock when we went for dinner that night as the result of the big contrast with the peace and quiet of Kpandai.

On Sunday the 17th, we spent the day in EWB coaching and knowledge sharing sessions. It was a great opportunity for us to compare notes and reflect on our progress with respect to our original personal and team goals. I recently put up my self-assessed mid-placement report card, so you can check out the details if you're interested.

The highlight of the retreat was our visit to the Kuapa Kokoo fair trade cocoa cooperative on Monday the 18th. I'm not sure if you're aware, but I have been heavily involved in promoting fair trade back home for the past couple of years. I had been the one to suggest this activity to the team for our retreat and I was super excited that the time had finally arrived. Everyone loved the tour and I endeavored to capture all of my thoughts in a blog post, which hopefully you've has a chance to read.

So apart from the one bus ride, your days were good ones.

With regards to your challenge to learn what type of water & sanitation work is being done in my area, I should start by mentioning that we were one volunteer short for our mid-placement retreat as she had to fly to Accra to go to the hospital. It turns out that she had Typhoid, which she probably contracted from dirty water. There are various other stomach bugs and parasites that are transmitted via water here, including some nasty ones like guinea worms.

I have had the opportunity to learn quite a bit about water and sanitation work, as my Ministry of Food & Agriculture office shares a building with the Kpandai District Water and Sanitation office. In addition, I have become good friends with a Peace Corp volunteer named Nhial who is volunteering in the Wat-San office, so I get to hear lots of first hand stories. (Nhial is the only other foreigner in the 100,000 person Kpandai district)

First the water side:

- Water Main - Kpandai town has a water main that was installed a few years ago by a Rotary UK project. Many houses have metered taps from the main, which draws from a couple of deep wells. I haven't been able to determine yet if the water is treated at all. I doubt it, but nevertheless it seems to be safe. This water is probably available to only a few thousand people in the district of 100,000.

- Water Sachets – I myself drink only water sachets called ‘Pure Water,’ which is small plastic bags of water that cost about \$0.05/each. Although this price is relatively cheap, most locals won’t pay it and the water isn’t typically available out in the villages.
- Drilled and Hand Dug Wells – there are many government and development agency projects to provide or support communities in obtaining drilled wells. Unfortunately, many communities still don’t have them. If the water table is high enough in their area, individual families can hand dig wells themselves.
- Streams and Rivers – I’m not sure of the exact ratio, but there are still many people in the district (probably the majority?) who bathe and draw drinking water from streams and rivers. This is obviously the least safe option by far.

And as for sanitation:

- Toilettes – I seem to recall reading somewhere that there are only something like 100 actual sit down toilettes in the entire district. These toilettes siphon drain into two concrete chambers buried nearby outside – one for solids and another to drain off the liquid. This is the best available option, as there are no waste water treatment plants in the district.
- Latrines – are like bore holes in that there are many government and development agency projects to provide or support communities in building them. Even more so than bore holes, however, there are many communities that do not have them. I guess people see more value in water bore holes, as it typically means they have to walk less far for water, whereas with latrines they apparently often don’t see enough immediate benefit to justify the work and expense.
- Dig and Bury – this is one step up from just open defecation in the bush. Dig and bury helps keep flies and groundwater from transmitting feces and the bugs that live in it.
- Open Defecation – this is the enemy that my friend Nhial is focused on along with the Water and Sanitation office. They do this primarily by educating people about the link between human waste and disease, and then by helping them to obtain latrines.

The people who work in this field stress that water and sanitation issues are intimately linked and that you must tackle both at the same time starting first with education.

My recent Post-Village Stay post shows pictures of the water well and latrines in the village I stayed in. If you haven’t seen it yet, hopefully you can check it out.

Hope all is well with you and thanks again for sponsoring me!

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott
To: Alireza Madadi
Subject: 10-14-2010 - Your Day

Hi Ali,

I just received the news about your resignation. I really enjoyed working with you and I'm sad to hear your leaving, but I'm happy for you as I trust you've found a great new opportunity.

On your day (October 14th), I ran the monthly all-day staff meeting at my Ministry of Food & Agriculture office. My Director (boss) was called away at the last minute and he left me to run the meeting in his place. I helped to run the previous month's staff meeting and I've been focusing in on them as a great opportunity to drive change.

The first step over here is the challenge of getting everyone to show up for the meeting on time. I put a simple chart on the wall with the names of all the staff and used it to track attendance. This worked like a charm. Everyone was late first thing in the morning, but they were all back in their seat on time coming back from every break for the rest of the day, as nobody wanted to have a mark beside their name.

The highlight of the meeting was the brainstorming session I facilitated on Value Addition ideas. I broke the 15 attendees into four groups and each one brainstormed new business ideas that local farmer groups could try in order to diversify and increase their incomes. One group suggested manufacturing salt licks using local materials (they are used to provide minerals required for the diets of animals like cows and goats). Another suggested rearing rabbits, which are popular but not widely available local food choice.

The other two groups both focused on gari, which is ground and dried cassava root. One group wanted to try packaging and branding the gari, which led to an interesting conversation about whether customers would pay a premium for the certainty of higher quality. The other group suggested pre-mixing gari with sugar and powdered milk so that people would only have to add water before eating it, which led to an interesting conversation about whether customers would pay for convenience. I was really happy that we were able to cover several important business concepts in the short session.

As for your challenge, I am currently struggling to write an article about my placement for a magazine back home, so hopefully you will forgive me for shortchanging your request for a two page piece. I will try to write a whole blog post about my observation about the life condition of women in northern Ghana and how they are contributing to the economic and social empowerment of their community soon.

In the meantime, here are some initial observations.

Although there are no female staff in my 15 person Ministry of Food & Agriculture (MoFA) office other than the administrative assistance, every staff member I have spoken to about the subject has volunteered that working with women and women's groups with respect to new initiatives in the community is far easier than working with men. MoFA requires that the office track the ratio of women to men reached by each of our activities and there is a DAO (District Agriculture Officer) assigned specifically to focusing on creating opportunities for women within agriculture.

When I was arranging the Projecting Change film screening a few weeks ago with the help of the Catholic priest in town, he introduced me to a few of the women leaders in the community. I included a picture and some information about Madame Francesca in my Projecting Change blog post. Since the screening, I have connected her with my MoFA office and we are going to help the 100 members of her women's group to further identify and develop business ideas.

Although I haven't spent much time in southern Ghana, based on my conversations with people, the lives of northern Ghanaian women are significantly different from those in the south. For example, in the south men pound fufu (a ball of pounded yam or mixed cassava and plantain dough that is most popular food in Ghana) while the women flip the dough, whereas in the north men are not involved in the preparation of fufu at all. In the north a more traditional man will not stop to take care of a crying baby, as it is considered a women's responsibility, whereas most men in the south will share in at least some of the hands on child raising activities.

Most women I have met in the north have trouble identifying role models, either locally or nationally. There are some national level women role models, like the minister of justice and the minister of energy, but this does not seem to be common knowledge here. Even the local leaders like Madam Francesca do not seem to get the broad recognition that they deserve.

Based on what I have observed, it seems like opportunities for women in the north are improving slowly, but definitely lagging the south. I am fairly confident that things will continue to improve.

Again, I apologize for not having time to write more right now. Perhaps we could get together in January or February and I can tell you the rest of the story in person plus here about your new career path? Please forward me your new email so we can keep in touch.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Harveen Aujila

Subject: 10-13-2010 - Your Day

Hey Harv,

Ok, first of all I have to admit that I totally failed with respect to your challenge of 'pausing for a moment and not thinking about anything.' In my defense, you didn't really think I was capable of that, did you?

On your second day (October 13th), I was focused on preparing for an all day staff meeting that was going to run the next day. My Director had been called away to an emergency meeting in Tamale the day before and he had asked me at the last minute to run the meeting for him. We had already been planning on me taking a big role, as he and I have been keying in on the monthly meetings as a great way to introduce the management changes he and I have been working on to the rest of the office.

I took a break from working on the presentation to go with my Director and his second in command to meet with the Farmer of the Year regional candidate from our district. This award is a pretty big deal

and my Director wanted to find out how his interview had gone. It was really interesting meeting him. Unfortunately he did not speak English, so my questions and his responses had to be interpreted.

I learned that he started his own farm when he was 20 years old. He only had 10 acres at that time, which is pretty average for subsistence farmers in the area. Over the course of the last 21 years (he is now 41), he has expanded his farm to 300 acres, he has 1,500 cattle, a bunch of chickens, goats and other small animals, two tractors and three transport trucks. When you add it all up, he went from living on a few dollars a day to being worth probably over a million dollars Canadian, which makes him practically Bill Gates in Kpandai. Pretty amazing! When I asked him what his goals for the future are, he said that his primary goal all along has been to send his three children to University. We're going to try to find ways to share his amazing example to help inspire others.

Hopefully between having to prepare for the staff meeting and the excitement of meeting this farmer, you'll understand why I couldn't find any time to rest my brain on your day. I promise I will try to find an opportunity. ;-)

Hope all is well with you and your family.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Marnie Larson; Jeff Lewis

Subject: 10-12-2010 - Your Day

Hi Jeff and Marnie,

Happy anniversary a few days late!

Your anniversary was my first day back after my village stay, which I described in a recent blog post. It was an amazing experience, but also a bit exhausting. So I started my work week on this Tuesday full of ideas, but light on energy.

I've been getting out for runs pretty regularly in the mornings before work, but I skipped it this particular morning because my stomach was still feeling a bit off from a bug I picked up during my village stay. So I just made myself some Cowbell (powdered 3 in 1 coffee) and walked down to work. As per usual, I was the first to arrive. I worked away quietly on my computer as people filtered in.

When my Director arrived, he asked if I wanted to go to the field with him. I jumped at the chance and we headed off south to take some pictures of some soy and maize fields. Rides with my Director are excellent opportunities to discuss management issues, and this ride was no exception. While we were on our way to the fields, he received a call and learned that he would have to go to Tamale the next day for an emergency meeting.

The second part of our previously interrupted staff meeting was scheduled for Thursday and we decided that, rather than reschedule it to accommodate the Director's emergency meeting, I should run it on his behalf. We're keying in on these monthly meetings as a good foundation from which to introduce various new management initiatives, so they're pretty important. When we returned from the field, we

discussed what concepts he wanted introduced and I worked away on the agenda and the presentation.

My audio blog this Sunday will talk about the meeting. It went really well and there were some really interesting highlights, especially in the session on Value Addition where the staff brainstormed possible new business ventures for farmer groups in the district. I was really impressed with how they worked together and what they came up with. The discussion in the wrap up included talk of branding and customer segmentation - it was almost like being back in one of our MBA classes!

Hope you two had a great day on your anniversary too. ☺

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Miranda Laratta

Subject: 10-11-2010 - Your Day

Hey Miranda,

Well I have to admit that I totally forgot about Thanksgiving! It was the last day of my village stay and I was pretty absorbed in the experience. In addition, I was distracted the day before by a nasty stomach bug that forced me to become intimately acquainted with the squat latrines of the village. Thankfully I was feeling better by the 11th, so I did in fact have one more thing to be thankful for. ☺

In the morning, I toured around the village with my host Paul, taking pictures and video. Then I went with Paul's brother Reuben to the church building in town where he volunteer teaches pre-schoolers and kids whose parents cannot afford to send them to school in Kpandai, which is an hour walk away. There's a pretty sweet video of me playing drums and the kids dancing on my Post-Village Stay blog, in case you missed it.

In the afternoon, Paul and I sat under the mango tree reading. I had brought a copy of Things Fall Apart that I finished while I was there, so I exchanged it with him for one of his books called Ancestral Sacrafice (he only has two or three left over from school). Both books deal with the clash of western African society with white missionaries and influence.

Paul and I had a really interesting conversation about 'juju,' which is basically traditional black magic beliefs. At 34 (my age), Paul has almost finally put himself through high school (he hopes to go back next year), and in most ways he is pretty well educated by local standards. Like many locals, he is also a devout Christian, so I was surprised at how deep his belief in juju ran. He told me of a recent case of a 30 year old man who had been cursed by a rival and died unexpectedly a month later. I listed numerous possible medical explanations for the man's sudden death, but Paul didn't seem convinced. I decided not to push the matter too hard. It's hard to find a good balance between the benefits of 'development' and local traditions, which can be at times beautiful and at others ugly from a western perspective.

My mango tree musings were interrupted by the arrival of a coworker on a motorbike to pick me up and take me back to town. Arriving back in Kpandai a short time later, it's hustle and bustle felt like a totally

different world from the village. It was a tiny bit of a shock, but I was happy to be back in my properly bug screened room with a ceiling fan. It felt a bit like coming back from a camping trip. ☺

In your challenge for this day, you asked me to describe what I'm most thankful for so far. The answer is the relationships I've formed. There are many in various stages of development, but the ones that stick out so far are:

- Ahmed Adams – He is my Director (boss). I described our time together in Tamale when we really got to know each other in an earlier blog post. My respect for him has continued to grow, as has our friendship. He's a hard working man with good intentions and a devoted single father.
- Nhial – my Peace Corp volunteer neighbor. He arrived in Kpandai just before me and will be stationed here for two years. We was born in South Sudan and grew up in refugee camps until his Mom sent him with his Uncle to the USA when he was eleven. When he finally scraped and scrapped his way through university on scholarships, instead of going off to start making money and enjoying the good life, he decided to volunteer two years of his life back in Africa. He has an amazing life story, which I will try to capture in a future post. After he is done in Ghana, his plan is to go back to Sudan and try to find his mother and brother, whom he lost contact with a few years ago.
- Paul - my host on my village stay. Although I only just recently met him, he seems like a genuinely kind and generous person and I'm really looking forward to getting to know him better.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Mark Bertolli

Subject: 10-10-2010 - Your Day

Hi Mark,

Your day (October 10th) started out a bit rough. It was midway through my village stay and I woke up in the wee hours of the morning as a result of my first major gastro-intestinal issues of my trip. Unfortunately my host Paul's outhouse facility had been destroyed by rain a month earlier, so I had to squat in the open air near his compound at 2am with bugs eating me alive.

I took some antibiotics that I had brought with me and they allowed me to sleep the rest of the night. When I woke up, I had to make several trips to Paul's brothers outhouse next door before the medication really started to work. I think my exhausting experience farming the previous day probably contributed a bit to my sickness too. .

So I mostly rested for the day under the mango tree in front of the compound. I did manage enough energy to play with some of the local kids and help a bit with some of the chores. In the afternoon, a massive thunder and lightning storm started, so the whole family huddled together in the compound and we chatted a bit on and off between watching the rain.

The next day I was feeling a lot better and I got a chance to go to the informal pre-school that Reuben (Paul's brother) runs in the village church. Parents who can afford the fees and who don't need their children to help on the farm send their school age children to Kpandai town for elementary and junior high school, which is about an hour walk each way. Reuben teaches the pre-school children and the ones who can't make it to the government schools.

If you get a chance, check out the Post-Village Stay blog post that I recently put up. It has pictures and videos, including one of me drumming with Reuben's class dancing along.

Hope all is well with you and your family. I will be in Kamloops for Christmas, so hopefully I will see you all then.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Penny Heaslip

Subject: 10-09-2010 - Your Day

Hi Penny,

Happy belated anniversary!

On your second day (October 9th), I was still on my village stay. I awoke early with Reuben and we suited up to go to his fields in long pants, long sleeved shirts and rubber boots. I added a hat and a pair of half-gloves that I got when I bought my motorcycle helmet, both of which proved to be excellent ideas!

Reuben is 28 years old and has had his own fields since his father died when he was 20. We met up with two of his cousins, Patrick (22) and Nicholas (20), before walking ten minutes to Reuben's field. I learned that the cousins all take turns working on each other's fields and they also cover each other if someone is sick.

We arrived at about 7am and began clearing new fields by slashing away at tall grass and weeds with cutlasses (machetes). I posted a clip of this on my blog. It was exhausting work and I was quickly drenched in sweat and I developed several blisters on my fingers above where the motorcycle half-gloves ended, so I switched the cutlass to my left hand for the second half of the day.

The guys were definitely much better than I was, but I think I managed to hold my own. We worked until around 11am and then built a fire, picked a couple of yams from Reuben's nearby field, and roasted them for lunch. Then we worked for another hour or so before drudging back to the village shortly after noon.

I just barely managed enough energy for an open air bucket shower before collapsing on a matt under the mango tree in front of the compound for the rest of the afternoon. In between naps, I chatted and played a bit with the village children.

In the evening after dinner, I had a great chat with Paul about his plans for the future. He is my age (34) and he is still struggling to finish high school. He hopes to go back next year to complete his final year and then save up enough to go to teachers college. He's an extremely persistent and curious fellow!

Although I rested for the second half of the day, I feel comfortable in saying that I worked hard for you on your day, as it took me a couple of days to fully recover from this round of farming and the blisters are just now fading away. ☺

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: James McPherson

Subject: 10-08-2010 - Your Day

Hey James,

October 8th was the second day of my village stay and I had the chance to try my hand at several of the chores and work tasks that Paul and his family regularly engage in. I helped the niece clean the dishes, the grandmother sweep and weed the yard, the brother Reuben weave a mat out of strips of bamboo, and I helped the whole family to process gari.

To make gari they shred cassava root using a gasoline powered grinder and then put it in a big sack with a rock on top of it to squeeze the water out. Then it is sifted through a screen before roasting in a bowl over a wood-fed fire. The result is dry off-white granules that you can add water, milk and/or sugar to for a quick meal – kind of like porridge. It's actually pretty good and an excellent example of a simple value addition activity that is available to substance farmers like Paul and his family.

It was a nice peaceful day and I had several great chats with Paul and Reuben. Unfortunately someone from the office showed up in the late afternoon and I had to go back into town with them for a couple of hours to fix a computer problem, which was a rude interruption to my village stay, but not that big a deal.

As for your belated challenge, I chatted with Nhial after I got back from my village stay about the situation in his birth country of Sudan. Nhial had just returned from a trip to Accra to meet with his peace Corp colleagues and he had met a woman from USAID who had worked in South Sudan who said that she would help him to locate his mother and brother!!

We had a pretty good chat about the history of the conflict. Nhial was born in South Sudan and then his family had to flee to a refugee camp in Ethiopia when he was one. They then went back and forth between Sudan and Ethiopia a few times over the years as fighting flared up in one or the other. Nhial finally left with his Uncle for the USA when he was 11.

The town that Nhial was born in was at the center of one of the four major oil deposits in South Sudan. Basically the whole conflict is about oil and resources. The Arab north strips them from the Christian/Animist black south without much benefit to the south. If it wasn't for the resources, Nhial

said that north wouldn't care at all if the south separated. Nhal can still remember abandoned oil wells with Exxon written on them from his childhood.

These days the whole conflict is complicated by the Chinese, who are backing the north in order to gain access to the resources of the south. Their involvement is blocking other super powers from intervening, although I'm not sure if the intervention would be positive or negative anyway given the fact that the conflict began long before the Chinese became involved...

As part of a peace agreement 5 years ago between the north and the south, the south is scheduled to have the right to decide whether or not it governs itself, I believe later this year. That's part of what's bringing things to a head right now.

Nhal had a copy of a recent article in Rolling Stone magazine about an American businessman who's backing southern 'warlords' in order to secure title to vast tracks of southern agriculture land, which he believes is going to be worth a lot of money in the near future. Look up the article if you get a chance, as it was a really interesting read.

Thanks for your recent update email. What exactly did you do to me tree? ;-)

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Penny Heaslip; Susan Heaslip

Subject: 10-07-2010 - Your Day

Hi Penny and Susan,

Happy belated birthday Susan!

On your birthday, I packed up in the morning and then caught a ride on the back of a motorcycle with one of my coworkers out to Nchanchina for my village stay. There had been a big storm the evening before that had taken out the electricity all night. The power was still out and it was still raining when I got up, but luckily the rain stopped mid morning and power came back on in time for me to charge my cell and camera batteries (there is no electrify in Nchanchina).

When I arrived at the village, my host Paul toured me around to meet some of the village elders. Nchanchina has a population of 240 and almost everyone seems to be related somehow. Because of the rain in the morning, the day had become a holiday for most people in the town. People were lounging under trees, sleeping an playing games.

After the tour of the village, I went with Paul's brother Reuben to his farm to get some yams for dinner. When we returned, we changed and went to the nearby village soccer field and we played a scrimmage with the local boys. I haven't played soccer since junior high school, but I think I managed to hold my own. ☺

I brought my Frisbee with me to the soccer field and I picked it up and started throwing it to distract everyone when I got too tired playing soccer. I don't think anyone had seen a Frisbee before and the children were very excited.

That evening we ate Fufu with guinea fowl soup in the family compound and then called it an evening. I shared a room with Reuben sleeping on a matt on the floor under the mosquito net I had brought with me.

It was a great start to my village stay. If you a haven't seen it yet, I put up a full Post-Village Stay post on my blog complete with audio, pictures and video in case you're interested.

Hope all is well with both of you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Saeed Samani

Subject: 10-06-2010 - Your Day

Hi Saeed,

On your day (October 6th), I was hard at work in the Ministry of Food & Agriculture office in Kpandai town. In the morning, I helped out Information Officer build a spreadsheet to make it easier for our staff to go out and register all of the farmers in our district. We have 10 extension agents who are doing the registration and there are probably about 10,000 farmers in our district, so it's a pretty monumental task!

Later in the morning, one of the Extension Agents came into the office and offered to take me out to the field with him, so I jumped on the back of his motorcycle. We went and surveyed some rice and maize fields and then stopped to chat with the farmer groups about the state of their fields. Some of the groups were obviously strong and others were obviously struggling. The most obvious indicator being how weedy their fields were.

When I got back to the office, I continued to work on the computer for the rest of the day. I started building the PowerPoint presentation and agenda for our next monthly staff meeting. These meetings have been an excellent opportunity to drive change in the office.

The power went out towards the end of the day and dark storm clouds rolled in. Power outages are very frequent in Kpandai, happening on average just about every other day. Normally they are short, but today it lasted all evening. I managed to get back to my place just before the rain started pouring down. Slowly my cell phone and laptop gave in and I was left with a flashlight and my book in bed early listening to the sound of the rain fall on the tin roof.

All in all, not a bad day. Thank you for sponsoring it!

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Suzanne Fulton

Subject: 10-05-2010 - Your Day

Hey Sis,

Your actual day (October 5th) was pretty quiet. I was the only one at the office all day, so I just worked away on my computer. My Director (Boss) was out of town and, although the staff could in theory have been out working in the field, I'm betting the majority of them took advantage to take the day off.

After work, I grabbed dinner on the street and then decided at the last minute to walk over to the house of one of my coworkers. He said he'd been in the field that day, but I'm pretty sure he was actually working on his own field. Anyway... We had a great chat for a couple of hours about value addition ideas that local farmers could try like drying mangos, making things out of bamboo, fish farming, making soap, etc... Then I walked home and called it an early night. It was nice that his was a light day, as it gave me a chance to recover from all the excitement of the film screening a couple of nights before.

As for your challenge, I didn't get a chance to try to tackle it until later in the week during my village stay. One of the brothers I was staying with, Reuben, volunteers teaching small children English in the church building in Nchanchina village. He does this in the morning and then goes to work in his fields in the afternoon.

Hopefully you saw the video of me drumming with the children on my Post-Village Stay Blog post? Well before that I tried to exchange songs with the class, but it didn't go so well. I tried to teach them Row-Row-Row-Your-Boat, but I pretty much just wound up singing by myself. Then the 'local' song that they tried to teach me was about an elephant called Bingo, which I'm pretty sure is not actually local, as the words were in English. Oh well. Looks like I better stick with drumming.

Hope all is well with you and Kris.

Love you,

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Tracy Halmos

Subject: 10-04-2010 - Your Day

Hey Tracy,

On your day (October 4th), I was still riding high after the film festival the previous night (I wrote a full blog post on it called Projecting Change Kpandai). I woke up to a beautiful sunny morning and I stopped and chatted with the daytime security guard at the District Chief's quarters on my way to work. He is originally from the neighboring country of Togo and we had an interesting chat about how things are much more difficult there.

When I got to my office, I was the only one there for the first couple of hours. My Director (boss) was away, some of the staff were away volunteering for the national census, and the rest were presumably out working in the field. So I worked away on my computer until the staff Information Officer finally showed up. Then we worked together reviewing the quarterly reports he has to submit to the region. He's the only one in the office of 15 people who's even partially computer literate and I am helping him to improve his computer skills, organize, and report his data better.

After work, I wandered through a new part of town to find a woman named Madam Marta, who several people had told me is one of the strongest leaders in the community. I finally found her place and introduced myself to her. She has just retired from being a primary school teacher (mandatory retirement here is at age 60) and I found her in the new pre-school that she had just opened adjacent to her house.

We had a great chat about the film festival and about how Kpandai needs its first library. The idea is to share one library between all of the schools, none of which currently have libraries or many books at all. She also talked about how they really need tactile learning toys for the small children, so I'm currently trying to see what we can make locally. I'm thinking about simple wooden blocks with letters and numbers painted on them for starters.

It started to pour rain while I was chatting with Madam Marta, so she invited me to stay for dinner with her family. After we ate, since it was still raining, I pulled out my laptop and the whole family gathered around and watched the movie Home, which they were pretty excited about. As the movie ended, I decided to brave the rain and made a run for home.

As for your challenge to learn how to say "I'm making a difference," here's how you say it phonetically in the primary local language of Nawuri:

I-mim-bay, En-sheg-eh (All this time I have been making a difference)

Working over here is a bit of a rollercoaster and there are times when I believe these words and times when I'm not sure, but luckily more of the former than the latter. And my experience is definitely having an impact on me. ☺

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Bindy Grewal

Subject: 10-03-2010 - Your Day

Hey Bindy,

Your day (October 3rd) was absolutely amazing!

I slept in a bit until one of the local boys knocked on my door wanting to play. After convincing him to come back later, I had a pretty leisurely morning before heading over to the Catholic Church for mass. Now I'm not Catholic or particularly religious at all for that matter, but pretty much every other person in Kpandai is and the churches and mosque are a great way to meet community leaders. Plus I was planning to screen a movie with the help of the Catholic Priest under the mango tree near his church that night, so I couldn't really miss his service. ☺

After church, I went into the office for a bit and worked on PowerPoint graphics and a handmade sign for the film screening. Then one of my coworkers showed up on the motorcycle that was delivered to town for me earlier in the week from EWB headquarters in Tamale. Normally EWB does not let short term volunteers ride motorcycles, but they decided to give them to two of us because they had a couple of spares, there are only 4 professional short term volunteers in Ghana right now, and we're older than the students they normally send (and therefore presumably more responsible).

My coworker offered to take me out for a motorcycle lesson and I had a great time driving down bumpy red-earth roads and practicing cornering on a village football pitch. There are lots of motorcycles kicking around Kpandai, but I'm the only person who wears a helmet as per EWB rules (and good common sense). Riding is a blast and I can't wait to do some solo exploring.

After the riding lesson, I rested a bit before heading over to the Catholic church to setup for the film screening. As the sun went down and the starting time of 7:30pm approached, a flood of people magically appeared out of the darkness. I estimated that there were between 200 and 300 people when we started the movie, but I couldn't see all that well because I was up front and it was dark. The Priest estimated 500, which I thought was high, but a couple of people I chatted with today thought it was around 400. Whatever the number was, it was a lot of people!

After I got home last night, I made a blog post including a few pictures and an audio file describing the whole experience while it was still fresh in my mind. I left the screening feeling incredibly energized and optimistic. Things are going great over here and I've met some amazing people.

As for your challenge, I haven't managed to make it to a wedding yet, but I will keep angling for a wedding invitation and I made a bunch of new friends last night, so my odds have just improved. ☺ If I do manage to wrangle an invite, I will do a specific blog post on it to close out your challenge.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Miranda Laratta

Subject: 10-02-2010 - Your Day

Hey Miranda,

Your first day (October 2nd) was a really busy one! I started it off by getting up and going for a run down the red dirt road path behind where I'm staying (my normal route). When I got back, I started hand washing my laundry in a bucket outside my place, which always attracts a lot of smiles from the passing

by locals. Midway through, a local girl took pity on me and offered to help. After we finished, I made us a couple of cups of Cowbell (three in one coffee from a packet) and we sat and drank it in the sunshine on plastic chairs outside my place.

After showering and cleaning up (it's only cold water in a little shack beside my place), I jumped on my bike and road over to the Catholic church to chat with the Priest. We were planning to screen a movie the next night and I wanted to go over the details with him. He was very keen on the idea because he had years ago used an old fashion movie projector to great effect in another district. The Priest and I drove into town to the one computer place to try and find some speakers that we could plug my laptop into. The guy at the computer shop had a plastic inkjet printer ripped apart, apparently trying to prove that it is not in fact disposable. We managed to get some speakers working reasonably well...

From there we went to talk to one of the female leaders in the community to help spread word about the screening. Her name is Francesca and we met her in her family compound. She is a kindergarten teacher and an amazing women! I learned that there is a simmering conflict between two rival chiefs that has been an issue for many years. Sounds like it's roots go back to the East Gonja conflict. Francesca formed a women's group a couple of years ago to help prevent any violence. The group is now 100 women strong and meets weekly with a 20p contribution to their shared account every meeting. They have 400GHC (\$350) in their shared account at the Agric Development Bank. They also worked with a Micro Finance NGO in Tamale to access 100GHC each for 50 women. They repay 10GHC/month for ten months + an extra 10 GHC in the 11th month for interest. Unfortunately 50 women had to be left out, because there wasn't enough money. In addition to teaching and running the women's group, Francesca has 5 children ranging from 9 to 22 years old and she is already a grandmother. I asked Francesca what she needed and she said educational toys so small children can play productively in class. I thought of wooden blocks and Janga that could be manufactured locally. I've sent an email to my sister, who is a Grade 2/3 teacher, to see what she suggests.

After I left the Priest, I filmed a video tour of the Kpandai by riding through town on the main road (the only paved one) on my bike with one hand on the handlebars and the other holding my camera. It turned out pretty well other than some wind noise. I'm going to try to send the footage back with another EWB volunteer in a few weeks, as the file is too big to transfer on the slow internet over here.

When I got back to my room, I grabbed my laptop and walked a short distance to the compound of a family that I had spent an evening with a few weeks ago, but had not been back to visit since. I put my laptop on a bench and around 15 family members crowded around the tiny screen and small speaker to watch the documentary Home, which shows amazing shots of nature all over the world. It was a good little warm-up film screening before the big one.

Check out my recent blog post to find out what happened at the big film screening the next night. I think the choice of movie was pretty appropriate considering both the local situation and the fact that we screened it the day after Gandhi's birthday and the international day of non-violence. ☑

So yours was an incredibly productive and enjoyable day. Almost as if I was powered by magical cupcakes...

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott
To: Carl Abbott
Subject: 10-01-2010 - Your Day

Hey Dad,

On your birthday, I woke up early and went for a run. When I got to work, I chatted a bit with one of the DAOs (Managers) about one of our management initiatives and then I went with one of the AEAs (Agriculture Extension Agents) to the field to help a farmers group apply pesticides to a test plot of yam mounds. Half of the field got a chemical fertilizer called Kombat and the other half received a natural pesticide made from the seeds of the neem tree.

When I got back to the office, I helped the MISO (Information Officer) to write up the minutes from our staff meeting in a new format that focuses on Action Items. I'm still feeling pretty pumped about how the meeting went and I think the rest of the staff are too.

I was exhausted after work so I picked up some rice and a boiled egg on the street and took it home to eat. My Peace Corp friend Nhial had to go to Accra for the week, so it was shaping up to be a lonely Friday night for me until a little 6 or 7 year old boy named Tobia came knocking on my door. Apparently he had made friends with one of the previous EWB volunteers (McLean) and he wanted to introduce himself.

On a whim, I pulled out my laptop and he hunched around it sitting outside on plastic chairs and watched the documentary Home, which shows amazing views of nature from around the world. He was enthralled.

So all in all a pretty good day. Hope the rest of your birthday after we chatted was good too, despite the airplane food and lack of legroom. ☺

Love you.
Mark