

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

From: Mark Abbott
To: Jane Comeault
Subject: 12-15-2010 - Your Day

Hi Jane,

As it turns out, I spent your day (the 15th) in Zurich and not in Ghana. We (myself and three other returning volunteers) had a 26 hour layover there and we met up with an ex-EWBer who is doing his masters in Zurich (Dane).

After taking the train from the airport to the center of town, we wandered around downtown a bit while we waited for Dane to get out of class. It was freezing and none of us had appropriate clothing, but we didn't want to waste our opportunity to see the city, so we all bought toques and started a walking tour of the city. As I needed one for home anyway, I eventually broke down and bought a jacket as well, which turned out to be an amazing decision.

Walking down streets in one of the richest cities in the world, with shops selling Prada and Rolexes, while picking our way through the snow was about the biggest contrast to life in northern Ghana as possible!

Eventually we met up with Dane and took the train to his dorm room at the University. Four of us slept on the floor of his cramped room that night, but before that we went out for dinner at a beer hall. None of us really cared much about the sleeping situation by the time we got back to the dorm.

Your sponsorship challenge for me to reflect on my time in Ghana was a great one. Thankfully EWB does a great job of encouraging reflection at the end of our placements. We already had a few sessions on this topic in Tamale a few days ago and today I have a day of debriefing sessions in Toronto before I finally head home. Traveling with my fellow short term volunteers has also provided an amazing opportunity for us to share experiences.

I've made a big effort over the course of my placement to share my experiences on my blog and I've just put up a post summarizing the big things I've learnt about development, Ghana, EWB and myself. Here's the link in case you're interested: <http://markwjabott.wordpress.com/2010/12/15/what-ive-learnt-summarized-in-under-300-words/>

You asked what was different than I expected and what surprised me. As I alluded to in my blog post, I was more surprised by the extent of the similarities between people in Ghana and people back home than anything else.

Hope you are doing well. Have an amazing holiday and hopefully we will be able to get together for lunch sometime early in the New Year.

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Carl and Karen Abbott

Subject: 12-14-2010 - Your Day

Hey Mom and Dad,

I am sitting on the plane between Zurich and Accra as I write this. The last few days are amazing and I'm feeling good.

If the two of you could have designed my last day in Ghana for me, you probably wouldn't have been able to improve much on what actually happened. Mark Soares' roommate's boss's brother invited us to stay at his place the night before. It was my first time sleeping in an air conditioned room on a real mattress in four months. Their house is comparable to one of the nicer places in West Vancouver, except the temperature outside was 30C. J

After having a heated shower and appreciating the spacious and modern bathroom, Freddy's driver gave us a ride to the nearby Accra mall. Other EWBers had recommended that we visit it to help us with reverse culture shock coming home, as the mall is pretty similar to the ones in Canada. It was a bit shocking for us, but not as much as Freddy's house. We wandered around for a bit and then had lunch at an Earl's like modern restaurant. My bill could have fed me for a month in Kpandai!

We only spent a couple of hours at the mall and then we went back to Freddy's place and had a swim in his pool. In the evening, his wife made us a traditional Ghanaian meal and afterwards Freddy drove us to the airport. Although our day and a half in the lap of luxury with Freddy was a bit of a shock, it felt amazing to be rested and comfortable before we started our several day journey home.

(The flights have been uneventful and we had an amazing day in Zurich. I arrived safely in Toronto last night safe and I just managed to get internet access at the EWB house in Toronto)

See you soon!

Love,

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Josie M. Lacey

Subject: 12-12th & 13th-2010 - Your Days

Hi Josie,

I'm writing this email as I sit on the plane from Zurich and Toronto, where I will have a couple of days of final debriefing meetings before returning to Vancouver. My schedule made it pretty hard to achieve your sponsorship goal of hugging as many people as I could, as I was in Cape Coast with my fellow EWB volunteers Mark and Jason for a final couple of days of relaxation, and they're not really all that

huggable. However, I must say that I did a pretty good job of hugging people just a few days earlier when I said goodbye to the rest of the EWB Ghana team in Tamale. J

We arrived late the evening before, so on Sunday morning I took my first walk on the beach in the brilliant sunshine. We found a great and cheap little hotel right on the beach and we had a really peaceful day swimming, drinking beer, and every once and a while working on blog posts and reports on our laptops.

In the afternoon, my friend Paul, who hosted me during my village stay, gave me a call to wish me a safe journey. He's a great guy and I'm really hoping that we will be able to keep in touch. After making my weekly blog post in the evening, we had an amazing dinner of cheeseburgers with a group of Dutch volunteers and we stayed up late chatting about international development.

The next morning we walked to nearby Cape Coast castle. In the picture on my blog post, I was standing right in front of our hotel and you can see part of the castle in the background. Cape Coast castle was built in the 1600s and changed hands several times before the English finally captured it for good. The castle is a beautiful but haunting place, as it was the main port of exit during the slave trade. There were an estimated 30 million slaves shipped from Africa mostly to the Americas during the slave trade and it is believed that up to 25% of them passed through Cape Coast castle.

We toured the dungeons below the castle. Ironically the worst of the cells is located directly underneath what was the castle's church. There is a tunnel from the dungeon cells to the rock cliff face and the 'Point Of no Return,' which was the final door that slaves went through before going onto the ships. When we stepped through the door, I was surprised that on the beach right beside it was a vibrant fish market with several small wooden boats.

The reason that I was surprised is that slavery is still a big problem in Ghana and forced child labour on small fishing boats is one of the common places where you find it. So standing at the 'Point Of No Return' where many ceremonies have been held during which politicians and leaders vowed 'never again,' it is extremely likely that you can look directly at modern examples of slavery. If you are interested, there is a really interesting TED talk on this subject:

http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/kevin_bales_how_to_combat_modern_slavery.html

After the castle, we walked back to the beach and spent a few more hours in the sun before heading to the station to catch the bus to Accra. The bus ride was only a few hours and it was luxury compared to the beaten down old jalopies up north. When we arrived in Accra, we called a contact of Mark's, who is the brother of his roommates boss.

He offered to help us find a place to stay and we happily accepted. He (Freddy) showed up to pick us up in a huge new BMW and asked if we'd like to stop off at his place for a drink before looking for a place. It turned out to be a huge beautiful private compound with five fulltime staff. His garage had a Bentley, Jaguar, Mercedes and a pickup truck along with the BMW. It turns out that Freddy has the Whirlpool appliance franchise for all of Ghana and he also deals in real estate.

We met Freddy's wife and 4 year old daughter. They invited us for dinner and then said that we could stay in their guest house. It was a great evening. We stayed up late drinking beer and a couple of bottles of wine. The next day when we said goodbye and thanked them, Freddy said that he has had

many travel experiences where people have hosted and been generous to him and he likes to pay it forward, a policy I certainly agree with.

Although Freddy and his family were extremely generous to us, I couldn't help but keep thinking about the stark contrast between a rich family in southern Accra and life in northern Ghana. It was really interesting to hear their perspective on the challenges Ghana is facing and an amazing last night in Ghana.

Hope you and your Mom are doing well.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Chris Blouin

Subject: 12-9th, 10th & 11th-2010 - Your Days

Hey Chris,

On the 9th I had debrief sessions in Tamale with the other two Professional volunteers from my sending, Mark Soares and Jason Bletcha (the other girl, Pam, who is also from Vancouver had to head home early). The debrief sessions were a great opportunity to process our experiences and bounce ideas off each other.

In the afternoon, the CEO of EWB, George Roter, arrived in Tamale for a few day visit and we had a good chat with him. Then in the evening, I went for my second dinner in a row with my Director, who had travelled from Kpandai to Tamale with me the day before. This time he brought his two young daughters with him and we went back to the same restaurant that serves Obruni (white person) food. I couldn't convince his daughter's to try pizza, but the Director seems to have developed a taste for it.

Director and I had another great conversation over dinner. It included a good discussion about how to motivate his Deputy Director, the difficulties of being a senior father, plus each of our thoughts about the future. I was happy to hear that he one day would like to either become Regional Director or move to Accra to work in the main office of the Ministry of Food & Agriculture. I think he'd do an excellent job!

The next morning (the 10th), we continued with meetings, but this time it was an opportunity for Mark, Jason and I to give a presentation about our placement to the whole team. After that in the afternoon, the whole team talked about our strategy going forward in light of what everyone has learned during their placements. As you and might have guessed, this type of meeting was right up my alley and I loved it! I'm working on a blog post that will summarize my key learnings, so keep an eye out for it.

In the evening, the whole team had a goodbye dinner for the three of us Professional Short Term volunteers. As per team tradition, our coaches crowned each of us as chief of something and have us a chiefs hat. Surprisingly mine didn't fit my perfectly normally sized head... ;-) My coach Erin crowned me the Chief of Personal Impact, which was a great moment for me.

We had dinner at the Sulley Gariba lodge, which is owned by an influential Ghanaian who is a senior policy advisor to the Vice President of Ghana. One of our EWB team members, Dan, works a bit with him and he came over to say hello to us during our meal. He said that he was flying to Accra tomorrow and he asked if anyone needed a ride. Jason, Mark and I jumped at the opportunity and that's how we wound up on Ghana's Air Force 1, or 2, or whatever it was...

The next day (the 11th) after saying our final goodbyes to our EWB teammates, the three of us cabbied it over to the airport. It turned out to be a military looking prop plane and the VIPs were whisked in at the last minute, so we didn't really get a chance to learn who else was on the plane with us. Nevertheless, it was a great experience and the flight took 1.5 hours as opposed to the 13 hour bus ride that we originally had planned.

We landed in Accra at a military air force base and there was nobody around, so we weren't sure what to do next. Luckily one of the other passengers offered us a ride to the bus station. He turned out to be the head of the Ghana Institute of Architecture and we had a really interesting conversation with him about the meeting he had been attending in Tamale, which was to discuss how to minimize the effects of flooding in Ghana.

We had to wait for a couple of hours in the chaotic bus terminal, but we eventually squeezed onto a crowded bus and rode the 4 hours from Accra to Cape Coast. After settling into a hotel, we finally collapsed into chairs under some palm trees at the edge of the beach and had a few beers. We had all of the next day to relax and this morning. I am currently sitting in a bus terminal waiting to catch a bus back to Accra and then we fly out tomorrow night.

As for your challenge to help you find a Christmas present for Steffanie, Siena and Anders, I'm just about to send out a Christmas fundraising email for EWB... ;-)

Hope you are doing well and see you soon!

Mark

www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Anya Spethman

Subject: 12-8-2010 - Your Day

Hi Anya,

I had thought that the day you sponsored, December 8th, was going to be a bit of a write off, as it was a travel day for me to leave Kpandai town for the last time to go to Tamale, but it turned out to be great. My Director surprised me by offering to give me a ride in his truck, which saved me from taking the nasty local bus, which is always crowded, hot, and takes over twice as long. The Director's truck did turn out to be a bit cramped too, however, as there were four of us squished in the back seat, as three other office staff hitched a ride to Tamale where their families live.

Along the way, we stopped off to chat with the Best Farmer award winner from the Farmer's Day celebration the previous Friday. This award was a big deal and it was interesting to spend a bit of time with the farmer. It turns out that he won the award by working extremely hard himself, often working

so hard on his fields that he couldn't even take food. My Director talked to him about the need to see his farm more as a business and he suggested that he should form a group and work with one of our Extension Agents to complete EWB's Agriculture As A Business (AAB) program. This was an amazing moment for me, as one of my primary goals in the district was to ensure that the staff are bought into the AAB program.

As we were leaving, the Best Farmer gave us 100 yams, two goats and a rooster as a thank you. These items were all piled into the back of the truck along with my two backpacks. I was a bit uncomfortable about this, as these items represented over \$300, which is a really significant amount of money over here. It felt a little bit like a kick-back, but I think it's just how things work over here.

When we arrived in Tamale, where my Director's family is based, we dropped Director off at his house and then his Driver dropped the rest of us off. We stopped at a office supply store and I bought a whiteboard, pens and an eraser for the office as a final gift. We have been developing and piloting an Earned Fuel Allowance system for the staff and I think the whiteboard will increase the odds of it being fully implemented. I also bought a few bags of dried mangos for the Director to use as examples for farmers groups in our District, where so many mangos grow during mango season that they mostly just rot on the ground. Nobody has yet tried drying them and I think that it could be a great way to help people get by in the lean months, which directly follow the mango season.

After checking into a guest house and catching up with a few other EWB volunteers, my Director came and picked me up for dinner. He grew up in Tamale and knows the town really well. On a previous trip, I introduced him to a restaurant that serves Obranie (white person) food and he really liked the food and he thought it was really funny that I had introduced him to something new in his own hometown. We went back there that night and had an amazing time. We have become good friends and I really respect him. That night our conversation ranged from personal goals, to chatting about the initiatives we had started in the office, to general discussions about development.

So a day for which I originally had extremely low expectations became a great one! J

I'll be back in Vancouver on the 18th and then I'm heading up to Kamloops to have Christmas with my family. Hopefully we will be able to catch up early in the New Year.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

www.markwjabott.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: George Mitchell

Subject: 12-6th & 7th-2010 - Your Days

Hi George,

Your two days, December 6th and 7th, were my last two days in the Kpandai District, so they were extremely busy. On the 8th I travelled to Tamale for intensive EWB meetings on the 9th and 10th. As I type this email, I am sitting under a palm tree on a beautiful beach in Cape Coast. We've managed to

sneak this one day of relaxation in before heading back to Accra and catching our flight to Toronto for our final debrief. I will finally get back to Vancouver on the 18th.

On Monday the 6th, it was quiet in the office, as the previous Friday was the big Farmer's Day celebration and most of the staff took the day off. The peace was broken when a group of five farmers showed up in my Director's office in the morning and began a heated discussion while I quietly worked away in the corner. It turns out that they were members of a rice farming group and they were angry because one of their members had won the Best Rice Farmer Of The Year award at the Farmer's Day celebration and they could not understand why one member of the group should be honored and not the whole group.

After they left, my Director spoke to the Extension Agent who had nominated the farmer. It turns out that the farmer is a relative of the Extension Agent. I joined the Director and the Extension Agent in the truck and we drove out to the community where the farmers group was based and we met with the entire group and the chief of the village. My Director decided to revoke the award and the farmer brought back the bicycle, machete, rubber boots, and two bags of fertilizer that he had been given as a prize. Although these items don't seem like a big deal from a Canadian perspective, they represent a significant prize to a Northern Ghanaian farmer.

When we got back to the office, I went and visited the local carpenter who was working on the second pilot set of wooden children's blocks for me. He had completed them so I collected them and walked over to Madam Marta's pre-school. All of the children gathered around as I took the blocks out of the bag and stacked them on a table. I then built a big castle for them and they became more and more excited as the castle got taller and taller. After I was done, the class sang me a song as a thank you.

Back in the office, I finished off the day by working on my final report for EWB. In the evening, the group of children who often visits me came by and I showed them a bit of a movie on my laptop.

The next morning, I got up early and went to visit Madam Francesca's elementary school. The teacher brought in three groups of children to view a video that my sister's West Vancouver school class had put together. I was a bit reluctant because of the huge differences that the video highlighted; the class in West Vancouver was full of teaching aids, computers and a fancy whiteboard, while the class in Kpandai had 80 to 100 students per teacher (normally unqualified) in a bare classroom. The students all commented on the differences, but they also found some similarities too and I think that the exercise was constructive.

When I got to the office, I learned that the Extension Agent who had nominated the rice farmer had been arrested and that he would therefore not be able to run the Agriculture As A Business (AAB) farmer's group meeting that we had scheduled for that afternoon. Apparently they take the Farmer's Day awards extremely seriously over here! In the end, he only wound up spending a few hours in jail, but the jails in Kpandai is apparently pretty nasty and he was visibly shaken.

As the AAB meeting was in Nchanchina where I had completed my village stay and where I have made a few friends, I decided to take one of the National Student Volunteers with me and run the meeting with him. It was a great way to end off my work in Kpandai, as the meeting went amazingly well and the student did a great job. During the meeting, my friend Paul who was my host during my village stay and who became a good friend of mine during my stay, made a comment about how they needed to start

seeing their farming as a business, but in their own way. This is exactly the realization that AAB is focused on creating, so it made me feel great to hear him say that.

Paul is exactly my age and he's an amazing guy who consistently helps out other people in his community despite the fact that he is a subsistence farmer who struggles to grow enough food just to support his family. I have had several conversations with him about the importance of keeping records for his own farming activities and of starting to hire labour rather than always relying on his own manpower. After the meeting, he took me to see the 2,000 yam mounds that he had just hired labour to raise. I was shocked. He had hurt his finger badly while clearing some land with a machete a while back and I had been feeling depressed about the impact of this injury on his farming. I had no idea that he had scraped together enough money to hire labour for the first time ever. It signified a big step for him and he was really excited to show me his fields. It was a perfect way to windup my working experience in Kpandai.

Back in town, I made the rounds of many of the friends I have made over the last four months. My two big visits were with Madam Francesca and Madam Marta (check out my blog posts on the two of them). I gave out postcards of Vanoucer and some small Canada pins as I said my goodbyes, which people really seemed to like.

When I got back home, a group of ten children were waiting for me, as they knew it was my last night. I gave them all Canada pins and showed them a movie. I also took individual pictures of each of them (they love the camera). After the children left, I packed up my backpacks and collapsed – tired but happy.

It's been an amazing experience over here. My head is still swimming processing everything that has happened. I'm glad that I will have the Christmas break to quietly reflect. I'm looking forward to sharing my experiences with you in person, maybe before I head up to Kamloops or after I get back.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Doug Spirig

Subject: 12-5-2010 - Your Day

Hey Doug and Rachel,

Happy belated birthday Rachel!!!

How's the weather in Fort Mac? The dry harmatan winds have just started in Ghana and the temperature is very pleasant, but it's starting to get really dusty. I only have one more week left before I fly to Toronto and then Vancouver, so I'm enjoying the temperature while I can.

Your day, December 5th, was a quiet and relaxing one for me, which is exactly what I needed after a packed week that included: my final presentation to the staff in my office, interviewing Grade 3 students for a question exchange with my sister's class in Vancouver, I played in a friendly soccer match, screened

movies in a remote village where we had to use a generator because there was no electricity, and helped out with the Farmer's Day celebration. Phew!

After sleeping in for a bit, I convinced a couple of local girls to wash my clothes for me. I started off washing my own clothes in a bucket out in front of my place for the first couple of months I was here, but recently I broke down and started paying the 1 Cede (\$0.80) for someone else to do it for me. J

Then I wandered down into town for lunch and sat with my friends the tailors out in front of their shop (there is some footage of them in my 'A Day In The Life' post). A couple of weeks ago, I got my family to send me their measurements and the tailors had just finished sewing clothes for me to take back for everyone.

In the afternoon, I jumped on my bicycle (I had to send my motorcycle back to Tamale the day before) and rode out to Nchanchina, which is the village I stayed in for 5 fays a couple of months ago. I spent a wonderful afternoon lounging around with my friend Paul and his family under a mango tree chatting and playing games.

Paul also took me for a tour of the yam mounds that he has made for next year. I was shocked to see how many he had made (around 2,000), as he had hurt his hand a couple of weeks back and I was under the impression that he wouldn't be able to raise many mounds before the ground dried up (farmers get a head start by raising mounds at the end of one growing season before the ground dries up and then they continue again when the rains begin in the spring). As it turns out, Paul had hired labour to help him, which was a very pleasant surprise for me, as we've had several talks about looking at his farm as a business and the logic of hiring labour, but I hadn't been sure if the concept had been sinking in.

I rode back to Kpandai as the sun was setting and then picked up some rice, bananas and oranges on the side of the road for dinner. I had a quiet night working on the computer preparing for my last few days in the district. I've had an amazing time over here and it's hard to believe it's wrapping up already.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Liam Rust

Subject: 12-4-2010 - Your Day

Hey Liam,

On your day, December 4th, I was woken up at about 6am by one of my coworkers knocking on my door wanting copies of the pictures I had taken the day before at the big Farmer's Day presentation. I was still exhausted after a crazy busy Thursday and Friday, so his early morning intrusion was a bit annoying. After fending him off, however, I was able to get back to sleep for a couple of hours.

Most of the day was a quiet Saturday recovering (check out my latest blog post for more on the excitement of last week). I did go down to the office and worked on the computer for a bit and in the mid afternoon I went with one of the Extension Agents from my office to chat with Madam Francesca,

who is the leader of a women's group in town that has one hundred members. I first met her a couple of months ago and we've been working on a few projects together. She's an amazing woman and her group is very strong. I'm going to put up a blog post about her later in the week.

This meeting with Madam Francesca was to discuss how sub-groups from her big women's group could access services from my Agric office. The group had originally formed a couple of years ago to help soothe tribal tensions, but lately they have been looking for opportunities for the women to go into business together. The Agriculture As A Business (AAB) program that I am here to help implement should be a great fit with the group, and it looks like my Extension Agent is going to start the curriculum with a few groups of women who have common business interests. I am really happy that my integration in the community helped to create this opportunity.

In the evening, I went for a beer with another coworker. He must have been tired from Farmer's Day too, as he started to nod off shortly after we arrived. Luckily an off duty policeman joined us and I had a really interesting chat with him about crime in the district and corruption in the police force. The police are not very popular in Ghana and most people think they are rotten to the core. It was really interesting to hear a different perspective; things are never as simple as they seem.

You mention high-quality H2O in your sponsorship email, so I assume this is an interest of yours? The other foreign volunteer in the district, Nhial from the Peace Corp, is working with the Water & Sanitation department in town and I've had the opportunity to chat quite a bit with him about his work.

On the water side, the district is still trying to get bore holes in place for every community in the district, but many communities still draw from streams (maybe half?). A short water main was put in place in Kpandai Town a few years ago by a Rotary project and it is the only pumped/piped water in the entire district.

On the sanitation side, there are probably less than 100 porcelain toilets in the entire district of 100,000 people and all of them flush into concrete settling chambers. The big challenge on the sanitation side is to get communities to build their own latrines and to stop OD (open defecation), which leads to all sorts of health problems.

As with my Agriculture work, the big challenge lies on the people side of the change process, not with the technology. The water pumps and latrine designs are well known technologies and what little funding is required can generally be found. The problem is getting communities together to understand the importance of these technologies and to work together to manage them.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Rogayeh Tabrizi

Subject: 12-3-2010 - Your Day

Hi Rogayeh,

Happy belated birthday!!! Sorry I missed it, but I'm a bit slow on monitoring Facebook over here. ;-)

I'm happy to report that I greatly exceeded your challenge of making 10 children laugh hard on your day. I have to admit that it wasn't too hard, as your day happened to be Farmer's Day – a big celebration in Ghana – and our district's party was in the village of Kojobone, which is off the beaten track and the children there are not used to seeing Obrunis like me. This makes me a big curiosity and I had a pack of children following me around for pretty much the entire time I was there.

I actually arrived in Kojobone the afternoon before to play soccer in a friendly Farmer's Day match and then screen several movies using a generator and the District Assembly's projector. Seeing an Obruni play soccer badly made children and adults alike laugh very hard. Then in the movie screening, we started off with half an hour of Disney's A Bug's Life, which had the 300 people in attendance in hysterics too.

On your actual day, Friday, it was the official celebration. It was supposed to start at 8am, but the formal proceedings actually started slightly after 10am, which is par for the course in Ghana. All morning they were blasting loud music from the sound system and countless small children in the community were dancing around frenetically. Every time I took out my camera, they went into hysterics!

The highlight of the ceremony itself was the displays of traditional dancing. Check out my latest blog post for some short video clips. There were also awards for farmers in the district, which was kind of interesting.

When the formal ceremonies ended at about 1pm, all of the local dignitaries gathered at a nearby junior high school for lunch. There had been much debate in our office about the menu and what drinks to buy, as the costs are very significant over here, but in the end everyone seemed to be happy.

After lunch, one of the local photographers started advertising 'pictures with the Obruni' and chasing me around getting me to pose with people. I was starting to feel really tired from all the excitement of yesterday and the morning, so I decided to make a quick exit from town. I jumped on my motorcycle and rode for a dusty hour and a half back to Kpandai.

I was exhausted when I arrived, so I picked up some rice for dinner on the street and then trudged up the dirt road to home. I had no choice but to shower, as I was caked in dust. After that, however, I collapsed into my bed and didn't wake up until the following morning.

It was a great day. I hope you had a great day on your birthday too. J

Mark

www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com

From: Mark Abbott

To: Steffanie Blouin

Subject: 12-1st & 2nd-2010 - Your Days

Hey Steff,

Well your days, December 1st and 2nd, were certainly packed with excitement!

On Wednesday morning, I gave my final presentation to the staff of the office. I took a big risk and pushed hard, challenging them to change. My blog post this afternoon will have more detail on the meeting. In the end, it worked out well, although it's hard to tell how well I got through to people.

In the afternoon on Wednesday, I jumped on my motorcycle and rode a half hour south to the village of Katijeli to meet one of my Extension Agents and run an Agriculture As A Business (AAB) meeting with a garri (dry powdered cassava) processing women's group. I've been loving riding my motorcycle. Do you think my Mom would get me one for Christmas? ;-)

Anyway, this was the second meeting I'd sat in on with this group and they were starting to warm up with me. It turns out that there used to be a really strong garri processing group in this village nearly twenty years ago. They had even sold collectively rather as individuals in order to get higher prices, but then a conflict (tribal fighting) came along and interrupted the group and they have never regained their former strength. We asked why they hadn't been able to regain their strength and they said that the original leader had died they needed outside help. We challenged them about this. Did you need outside help last time? No. So why do you need it this time? This seemed to inspire them a bit. They were pretty happy at the end of the meeting and they took me on a tour of their garri processing operation.

When I came back to the office in the late afternoon, I had a great follow-up conversation to my morning presentation with my Director. He asked about my opinion about which staff member he should select as employee of the year for the Farmer's Celebration awards on Friday. This led to a great conversation about every employee in the office where we talked about their current willingness to engage in change and strategies to get them moving.

After grabbing some rice for dinner on the street, I went home and relaxed for a bit until Madam Marta came by with two of her young women leader protégés – Monica and Priscilla. I had asked to interview them for my Strong Women Leaders blog post series. Unfortunately I didn't have much energy left by the time they arrived and it was a bit strained talking to all three of them at the same time. They kept coming back to the challenge of not having enough money and I couldn't muster the energy to inspire them to be creative and look for other avenues to achieve their goals. Guess you can't win them all. ;-)

On Thursday morning, I worked in the office for a couple of hours and then I went to Madam Francesca's elementary school to collect responses to the questions that my sister's elementary class had sent. Unfortunately the teacher's there had not collected the answers and organized the students like they were supposed to, so I wound up spending a couple of hours there interviewing individual students and snapping their photos. I let each student type their names into my computer, which was a big highlight for them because I think only one of them had ever used a computer before. I should have a blog post up with the questions and answers soon...

After leaving the school, I rushed back to the office and prepared to leave for Kojobone for the Farmer's Day celebration. The actual event was the next morning (Friday), but we had a fun soccer match and a movie screening on Thursday night, both of which were my idea. I played in the first half of the football match, but I was way out of my league, so I bowed out gracefully at half time. The village is way off the grid, so people were really excited to see an Obruni – especially one who played soccer.

I quickly cleaned up after the soccer match and then setup in the village square for the film screening. There is no electricity in the village, so we had to use a generator. The movies were a huge hit and attracted over 300 people. It was probably the first time that many of the children had ever seen a movie, certainly one projected like that. After the meeting, we cleaned up in the darkness under the brilliant stars.

It had been arranged for me to sleep in a room at the compound of one of the village leaders with a few of my officemates. I only had a matt on a hard mud floor, but it didn't really matter, as I was so exhausted.

As for your challenges...

Unlike Thanksgiving, which nobody has heard of before, Christmas is a big deal over here, just like at home. The population is predominantly Christian where I am, although there are almost as many Muslims right in Kpandai town. People are much more religious here, so I imagine that church events like midnight mass are probably attended by most people. It doesn't sound like there are any specific foods that people prepare, but people do prepare feasts and exchange gifts.

And my proudest moment? At the end of my speech on Wednesday morning, my Director got up and thanked me for having the courage to give everyone direct feedback and for all of my hard work. That was a pretty good moment. J

How's everything with you. Any news yet?

Mark

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