

## From Poverty to Prosperity ICS Placement with Challenges Worldwide



First of all, I would like to thank the generosity of friends, family and of course the GIFT Trust for the kind donations that enabled me to reach the fundraising target of £800 needed to take part in such an inspiring and developmental programme; both for the people I touched both directly and indirectly through my volunteering efforts, but also for my own personal development.

Faced with an unexpected gap year after narrowly missing my grades for university I began to investigate the potential avenues to productively spend my time over the next year before my retakes and attendance of The University of Nottingham to study Industrial Economics. Soon enough my research led me across ICS (International Citizen Service) which is a government backed scheme funded by the Department of International Development and UK Aid. The programme works with the world poorest communities and emerging economies to provide sustainable development support and international aid.

My ICS placement was with the partner charity Challenges Worldwide and consisted of 10 weeks in Calum Jackson Accra, Ghana. I was placed into an indigenous Jehovah witness family called 'The Smiths' which consisted of a host mum, dad, 5 brothers, 3 sisters, 2 cousins and the pet dog Avec. In addition, I was matched up to an in-country counterpart called Ekow from Cape Coast and had a roommate called Nesta from Accra. There was also another UK volunteer from London called Jed who was Ekows roommate in the host home. Before the placement I could not have anticipate the strong bonds of friendship I would form with both Ekow and Nesta over the course of the next 10 weeks. I anticipated the differences in culture and limitations of language to be a barrier for building the blocks of friendship. Yet did I know the of extent which we would get along and form a lifetime of friendship over such a short period of time.



The first week of my 10-week project was spent training as all the UK and Ghanaian volunteers stayed in a hostel together as we got to know each other. This was when I first met Ekow as we initially shared a room together in the hostel. Once everyone had settled in, we were all matched to our host homes and our enterprises that we would be working with for the rest of the programme.



Challenges Worldwide are a social enterprise that work to provide business consultancy services to small-medium sized enterprises to promote sustainable development and growth of fair and inclusive economics. The goal of Challenges Worldwide's work is to achieve economic development, reducing the need for international aid, to alleviate poverty and bring a lasting positive impact on low income countries. They work towards the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) for 2030 that aim to transform the world: ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring peace and prosperity. Challenges Worldwide focus more specifically on number 8 (Decent work and economic growth), 9 (industry, innovation & infrastructure) and 11 (Sustainable cities and communities). However, all the SDG's feed off each other and the work of the enterprises Challenges Worldwide support can have a universal impact on all of them.

Me and Ekow, my counterpart, were partnered up with a recently established enterprise called Kwobs College. They provide quality education in tailorship and fashion design to predominantly women aged 18-35. The social impact of the enterprise was their ability to empower women by educating them into a profession and vastly undercut the tuition costs making it more accessible for students from lower social-economic backgrounds. As well as providing free entrepreneur workshops and dress making sessions in the local community.



Kwobs College were co-founded by two amazing individuals called Victor Adu and Elvis Opoku Agyemang. We worked along side them analysing the enterprise, making recommendations and then implementing those recommendations to help overcome any barriers for growth. Both Victor and Elvis were very accommodating of our help and showed us both the same kindness as our host family. They even made me a shirt to wear for church. Through working with Kwobs College I have developed my ability to work with people cross culturally in a business setting as well as my research and analytical skills from analysing the enterprise. We conducted an enterprise diagnostic, which Kwobs College scored 47.06%. However, after the implementation of recommendations they scored an outstanding 70.10%. This shows the magnitude of which our work has had on the enterprise and acts as a tool to measure the progress of development.





The host family went beyond all my expectations for the lovingness and acceptance they offered me straight from the moment we met. They went out their way to make sure we had everything we needed, always asked how we were doing and strived to make our stay as accommodating as possible. The host brothers were eager to show us around the area, taking us to the local bars to watch football and the local soccer pitch to play with their church (Ghanaians love football).



Throughout my host home stay I have become more appreciative of the simple things in life that I am fortunate to have back at home. Instead of a hot shower to start the day off I would endure a cold bucket shower and must wash my clothes by hand which consumed hours a week of my time, for which I would simply use a washing machine at home. This has opened my eyes to the convenience of simple appliances that I take for granted and has led to a realisation that not all people, especially those from lower income countries, have the great fortune of owning such simple yet time effective appliances.



My whole experience, especially the host home element has improved my ability to adapt to new environments. Throughout the 10 weeks I encountered a new variety of people from different backgrounds and cultures who introduced me to food, traditions and places that I have never experienced before. The food came at the biggest shock for me, our diets turned very carb very quickly. We would open the day with porridge and bread accompanied by either an omelette or a sausage. Meanwhile for lunch we might have yam chips, waakye, jollof rice or kenkey together with some chicken or fried fish. Whereas for dinner it would range from red red, fufu, boiled yam to plantain. My favourite meal was chicken and peanut soup with rice balls or chicken with yam balls and tomato sauce.

One of the hardest elements to tackle was the travel. We would have to catch trotro's which consisted of a very old minivan that shouldn't be on the road fitting in up to 16 people. Everyone was crammed on and anyone over 6 feet tall like myself had a hard time fitting their legs in. Now and then we would pass a broken down trotro and even saw a door fly off down the motorway.



The similarities in personality and the resemblance in common interests with the Ghanaians deeply shocked me in contrast to the picture I had painted in my head. They have been heavily influenced by western culture, keeping themselves updated with the latest music, films and television programmes. They especially liked Ed Sheeran and Drake. Our ICS programme meant that each UK volunteer had a Ghanaian counterpart, there was therefore 14 UK volunteers and 14 Ghanaians. All the Ghanaians came from different regions within Ghana, which all differ greatly in culture, beliefs and heritage. Such a mix of people meant I got a taste of all of Ghana without needing to step out of Accra. Although with such diversity comes differences in opinions. It was fascinating to learn about the different way of life and set of belief systems which the Ghanaians have. In respect to this have become more understanding and resilient to differences in opinion. Instead of arguing against what I thought was right from a British society point of view, I would now aim to educate people on my side of the argument and let them decide for themselves. Rather than impressing my opinion as the truth/right way, as the different cultural upbringing has given rise to a variation of stances and perceptions on certain issues such as religion, sex and the LGBT community.





Spending such a long time away from home and being constantly taken out of my comfort zone has allowed me to reflect on my own personal development. Looking back at the start of the programme I can see the level of progression I have made as the programme developed and the weeks went by.

The memories I bring back with me will have a lasting impact and be renowned as a part of this truly treasured experience. I have had such an incredible and unforgettable time in Ghana that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Being immersed into such a different culture, unlike any I have faced before, has opened my eyes to the diversity of world around me. I truly believe that this volunteering programme has inspired me and increased my awareness and the importance of sustainable development for poverty alleviation.

I hope to visit Ghana again in the future as I feel there is still more to experience, and I will sincerely miss my host family and all of the friends I have left behind.

