

Dear Class of 1995,

First of all, I want to express my sincere gratitude for your support of Unite for Sight in Ghana. The funds you donated sponsored the outreach programs to promote general eye health, the distribution of reading glasses and medications to people who may not have come into direct contact with health professionals or received medical treatment otherwise, and the vision-correcting surgeries of many underprivileged Ghanaians who we as volunteers often directly screened.

My trip to Ghana was truly a transformative and incredible one. I travelled to Accra with 300 reading glasses donated by PRVAIL on June 10th and returned July 21th. During that time, ophthalmic nurses and volunteers, such as myself, travelled to many regions throughout the south of the country, including the Volta region bordering Togo, further west to Adansi South, areas near the second largest city Kumasi as well as to several community centers within the city of Accra. Our outreach program hoped to provide some basic information on how to prevent eye conditions and the causes of eye disease. For example, a common practice in rural areas is to use breastmilk as eye drops. However, this can easily lead to infection. The program offered alternatives to traditional eye medicines, offering eye drops for conditions such as glaucoma and severe allergies that can lead to pterygium. The ophthalmic nurses prescribed the medications and we asked patients to pay a token fee to bestow greater value to the drops and encourage their appropriate use. Furthermore, we showed them how to use the eye drops and ointment since patients often had never used them before so were prone to either dispensing them incorrectly or overusing the drops. Particularly, if the eye drops are dispensed incorrectly and dropped on the cornea, they are painful and the patient might stop using them. In the

case of glaucoma, this could have tragic consequences since the increased pressure within the eye damages the retina so that later surgery would be ineffective.

As part of the outreach team, I learned about many eye conditions firsthand from people who had lived with blindness for far too long and from the ophthalmic nurses who always explained the pathology and let us examine unusual cases. While I learned about pathology and public health as a volunteer, I also felt a part of a team, supporting the ophthalmic nurses. With the help of six volunteers, one ophthalmic nurse screened and treated over 300 patients near Kumasi and referred at least 20 patients for sight-restoring surgery.

Volunteering for Unite for Sight in Ghana allowed me to observe, and sometimes participate in, amazing surgeries that often gave patients their sight back the next day. The majority of the trip we watched surgeries at the privately owned Crystal Eye Clinic, run by Dr. Clarke. A Ghanaian, educated in Germany, Dr. Clarke returned to his homeland and performs surgeries sponsored by Unite for Sight. He is a surgeon of boundless energy, regularly working from the early morning to past 10pm and removing cataracts in less than 15 minutes. Observing surgery in a developing country was an experience, but having met and heard many of the patients' stories made the surgeries more memorable. In Juaso outside of Kumasi, a little 6 year old boy came in with his grandmother. His mother had taken him to another screening program a year ago where she had been diagnosed with a retinoblastoma. But the mother had refused treatment. The grandmother finally took the child to us because he was in so much pain that he was hitting his head against walls and could no longer go to school. The eye had grown to at least three times its original size and the cancer had spread to his eyelids. We

immediately scheduled him for an evisceration at the Crystal Eye Clinic in Accra and thankfully, the grandmother consented. Fortunately, the cancer seemed not to have spread to his optic nerve so while he will only have one eye now, he will be able to return to school.

Most of all, I met some of the most incredible people in Ghana. The ophthalmic nurses I worked with and spent much of my free time with regularly had the greatest dedication to the organization: two of the nurses left their family in Liberia to work long hours in Ghana. The other nurse, Dennis, left his job in Great Britain, where he had studied and practiced and his wife is studying, to return to his homeland and with his children. It is their dedication to the mission of Unite for Sight that makes the organization so successful in Ghana and I was honored to work with them.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Smith-Lin





