



Two UA students work with a kindergarten class. Students help teach children English, math and other skills.

UA students learn about Ghanaian culture and do work related to their majors in schools, courts, a radio station and more through the UA in Ghana Service Learning Program.



BY EMILY STRICKLAND

Josh Mazon's interest in Africa was piqued by Dr. Seth Appiah-Opoku's African geography class at The University of Alabama, so when he had the chance to travel to Ghana as part of a service-learning experience, he seized the opportunity. Mazon, who is from Long Valley, N.J., and graduated in December 2017, says he did not anticipate how much the trip would broaden his perspectives.

"Taking African geography prepared me, but there is nothing like the real thing," Mazon says.

Every summer, Appiah-Opoku takes 10 University of Alabama students to Sunyani, Ghana, to participate in the

UA in Ghana Service Learning Program, which began in 2004. The program offers UA students an opportunity to learn about Ghanaian culture while participating in projects that correlate to their majors and earning academic credit for GY 444 Field Studies in Africa.

"The program is designed for everybody on campus so that, dependent on your major, we want you to learn something that will help you, something that is different from what you would do in the U.S.," Appiah-Opoku says. "So, if you have engineering students, then they do projects in their area. We also have communications students; they go to radio stations."

Other students serve in high schools and elementary schools, hospitals, environmental agencies and social-service organizations. In addition to working, students also tour the

Elmina Slave Castle, Kakum National Park, a monkey sanctuary, a gold mine and other sites around Sunyani, Kumasi, Accra and the Cape Coast.

Jenna Ingalls, a junior from Wells, Maine, majoring in political science, spent her time in Ghana teaching approximately 40 5- and 6-year-old children English, math and other basic skills. While more than 250 languages and dialects are spoken in Ghana, English is the country's official language and predominates in government and business affairs. Most children in Sunyani speak the local language, Akan, at home. "I had a lot of fun and learned the students love to count," Ingalls says. "They also love to sing songs and were intrigued by American songs, such as 'Row Your Boat' or 'The Itsy, Bitsy Spider.'"

Mazon, who majored in criminal justice and criminology, worked at three schools where UA students proctored exams and taught classes. He and another student also learned about the Ghanaian judicial system and visited courts in Sunyani, the city where the students did most of their service. "I had an amazing time immersing myself in the culture and even started to learn some of the local dialect," Mazon says.

In 2011, Sunyani and Tuscaloosa officially became sister cities, and delegations from both cities now visit one another regularly to gain a deeper understanding of each respective culture. Appiah-Opoku was instrumental in the formation of the sister-city partnership and has led a delegation from Tuscaloosa to Sunyani on three occasions.

Daniel Owusu, protocol officer at the Brong Ahafo Regional Minister's Office, is the Ghanaian representative responsible for placing UA students in service projects. "Our people learn a lot from your students," Owusu says. "Those who work in the FM radio station read the news and even assist with the preparation of it. Our people love listening to and learning the American English. [Ghanaians are more familiar with the British dialect because the country was a British colony until 1957.] Those who work in schools interact with our students both inside and outside the classroom. Our students learn a lot about Tuscaloosa, The University of Alabama and the U.S."

UA students who served in and visited courts and prison

facilities were given opportunities to share ideas about similarities and differences in U.S. and Ghanaian systems. "Students shared their knowledge and experience with our officials," Owusu says.

Ingalls, whose political-science concentration is in the Middle East and Africa, says the experience gave her a new understanding of Ghanaian politics and an international view of issues the United States faces. "People internationally are really involved in U.S. politics, and it is rewarding to tell people the truth about stereotypes of the U.S. while also breaking stereotypes of Africa," Ingalls says.

Since the UA in Ghana Service Learning Program's inception in 2004, approximately 130 UA students have dedicated 40 hours apiece to working in the African nation during annual, three-week trips. Approximately 300 Ghanaian school children are involved with the program each year, and millions of people hear news that originates from the FM radio station where UA students regularly volunteer. Engineering students have worked in the civil engineering department of the Sunyani municipal government, and environmental-science students work with Ghana's Environmental Protection Agency.



Three hundred Ghanaian children participate in the program each year.

Appiah-Opoku says he believes the program changes students' outlook in substantial ways. "I think it shifts the students – the way they think, the way they see the world," he says. "We have students who think that life in the third world is so horrible, but when they go over there, they see that the third world is not the

way they hear about it. People are making a living despite the problems, the poverty."

Mazon says travelling to a developing country was an eye-opener. "I am so grateful for what I have now and have become a lot less materialistic," he says.

Appiah-Opoku says it is important for students to experience another part of the world. "The only way to understand the world is to go out there and see how others live," Appiah-Opoku says. "It should be a global village."

To learn more about the UA in Ghana Service Learning Program, contact Dr. Seth Appiah-Opoku at [sappiah@ua.edu](mailto:sappiah@ua.edu) or 205-348-2731.

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