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As cliché as it sounds, my offterm in Ghana was truly life changing. It is difficult for me to decide where to begin to describe the incredible experience I had and what it meant to me. I'm sure this report will only scrape the surface in expressing the joy, pain, conflict, love, confusion, exhaustion, and amazement I felt in Ghana. I worked in the maternity ward of the Kasoa Government Hospital. I observed, and then assisted midwives in managing labor, catching babies, cutting umbilical cords, delivering the placenta, wrapping, weighing, and bathing newborns, dressing umbilical cords, giving injections, performing palpitations and measuring fundal height during prenatal checkups, performing HIV tests, and filling out health insurance, lab, and registration forms. I absolutely loved every minute I spent at the hospital. I became close friends with many of the midwives and ward assistants. I loved it so much I went in on weekends and did several overnight shifts. I dearly miss the friends I made at the hospital.

It is incredible for me to look at the progress I made at the hospital. On the first day I felt completely overwhelmed. As I watched my first vaginal birth I felt dizzy, and sick to my stomach. I had to keep sitting down, and each time I tried to stand up I'd last only a few minutes before I had to sit down again. I left the hospital after my first day wondering what I had gotten myself into, but also determined to do whatever it took to make this a meaningful experience, to be as helpful as I could, and learn as much as possible. From that point on, I worked really hard to persistently ask questions, carefully observe procedures, and ask to try things. By the end of my internship I had delivered at least 8 babies with only verbal instruction from the midwives. I had assisted with over 30 deliveries. I felt like a part of the hospital team. I think my success came from being willing to do anything. I took the initiative to do pretty boring or undesirable jobs like filling supplies, taking out the trash, or filling out forms. The staff appreciated that I was eager to work and learn. This process really challenged me as I am not naturally outgoing or confident. Every day, and sometimes every minute, I had to consciously force myself to step out of my comfort zone. I am so thankful I did.

I lived with a host family. They were incredibly kind and welcoming. They cooked breakfast and dinner for me, helped me with my laundry, cared for me when I was sick, introduced me to their friends, and taught me Twi (the local language). I loved spending time with them after work. Their four-year old daughter, Alice, was a joy to be around. She called me "Nana" which means grandma in Twi. We made pinwheels from paper and sticks, colored, did her homework, and took pictures together.

My internship at the hospital and my host family accommodations were secured through the Cheerful Hearts Foundation. During the first weeks of my stay the Cheerful Hearts foundation founders were very attentive to my needs and made sure I was happy, safe, and adjusting well. They got me settled with my host family, introduced me to people at the hospital, and checked in with me often. They even took me on a day tour of Accra, showing me many famous monuments, museums, and other sights. I think one of the hardest things for me was feeling abandoned when they left me more on my own after the first few weeks. I got frustrated and

homesick, as I struggled to navigate public transportation, decide how to spend my free time, and how to stay safe by myself. I quickly found some aspects of every day living to be draining. The “obruni” (white person) catcalls and unwanted attention from men were particularly exhausting and unnerving. Sometimes, I struggled to maintain a positive attitude and found myself angry, discouraged and frustrated. I challenged myself to replace each of these negative feelings with a feeling of gratitude for the opportunity I was having. This really turned things around for me. I learned to acknowledge and accept my frustrations, and then to turn them around. I’m grateful I was challenged to make my way on my own. It forced me to reach out to people at the hospital for help, advice, and companionship. As a result, I formed very close friendships with many wonderful women at the hospital.

I felt an obligation to travel during my free time, but was also really afraid of doing this alone, after the Cheerful Hearts founders left me to my own devices. I felt guilty for not being adventurous or brave enough to travel. I did find people to travel with at the hospital, which was interesting, fun, and fulfilling. However, I’m also glad I spent most of my free time at home with my host family, working at the hospital for longer hours, and meeting others in the community. I learned that this was way more valuable than seeing a landmark.

Overall I remained remarkably healthy throughout my trip. I enjoyed trying the many new foods in Ghana, although I often had an upset stomach. I also had many of mosquito bites despite using a net and strong bug spray. At one point I was very ill for about 5 days. It started when I threw up while at the hospital on a Saturday. The hospital staff was incredibly kind to me. They got me a change of clothes, gave me medicine, and even drove home with me. Everyone told me I had malaria, although I didn’t have a blood test so I can’t confirm that. I was grateful to have this experience, as it really helped me understand how thankful I should be for my good health, and how relatively easy it is to maintain good health living in the United States.

The most profound experience I had in Ghana was witnessing death. I was present at the death of three newborns. One died during a breech delivery, one was premature, and the last one had suffered distress in the womb. Each time I was struck by how unaffected everyone seemed by the death. No one cried; no one even seemed really upset. The dead bodies were unceremoniously left lying on tables or beds in the maternity ward. Each time I asked if there was anything else we could have done, and each time the answer was no. Watching the premature baby die was excruciating. The midwife was using a hand respirator to help the baby breathe, but after a short while she stopped. This was incredibly hard for me. I wanted to yell “Don’t give up! Keep pumping!” or I wanted to take the respirator myself and do it, but I felt it wasn’t my place to do either of those things. The midwife was resigned to the fact that the respirator wasn’t helping. After the baby stopped breathing the mother simply rolled over, left the baby lying at her back, and fell asleep. The whole experience seemed surreal. I felt like I had no way to process it.

I think the biggest lesson I learned in Ghana concerns gratitude. I was really struck by how people in Ghana greet each other. They ask, “How are you?” to which the reply is either “Fine” or “Not fine.” In a way, this was sad to me, because the answer could never be “fantastic”, or even simply “good.” But on the other hand, it

showed me how grateful the Ghanaians were for everything they had. They were appreciative to simply be "fine." They didn't need any kind of excess. They were deeply thankful for their health, their lives, and the day they were living. They would also never with "horrible" or "depressed." Even when they were physically ill, hungry, or struggling, they were hopeful and happy. This and other experiences constantly reminded about how much I take things for granted, and how prone I am to be ungrateful for the abundance I have been blessed with. I really hope to hold onto a more constant and genuine appreciation for the little and big blessings in my life.

I hoped that my experience would help me decide between pursuing midwifery or a medical degree. It certainly confirmed my interest in midwifery, and really clarified my understanding of the distinctions between the two fields. I left Ghana still unsure of which path to follow, and anxious to learn more. Luckily, an internship became available at a freestanding birth center that serves a high-risk population in Washington DC. This experience has complemented my experience to Ghana well, and has led me to decide to apply to midwifery programs. I also am certain that I want to return to Ghana at some point in my career, and I would love to pursue other international healthcare work as well. Ghana certainly had an invaluable impact on my career goals.

I am indescribably grateful to the Dickey center for giving me the opportunity to go to Ghana. I made lasting friendships, challenged my attitudes, perceptions and preconceptions about myself and the world, and redirected my life path.