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The Ashanti Gala will be held this year on Sunday September 30 at the Britten Theatre, London SW7 2BS.

Dancers from both the Royal Ballet and the English National Ballet have volunteered to take part.

'Develop a Village' Scheme Bringing New Donors to Ashanti

Ashanti Development's new Develop A Village scheme is powering ahead and has attracted sponsors for seven new villages even before it is formally launched. The scheme introduces potential sponsors to villages which badly need their help, and encourages them to form long-term relations with each other. Donors are helped find the quickest way of bringing their village out of poverty, and Ashanti Development offers its services to do the work.

We know what we do is very effective, and we know we do it well, 'says Ashanti Development Chair, Martha Boadu. Our problem is just to get the finance to do more, and we hope this scheme will solve it, 'she adds.

The scheme can be managed in many ways, but ideally involves prospective donors visiting the Ashanti Region, choosing a village to sponsor and then holding talks with the Chief, Elders and Village Councils and together drawing up a strategy for the village's development.

Back in the UK, the sponsor gives Ashanti Development the money as and when it suits them. Ashanti Development spends it exactly in line with the agreement made with the village, sending the donor photographs and reports. But there is one condition. The donor must finance materials for each household to build itself a latrine, and must provide training for the community in health and hygiene before doing anything else. Without these benefits Ashanti Development, which hopes to fund clean water provision from another source, sees no point in working with a village.

The donor is welcome to make more visits any time they want to see the changes for themselves. Indeed they are encouraged to develop a long-term relationship with the community. It is hoped that over time they may wish to fund other benefits for the community –mosquito nets, for example, or new school buildings and latrines, agricultural training and farm support, small business loans or food processing facilities.

Starting prices for sanitation and health and hygiene training range from £1,500 for a small village to £60,000 for a larger one. New sponsors include a company, which believes the scheme offers an excellent way of promoting cohesion among the workforce, and individuals wanting to contribute to the wellbeing of people who are much less fortunate than themselves.

The scheme sprang directly from an idea of Daire Behan S , described below, which was then replicated by other donors, including Rotary Club and a group of Italians who ultimately set up an Italian Branch of the charity. Thirteen villages have been sponsored by individuals and companies before the present version of the scheme had even been launched.

Founder Martha Boadu says she knows there are risks involved in the scheme, but believes they're well worth taking. We have explained the scheme to the villages, and told them about some of the things that could go wrong – misunderstandings due to different cultural behaviour or donors changing their minds, for example. But given the chance of gaining access to clean water and sanitation and the possibility of other benefits coming later, all of them chose to take part, 'she explains.

Case Study: Old Daamang, the first village to be sponsored

By the time David and Daire decided to marry, both were single parents with grown-up children and were well on the way to becoming single grandparents. Both had homes which were fully-equipped with everything a home could need, and their problem was what to ask their families and friends to give them as wedding presents. They weren't setting up new homes but merging two existing ones, and there was very little they didn't already have.

Luckily, Daire had a brainwave. She asked Ashanti Development to find a small village for them to sponsor, a village where a little money could make a real difference. They would ask their wedding guests to donate money to the village instead of spending it on presents.

The village chosen was Old Daamang, once a prosperous farming community but more recently a crumbling ruin. Some fifty years ago the cocoa crop failed all over this part of Ashanti, including at Old Daamang. It eventually became extremely difficult for the villagers to survive, so all those with savings moved lock, stock and barrel to a new location, which they named New Daamang. They left behind them in Old Daamang only the poorest of the poor, the ones who had no savings to buy new land.

David and Daire's friends loved the idea of sponsoring Old Daamang. Daire thinks their wedding was particularly happy because people were so pleased with the idea. Certainly, they gave far more than anyone could have predicted –over £8,000.

Right

Old Daamang Villagers Looking at Daire's wedding photos



When Old Daamang heard the news, they were overwhelmed. A public meeting was held to work out what they'd like to have the money spent on. They decided to use most of the money to set up farming cooperatives and to employ the local Agricultural Research Station to train them in modern agricultural methods.

They then asked Ashanti Development to buy them a big, clean, communal latrine, but were happy to modify this to one latrine per household –Water Aid say that household latrines are much better maintained - and we added health and hygiene training to the list. Finally, they added mosquito nets and microcredit, a scheme providing women with business training and small business loans, to the list.

The villagers sent Daire and David messages of thanks. 'We had no-one to help us before. Our children are leaving, we are getting new children and the problem is getting out of hand, 'said one, adding that God had sent them.

One of the woman stood up and said she wanted to add something from a woman's point of view. 'This message is as though I am dreaming, 'she said. She promised that if she could receive a microcredit loan she would handle the money very well and God would bless her enterprise, and the other women agreed.

'Sponsoring Old Daamang was one of the best things I ever did in my life 'says Daire Brehan.

The women kept their promises. All of them repaid their loans –though all loans made by Ashanti Development are repaid (with the exception of one woman, who died!) –but exceptionally the women of Old Daamang repaid them early. They used them to set up small businesses selling, for example, flip flops, or buying maize wholesale to sell on, selling rice and oil, and making African donuts. They told us the money had really changed their lives. One of them, Mrs Damqua, had used her loan to make and sell Kenke, which is powdered, fermented maize mixed with water and flavouring and cooked in plantain leaves. It sells well, and yielded enough profit to keep her and her disabled father in food. Mrs Damqua says that if it were not for microcredit she and her father would be destitute, and possibly dead.

'Sponsoring the village of Old Daamang was one of the best things I ever did in my life, 'says Daire Brehan. 'Stories like the one about Mrs Damqua make one feel so responsible, ' she says.

Peter Rees is a Year 12 student at Hills Road Sixth Form College, Cambridge, studying maths and science at A-Level. He has been to Gyetiase twice: he loves Elizabeth's cooking and going to The Spot. In the future, he hopes to follow a scientific career.

Purple! 'Red! 'Yellow! 'Frowns turn into grins and excited shouts erupt in the native language of Twi.

Felix is a ten year old Ghanaian orphan. Right now he is sitting with ten of his peers curiously watching the crudely improvised apparatus consisting of half a plastic water bottle, a stick and a piece of filter paper. The children are intent as water begins to rise up the paper, encompassing a dot of black ink. Frowns appear. A black streak stretches across the filter paper. Out of the black comes purple.

Purple! 'Red! 'Yellow! 'Frowns turn into grins and excited shouts erupt in the native language of Twi.

This is a chromatography experiment in the school of a rural Ghanaian village called Gyetiase. Felix and his friends are experiencing practical chemistry for the first time in their lives.

My idea of a Science Summer School had developed after visiting Gyetiase in 2010 to teach English, Maths and Sport. I went there under the auspices of the Ashanti Development¹, a small Anglo-Ghanaian charity committed to improving sanitation and education in this region of Ghana. Initially, I expected to work as an assistant to one of the British volunteer teachers, but when ill-health forced her to withdraw I became a teacher. I returned from that experience with mixed feelings, impressed at the enthusiasm for learning shown by the Ghanaian children but depressed by the complete lack of educational materials and resources, especially in science. No alternative was available to local teachers but dictation, rote learning and copying from the blackboard.

Right
Gyefiasse Junior High School

I was rather humbled when I thought of how I took for granted my own school science laboratories, knowledgeable teachers and inspirational TV figures such as Brian Cox. Aware that 2011 was the International Year of Chemistry, I started to plan experiments that could be undertaken in a classroom without running water, without electricity, without doors, without glazing in the windows and holes in its corrugated tin roof. Other than this building, the only things that were provided were a pitted blackboard and an abundance of keen children.

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Chromatography was our first lesson. Having acquired materials from the local Mampong market, several 500ml plastic water bottle, scissors and coffee papers (a substitute for filter paper), I demonstrated to the class how to construct the simple apparatus. This was no trivial task. Not yet accustomed to the obtrusively abundant resources, excitement filled the classroom as I revealed the bundle of pencils, paper and empty water bottles from my bag. With mounting desperation, every child tried to attract my attention by shouting 'me! me! me!' and waving their hands in the air as if my supply of pencils might evaporate. Once everyone was satisfied we assembled our African-style chromatography kits together at a blistering pace.

What many children lacked in experience was compensated by enthusiasm and natural aptitude. Within an hour every child in the classroom had conducted their own scientific experiment and learnt that black ink will separate into its constituent colours when using paper chromatography with water as the eluant.

Bolstered by this success, we moved on to invisible writing. This required limes, paper and candles, all of which were available locally. Having scoured Mampong Market in the midday sun I was determined to put on a spectacular show. This experiment involves writing a word in lime juice on a piece of paper, which turns invisible once dried; then, when heated carefully, the writing is revealed as it turns brown. One might have thought that giving over twenty excitable, 10-13 year old children matches and pieces of paper to hold very near to a candle flame would be a recipe for disaster but having witnessed some of these children using knives and machetes on their parents' farms I was confident that they would handle fire with maturity and responsibility which proved to be the case.

It was fundamental that we covered the concept of an acid and a base, and fortunately the class had already heard of the pH scale. I had brought out Litmus paper strips and we dipped each end into acetic acid and a fresh lime turning it red, and into soap and bicarbonate of soda, which turned it blue. Seeing the colour of the litmus change to red or blue from contact with liquids that did not contain those colours was astounding for the children. Then I illustrated the idea that acids react with bases using the stereotypical kitchen chemistry experiment: bicarbonate of soda and vinegar. After bringing 300g of NaHCO_3 and 750mL CH_3COOH through airport security customs, I intended to use it to full effect. To add an African twist to this kitchen science essential, I added the bicarbonate into a recently consumed coconut shell, and poured in the vinegar. Since I wanted to conserve resources I hadn't practised this experiment before as I knew it was very simple. However the result was startlingly anticlimactic and even though I didn't hold back when adding either chemical the effervescence simply drizzled down the sides onto the floor much like the dripping head of a frothy pint over-filled in its glass.

My own disappointment was ignored by the line of intrigued students who immediately demanded their own, personal version of the amazing 'boiling.' Before long, the classroom floor looked and smelt like an English fish and chip shop, and excited cries emanated from the building. Small things are magical to those with no preconceived expectations.

There were three exceptionally clever students: Ama, George and Osei. On the third day, George's father appeared at the window and listened to my lesson on bacteria and microorganisms. The presence of such spectators neither surprised nor perturbed me having grown accustomed to it during my previous visit. A forty-year old builder would occasionally join the class, which proved awkward as he would shout out an answer to every question I proposed, his answer being invariably '7.' In the break, George's father, Patrick, introduced himself; clearly George had told him all about the experiments so far and he was pleased that his son was able to do something educational during the long summer vacation. Most of the families are subsistence farmers, but George's father was a teacher. He noted how the class wrote up the experiment in our format of aim, method and result. Patrick commented on my teaching style and was surprised not only by the number of questions I asked the students but also by how much I moved around the room as I talked! I was merely trying to imitate my own British teachers.

It was challenging to attach learning objectives to the experiments that would cohere with local understanding of sanitation management but filtration seemed to be a relevant experiment to reinforce the principles of water purification. So, returning to my modified plastic water bottles and the red soil of the village, I embarked on a demonstration. Since the children drink murky water from the local stream, the concept of cleaning it so easily was surprising for them. They had heard that they could become ill from dirty water but didn't understand how or why. When clean water began to drip through the makeshift funnel (the top half of the water bottle inverted) several children wanted to drink the water.



It simply added to their confusion when I insisted that the water was still not necessarily safe to drink, but it was exhilarating for me to hear Osei suggest that this was because the microorganisms were still in the water as they were small enough to fit through the holes in the filter paper. This comment was a breakthrough: the practical experiment was helping the students to make sense of something they had learned by rote.

Our last experiment involved magnets. Many students knew the definition of a magnet off by heart from the textbook but having never seen any before these were by far the most intriguing piece of equipment. The concept behind attraction and repulsion was mind-boggling for every child in the class but trying to push the north poles together soon became everyone's favourite activity.

An attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the Science Summer School has to take into account the difficulties that were almost impossible to overcome. For example, many of the children struggle with the distractions of hunger, thirst and fatigue. In addition, classroom disturbances were frequent; a stray chicken might strut through the classroom, or students would abruptly leave the lesson with a cheerful 'I need to urinate,' and miss part of the

demonstration. Another problem was the students' strong reluctance to admit when they didn't understand something. In Ghanaian schools copying is common place and the only important thing is getting the correct answer, rather than understanding the working behind it. So, when I asked students if they understood the answer would be 'yes', however when asked a simple question in which they had to apply their knowledge, I was usually met with blank faces, and awkward silence. Similarly, if a student was praised for good work, s/he would soon be surrounded by other children who would copy their work and expect similar praise. While this was at times infuriating since it defeated the point of my teaching, it was endearing to see young girls (no older than fourteen) bringing their very young siblings to school with them and completing work for them before starting their own. However, looking back on the ten days of the Science Summer School it was clear that these simple resources were effective in generating an enthusiasm for science.

‘Hey Peter! You know I said I’d be a big businessman when I’m older? Well, not now ... I’m going to be a scientist.’

Perhaps the most important aspect of my experience is that the experiments and lesson ideas could be used by teachers in other developing countries, where there are similarly few resources.

After ten full teaching days it was time to pass on my lesson plans and resources to the Deputy Head of Gyetiase Junior School. He enjoyed looking through the students' experimental notes and was clearly proud that they had worked so hard. I am left remembering my final conversation with Felix on the day of my departure:
‘Hey Peter! You know I said I’d be a big businessman when I’m older? Well, not now ... I’m going to be a scientist.’

¹¹ Ashanti Development Charity:
www.ashanti-development.org

²² Obronɔ is the Twi word for ‘white person’