

VCU students and FOR AFRICA benefit proceeds arrive in Ghana to help a child development center take shape

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Sharmila Clee was the 2006 Recipient of the Loudoun County "Beat the Odds" Award

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VCU Social work student **Sharmila Clee** spends time with children in the slum area of Accra.

They line up in pairs and begin to pick up and pass heavy blocks of cement along a human chain. Muscles strain as the steady rhythm of moving and stacking blocks is carried out under the warm West African sun. A day of manual labor may not be the easiest way to spend a winter break, but the men and women moving these cement blocks wouldn't have it any other way. They are helping to build a child development center for the children of Ghana.

Two months earlier, the Virginia Commonwealth University community raised nearly \$50,000 for the effort by attending the FOR AFRICA benefit and celebration for the children of Ghana. Organized and coordinated by Chris Burnside,

former assistant dean of student affairs in VCU's School of the Arts, FOR AFRICA featured three nights of performances, a silent auction and an African market.

"It's a small miracle!" said Randi Buerlein, assistant director of field instruction for the VCU School of Social Work.

While FOR AFRICA introduced sell-out crowds in Richmond to life in Ghana, Buerlein is no stranger to the immense joy and intense struggles of the people who live there.

Buerlein has led groups of VCU students, alumni and supporters to Ghana for years. And since 2002, she and her students have supported the work of Sovereign Global Mission, a non-governmental organization that serves homeless street children and rural children who can't afford to go to school.



VCU School of Social Work students transfer concrete blocks for the construction of a child development center, which will serve as a home and school for street children and children living in the rural village of Adoteiman, Ghana. The proceeds from last fall's FOR AFRICA benefit helped to pay for the building materials and skilled labor necessary to build the center. Photo by Doug Buerlein.

FOR AFRICA's success allowed organizers to donate \$30,000 directly to construction of the child development center, which will serve as a home and school for street children and children living in the rural village of Adoteiman, Ghana. The center will be finished in April, with the first students enrolling this spring.

“It took a long time for the money to transfer from the U.S. to Ghana,” Buerlein said. “But when we arrived, skilled construction workers had been hired and materials purchased. The FOR AFRICA benefit allowed those resources to be in place when we arrived.”



Randi Buerlein, M.S.W., assistant director of field instruction for the VCU School of Social Work, walks through the slum area of Accra with three brothers, two of whom have recently been selected for sponsorship to attend school, thanks to the success of the VCU's FOR AFRICA benefit performance in November. Photo by Doug Buerlein.

Money raised by FOR AFRICA will also be used to sponsor children at the school through the purchase of books and uniforms. Additional proceeds from the benefit will be set aside to sustain the effort in the future.

“Children in Ghana want more than anything to go to school and now some will be able to do so,” Buerlein said. “We continue to work with Eric and Felicia Annan (the co-directors of Sovereign Global Mission) to reduce barriers like disease, poverty and hunger, which prevent children from going to school.”

There were 21 people from VCU on the most recent trip, which took place in late December and January. In addition to helping with construction of the child development center, the VCU group taught women about health, disease prevention and nutrition, passed out clothing and helped to serve food during Sunday community feedings.

They also delivered letters from Richmond area children who performed in the FOR AFRICA benefit. The Richmond children wrote about themselves and asked about life in

Ghana. Children in Ghana wrote back.

“I love that you wrote me friend,” wrote Ghanaian child Elizabeth Tetteh. “I am nine years old. I like to swim too. Are you good and fast at swimming?”

Anita Teye wrote, “I like to study math. I want to be a seamstress when I get older. I like to eat rice and fish.”

Buerlein delivered the letters when she returned to Richmond.

“It is a powerful experience to write to a child in Ghana and to have the child write back,” Buerlein said.

“And it was an educational experience. The children shared information about themselves, favorite foods and what they like to do. And they learned about each other.”

And Buerlein continues to learn more about the generosity of her students and the people of Central Virginia. She said the FOR AFRICA benefit has had a positive ripple effect, with donations and requests for information continuing to pour in.

To make a donation to Sovereign Global Mission, contact Randi Buerlein at 804-828-0708 or at rwbuerle@vcu.edu.