

Librarians bring books and expertise to Ghana library

By Michaela Kennedy

"Adwaaba," or "welcome" in the Akan language of Ghana, echoed around librarians Kristin Williams and Lisa Davis on their odyssey to the lush hills of Cape Coast, Ghana. Locals learned about their trip to the west coast of Africa and tasted Ghanaian chocolate last Thursday night in a discussion event at the Jamestown library.

In July, Davis, an island resident, and Williams spent their two-week vacations as volunteers in a library-building project at Cape Coast School for the Deaf, fondly known as Cape Deaf. They transported 20 pieces of luggage, each with 70 pounds of donated books and other resource materials, from Rhode Island to Ghana. The two philanthropists then catalogued and organized it all for public use. Delta Airlines was very generous in allowing the shipment free of charge, Davis acknowledged.

Cape Deaf has 370 deaf students. "They can stay until they learn a vocation," Williams said. The school is only one of 13 schools in the country that is dedicated to help people with disabilities. "The literacy rate is 57.9 percent," she added.

Williams, the former children and young adults' librarian for Jamestown, heard about Davis' decision to journey as a volunteer to Ghana. The more she thought about Davis, the more excited she got. She applied for the same volunteer abroad program at Cape Deaf, and was accepted. "Certainly at any point during the trip, I was glad you came along," Davis said as she



Kris Williams and Lisa Davis took the Press with them to Cape Coast School for the Deaf in Cape Coast, Ghana, Africa, where the two librarians helped build and set up a library for the nearly 400 students that attend school and live there. Davis worked at the Jamestown library, and Williams was the former children's librarian in Jamestown. She now lives in Rochester, N.Y.

smiled at her friend.

When they arrived, the students performed lively dances, "which was extraordinary since they can't hear anything," Williams noted. Cape Deaf students learn American Sign Language, and the volunteers learned some sign phrases during the stay. In addition to hearing-disabled students, some blind students attend the school and are taught Braille. The sight-impaired children grabbed the visitors' cameras and jokingly snapped pictures of each other, "which was also funny because they couldn't see anything."

The clash of cultures could cause trouble, unbeknownst to the foreign visitors. If children did not do their chores, they would be punished by not receiving meals. The librarians saw children hunched over, carrying buckets of water. "We would of-

fer to carry the water, not realizing they would not disobey a white person. But at the same time they knew they had disobeyed their teacher and would lose rations of daily food," Williams explained.

Not that the food was always to the Americans' liking. They were served "grass cutter" which they later found out was rat. In addition, produce was fertilized with human waste, so everything had to be cooked thoroughly before eating.

One slide showed some electrical appliances unplugged near an outlet. "Don't let the electrical cord fool you," Williams warned. The two women had a refrigerator and hot plate in their guest quarters, but nothing worked. "The whole time there, we had no electricity." A picture flashed on the screen of a sink with a bucket of water next to

it. "The sink had no running water," Williams added.

The absence of running water and electricity emphasized the arduous labor the Cape Coast workers endured to build the library. One snapshot revealed a work area with few tools. No machinery was available, and a single wheelbarrow was used for cement mixing.

Despite a life seeming so difficult to a well-off American, the people of Cape Coast were happy and always smiling. The volunteers witnessed strong, caring relationships everywhere. They agreed one of the best things about Ghana was the lack of violence. "They are very serious about personal safety and child safety," Davis said.

The women stressed that the mission of Cape Deaf is to highly educate students, so they do not

need to rely on others because of their disability. Chicken and pig farming are two of the vocations taught. Staff members of the school wore samples of batik, hand-printed cloth created by the students.

Williams and Davis did not need to wait long to uncover fascinating, and sometimes shocking, aspects of Ghanaian culture and history. One picture showed what looked like a long trunk shaped like a Coca-Cola bottle; another image captured men carrying a big pink fish. The objects were coffins, for which Ghana is famous. Funerals are three days long, lavish, and the whole village is invited. "People come from all over the world to have their coffins made," Davis noted.

The librarians also flashed pictures of Cape Coast Castle, a slave trade fort in the 1700s, and described the squalor endured by the captured people at that time. Following the images of a treacherous past were slides of the Cape Coast Public Library, "the most beautiful building there," Davis said. Few people used the library, however, because people must pay to join the library. "Many people didn't have the money, so few people, save a few college students, were there," she added.

Davis and Williams visited the orphanage where Davis' daughter, Hannah, volunteered the previous year. Urine ran through streets in a village of squalor that held little hope for the children. "When they turn 18 they are turned into the street," Williams noted.

In a question and answer session with the audience, Williams and Davis admitted they would like to return to Ghana, or to other places in order to repeat the effort toward education for world communities in need. To build and staff libraries is \$4,000 a year, "which is nothing," Williams said.

For more information about volunteer projects in English-speaking Ghana, visit online at www.ikando.org.

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