

Copy of an article by Cheryl Bloomfield in the 'Feminine Focus' Section of The Courier, 1977

Jane's African Eye-opener

When mother of five Jane Knight joined the staff of Oxfam three years ago she believed that putting the world to rights would be a relatively simple task. "I thought it was something I could do during the day and get back to be a housewife and mother in the evening" laughed Jane.

But a recent trip to Ghana has changed all that. After visiting a developing country and seeing the conditions in which people live Jane realised that she has a lot of work to do.

Jane's four week trip took her to many places, including Upper Volta, one of the poorest countries in the world. As Oxfam's Assistant Regional Organiser in the area, she was joined by 19 school teachers from Birmingham and Oxfam's Educational Organiser. The aim was to give teachers an insight into life in a developing country.

Experiment

"The trip was an experiment. It was the first time that Oxfam had organised anything like this and I believe it was a huge success. In the past we have always found it difficult to explain to teachers what it's really like in these developing countries; and obviously if they don't have enough information they find it impossible to teach children in schools. So Oxfam decided the best idea would be to send a group to see for themselves" said Jane.

First port of call for the party was the University of Legon in Accra, where they spent three days acclimatising to the country. Then it was on to Kumasi, a large market town in the north of Ghana. Here Jane spent 10 days studying health and education, visiting hospitals and schools in the area. Her impression was one of complete admiration for the staff in both hospitals and schools. "The medical standards are excellent there, although they work very much on a shoestring. I saw a 2lb premature baby that had as much chance of living as he would have in this country".

"Horrifying"

"The doctors and nurses are all highly qualified, but it is quite horrifying how hospitals are run on a bare minimum of staff" she said. In the area Jane visited there are just nine hospitals for 10 million people, and in one hospital 2,000 outpatients were waiting for treatment. Wards were so overcrowded that in many places mattresses were placed on the floor to save space. Because of the shortage of hospitals there are plenty of maternity homes and one in particular housed a bakery business on the side.

She took a particular interest in education and was interested to discover that although primary education was free, parents had to pay for secondary education, but in turn university education was free. "Obviously this means that education is very much for the richer families and often poor families don't have chance to continue much of an education after the primary stage".

Short Supply

Classes tend to be overcrowded and teachers are in short supply as many of them are tempted to find teaching jobs in the nearby and wealthier Nigeria.

From Kumasi the group was split and Jane and a Birmingham girl spent 10 days in Upper Volta completing a project on aid. They stayed in the capital Ouagadougou and explored the area in depth, including the Sahel region which lies in the southern belt of the Sahara Desert. Jane was particularly impressed with the sheer diligence of the local people. "The inhabitants work very hard to grow enough food for the area and they nurture and cherish their crops very tenderly. Looking after the

crops is a family affair and often in the dry season you see children spending all day watering the vegetables”.

Jane came into contact with plenty of white people in the area, mainly French, Dutch and Swiss, and as Upper Volta is an ex-French colony, French was the spoken language. And in order to understand many of the complicated discussions that took place, Jane had to fall back on her schoolgirl “A” level French. “But to really study the area in depth I needed much longer out there; towards the end I was just beginning to feel I knew a little about the place” said Jane, who lives in Piers Close, Warwick.

After Ouagadougou the group re-assembled in Accra to discuss their projects and hold seminars.

Hardships

On one point they were all agreed. “It is extremely difficult to get across to people who have not been to these countries just the sort of hardships that are suffered over there. As we live in our wealthy western culture it is very hard for us to imagine what goes on over there and this really is a problem we face. Just how do we set about making people aware of the situation?” asked Jane.

Now she is back in Leamington this is the task she has set herself. Armed with teaching aids, musical instruments and plenty of information she is preparing to meet educationalists and groups in the town.

“Ideally I would like the subject of developing countries to be introduced gently into the curriculum in schools, rather than as a set subject given some time in geography lessons. It is a matter of changing young people’s awareness and making them become more tolerant of the hardships some countries have to suffer”. Jane feels this can be done successfully at an early age and she hopes to take some aids to junior schools, including printing blocks made from calabash fruit and wooden musical instruments.

Awareness

“If we could just get children to play these instruments and perhaps print cloth as the natives would in West Africa, it will just change their whole awareness and make them think of another country for a time”

The Third World Information Centre, which opened above the Oxfam shop in Bath Street 16 months ago, has plenty of literature and samples from developing countries. It is open to anyone who has a specific interest in the subject and Jane hopes, particularly after her trip, that more schoolchildren and teachers will want to visit the centre.

“I found it very interesting that everyone’s opinion of the country changed dramatically after the trip. It certainly opened our eyes” In fact Jane believes that anyone who has the chance to go to a developing country should take it. “The atmosphere over there is so friendly and relaxed and there is no hostility between anyone. Everyone is courteous towards everyone else and I think that attitude would certainly help over here. As a mother of five children I certainly want the world to be a better place by the time they have grown up. I want there to be more harmony and understanding between the developed and underdeveloped nations, and after all, we can only achieve that by studying their way of life”.