

This is Africa

BY: SHAWN SHAH

As the vuvuzelas fell silent and the 2010 FIFA World Cup came to a close, a remarkable quality emerged among the Ghanians: pride. Ghana had exceeded all expectations in the World Cup, and carried the hope of Africa on its shoulders as it outlasted all of the other African nations. Perhaps even more extraordinary is the fact that the Ghanaian Black Stars, despite their heartbreaking defeat in the quarterfinals, have since been distinguished and celebrated as African heroes.

However, the Ghana News Agency recently reported that the Ghanaian government expended an exorbitant fifteen million U.S. dollars to account for the national team's expenses as well as that of sending Ghanaian supporters to the World Cup. While soccer undoubtedly united the nation, could that money not have been more efficiently spent on more urgent and pressing societal issues?

I spent almost two weeks in Ghana this past July alongside nine other medical students from Florida State University and a team of physicians from the medical outreach organization, Hearts Afire. All in all, we were able to provide free medical care to over 2,000 Ghanians.

While incredibly humbled by the experience, I often found myself flustered by the Africans' acceptance of the way things transpire throughout the continent. I was reminded incessantly of the concept that "This is Africa," or "TIA" as the Africans liked to say (also popularized by the film *Blood Diamond*). "This is Africa" also refers to a Ghana in which 12% of children die before the age of 5 (according to the World Health Organization). In fact, most are considered fortunate to make it out of childhood. This is the same Africa where Ghanians continue to die from infectious diseases such as malaria and schistosomiasis, despite available treatment. Not to mention, this is the Africa where the war against AIDS appears to be at a standstill, at best.

"TIA" can no longer serve as an excuse to remain complacent with the status quo.

One morning at a school site in Elmina, Ghana, I encountered a young yet weathered mother alongside her three children.

The small room's oversized window allowed the pink glow of sunrise to illuminate and frame just how emaciated the woman had become. I told my translator to greet the woman by saying, "Good morning, I am here with the medical team. Are you having any pain?" The mother simply grinned and shook her head. She remained silent for the next few seconds. Confused, I asked the translator to ask again. Moments later, tears speckled onto her discolored cheeks as she continued to remain silent. I was stunned. "I understand this must be incredibly difficult for you. I am here because I want to help you in any way that I can. I..." She did not let me finish my sentence before she began talking in her native tongue about the recent anxiety and bereavement she dealt with over the murder of her spouse. Moreover, she had quit eating to ration food to her three children. She had sent her body through a plethora of health issues unknowingly, but refrained from bringing that up as a medical issue as she just wanted someone to listen.

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Ghana needs to enact change to lead the continent in becoming a progressive Africa of the 21st century. Investments in water and sanitation infrastructure alone will meet tremendous needs. I learned that the Africans want change but many do not have the financial means to attain it. What the Africans do possess is unbreakable hope, spirit, and pride. In fact, it was the Ghanians who showed me a simple lesson in compassion: listen in a way that fosters open communication. The end result will truly amaze you. While the government needs to be held accountable, the conversation simply needs to be started with, "I want to help you in any way that I can," rather than resorting to the trite pretext, "This is Africa."