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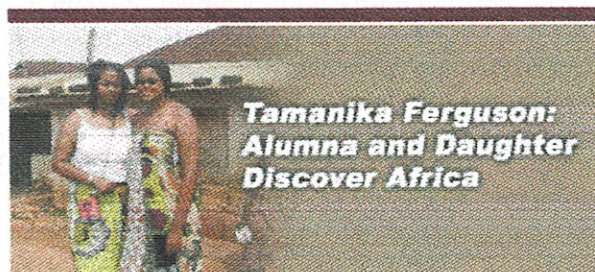
DOMINGUEZ HILLS

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◀ Tamanika Ferguson and her daughter, Antwanne Allen, enjoy a visit to Ghana, West Africa; courtesy of Tamanika Ferguson

ALUMNI NEWS

Tamanika Ferguson: Alumna and Daughter Discover Africa

Tamanika Ferguson (Class of '07, B.A., Africana studies/public administration) has transformed herself from a troubled streetwise teenager to a college graduate who has mentored at-risk teen girls while working with a nonprofit that helps young people in the juvenile courts and youth facilities transition into mainstream society upon their release. This summer, she undertook another project that resonates with the same hope for the future: introducing her daughter Antwanne Allen – and herself – to their ancestral origins on a trip to Ghana, West Africa.

"I'm happy that I was able to take [Antwanne] with me," she says "to embrace our African heritage and recognize the links between African Americans and black Africans in Africa. I'm glad I was able to give her that experience."

Ferguson participated in a travel program through Long Beach City College (LBCC), where she earned her Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts. Part of the month-long excursion was spent in the village of Dzogbedze-Alavanyo, where the group did volunteer work at an elementary school that was being rebuilt. Prior to the trip, the students gathered donations of school supplies from both the Dominguez Hills and LBCC campuses, which they delivered on their visit to the village. In addition, \$50 out of each traveler's fees for the trip went toward building the school's roof.

"It's a small village, but they have a lot of children and they need their own school," Ferguson says. "They have been building a structure and a little library. We got to see them receive the school supplies. There were a lot of kids and they divided the school supplies between this school and one in the next village. But it wasn't enough for 200 kids. After that, we got a chance to help with sweeping the area, working on the roof, different things to help them [build the school]."

Another part of the journey for the group was meeting the women of the Africa Alive Microcredit Association. Ferguson has worked with the organization's coordinator, Janét Hund, to promote and sell items handcrafted by the women of the village, such as jewelry and tie-dye clothing. Hund sends the women money to purchase materials to make their wares, receives the finished products in the

United States to sell, and then sends the proceeds from the sales to the villages. The program affords the women a level of self-sufficiency and stability.

Ferguson was struck by the industrious and collaborative nature of the Ghanaian people, saying that "Everyone is always engaged in some type of activity, from children to adults to older people. They do what they need to do in order to survive.

"And everyone helps each other out, families are all working together. In one of the homes we visited, a participant in the microcredit program, lived with her father and her father's mother, who was 97 years old. This is a close-knit community, so they all help each other, whether they need some food or are going out to sell their products."

While Ferguson and her daughter witnessed what may seem to many like a meager existence, they were treated to great hospitality and a chance to share in the culture's celebratory traditions. In Dzogbedze-Alavanyo, they were welcomed with drumming and dancing by the elders and chiefs of the village. Later on in the trip, Antwannet was able to celebrate her 15th birthday, with more drumming and dancing in her honor and a touch of home: their group coordinator Owass, himself a native of Ghana, hunted down some chocolate and vanilla ice cream, a rare treat in that part of the world.

"It was fun because they drummed for me and then it started raining," says Allen, "so we were dancing in the rain."

"Every time you turn around, there was dancing and drumming," laughs Ferguson. "It's a very active and engaging culture. Part of our tour was dance and drumming classes from a master drummer. We were in a studio with bare floors and no air conditioning; it was a very good workout."

On a more serious note, the tour included a visit to Elmina Castle, on Cape Coast, the site of African slave ports in the 1400s. Ferguson describes the first-hand experience of reliving the horrors of the slave trade.

"I had already learned a lot about slavery, but it's not the same as experiencing it for yourself, although your mind has a vision of what happened," she says. "They split the black students from the rest of the students. People get heated, they get emotional and they lash out, so I think that was why they did that.

"Everyone was lost in their own thoughts," she recalls. "Nobody was crying, but nobody was laughing either."

Allen, a freshman at Renaissance High School for the Arts, says that, "It was a real learning experience for me. In junior high and high school, we didn't really learn much about things like this. We spent a week on it... they talked about how the slaves were shackled, who owned them, and where they were held and then we moved on. So you don't really get details. I got to see the Africans' side of the story instead of just seeing the Europeans' side."

Although the travelers experienced some of the deficiencies of life in a developing country, such as a shortage of electricity and frequent power outages, the warmth of the people and the natural bounty of the country made up for the inconveniences.

"Everybody on the trip was placed with a family for two days," Ferguson recalls. "The family we stayed with was very nice. They cooked for us; we tried a lot of African dishes. The food was very good, the vegetables were fresh and the fruit,

especially the mangoes and pineapples — put ours here to shame.”

While a student at California State University, Dominguez Hills, Ferguson was the recipient of numerous scholarships, including the William Randolph Hearst/CSU Trustees' Award in 2006. Ferguson describes herself as a “go-getter” who knows how to find financial resources to further her education and to help give her daughter a better life. She is grateful for the opportunity to give her daughter a broad range of experiences despite being a single parent.

“I am very fortunate that I have been able to support my daughter both financially and by being there for her,” she says. “I make sure that I expose her to different environments, so that way, when she is older, she’ll be a well-rounded individual. I put a lot of time and energy into making sure she will have a brighter future.”

For a photo album of Ferguson's journey to Ghana, [click here](#).

- Joanie Harmon

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