

Service, Learning, and Research in Ghana

CALS alumna embarks on ag mission in Africa

By Glenda Caudle

A CALS ALUMNA IS VOLUNTEERING in Ghana until summer 2016. Kelsey Barnes, originally from Tennessee, graduated in 2015 with a bachelor's degree in agricultural science at Mississippi State. Currently, she calls the small village of Gbulahagu in northern Ghana home. When she returns to the states, she will pursue her master's degree at Texas A&M.

In the meantime, she is committed to an international volunteer agricultural experience that is playing out far away from home, thanks to AgriCorps, whose mission is to connect American agriculture volunteers to the demand for experiential, school-based, agricultural education in developing countries. The organization's partnership with 4-H Ghana is giving Barnes a life-changing opportunity she never imagined could happen to a small-town girl from Tennessee.

She was encouraged and inspired by her father and her sister: her dad is a farmer in Tennessee and her sister pushed her to pursue international interests. Her passion for international agriculture, she says, was also inspired by MSU professors Dr. Gaea Hock and Dr. Laura Lemons. "Neither of them persuaded me to

become involved in such an enterprise. They just spoke so highly of their own experiences and had so much passion for their teaching and for agriculture that I couldn't help but fall in love with it, as well."

A professor told her about AgriCorps, and she realized the program for volunteers fit her idea of mission perfectly.

Founded by past national FFA president Trent McKnight of Texas, AgriCorps partners with 4-H Ghana and 4-H Ethiopia and works to help communities through agriculture and farming. While the focus of their work is youth, they also put farmers in touch with different resources that can help them increase production.

When Barnes mentioned the possibility of combining her volunteer efforts in Ghana with work on her master's degree, her advisor was all for the idea. As a result, she will not only be helping an agrarian society grow stronger, she will also be doing research about the barriers that have to be overcome if agricultural efforts are to be successful in West Africa.

She is working as an extension agent, 4-H advisor, and agriculture instructor.

She teaches agriculture and English at the village school and helps with the 4-H club. She also helps farmers address problems with crops.

"For example, I have a farmer with Striga, a very invasive weed in corn, on his farm, so I met with a weed scientist at a local institute and got him to come see the problem and develop a plan to control the weed before it destroys the farmer's whole crop," she explained.

"I am kind of the connector between agricultural knowledge and technology to the future farmers, the agriculturists, and today's farmer," she said.

The students she works with are from 13-20 years old and it is her job to teach them leadership skills and critical thinking.

"We want them to become innovative and self-reliant. We want them to look at farming as a profitable business, as opposed to just getting by. Most farmers I deal with are male, but there are a lot of female farmers. They range in age from 20-65, although most of them don't know their birth dates."

Barnes said when she first arrived in Ghana, full of enthusiasm, she had lots of goals, and most of them were

measurable: increase yields by 10 percent, introduce different seed varieties, decrease post-harvest loss, introduce grain bins, increase the number of 4-H members by 10 percent, and increase female attendance in school.

However, after being "in the field," she has adjusted her thinking. Now her goals are less tangible and include inspiring the whole community, motivating the farmers to have higher yields, and giving her students hope. ❖

This is an excerpt of a longer story that originally appeared The Union City Daily Messenger in Tennessee.



LEFT: Barnes instructing one of her students.

BELOW: Barnes getting water from the well. (Photos submitted)

