

Civil engineering major Jennifer Phillips, B.S.C.E. '06, got a taste of another culture when she traveled to Ghana in June with Russ College professors and fellow students as representatives of Ohio University's chapter of Engineers Without Borders (EWB). A nonprofit humanitarian organization, EWB helps developing communities worldwide with engineering needs while teaching engineering students about practical problems and how to solve them.

"The idea is to create students who are more globally aware and get them involved outside the classroom," said Jeff Giesey, associate professor of computer science. "The reason I helped start the chapter came from my desire to use the skills and knowledge we have as engineers to help the people in the world who are struggling to meet their most basic needs."

Phillips, now a transportation engineer intern with the Ohio Department of Transportation District 9 in Chillicothe, Ohio, explains how in the process of sharing her engineering knowledge, she learned a few things herself.



Jennifer Phillips, B.S.C.E. '06, with local schoolgirl.



This summer, Drs. Jeff Giesey, Guy Riefler, and Greg Kremer, and students Jonathan Bebb, B.S.E.E. '98, T.J. Cyders, Cy Cost, Katie Melton, B.S.M.E. '06, and I spent three weeks in a rural Ghana village working with the local people to provide housing for school teachers.

Currently, the community is having trouble retaining teachers because most of them are drawn to bigger cities where there is reliable electricity and running water. Our goal was to help provide desirable living accommodations to attract and retain qualified teachers. We ended up forming international friendships while experiencing a culture much different from ours in Athens, Ohio.

We flew into Accra, the capital of Ghana. We were warmly welcomed by Emmanuel, who gave a few lessons in Twi, the local dialect, and gave us an idea of what to expect.

Two days later, we traveled to Maase Offinso, where the village officials held a formal ceremony expressing their joy and gratitude toward us. I was given the African name "Ya"—meaning "a female born on a Thursday"—by an elder village woman. The next day they showed us the site chosen for construction. The tall grasses had been cut down using a machete.

Over the next two weeks, we assisted the local people in clearing the brush, digging the foundation using shovels and pick axes, mixing concrete by hand, and carrying blocks. The Ghanaians are very hard workers. I was amazed when I saw the men uproot a tree by hand. They dug around the base and pulled it over with a rope.

Everyone pitched in; the headmaster of the primary school had the children come to the site carrying blocks. The women showed me

how to transport the concrete using head pans. Before we left, a two-family duplex stood with blocks to the top of the windows.

We also did some surveying; took water samples from the wells, springbox, and stream; and investigated their septic system and community dump to gather information to plan for next summer's project. We visited the schools to discuss the project with the teachers and surveyed individuals to learn about the health of the village.



Russ College electrical engineering grad student Jonathan Bebb, B.S.E.E. '98, gathers with children of the village.

Most of my evenings were spent with my 18-year-old host sister, Mary, and her grandmother, Cecilia. Mary taught me how to pound fufu, a local dish made from cassava dough and meat stew. I also had the opportunity to go to school with her, to her home economics class. Mary emphasized the importance of education to the Ghanaians. She hopes to become a nurse to help her country.

English is taught to the school children, but many of the adults only speak Twi. This language barrier made me laugh hysterically when I saw one of our professors—I won't say which one—eat sand because he thought he was being offered a local dish.

In our free time, we did some shopping and sightseeing. I bought hand-carved masks, pottery, and bamboo jewelry. We also went on a canopy walk 80 feet above the rainforest; visited a farm where plantains, cocoa yams, and corn were grown; and we spent a day at the beach.

It was a great experience. I was able to visit a beautiful country and meet some of the happiest, friendliest people. I am grateful I was given this wonderful opportunity! 🌍