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Coventry teen spends spring break teaching in Africa

Thursday, 24 April 2008



Collin De La Bruère and the students with whom he spent spring break in Africa. (Courtesy Photo)

By CHRISTOPHER ROY

Express Staff Writer

COVENTRY — A Coventry resident spent his spring break from Stanstead College by teaching math and English to seven-year-old orphan children in Ghana, in western Africa.

During an interview after his presentation to Coventry Village School students Wednesday, Collin De La Bruère, 17, said the final decision about him spending his spring break in a third-world country was made after discussing it with his mother, Carla Watson, in late January.

"My last two spring breaks were really uneventful," he explained. "I really wasn't doing anything, just relaxing. Because I am still young, I wanted to make a difference instead of sitting around the whole time."

Many of the students he taught were children who lost their parents to AIDS/HIV, said De La Bruère, who added that the average life expectancy in Ghana is very short. He said teaching children, who may also have the same sickness and die, made the experience much more meaningful.

"It made me feel better to know I can make a difference in a kid's life," he said.

A typical day involved waking up around 7 a.m., eating breakfast, and making the 20-minute walk to the orphanage that also serves as the school. When school got out at 3 p.m. he would return home to work on lesson plans or correcting papers.

Many of the students were just starting their education and were somewhat behind the traditional grade level for someone that age. The school building, which didn't have a roof, was a house that had never been finished. De La Bruère said he was teaching in a run down bedroom and the students ate their meals on the porch. Even though his personal living conditions, including sleeping on a bed made of boards with a blanket, were less than what he was used to.

"The kids I was teaching had even less than that," said De La Bruère, who noted that his bed was covered with a mosquito net to prevent the spread of malaria. "I didn't feel right about complaining."

In his free time he went into the city where it was common to see goats and chickens running around on the streets. He also went to the beach and a local market.

"I wanted to experience more of the culture," said De La Bruère. "The cities themselves are really nice and really developed by the standards of that country."

The entire trip cost him \$4,000, funded by local donations including one from the Coventry Town Foundation. When he arrived he was received with open arms.

"Everyone was hospitable and they really admired me for giving up my time to help them," he said, noting that the children were really excited to see him. "I was expecting them to treat me like a teacher, but they

treated me like a new friend and I was really thankful for that.”

Many of the people are impoverished but were also the happiest ones he has ever seen. De La Bruère said many of them know their situation will not change, so they are doing their best to make the most of what they have.

“That is something we can learn from them,” he said. “They were a lot happier than I expected them to be, and the poverty was worse than I had foreseen.”

When it came time to leave, he didn’t want to tell them he probably would not see them again.

“They said bye to me like they did every day,” De La Bruère said. “I felt bad knowing I would never be coming back, because they would not understand why.”

During the flight home, he said, he felt good about what he accomplished but also thought he could have done more. Now he plans to be more active in trying to raise money for organizations that provide financial assistance to such countries.

“I made a contribution and two weeks didn’t seem like enough time,” he said. “Right at the end I thought of all these new things I could have done with them. If I had a month with them, I think I could have got them reading sentences.”

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