

LOVE BEYOND BORDERS

Author: Mitzi Albano, BSN, RN, San Diego, CA

Section Editors: Pat Clutter, MEd, RN, CEN, FAEN, and Carole Rush, MEd, RN, CEN, FAEN

As nurses, we measure things all the time: a newborn's weight, a diabetic's blood sugar, a septic patient's perfusion level. However, sometimes we come across a circumstance we are unable to quantify into numbers; situations we are unable to express into words. Most people assume science is complex and intricate, when in fact, it is just the opposite. Science is simple because you can explain it. There is research and evidence that validates that what you are doing is being done because it is safe and has yielded the best outcomes. Protocols and policies are created based on this concept, giving nurses not only standards and purpose but also peace of mind when carrying out an intervention. However, regardless of the years of education and hours of clinical practice, there are some things that happen to us that we don't have the evidence to explain.

In January 2013, I embarked on a humanitarian mission trip with San Diego State's Global Medical Brigades chapter to Ghana, Africa, with a group of 60 volunteers. A mixture of physicians, nurses, and students made up the cluster of people dedicated to setting up a week-long free clinic in the rural village of Ebuakwa. Only 7 months before this journey I had graduated from San Diego State's School of Nursing with my Bachelor of Science in Nursing. A month following graduation, and after a rigorous interview process, I was hired into my dream career in a distinguished emergency department at Sharp Chula Vista Medical Center in Southern California. I had worked so hard to live the life I once dreamed of and at 24 years old I had turned that vision into my reality.

Finally, things in my life began to feel constant and stable. I remember thinking how satisfied I felt with the outcomes of my endeavors. I had only been working as a registered nurse for 4 months but had quickly adapted to my new role as a responsible adult. I was working full time in a meaningful profession, filed for insurance benefits, rented

my own apartment, began to make payments towards my student loan, and even set up a retirement fund. Just when I thought I was done growing up for a while, I had no idea how my experience in Africa would make me grow even more.

I remember exactly how I felt walking off the plane when we landed in Accra, Ghana. The anticipation of what was to come and the thrill of a new environment masked any sensations of fatigue I had accumulated from the long travel. Immediately, a bus drove us to Ebuakwa to partake in an opening ceremony the villagers had prepared for us. Before stepping off the bus, instruments and the sound of singing were heard from a distance in celebration of our arrival. Instead of simply walking to the ceremony we danced our way there, a child leading the way in each hand. As we gathered together in the warm sun, children swarmed us, sat on our laps, played with our hair, and touched our faces as if to determine if we were real.

It was in this moment that I met Beatrice, a 5-year-old girl who completely moved my soul from the moment I met her (Figure 1). There was something about her energy that made me feel instantly captivated, a marvel that science could never explain. The ceremony ended just the way it had begun. Everyone joined hands with people they had just met and everyone moved around freely as if the music would never end and the sun would never set. For the first time in most of our lives, we were consumed by something bigger than us. We all fell in love.

Sounds of laughter and harmony radiated throughout the atmosphere and I remember pausing amidst the chaos and soaking in how free and alive everyone looked. In that moment, I felt incredibly liberated to be carefree. There wasn't a single quiet soul because everyone's spirit was bursting with emotion. Beatrice held my hands the entire celebration and we laughed, sang, danced, talked, and made funny faces. We did all of these things without ever saying a word in the same language. This moment was beautiful.

As the bus driver started the engine to drive the volunteers to the compound, I attached myself to the window to wave goodbye to all of the wonderful people I had just met. There was Beatrice, as close to the window as possible, waving goodbye with a smile that was brighter than the sun. The bus began to move and the children began to chase the tail of it. Most of them without shoes, their bare feet pounding against the hot rock-covered ground (Figure 2). The image of the children began to fade away as the bus gained speed that surpassed their pace. Overwhelmed

Mitzi Albano is Clinical Nurse, Emergency Department, Sharp Chula Vista Medical Center, San Diego, CA.

For correspondence, write: Mitzi Albano, BSN, RN, E-mail: malbano19@gmail.com.

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FIGURE 1

Over 20 hours of traveling and straight into the arms of little Beatrice. Never have I fallen in, and been consumed by, love so quickly.



FIGURE 3

Working side-by-side with my Fante translator and new friend while taking vitals for this patient.



FIGURE 2

Running after the bus!



FIGURE 4

Measuring the height of one of our youngest patients during the triage rotation.

with awareness, excitement, and purpose, I couldn't help but think, "Is this what it feels like to come alive?"

Over the course of the next few days we turned small classrooms of an elementary school into a medical clinic. A patient would journey through a series of stations where Fante (a dialect spoken in Ebuakwa) translators were readily

available to interpret (Figure 3). First, general demographic information was obtained during patient registration which consisted of an outdoor tent that hardly shielded the rays of the burning sun. It didn't take long until I discovered that most of the villagers did not know their age because in the Ebuakwa culture the celebratory idea of an annual birthday

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