

# FACULTY FOCUS

FALL 2008



FACULTY OF  
**NURSING**  
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

INTRODUCING

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# INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

## Dancing to a different drummer: A nursing student learns multiculturalism in Ghana

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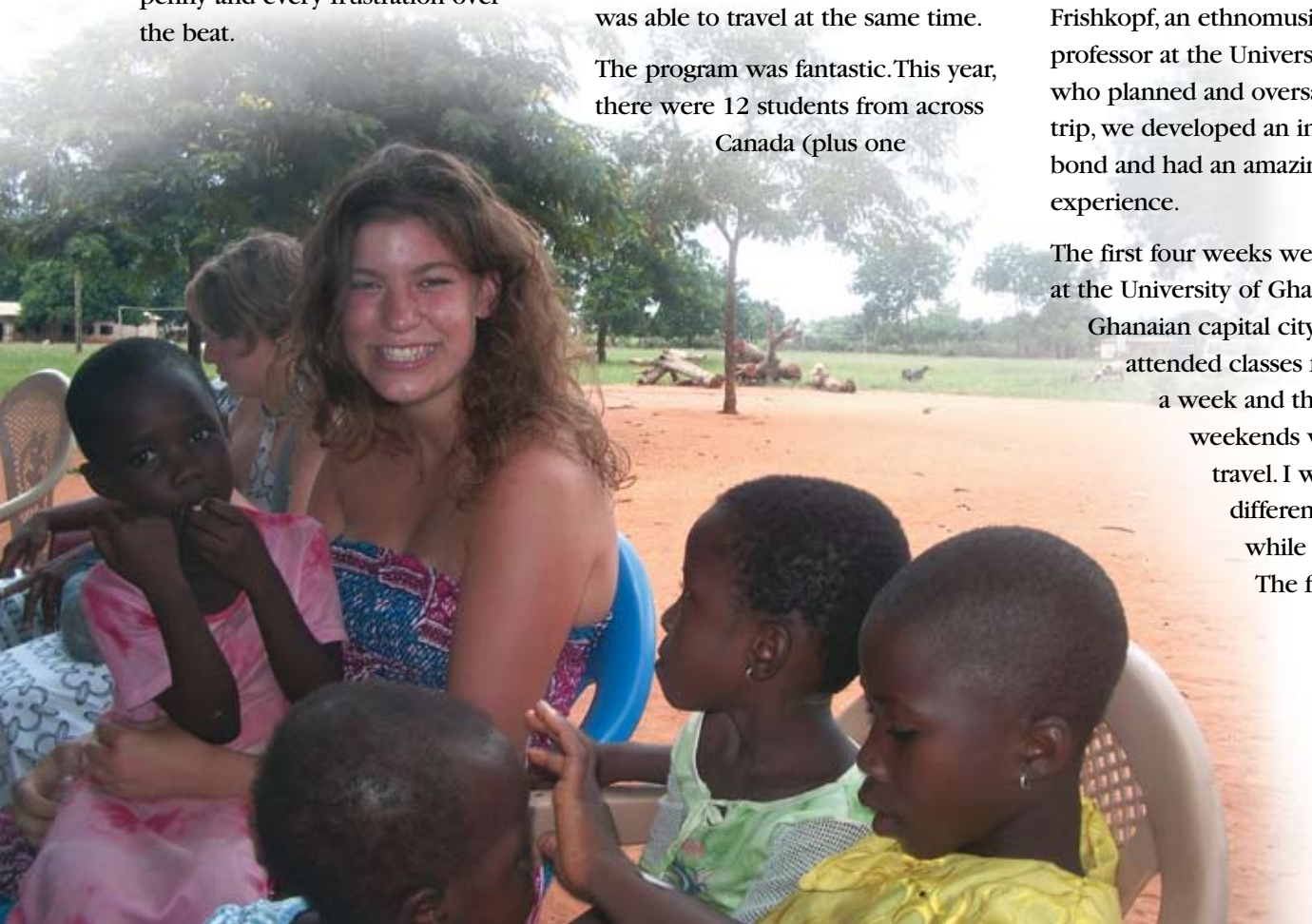
As I looked around I began to feel panicked. Everyone seemed to be copying the rhythm that the instructor was beating on the drum perfectly. I, on the other hand, always seemed to be a second behind everyone. All I could think was *“why had I, a nursing student with no musical background or musical talent whatsoever, travelled thousands of kilometres to participate in an ethnomusicology program in Ghana?”* But let me clear the record now and say it was an amazing experience, worth every penny and every frustration over the beat.

When I first heard about the University of Alberta’s ethnomusicology program, I immediately dismissed it. I’ve had a passion to be a nurse in Africa since I read a book on Uganda in Grade 7, and the prospect of studying in Ghana sounded amazing, but I didn’t think of applying because I wasn’t musically inclined. However, when an email appeared in my inbox one day saying that musical experience was not necessary, I printed off an application immediately. It was one of the best decisions I’ve made, as I completed my two senior electives required for my nursing degree and was able to travel at the same time.

The program was fantastic. This year, there were 12 students from across Canada (plus one

American). Some people already knew each other, as they were in the same program at the same school, but for the most part we were twelve strangers thrown together. I did not know anyone, however I met two girls at the orientation session in the spring, and we decided to travel around Ghana for a week before the program started. The next time I saw them was at the airport. The majority of the students were music majors, though a few of us were majoring in other areas such as political science, sociology, linguistics and, of course, nursing. We were a diverse crowd yet, under the guidance of Michael Frishkopf, an ethnomusicology professor at the University of Alberta who planned and oversaw our trip, we developed an incredible bond and had an amazing learning experience.

The first four weeks were spent at the University of Ghana in the Ghanaian capital city, Accra. We attended classes four days a week and then on our weekends we would travel. I was in three different courses while I was there. The first was





*The final performance by the ethnomusicology class.*

ethnomusicology, which links culture and music; the second course was Middle Eastern and African studies, where we learned Ewe (a local language), history, politics, and literature. The final course was the practical music course where we learned drumming, dancing, and singing. For the two theory classes we had different lecturers each day, teaching on a specific area that they had poured their lives into studying. Then our professor from the U of A, who organized the program, would assign us our readings and assignments. We had our hands-on music class outside at the end of each day for two and a half hours. What could be better than sitting under the African sun, learning to drum, and getting university credit for it?

The weekends were full of adventures as we went to Kokrobite to experience the beach and study under Mustafa Teti Ade, a world renowned drummer. We travelled to

Busua, a local fishing village where I learned to surf, to Kumasi where the largest market in West Africa is located, and to Kakum National Park where we experienced one of the few canopy walks in the world. We visited Cape Coast and toured through slave castles and learned of the horrors of the past.

After the four weeks on campus, our group travelled to a little village in the Volta Region called Dagbame, where we spent our last 2 1/2 weeks. In the village, we no longer had theory classes, but our music class lasted anywhere from four to six hours each day. We also worked on a field project where we

interviewed local villagers on how music has changed in the village and what has influenced this change. In the village we had the opportunity to participate in a funeral, clearly a celebration of life consisting of dancing, drumming and, singing all through the night and events that lasted over a week. One day, we even had the opportunity to observe a ceremony at the Shrine that included an animal sacrifice.

However, my time in Ghana was about so much more than the school aspect. It was about meeting the locals and making friends. I also had many opportunities to play with children on the beach and in the street. My time in Ghana was also about adapting to situations. I remember on about my third day in Ghana, my two new-found friends and I decided to walk to a nearby fishing village. It was an interesting experience trying to dodge the vehicles, pedestrians, and goats and chickens filling the street. On top of perfecting our manoeuvring skills, we had all the little children calling out “Obruni” and trying to touch us.



We had been told that this meant white person and, because the village rarely had white visitors we were something of a novelty. Another adaptation I had to acquire was not to use my left hand for interactions with others, as it is highly offensive as it is seen as unclean. I also had to get used to the fact that not all cultures are as time obsessive as North Americans. This was very notable in regards to transportation, where I always planned on the bus being at least a half hour late and the ride taking longer than estimated.

I also had to adapt to the food. There was rice, chicken, plantain and yams in abundance. I even started eating fish and enjoying it. Then there were the local dishes that I

enjoyed immensely. One dish in particular, called fufu, I love — minus the clumps of goat meat with the organs still attached. One thing I didn't have to adapt to was eating fresh fruit every day for breakfast, getting pineapples and mangoes for 50 cents each (which is an inflated price because I'm white). My time in Ghana was definitely a well rounded experience both inside and outside the classroom.

People always ask me the question — why did you study music if you want to be a nurse? In the end, it doesn't matter that I studied music rather than something like psychology or nutrition, which are seen as more applicable to nursing. The truth is I learned just as much, if not more, in

Ghana that I can apply to my career as a nurse. From the drumming classes I learned patience; from the ethnomusicology class I learned to ask questions to further my understanding; from my Ewe classes I learned basics of communication; and from my field work I learned interview skills directly applicable to taking a patient's history. Outside of class, I experienced being a minority, seeing issues from another perspective and adapting to what is appropriate in specific environments. These are applicable to me, as I want to nurse internationally.

Yes, my brothers may have mocked me when they heard I was going to be studying music, but I'm the one who's laughing now.

*Jennifer Hermann at the Kejetia Market in Kumasi, Ghana.*

