

Reflections from a Study Tour Participant



Just over a year ago, Marisa Sellman followed her heart's calling and participated in a Heifer study tour to Senegal and Ghana. After reading about Heifer in her newspaper, *The Charlotte Observer* (North Carolina), Marisa became a donor and then decided she needed to "meet the people whose lives have been changed by Heifer." She describes a Heifer study tour as "a way to take a personal journey through poverty and witness that poverty alleviation can work." Marisa goes on to say, "You go to a village and are invited to step into their world for a moment...they share a piece of who they are. And you are profoundly changed for the better."

When asked to share her most vivid memory from her visit to West Africa, Marisa recalls meeting Zibnob, a woman whose husband had died in a freak accident, after which his family took everything from her and her kids. Left with nothing, this widow was barely surviving until she was gifted a heifer which she named "Nyamekye" meaning, "God has given to me." Marisa continues, "Before we left she took us to meet her neighbor, her former brother-in-law. I was amazed by the power of forgiveness. This was one of the family members who took all of her dead husband's property. The gentleman spoke highly of Zibnob and said he promised to buy milk from her. [Nyamekye was pregnant at the time of this project visit.] He said she is like a mom to him. As I was walking away just thinking about what happened, I looked up and saw a ripe mango in a tree. Zibnob noticed me looking at the mango and came over and pulled it from the tree...She wanted me to have that mango as a thank you. I should have been thanking her for sharing her life with me and showing me what true forgiveness looks like."

The director of finance for her church, Grace Covenant Church of Cornelius, North Carolina, Marisa is involved in many mission-oriented projects. She has used knowledge gained from the study tour in her work with gardeners in South Africa and communities in Haiti. Marisa learned practical tips like using chicken manure for fertilization and other organic practices, especially important when those consuming the produce are people living with HIV or AIDS. She also became more aware culturally, sharing that as she designs new programs, she is "more conscience of telling the story of the people I met in the villages and creating programs that would help people in similar situations...in a way that honor[s] and respect[s] what they do."

From the study tour, Marisa says she learned that "change is slow and steady" and that "at whatever socioeconomic level you are, you have dreams for yourself and your kids...we are all the same...we just don't have the same resources available." Marisa goes on to say, "I believe when people see a sad image on television, they often turn the channel because they are uncomfortable. It is all right to feel uncomfortable. What is not all right is not to do something about it. The study tour has profoundly changed my life. I feel God telling me "now you have seen this - what are you going to do?" Now that I know their names, I cannot sit back and do nothing."

Toward the end of the study tour, the tour leader challenged participants to write a poem about their experiences in Senegal and Ghana. What follows is Marisa's poem.

One More Piece

The joy on faces
The uninhibited dancing
The opening of lives
The sharing and caring
One more piece
Lives changed overnight
Death and instant destitution
The power of forgiveness
The birth of hope and a future
One more piece
Cast aside by society
Viewed as useless
Determination and leadership to make a difference
One more piece
All the pieces fit together
All the pieces have names, they all matter
All these pieces fit together in God's master plan
I am always on a search for
One more piece

-Marisa Sellman, March 2010

