



The Peace Corps agreed to wait, as did the OU College of Law, so Trevor Tullius enrolled in the University of Ghana, the only Caucasian in his 350-student dorm.

*Photos provided.*

# Into Africa:

## Reaping the Rewards of Study Abroad

Others might question Trevor Tullius' choice  
as neither safe nor sensible—  
but he never felt endangered, and for him,  
going to Ghana made perfect sense.

BY KAREN DORRELL

**T**revor Tullius, OU Class of 2004, was a student any university would be proud to claim.

He was graduated summa cum laude with a degree in political science, after winning a number of awards, honors and scholarships, such as Outstanding Senior Man and the Carl Albert Award for the Outstanding Senior in the College of Arts and Sciences.

During his college career, he served as a leader in many organizations, notably as student body vice president, while volunteering to help people in need, from Liberian refugees to the homeless in Oklahoma City. The son of Jake and Mary Ann Tullius of Norman, he was an Eagle Scout and active in McFarlin Memorial United Methodist Church.

This was a young man who could have chosen any school in the United States or Europe for his post-graduate work and probably received instant acceptance. He chose the University of Ghana in a developing nation on the west coast of Africa, surrounded by other countries in the constant turmoil.

What would prompt him to forego the comforts of a posh dorm, not to mention air conditioning and hot water, for a year of study in Ghana?

The answer can be found in the two weeks of August 2003 that Tullius spent in Ghana as a United Methodist Church volunteer. There he worked in Buduburam, a camp for refugees from the Liberian civil war, which was located

about an hour and a half outside Accra, the capital of Ghana.

He was impressed by the work being done in Buduburam and by the desperate need of the refugees. He helped with an HIV-AIDS awareness campaign and other projects and became friends with some of the young adult Liberian refugees.

They told him the church was planning a year-end retreat focusing on leadership and urged him to return and bring friends. He

agreed, and thereby started a ripple of hope that is still spreading. Tullius returned for the retreat the following December, bringing with him OU colleagues Jared Buchan and Nathaniel Scott. Back on campus, Buchan's reports convinced fellow student Wendy Selman to undertake a similar mission, and Scott is or-

ganizing volunteers to return to the refugee camp in December 2005.

While in Ghana, Tullius began to consider pursuing his post-graduate studies there. He visited the campus in Accra and discovered he liked the area. Hedging his bets, he applied to the University of Ghana, the OU College of Law and the Peace Corps at the same time. All three accepted him.

Fortunately, the College of Law agreed to a delayed admission, and the Peace Corps thought a year in Ghana was a great idea for a future volunteer. So Tullius headed to Ghana again, this time as a candidate for a master's degree in international relations. *continued*



The sights of Africa hold a fascination for Tullius, and Ghana did not disappoint.



For church services every week, Tullius drove more than an hour from Accra to the Buduburam refugee camp where his earlier volunteerism first drew him to Ghana.

Tullius admits that life in Accra required adjustments on his part, but he says that is all they were—adjustments—made fairly quickly. He learned to view air conditioning as a rare luxury and discovered you do not really need hot water in the showers.

He learned to cope with the private bus system, listening as the drivers pulled up to intersections and shouted the name of the

next stop and mastering enough local language so that he would not be considered a greenhorn and charged an inflated fare.

He adapted to the food—lots of soup and rice, plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, very little meat—and managed to lose about 20 pounds. Since there were no stores, he became accustomed to buying items like toilet paper and toothpaste from street vendors through car or bus

windows while driving through town.

He also adjusted to living in a basically open-air dorm, with no windows that you could close, and to sleeping under a mosquito net. Other insects created their own challenges, including an infestation of particularly noisy crickets, a swarm of bees that chose his room to set up house-keeping, and a plague of enormous termites—“like silver dollars with wings”—called forth by recent rains.

He was the only Caucasian in his dorm of about 350 students and frequently the only one in towns that he visited, but, he says, “I never felt unsafe.” The people of Ghana were warm and welcoming, and the government there is a stable democracy. The country has strong historic ties to Great Britain and continues many of the British ways. The division is fairly sharp along economic class lines, with the very rich and the very poor.

This situation was brought home to Tullius as he was trying to set up his room when he first arrived. He needed to find



ABOVE: Living in an open-air dorm was challenging for the Norman-born Tullius. AT RIGHT: In war-torn Monrovia, Liberia, Tullius found the main traffic light blown upside down and without power but still topping a “Drive Safely” sign.





Tullius earned a master's degree at the University of Ghana, but even more valuable was the education outside the classroom that he packed into every moment abroad.

a used refrigerator and was at a loss as to where to look. One of his classmates casually loaned him her car and driver to take him around the town.

Email and cell phones helped him stay in touch with his family and with his Liberian friends at Buduburam, whose cultural and historical ties were with the United States. As a result, the Liberians and the Ghanaians were very different. The fact that the Liberians were refugees, confined to the camp and forbidden to get jobs, meant that his Ghanaian friends and classmates thought of them as aliens.

Tullius made the hour-plus drive to Buduburam every week for church services at the camp. "I always tried to take some of my Ghanaian friends with me to church on Sundays so they could get to know the Liberians as people, not just refugees," he says.

While in Ghana, Tullius squeezed in as many trips as he could to various parts of the country. During one journey to the Muslim far north, the bus broke down, stranding their group in a small village where the residents "hadn't seen someone like me in a long time, which means I instantly attracted a pack of kids and received a couple of marriage proposals."

He also spent a week in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, where a somewhat shaky peace is in effect, ending the civil war that erupted in 1990. Since that time, Tullius



Robert Taylor

When his Peace Corps commitment is fulfilled, Tullius plans a return to OU law.

notes, the entire country has been without water and power.

"Most people who can afford it use generators and wells," he reported in an email home after that visit. "The city is a typically war-torn place; bullet holes in buildings, burned-out homes, people squatting in former office buildings. But the people were very nice and the U.N. was everywhere. I always felt safe and even bumped into people I knew

who had returned home from Buduburam."

One of the photographs Tullius took during his visit to Monrovia says it all for him—the destruction of the infrastructure, the striving to regain normalcy. In the main intersection of downtown Monrovia, there is a traffic light. Of course, it does not work without power, and even if it did, the light fixture itself is a casualty of war, blown upside down by a bomb blast. But beneath the lights is a sign that pleads: "Drive Safely."

Liberia is preparing for general elections in October, "after which we will know if the peace will last," Tullius says. More of his friends from Buduburam are hoping to go home at that time and start rebuilding their country.


By then, Tullius should be back in Africa for three months of Peace Corps training in The Gambia, where he will spend the next two years as a volunteer. He will be assigned to the agro-forestry division, learning about and probably teaching sustainable agriculture. After that, it is back to OU for law school.

So what did he get for his year in Ghana?

"An education," he says succinctly.

And he does not mean just the classes that led to his master's degree.

"Every day was a new experience, new places, new people. In order to survive I had to learn a lot quickly about a new culture and its nuances, a new history, new languages. And I had to also teach myself more about my culture, about U.S. history. I learned more about myself—what's really important, and what I can do without.

"And I learned that people everywhere have more in common than you could imagine. The differences aren't that great or that important. The things that really matter—peace, education, health care, our children—are the same everywhere. We're more alike than we are different." 

*Karen Dorrell is a freelance writer, living in Moore, Oklahoma.*