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Mrs. Florence Mante's Amazing Grace School

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MRS. FLORENCE MANTE’S AMAZING GRACE SCHOOL

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
Daniel Keith Davis
B.A., University of Southern California, 2016
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Abstract

Mrs. Florence Mante's Amazing Grace School is the story of both Mama Florence and the children that she has dedicated her life to. Mrs. Florence Mante is the Ghanaian cofounder of the Amazing Grace Preparatory School. The West African school is committed to developing African leaders and ending the cycles of poverty in the village of Kodiekrom. My thesis focuses on using interview-driven artwork and collaborative storytelling to depict the unique challenges and triumphs of Mama Florence's life in Ghana. Digital illustrations, a narration from Mama Florence, and music take the viewer on her deeply compelling journey, raising awareness for her mission.

Introduction

Mrs. Florence Mante's Amazing Grace School seeks to reach out to a Western audience through one of the most powerful forces, a relationship. Having lived with Mama Florence and her family in Ghana for six months, I felt compelled to give her story a platform. The story is not only an invitation to the viewers to join her mission, but it serves to add increased specificity to the constantly evolving relationship between Africa and the West. Mrs. Florence Mante is a real woman, not an unreachable figure or nameless icon. *Mrs. Florence Mante's Amazing Grace School* is your official introduction. She is initiating a relationship with you in the same way that she reached out to the rural, Ghanaian village of Kodiekrom, when there was not a school in sight. In that village she powerfully painted a picture of a new community that was mobilized to impact the world. The community and partnerships that she has now successfully birthed are transcontinental. Likewise, the invitation for partnership in Ghana through education is still open today.

In the work, the voice of Mama Florence and her family remain as unedited as possible. This is especially true for her daughter Jennifer, who played a crucial role in translating her mother's words into poetry. This closeness allows the connection to Mama Florence to remain unsevered, while also bringing to life her transformative undertaking in Ghana. Her immediate family members were active participants in the story, visuals, and dialogue between Americans and Ghanaians throughout the entire production process.

My role as an artist was to absorb and build a new illustrated world from the details that were handed to me through interviews, interactions with her community, and photographs. My digital illustrations were informed by West and East African street paintings, as well as my personal character design background. *Mrs. Florence Mante's Amazing Grace School* is not a cultural dissection of her experiences or choices, but rather an account of her life that highlights specific details, events, and environments that she has found to be integral in shaping her life's work.

There are hundreds of humble Ghanaian children in Kodiekrom whose stories deserve an equal voice in the fight for education and economic opportunity. Yet Mama Florence continues to stand in the gap for them, working tirelessly to provide the tools that they need to end the cycles of poverty and become educated African leaders. Who she is speaks volumes about who they can become. All that is needed is a genuine introduction.

The project is a two and a half minute 2D animated film, accompanied by an installation that can be accessed online at <https://vimeo.com/708728710>. The film is composed of over twenty digital illustrations that tell the story of how Mama Florence and her husband started The Amazing Grace Preparatory School to help end poverty in Ghana. Mama Florence narrates the film. She tells her story, speaks of the school's success, and gives an open invitation to the viewers to join and support her in her mission to give in-need children in Ghana a better future through education. I drew each illustration digitally, and I directed Aneeq Ahmed Farooqi as he did some subtle animations on the artwork. I also worked with local Ghanaians to create the music for the film. The installation includes a continuum of these digital illustrations in a printed format. It provides additional context for the making of the film. Through text, photographs,

process work, and final imagery, my relationship between Mama Florence, the school, and my artwork are revealed. The overall goal is to invite viewers to the world that Mrs. Florence Mante is currently creating through visual storytelling.

Poem

The poem that guides viewers through the short film is the following:

My dear children, I see you.

I watched my father reach children with kindness.
Sometimes without speaking,
His actions would say, “my dear children, I see you.”

Then I became a teacher, determined to see my students thrive.
Even those who came to class with no food or no shoes,
I assured them that “me ne wo meanu”,
God really sees us.

My husband and I moved across the world.
We shared with our friends our dream to show the children of Ghana, “dear children, we see you!”

In the village of Kodiekrom, there was no school in sight.
Peasant farmers, and mothers with their wailing children tied to their backs
Were so focused on their needs of the day, they could not see their children’s’ future.

So, we built and we evangelized, of God’s Amazing Grace School,
Pushing to assure parents that, yes, poverty will end in their families, once their children step foot in a classroom.
Jollof rice, became our greatest tool that we used to showed them that indeed, “dear children, we see you!”

Starting with 4 children, now we have over 400.
Each student still coming from low-income homes,
Each student still enjoying hot meals every day,
Each student still knowing that, I really see them.

We have trained nurses, engineers, accountants, teachers,
And we are not done. We are just getting started.

My name is Mama Florence Mante.
Please come join me to proclaim loudly to all the children of Ghana who need our help:
“Our dear children, we see you.”

Backstory

Mrs. Florence Mante and her husband, Rt. Rev. Prof. Joseph Obiri Yeboah Mante also known as J.O.Y. Mante, are the cofounders of the Amazing Grace School. The Amazing Grace School is dedicated to building future leaders of Africa and ending cycles of poverty in Ghana. The two, conceived the idea for the school in the 1980's while Rt. Rev. Prof. J.O.Y. Mante was completing his doctoral studies in southern California. After partnering with their friends in California to create the Adom Partnership International to help support the various needs of The Amazing Grace School. The school was opened in a village near Kumasi in 1994. The Adom Partnership International partners was incorporated as a 501(c)3 organization and has sent various college student teams from Intervarsity Christian fellowship to help with the school's construction. Today, Rt. Rev. Prof. J.O.Y. Mante, currently serves as the 18th Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, which is equivalent to the chief executive officer. With her husband in a prominent role in ministry, the school has faithfully remained under Mama Florence's authority, and she continues to spearhead 90% of the leadership operations.

I initially met Mama Florence and Rt. Rev. Prof. J.O.Y. Mante in 2014. Many affectionately call the well-accomplished minister, Rt. Rev. Prof. J.O.Y. Mante, Osofo, meaning pastor in a Ghanaian dialect. I was studying animation and digital art at the University of Southern California, when I heard about the work that they were doing in Ghana through a college campus ministry called Intervarsity Christian Fellowship. The Mantes, along with their California-based partners, had invited college students to come to Ghana to help in the continued building and expansion of the school. After praying about the opportunity, I felt like it was more significant than any animation internship that I could pursue that summer.

When I landed in Ghana, I was shocked. The bursting joy and love the people had for one another, even in the face of hardship of poverty was unlike any country I had experienced prior. Upon meeting Mama Florence, her gentleness, humility, and powerful resolve, allowed me to see that she was selflessly devoted to meeting basic, yet vital needs, and transforming difficult circumstances every day. Upon arriving at the school, I quickly saw the deposits she was making into these children. Basic school materials like pencils, paper, markers, were so valuable to both the students and teachers when available, yet despite this reality, it was the unrelenting smiles and bold love for Jesus in the school from the toddlers to the elderly that allowed me to see the source of life and hope that I tangibly felt there.

"Sir Daniel!" Is what the children would called me as I walked past their room. "Will you come to our class today?" My answer is still, yes. Starting with one child sponsorship for a first-grade student named Samuel Obeng who wanted to become a pilot, I began to ask myself more often, "With what I have been given, what can I do?" I was miraculously sent back to Ghana for a six-month work trip, while employed by a US-based mobile app in 2017. In that period, Osofo and Mama Florence then invited me to live with them. Most recently, I returned in the summer of 2021 to begin working on this project.

Process

After catching up with Mama Florence in 2020 over the phone, I began to think more on the financial need of the school. At that time the school had unpainted, wooden two-person desks that seem to have been used since the school's opening in the 90's. The benches had been repaired numerous times, but they kept breaking and the school desperately needed funding for new one-person desks. The recent onset of COVID did not help the case for these old two-person benches. Yet, even greater I remembered students who simply could not afford their school fees, that Osofo and Mama Florence generously cover. I did not personally have the funds to provide the school with the amount of money needed. I was confronted with the fact that many people were not even aware of Mama Florence and her transformative school that is helping end cycles of poverty in Ghana. I spoke with her daughter, Jennifer, over Zoom, who was living in San Francisco at the time. Together we came up with an idea. We decided to share her mother's story.

After interviewing Mama Florence about her life and experiences, Jennifer wrote a poem encapsulating her mother's words. I then showed Mama Florence and Jennifer various styles of art from myself and various African street painters. By roughly combining stylistic elements from each source, we landed on a digital art style that everyone agreed to.

From there I used the poem about Mama Florence's life journey as a guide to create storyboards that accompanied the words. I then found myself preparing to head back to Ghana to reunite with Mama Florence and her family, and to continue the project. Once in Accra, I conducted a few more interviews with Mama Florence and her husband. Then I took a bus to Kumasi, near the Amazing Grace Preparatory School. Accompanied by Mama Florence's extremely helpful son, Andrew, I was able to visit the children at the school, as well as take reference photographs of the school, town, clothing, and cloth patterns, for the artwork. I also partnered with Phillip, the art teacher at school. He led the students in creating colored drawings that would be incorporated into the school's story.

A friend in Ghana, who I had known since 2014, connected me with a local music producer, David. Prior to our arrival, David recorded a live band to accompany the words to the poem. Mama Florence, Jennifer, and I then took a ride to his studio sometime after and recorded the poem narration for the film. The collaborative editing process of the soundtrack followed.

After our audio, reference photos, and student drawings were solidified, I then created the final artwork for each storyboard using adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. Each of the people incorporated were caricatured to hopefully match the youthful energy often found at the school. Photographs of African prints, and student drawings were also interwoven into the clothing and backgrounds of the artwork, to literally incorporate pieces of Ghana into the very real story.

Lastly, I sent my digital artwork files and animatic to Aneeq Ahmed Farooqi to begin directing him through the animation process. The goal was to have minimal animation to simply create a more cinematic pull in my illustrations. Having created a few test shots myself, I was able to send him direct notes, feedback, and even tutorials for the subtle movement of the camera

PROCESS

- HEARD MAMA FLORENCE'S CALL.
- TRAVELED TO GHANA.
- ENTERED RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PEOPLE.
- LISTENED TO MAMA FLORENCE'S STORY.
- STORYBOARDED HER STORY.
- OBTAINED REFERENCE FROM HER WORLD.
- RECORDED HER, THE STORYTELLER.
- FINALIZED THE ILLUSTRATED VIDEO.
- SHARED HER STORY WITH YOU!

2014-2017-2021
"TO END CYCLES OF POVERTY AND RAISE FUTURE LEADERS IN AFRICA"

MY NEW FAN

CALIFORNIA 1980's

HOLLYWOOD

LOCAL GHANAIAN MUSICIAN

ADOM PARTNERSHIP

TO GIVE OR LEARN MORE ABOUT MAMA FLORENCE'S WORK:

WWW.ADOMPARTNERSHIP.ORG

SCAN ME

6

Interviews

Mrs. Florence Mante was born on January 30th in Bantama, a suburb of Kumasi in Ghana. Her parents separated when she was young. Mrs. Mante was the daughter of a very successful timber merchant who owned several farms, and he was also an international exporter. Mrs. Mante's mother was a merchant of African cloth and linen materials. Her mother operated from a small shop, in which Mama Florence helped to sell the materials as she was growing up. When asked if African cloth was a part of who she is, Mama Florence's answer was a confident, "Oh yes!" When she further elaborated on the importance of African prints in her story she said, "Even with the school that we are running, the (uniform) materials are also African prints that we use for the students. It is for them to also feel that they are not Americans, and that they are not foreigners. That everyone will know, that yes, this is Ghana."

The morning I started the interview, Mama Florence sat across from me at her kitchen table. She was wearing vibrant blue, green, and yellow African print clothing. It was the afternoon of June 14th, 2021, and it was warm outside. The ceiling fan livened the humid Ghana air. She had carved out time from her schedule just to meet with me, and I was excited to speak with her.

DANIEL: So, was your mother educated?

MRS. MANTE: My mom was not educated, but she made sure that all of her children went to school. Her mom had seven children, six boys, and she was the only girl. In those days the people protected the girls. They didn't want them to go to school. They just wanted them to marry and have children. I'm sure that my mom got married to my father when she was about seventeen or so. That's when she started having children. So, she didn't get a chance to go to school. They didn't put her in school at all. But she loved education! And she made sure all her children got educated. She had nine children with my dad! We have two gynecologists, one midwife, two teachers, one engineer, another nurse, and then one housewife. And she made sure that all of us, everybody, got educated! She said that even if she had to sell her clothes for us to be educated, she would do it. So, you could see how dear education was to her. Because she loved to see people well dressed, and well behaved. You know? And she thought that it was good for the country, and also for her family. So, she made sure that we all went through that. And so, she'd wake up early in the morning for devotion. Early in the morning! Morning devotion before you get up, to go and do whatever chores you have to do. She was very strict, and very principled, and we loved her.

DANIEL: Do you think education changed the trajectory of your father?

MRS. MANTE: My father? Yes. Yes. When I grew up, and I met him he was also traveling outside the country. And he even bought a cargo, a plane. He was sending food and other items from Ghana to the UK. The airline was called Germany Air. He did this with some of his friends for a while. And then when he realized that maybe they were cheating him in the finances, he left. But he continued to make sure that all his children so far as you go to school, he will support you. My dad had 24 children.

DANIEL: Wow! But he financially supported them through school?

MRS. MANTE: Yes, financially my dad supported everyone who wanted to go to school. There are a few of my siblings who skipped out. But most of us went to school. Education was really, really on his heart. And was proud to see his children succeed. You become a doctor, you become a teacher, you have a whole profession you know? And he was proud of that.

DANIEL: So how has your dad influenced your desire to help others?

MRS. MANTE: My dad had so much compassion for individuals. When I was growing up especially in the Christmas season, he would call me and make a list of most of the old people that he knew who were at home. He would write their names, and then write an amount of money that I would have to go and give to each of them. He did this until he died. He supported people. He said that some people might be home, and they don't have money to buy their drugs (medicine), or food to eat, or some clothes to wear. At times he would visit them in their homes, and he had so much pity. So, he would send them money. And when he sends us, his children, it is enough to push you to know that you have to care for someone else. And we all did. My brothers and my sisters, even after his death, have made a fund where we are supporting other children within the family. And even if we get some people outside the family too, we sponsor their children's education. And it's because of what he did.

That has been implanted in us too. So, when you see there is someone in need, you don't just walk by like you haven't seen it. Do that little that you can to make the person also comfortable. And that is what has brought us where we are at the moment, to be able to help children to get educated. Because he said that with education one becomes so enlightened. And when you are enlightened, you will have the desire to also work hard, and to make sure that you make it, and be able to help other people. Because if you don't make it, how can you help other people?

One evening in her home, Mama Florence began to tell me the story of how her dad came across a boy who as not only homeless, living on the streets of Ghana, but who was also crippled. She detailed how her father was so moved with compassion that he decided immediately to help him. The boy eventually made it to the Kumasi, cultural center. In the Ashanti region of Ghana, it is among the country's most famous tourist sites, filled with the workshops of the top craftsmen in Ghana. Captivated by the heart of her father in his very raw encounter, with Mama Florence's permission, I began to record our conversation.

MRS. MANTE: My dad decided to sponsor this boy's schooling, and he sent him to school. He sent him to where he could polish his craft, and his craftiness.

DANIEL: What did he do?

MRS. MANTE: Carving, wooden. And also, he used clay to build. He does a good job! At the cultural center in Kumasi, is where he was.

DANIEL: Oh, he works there?!

MRS. MANTE: Yes! He was there. I don't know whether he has moved. But he was still there when I last saw him.

DANIEL: Oh wow! So, he was a boy when your dad came across him?

MRS. MANTE: Oh, he was just a boy. My dad, he gave him a room in his house to stay. And then he did his work at the cultural center. He built statues, and carvings for people to come and buy.

DANIEL: That's amazing! How old do you think he was?

MRS. MANTE: At that time? I think in his teens, maybe fifteen or sixteen. But right now, he's old.

DANIEL: Was he in your school?

MRS. MANTE: He was not in my school. It was like a craft school. So, we had to get him a wheelchair, you know? Because he couldn't walk. So, my dad took care of all that!

DANIEL: So, when you imagine the first image with your dad, what do you see?

MRS. MANTE: Kindness! Welcoming people.

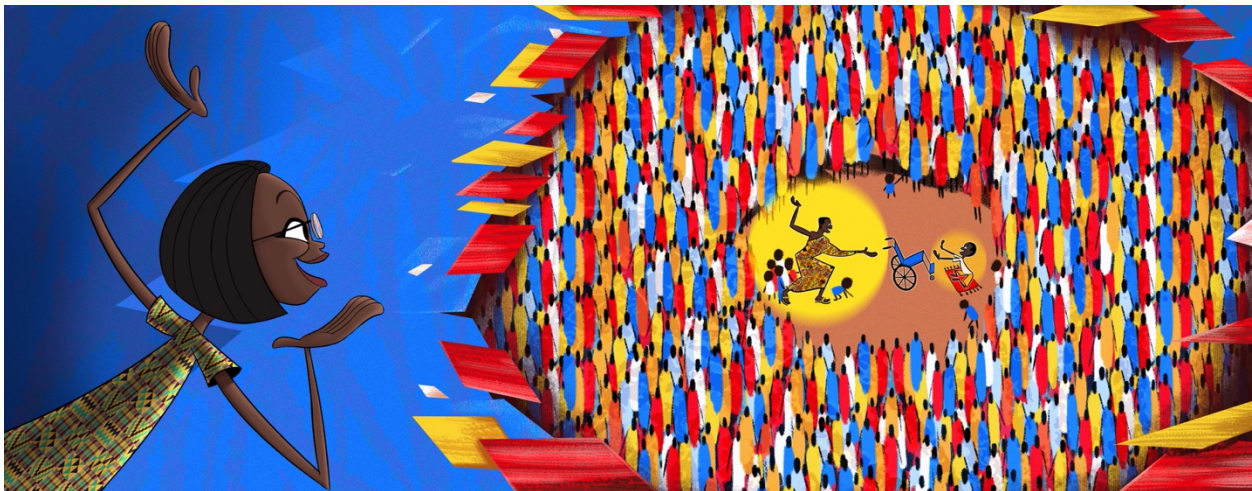


Figure 2. *"I watched my father reach children with kindness."*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital



Figure 3. *"Sometimes, without speaking, his actions would say, 'My dear children, I see you.'"*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital

Through Mama Florence's words it is very evident that her father passed the torch of compassion down to her. Often a desire to help and give love from her father translated to a deep desire to provide education to those he held dear. These pictures illustrate that inheritance of love through education that Mama Florence received. This love in action was felt by the mass patterned array of people, and especially children, that her father was burdened for.

DANIEL: When did you grow a heart for helping children?

MRS. MANTE: I had the desire to help children in the 80s, 1986 or 7, when I was teaching in Kumasi. There were some children who really needed help. And at that time, I could afford it. So, I pulled some children over and tried to help them. There were times when they would come to school, they had not eaten, and they didn't have books to study, or even money to buy a few things that they needed. They simply didn't have it. So, I had compassion on them and provided some of their needs. That was when I was teaching. I think that was a junior high class.

DANIEL: Was there a specific moment in your life you realized you like children?

MRS. MANTE: Yes, I've always liked children. I was very young. When I was in my early 20s, before I was teaching in Kumasi, that was when I started truly caring. And I started by preaching to them, showing them pictures of Jesus Christ, and telling the story. I was teaching them songs, praying with them and all that. That's when the whole thing started, in a small village called Mampong.



Figure 4. *“Then I became a teacher, determined to see my students thrive. Even those who came to class with no food or no shoes, I assured them that “me ne wo meanu”, God really sees us.”*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital

Around the time that Mama Florence was employed as a teacher for junior high students in Kumasi, her husband received a scholarship and traveled to the California to pursue his masters and doctoral studies at Claremont college. Mama Florence stayed in Ghana for a short while, before joining him in California as he continued his studies. The same afternoon from their home in Accra, I had the wonderful opportunity of interviewing Rt. Rev. Prof. J.O.Y. Mante separately. When recounting the joint conception of the school he said the following:

RT. REV. PROF. J.O.Y. MANTE: We didn't have anything. We wanted to raise money to come back and live in Ghana to continue God's work, and to start the Amazing Grace School. Mama Florence and I actually concluded The Amazing Grace School. Let me let me say that part. And this was during the late 80s, 1980s. That was when there was a famine in Ethiopia. And this was shown on television throughout the US. This was when these special artists and singers did the album, “We Are the World”. Because it was about Africa, I always asked myself every morning, “What can I do?”. And Mama Florence and I talked through it, and we decided that we cannot help everybody, but we cannot choose not to help anybody. So that became part of our motto. It'll be disastrous not to help anybody, although we cannot help everybody.

So, we decided that we will pick some people, particularly because Mama Florence was a teacher. We thought through it. “Ok, we will have a school. And in the school, we will have a certain number of students whom we will feed and teach to get them educated, so that they will grow and change their communities.” And the difficult part as you said, was, how to raise money to start it. I knew in my heart that I really meant it. Mama Florence really meant it. It was something that we were going to do. But how do we get friends around us to believe us? That was a tough one. There were some people with whom we were in a Bible study group with. We share the idea with them, and some supported and some did not even believe it. But we are glad for those who supported. I am grateful for the one or two of them that really trusted us, even more than we trusted ourselves! And they supported throughout. Even when they didn't have much, they still would give a little amount of dollars a month. And by God's grace, when we came to Ghana, with the little that we had gathered, we decided that we would start.

And when we came to Ghana, we have laws here in Ghana to operate. And if you're going to establish a non-governmental organization, you've got to register it properly. And in registering it, we registered it as the Adom ("Grace" in Twi) Foundation. Because before we came, we had also talked in California, about similar things. And because our friends in California raised money to support the Adom Foundation in Ghana, we agreed that they will register the partnering organization in California as the Adom Partnership International.

DANIEL: Okay. So, it's kind of separate, but they work together.

RT. REV. PROF. J.O.Y. MANTE: Right. The Adom Partnership International's job is to one, pray for the Adom Foundation in Ghana. Two, to support in every way possible, the Adom Foundation Ghana. And three, to keep good fellowship with Adom Foundation Ghana and the people of Ghana. And that is why we receive Intersivity (Christian Fellowship) students. Not directly from Intersivity, but through the Adom Partnership International.

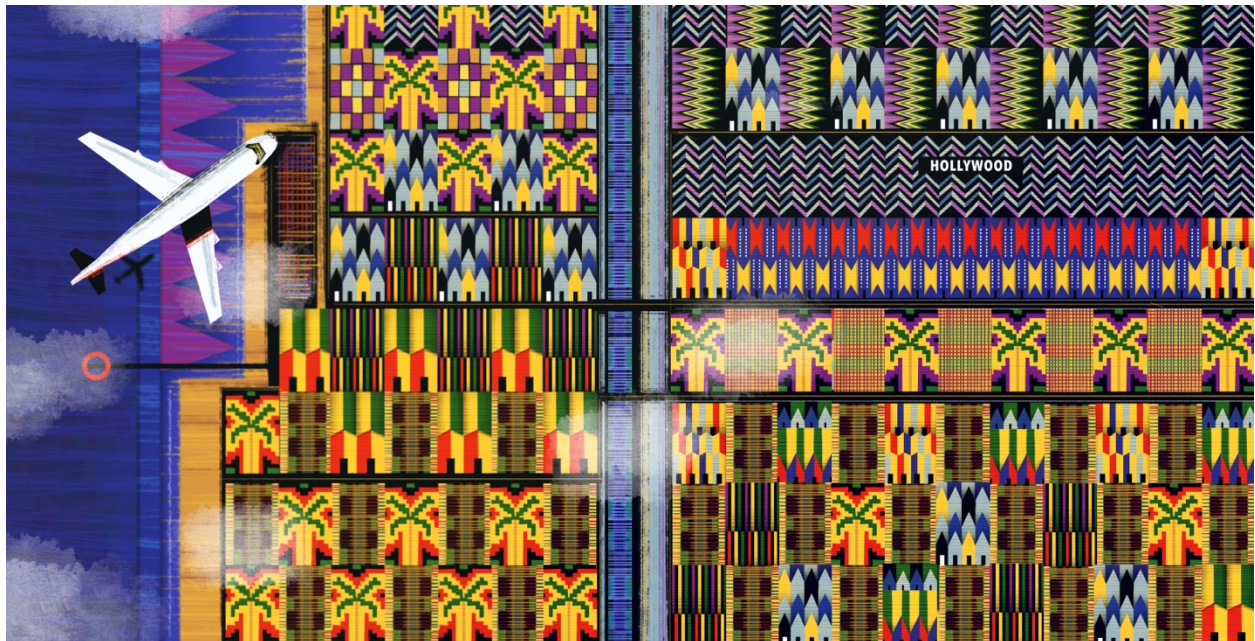


Figure 5. *"My husband and I moved across the world."*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital



Figure 6. *“We shared with our friends our dream to show the children of Ghana, “dear children, we see you!”*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital

This image shows the excitement and confidence of the few that confidently supported the vision of Mama Florence and Osofo, showing the early formation of the Adom Partnership International. It was through Intersarsity Christian Fellowship at USC that I was able to first get connected with this partnership and go to Ghana as a student in 2014.

Jennifer Mante, Mama Florence’s daughter joined us for a portion of the interviews as well.

DANIEL: When you started the school, what was the greatest challenge?

MRS. MANTE: When we got to Kumasi from the US, we had made plans to construct a school building. We started in early November, and we're able to get four children to start. And it was difficult because we were not getting the students to come in. The parents were not bringing their children. So, we had to go from house to house to convince them of the necessity of keeping their children in school. And gradually, some of them were able to buy our ideas and drop their children in the school while they leave for the farm. Because most of them passed through the school compound to go to their farms with their children. Some people thought that we were just coming to do a one-day-wonder, and that we would not sustain what we were going to do. They thought we were just going to trick them. So, they were not going to bring their kids to us. But when they realized that we really meant business, then they decided to bring their children to us to train them.

JENNIFER MANTE: Trying to bring a completely brand-new idea saying, “Bring your kids! This thing is going to be for their benefit.” That’s a huge deal! They had the funding from the money they brought with them from California, so they had the money to start.

But to change the mindset of adults is hard! Even hearing that to me sounds like such a big task. To convince people that one, this thing is new. Two, it's good for your family and your child. But you don't even see the benefits of it right now. You only see the benefits of education twenty years later. And to convince them that this thing we are doing is going to benefit you in the long run itself, is yeah. That's super hard.

DANIEL: So, if a child didn't go to Amazing Grace school, what would be their like normal life trajectory?

MRS. MANTE: They would just be roaming about the village. Not doing much. Or at times, they will follow their parents to the farm. Instead of leaving them alone in the house, they'd rather take them along.

JENNIFER MANTE: Just to add on to that, so like mommy is saying they would probably go as a baby, because, yes, just stay with your mom, that's the normal thing to do. And so, they grow with it. Every day they'd go to the farm. Eventually, maybe if they're I don't know, like six years old they can start picking something. It just becomes part of their everyday life because that's what they're used to. For one, when they start going to the farm regularly, and they don't have any interaction with other people, or they don't go to school, they miss out on education in general. They may not ever learn how to speak English, for instance. So, you see, a huge language gap that we have is because people don't get educated early. They may not they may never learn how to speak English, they may never learn how to do math. I mean, they can count in their language, but they never learn how to do proper calculation. They may never get the education that could help them go far. And so, the trajectory will end up like this. He didn't go to school. He's growing now. He's sixteen years old. Some of his age mates did go to school, and are now going to high school. He can't go to high school. So, he ends up becoming a trotro ("local bus") helper. That's the trajectory. Or he may end up becoming a street child, walking up and down the streets roaming about doing nothing. Those end up usually being the options. Or they have to start selling something on the roadside. Because now they have to find food to support themselves and their family. When that happens, now you're twenty years old. You don't have any education, and you don't have any skills. You're stuck.

And then for the rest of your life you might end up just going back to the farming. And when we say the farming, it's not even the farming that is commercial farming. This is small scale farming that you are doing just for your family. It's not like farming that is going to benefit your village. It's a small piece of land for you and your family...

MRS. MANTE: ... to feed on.

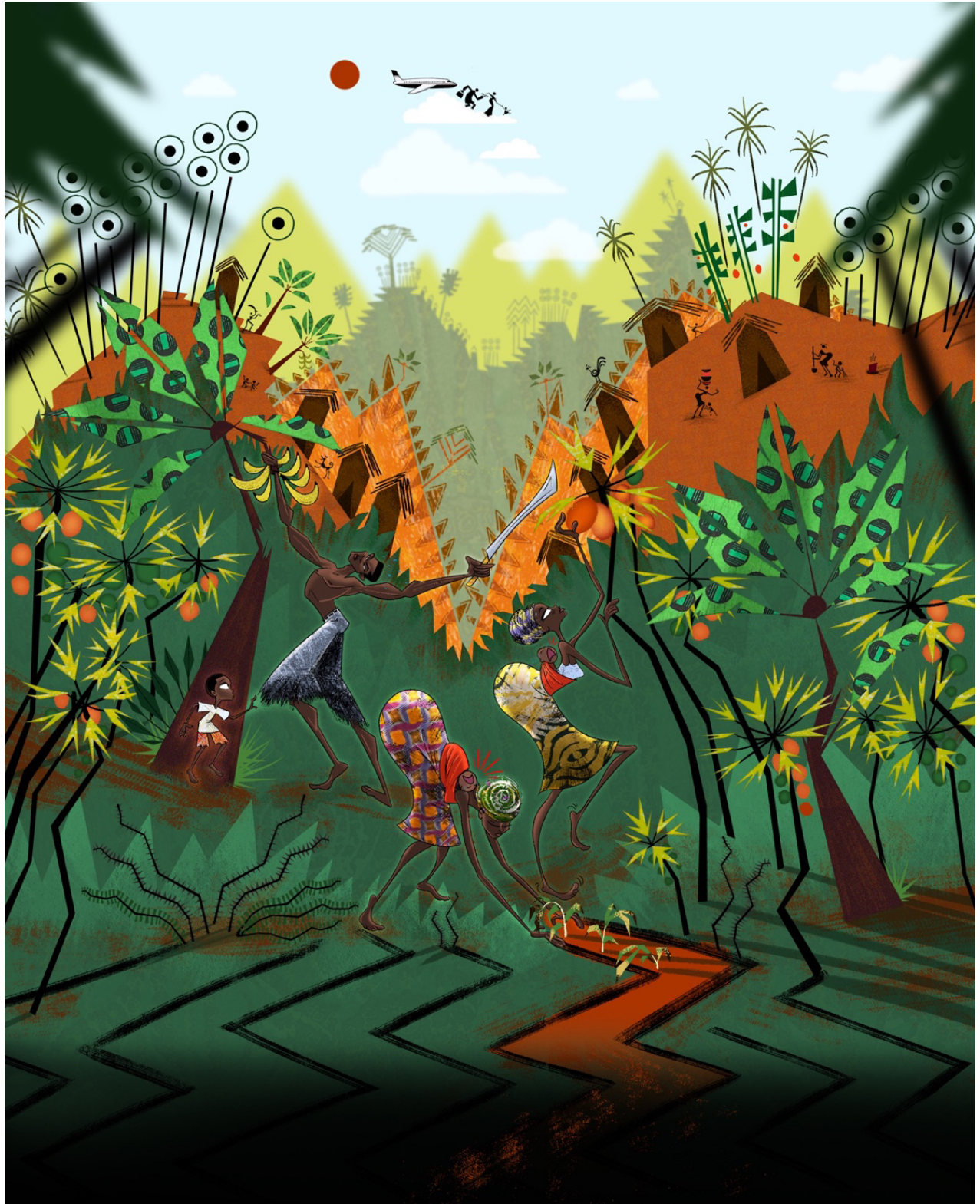


Figure 7. *“In the village of Kodiekrom, there was no school in sight. Peasant farmers, and mothers with their wailing children tied to their backs were so focused on their needs of the day, they could not see their children’s future.”*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital

DANIEL: Why are hot meals so important for the students?

MRS. MANTE: When we started most of the students didn't have hot meals at home. Some of them would just follow their parents to the farm. And when they get there, then they would prepare something for them to eat. But when they come to school, at least, they're able to get the education, and also get a meal to eat. Getting the meal meant so much to these children. You could see the happiness on their faces when they are eating. And when the parents came to pick them up, you could see that they were satisfied with how their children are being trained, you know? And the joy on their faces! And some of them, they don't even want to wash their hands. They want their parents to smell that. You know? The aroma! They want them also to feel it. And it has been amazing.

But these days things have changed because most of the parents are able to give their children food. Some of them are able to give them a little money to buy some snacks or something that they want around. At first, they hardly got money to buy things. Things are changing bit by bit. And we are praying that more parents will be so much more concerned about their children and work harder to support them. Because these days, when the children come to school, and we give them meals, they are happy. They are all always happy to have lunch in school. A hot meal means so much to all these children! They look forward to it! And I will continue to encourage everyone who wants to support Amazing Grace, that meals mean so much to the children. They make them healthier than buying food from outside. Because we're able to give them food that is nutritious, and food that will make them healthy, and prevent so many sicknesses and diseases for them, rather than buying food from outside.



Figure 8. *"Pushing to assure parents that, yes, poverty will end in their families, once their children step foot in a classroom. Jollof rice became our greatest tool, to show them that indeed, 'dear children, we see you!'", Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital*

This shot captures the transformative period in the lives of families during the initial opening of the Amazing Grace Preparatory School in Kodiekrom in the 90's. I wanted to show the visual transition from a lower income village home to the economic hope and assurance that Mama Florence recounted in her newly built school through quality education and aromatic food. Free meals were extremely important to the early success of the school, in an environment where nutritious meals were sometimes scarce as Mama Florence described. Skeptical parents could more easily see the benefits of the meals and good childcare, rather than the newly introduced, and foreign promises of education. While a rice-based dish may seem commonplace, jollof rice is a famous specialty and often includes meat. Mama Florence's daughter, Jennifer, likened the significance of the meal to Christmas dinner for low-income children in the U.S. In this way Mama Florence's school provided tangible light and growth for the entire community.

DANIEL: So now the financial need for the parents is more for them to provide a good education for their children. That's the main area, would you say?

MRS. MANTE: Yes. Some of them, some of them still are not able to afford to take them (the children) through; through; through. And that is a concern for us. Because we want to see our children be able to go to senior high. And be able to go to a tertiary institution so they can have a better future. So, if they make us aware that they need help, then we think of helping such students to be able to move on.

DANIEL: What's one thing that you want to see drawn in your story? Is there anything specific?

MRS. MANTE: Hmmm. I think the joy of the students in the school.

DANIEL: Okay, yeah! That's what stands out to me a lot.

MRS. MANTE: Yea. That at least they are happy that they are there. They know that through that school, they can also have a better life too. To be able to go there, and then come out to help improve the lives of their communities and their families.



Figure 9. *"Each student still knowing that, I really see them!"*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital

As the school develops, nutritious meals, and access to school clothing continue to be a challenge in the lives of some low-income students in the village of Kodiekrom and surrounding areas. However, due to slow, yet celebrated development of the village, it is now providing a sustained education that is the primary concern for most families, rather than the former challenges. Through the donations of both the Mantes and foreigners through Adom Partnership International, Mama Florence is able to provide additional assistance to families who would withdraw otherwise. This picture illustrates how Mama Florence's international support and investment in the lives of the students has increased over time. Her work not only meets their basic needs of access to nutritious food, but it also funds the student's schooling. These efforts allow the students to graduate and move on to higher education with no additional strain to their parent's resources.

DANIEL: What would you like those in the West to know that may either be interested or skeptical about supporting your school or sponsoring a child?

MRS. MANTE: How should I put it? I don't want it to sound like we are begging. And that's my concern, that we are not begging. We want people to freely want desire to support children, to improve upon their education. It's not because they don't have food to eat. It's not because they don't have clothes wear. It is because they want the continuous life. Do you understand what I am saying?

DANIEL: Yes. It's more like you want them to feel invested, rather feeling like they are 'saving' per say? Is that what you mean?

MRS. MANTE: I want to say that we want people to know that children, in general in the school, when they are supported a bit, it will help them to be able to have a better life. Some of them it's true. Their parents are struggling. Some of them have four or five children in the school. And when we see that, we try to give scholarships to maybe two or three of such students. This is so the family will be able to continue to keep the children in the school. Otherwise, some of them will withdraw them. If they are able, and they know that they can have financial support, then, they will stay.

But I do not want it to sound like we are going to beg people to come to Africa, where the children are so poor, or they don't have clothes to wear, they don't have food to eat. It shouldn't sound so down. You know? That's why I say, I don't know exactly how to put it.

DANIEL: So, at what point did your faith in Jesus become part of your mission for your school?

MRS. MANTE: It has always been. Because even when I was teaching, and that's what I was saying that the children used to give me a nickname. "Me ne wo meanu" (in the language, Twi), meaning, "the two of us need Jesus". So, I always preached Jesus. And I wanted my students to also understand who Jesus is. And through that, as I introduce them to Jesus, I also tell them of the need to continue to be educated so that they will also be able to have a better life. For Jesus gives us life. And that made me continue to teach these little children about the love of God, and what Jesus Christ means to all of us.

DANIEL: Why did you personally decide to follow Jesus?

MRS. MANTE: I followed Jesus because I realized no one on this earth could save me. And I was so scared. Because when we were going to Sunday school. They were teaching us and showing us pictures of hell! All the sorts of evil things that go on there, and I didn't want to go there.

So, when I head off the message of Jesus Christ, saying, "I'm knocking at your house door. And if you open it, I'll come in and dine with you. And that I'm going to prepare a place for you. And that when I go, I'll come back and take you there." I decided, I will

follow this man! And go to where is! And that would be a good place for me, then to go to hell and suffer being in this fire forever. Let us all follow Jesus and live a life that is worth living. That is all we need. Everybody needs Jesus.

DANIEL: And so, how has your faith been tested in starting and maintaining the school?

MRS. MANTE: Leaving my family to go to the school to take care of other children was a big challenge. Because were times, Jennifer and Lydia (her daughters), I would just leave them if I am working. I would leave them, and I would go to Kumasi almost every other week. I used to go to Kumasi very often, you know? To take care of the school. And it was hard. It was hard on the children and on myself. Because of the transportation, I didn't have my own car. So, I had to take public transport. By God's grace, I really thank God that I never had any accidents on that (dirt) road. And God has been so faithful to us, protecting us in diverse ways. And though when I travel at times, I'm scared. I don't know why, but at times I become scared on the road. But always God takes us through. And I'm really grateful to Him, that when I'm gone, He still takes care of my family. There were times that we would come up short on our finances. We would have to cough up money to support the school.

DANIEL: Your personal money?

MRS. MANTE: Yes. Our personal money, Osofo and I. We'd have to bring some money to support the ministry. And we've been doing it with joy because by God's grace that is not like we have become so poor. But because of the ministry that we are in as a Presbyterian minister and the wife, by God's grace we're able to do the work. And God is also blessing us in that ministry. So, we thank God that were able to support where the need comes.



Figure 10. *Mama Florence and Osofo sitting in the middle of students and faculty at the Amazing Grace School (1990's)*

DANIEL: I do think there is something interesting about how the West sometimes portrays Africans. A lot of times when people who want to fundraise, and maybe the means are good, they want to raise money, they still have like, very degrading almost images. How do you feel about that?

MRS. MANTE: It bothers me. It bothers me because it's like, as if we are not humans. You know? And the way they portray us, it makes us feel so bad. But when you come and you live among us, you realize it is not so. So, I don't want anyone to think our students are living on trees. Because they're all coming from homes. Maybe parents are not able to provide for them, like they would have been provided for if they were in the Western world. Things are different here. They take one day at the time, most people. You know? And such people also need a little support, if possible. And that is what we are asking people. Don't look at what is happening. But try and see if you can help improve some make someone's life better by supporting them financially. Because the little that you are able to provide the little ones, little by little, it'll help improve their surroundings. It will help improve the education. It will help them improve their lives and themselves. And that's how I feel about this question.

DANIEL: I agree with you. Yeah, I think you had a lot of good things to say. So, what does a successful African leader look like to you?

MRS. MANTE: A successful African leader is someone who has been able to go through the ladder and go up. From the gradual situation, you know? He did not one day become rich. But rather, he has been able to climb a little at a time and has been able to make it. Whether through education or through entrepreneurship, people are able to do that. And we're talking about an African leader.

DANIEL: So, it's one of the missions for the school to help end the cycles of poverty and raise future leaders of Africa.

MRS. MANTE: Yes. It is someone who has actually worked very hard. Not cheating people to be up there. But rather seeing that the person has actually worked harder to make ends meet. And if the person fears God, that will be a plus. Because when you fear God, and you have so much love for God, and then you also have love for the individual. And you'll be able to do what is expected of you, and not look down on people as you are going up. Because the people that you are going up from, if you are not being careful and you look down, when you fall, they will be there. Down there, waiting for you.

So, you should tend and take good care of the people that you are leaving behind. If you can work hard to pull others up with you, all the better for you someday. So, we keep on encouraging people to work harder, work harder. Don't be lazy! Work hard to make ends meet, and also to be able to extend your generosity to other people. There are some leaders who are really wicked. They don't care about anybody inside. You should have the fear of God in you to be able to be a good leader. For that will make you care if you have God in you. Unless you, with your Christian Bible, you don't care for anybody.

DANIEL: That is possible.

MRS. MANTE: Hey!



Figure 11. *“We have trained nurses, engineers, accountants, teachers”*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital

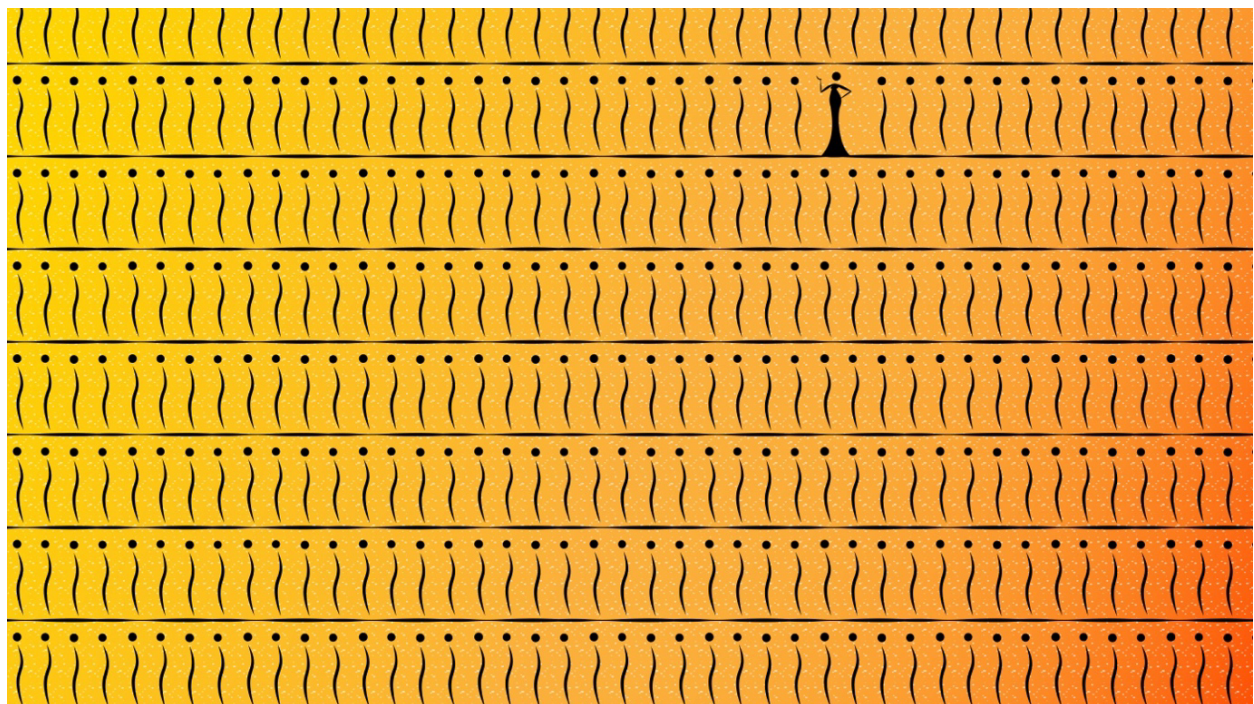


Figure 12. *“And we are not done. We are just getting started.”*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital

Through the organized alignment of successful Amazing Grace graduates in various professions, I wanted to emphasize the sheer effectiveness of Mama Florence’s mission. The patterns give a sense of beauty and order. In a village where education was once foreign; it took nothing short of a strategic, well-ordered plan to create economic success in a town that was once only populated by peasant farmers. Behind the individuals is a bright yellow adinkra

symbol. “Adinkra are symbols with historical and philosophical significance originally printed on cloth which royals wore to important ceremonies. Having originated from the Gyaman people of Ghana and la Côte d’Ivoire, the symbols have assumed global importance and are now found in logos, clothes, furniture, sculpture, earthenware pots, and many others”.¹ The symbol pictured is extremely popular and it is called Gye Nyame, meaning, Except God. It signals, “the necessity of God’s intervention in a difficult situation which transcends the ability of man to resolve.”² I liken it to the saying, “but God or only God.” As Mama Florence would note, it is only by God’s grace that such work could be accomplished through a woman and her husband which continues to develop the future of Ghana and build its leaders even to this day.

MRS. MANTE: We pray that all our Amazing Grace students will do well.

DANIEL: Yes.

MRS. MANTE: Those who are finished, will do well. And those who are still in school. I pray that God will lift them up someday to be good leaders for our country. And I know it will happen.



Figure 13. “My name is Mama Florence Mante.”, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital

¹ Adinkra Symbols & Meanings. Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, 2020. <https://www.adinkrasymbols.org/>.

² “Gye Nyame,” Adinkra Symbols & Meanings (Adinkra Symbols & Meanings, September 14, 2020), <https://www.adinkrasymbols.org/symbols/gye-nyame/>.



Figure 14. *"Please come join me to proclaim loudly to all the children of Ghana who need our help:"*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital



Figure 15. *"Our dear children, we see you!"*, Daniel Keith Davis, 2022, Digital

Mama Florence is still extending the invitation to everyone to support her work at the Amazing Grace School. Ghana is in not only in her prayers, but her actions every day.

Context

One main source of inspiration for this project was a short film called “Kashi’s Story”, created by the International Justice Mission to help raise support to end sex trafficking³. “International Justice Mission is a global organization that protects people in poverty from violence.”⁴ The video was narrated by a survivor of sex trafficking who told the story of how she was rescued and empowered by IJM. Adam Joe was the lead film director at IJM at the time, and a former student at the University of Southern California. We met at InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the campus ministry I was involved in during my undergraduate years. After seeing the film, “Kashi’s Story”, I called him to hear more about his work, and to see what guidance he had to offer in my upcoming projects.

Throughout our talk, I was deeply moved by the care and agency that he provided the survivors that were central to his film work. “You have a voice, I’m just here to amplify,” is what he would tell those who have experienced violence in impoverished countries. He empowered them by saying, “Think of me like a megaphone which I am holding to your mouth.” In this way, he was able to amplify countless experiences with words, and descriptions that came from the storytellers themselves. He used his artistic skills to magnify voices that needed to be heard. Adam helped deploy powerful call to action that has given IJM much success in their fight; often allowing them to partner with global governments. While IJM is not specifically a Christian organization, Adam Joe’s approach allowed him to create media that outflowed from his personal faith.

While my project does not directly address survivors of violence like IJM, I felt that incorporating Joe’s “megaphone” approach to filmmaking was crucial. It would lay the groundwork for a sound approach to both the narration and visual aspects of this project. Firstly, on a visual level as an illustrator, I wanted to be careful not to create images that would exploit the individuals experiencing hardship, but rather give a platform for those whose story is being highlighted. I think it is important to emphasize that showing photographs of hardship, or suffering can sometimes be counter-productive to the issues being highlighted. For that reason, I prefer to address it broadly.

Like most Americans, I am familiar with images of hardship and suffering coming from various countries in Africa by way of Western based NGO’s or news outlets requesting aid. Whether the images depict hardship due to war, famine, or other circumstances, there has often been a lack of dignity or agency afforded to the individuals pictured, especially Africans. However, in his interview, Rt. Rev. Prof. J.O.Y. Mante mentioned that the positive art created in response to the famine in Ethiopia in the 80’s, particularly the song, “We are the World” by U.S.A for Africa, was a large inspiration for his founding of the Amazing Grace School. Likewise, I wanted to create artwork that had a positive lens for those in need in Ghana. I decided to illustrating the characters, as opposed to using photographs to depict the

³ “Kashi’s Story - Youtube,” accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrETX7fm0O8>.

⁴ “About International Justice Mission: Combatting Trafficking & Slavery,” IJM USA (IJM), accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.ijm.org/about-ijm>.

circumstances described in Mama Florence's stories. I felt this would be the most effective approach. This decision lessened the risk of exposing real individuals or depicting a particular person in an inhumane way. While stylized characters can easily perpetuate stereotypes, my intention was to only incorporate drawings that were either approved by the family, or Mama Florence herself. This corporative approach avoided the perpetuation of any potentially negative images. It also provided a more insightful depiction of the experience.

Through sharing a vetted representation of this story; I also wanted to promote the tremendous value of partnership with Africa, specifically Ghana. Rt. Rev. Prof. J.O.Y. Mante, revealed to me, that partnership is so much more than financial assistance. It is partnering with the locals, fostering fellowship, and building strong relationships to those communities, allowing money to flow from those intimate bonds. In *Social Suffering*, the author addresses how suffering and hardship is represented to the West. "Suffering is presented as if it is free of local people and local worlds."⁵ Often mainstream images asking for aid in Africa are framed in such a way to exclude any community involvement. We are left assuming that there are no national policies or local initiatives at work to address the issues. What I found extremely powerful about the school that Mama Florence and her husband founded, is it shows that she and other Ghanaians are working with their communities, as well as internationally. They are not passive participants in a commonplace Western narrative. In fact, they are agents of change. And those agents include the current students and alumni of the Amazing Grace School. These successful individuals birthing change are people that any foreigner has the opportunity to join, not only from the outside but from within.

The moment I stepped foot on the grounds of the Amazing Grace School, I knew, the story it held was not a story of suffering, but also one of joy and triumph. Ghana is a country filled with joy. Hardship is not what defines it! This understanding is extremely integral in my personal viewpoint. It is evident that Mama Florence's school acts as an amplifier of this joy. While NGOs like UNICEF have had much financial success in raising funds, it is unfortunately commonplace that African people with exposure to Western nations can describe imagery and campaign strategies as "offensive or shameful."⁶ I consider Mama Florence, and her family, my family. And in that consideration, the "so down" linear narrative that she described was not only something that she did not depict in her experiences, but that perspective was something that I did not see. Mama Florence and Jennifer did a fantastic job in the poem writing and documentation of her experiences. So much so, that it was made clear that the hardships described in the poem, in her early days of teaching, did not go unseen, or unmet by Mama Florence. As not only the children's school teacher, but as an educated, exemplary woman, she made it her mission to meet the needs of others when they arose. In this way, it is clear even without Western involvement, God continues to work on a local level to bring hope and joy to those in need. And it is the "the joy of the students" attending Amazing Grace School, that she shares in her story.

⁵ Kleinman Arthur, *Social Suffering*, 1st ed., 1997, 7.

⁶ Maja Dolinar and Sitar Polona, "The Use of Stereotypical Images of Africa in Fundraising Campaigns," *European Scientific Journal* 9, no. 11 (2013), 27.

Creating this project, I realized that this may simply be one more narrative that reaches the West concerning Africa, but I do believe that it is not in vain. The more stories we are exposed to the better. Not only that, but the more comprehensive the story, the more capable we can become of effectively loving and partner with our international neighbors. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian novelist, has led conversations on African representation in her TED Talk titled, “The Danger of a Single Story.” Adichie says, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”⁷ It is for this reason, that I wanted to incorporate as much of Mama Florence’s story as possible within the time restraints inherent in both in the film and the interviews. Even including details directly outside of the school, like her father’s tremendous heart, seemed pertinent towards providing viewers with a multi-dimensional view. I personally have learned so much from having multiple stories depicted for me by Mama Florence. I am so much more enlightened about how to have better relationships with others from different economic, ethnic, and social backgrounds. The overall experience has provided me with an excellent first-hand example of what it means to use relationships as a means to helping others in need.

While thinking about stories coming from Ghana, I believe Dr. Moyo, the Zimbabwean Director at the Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment, has an amazing perspective on storytelling concerning African people in conversation of development. In his profession, Dr. Moyo heads the arena of philanthropy, continental development, and governance. He said, “you cannot have somebody else tell your story and expect it to be your narrative, so we need to have Africans telling their own stories.”⁸ He talks about the need for Africans to tell their own stories in the “grassroots level, academia, practitioner level,” and beyond.⁸

I do agree with Dr. Moyo, and while collaborating with the Mantes on this project was tremendous a pleasure, I hope that someday I can personally have the funds to support the wonderful students and alumni of the Amazing Grace School in telling their own stories through compelling artwork and media. This way their work can provides much more context, accurate imagery, and emotional depth that I could ever attempt to gather. Until then, I aim to be faithful in doing my part in meeting artistic needs when they arise with resources at my disposal. I consider it as my responsibility to amplify stories that may not otherwise be heard.

Conclusion

In the larger story, it is evident that the powerful work of Jesus Christ, has been central to the work that Mama Florence does, as well as the hope that she has for each child’s future. The success of the school was built on the fervent prayers of countless individuals. As she said in her interview, her children literally called her, “Me ne wo meanu” by name, meaning, “the two of us

⁷ “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story - Youtube,” accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>

⁸ Footnote: “Changing the African Narrative: News, Resources & Opportunities from ZGF,” Marketing, Automation & Email Platform (Zambian Governance Foundation for Civil Society) accessed May 1, 2022, mailchi.mp/zgf/changing-the-african-narrativenews-resources-opportunities-from-zgf?e=9fec86b343.

need Jesus.” Even the children were determined that having conquered death, there is no hardship in Ghana that is too powerful for Jesus to overcome in their lives. I am a first-hand witness that the joy and victory that is in the hearts and lives of these students is not due to the world around them, but comes from their sobering faith in Jesus, and His ability to tangibly impact their future through the school. As Mama Florence confidently said in her interview, “I pray that God will lift them up someday to be good leaders for our country--I know it will happen!”

As Osofo once remarked to me, Mama Florence is the woman who has been consistently doing the hard work to make the Amazing Grace school what it is today. My project by no means is meant to be a definitive encapsulation of Mama Florence life, but simply an introduction to her as a real person. She is changing children’s futures through education daily, and continuously bringing others along with her. Her invitation remains open to all who hear and consider, “What can I do?”

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Vita

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