

# ECONOMICALLY EMPOWERING GHANIAN COMMUNITIES THROUGH PATCHWORK QUILTING

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*This narrative is to inform social workers, students, and other professional helpers how an appreciation of creativity and an understanding of the African tradition of Ubuntu can aid in the empowerment of people and their communities—especially young women—in emerging countries. It is a narrative that “stitches” together the development and implementation of a cross-Atlantic, intergenerational, income-generating quilting project between older African American and younger Ghanaian women from my social work perspective as an organizer and storyteller.*

**Ubuntu** – n. (oo-BOON-too) an ancient African word, meaning “humanity to others.”

## Introduction

I have been a clinical social worker for over three decades. Throughout my professional career, I have been an activist for the rights of the abused, the disenfranchised, and the socially and economically deprived; in particular, women and children. As an avid quilter, I always look for opportunities to enrich the lives of vulnerable populations by teaching them the art of quilting as a means of becoming empowered and self-sufficient. Most recently, I have done this by facilitating the sale of quilts in the U.S. and Ghana. I am a firm believer that nothing happens by chance: that God divinely connects people and orchestrates situations for the betterment of society. I believe that unpredictable situations or experiences can lead to new and different patterns of creativity. Thus, this narrative is an account of how The Celestial Heritage Quilting Project, an income-generating venture, came into physical manifestation through the providence of God.

The foundation for this project was laid by my eldest son, Christopher Lake, MSW. Chris made his first trip to Ghana while in high school, and went to Ghana a second time in 1995 as a senior at The University of Pennsylvania through Temple University's

Study Abroad program at the University of Ghana. During this trip, Chris met Mr. Kwabena Osei Bonsu, a native Ghanaian who was actively involved in making the sanitation conditions better for the people of Madina, a town in metropolitan Accra. Chris contributed some financial support to help move the effort forward, and the two men became friends. Before returning home, Chris formed an import/export enterprise with Mr. Bonsu, a relationship which they have maintained to this day.

Upon my son's return to the U.S., I became acquainted with Mr. Bonsu via phone and email. I was impressed by the excellent quality and workmanship of the products he sent over, particularly the garments made from beautiful batik fabrics. I pondered the potential marketability of a business venture--maintaining an import/export business of African products, especially clothing, that would help young women acquire income as a result of their sales.

## Quilting and Business Experience

I believed that I could pull off this cross-Atlantic project with the help of God, and my training as a quilter and entrepreneur. I have been blessed to not only be a social worker but the founder and CEO of Celestial Enterprises Unlimited, Inc., a 501 (c) (3) not-for-profit organization in the U.S. was dedicated to helping educate and empower

disenfranchised and economically disadvantaged young women. In fact, out of my passion for quilting, I established and operated The Calico Giraffe, a small in-home quilting business that was successful during the 1970s and 1980s. I have always had an affinity for African textiles, and have incorporated batik textiles into many of the quilts and wall hangings that I've sold. My social work background and sensitivity toward humanity was expressed in some of my work. I designed personalized baby and children's quilts, as well as the "Comfort Quilts" that were intended to provide comfort for those suffering from loss and grief. These quilts and wall hangings were embellished with scriptures, sentiments, and phrases of comfort. I never imagined that God would "stitch together" my gift of quilting with my social work and business management skills, but this unique skill set enabled me to make a difference in many lives.

#### **Getting the Project Off the Ground**

I met Mr. Bonsu in 1999 during my first visit to Ghana. I remember how excited I was to finally stand on the soil of my ancestral home. As I looked into the faces of the people, I recall thinking that they looked familiar, like the faces of my family members and friends at home in the U.S. It was an unforgettable experience. Throughout all the challenges that visit solidified my belief that maintaining the import/export exchange was well worth it. Mr. Bonsu and I shared a common commitment to train and empower young women to become more productive economically to improve their standards of living. Because of this, we came together and pondered how we could use our gifts to be a blessing to the disenfranchised in his community. After time spent in discussion and prayer, we decided to create a Non-Government Organization (NGO). That July, we completed the necessary paperwork to legally form and incorporate The Celestial Needy Children's Program (CNCP) in Ghana.

#### **The Role of Young Ghanaian Women**

The initial entrepreneurial enterprise of CNCP was The Celestial Stitches Heritage

Quilting Project. It was established to teach the art of patchwork quilting to young women, thus aiding their social and economic development. Ten young women were recruited and trained, and made up the core group of seamstress working for CNCP for more than four years. To be a part of the quilting initiative they had to live in Madina and be between 16 and 21 years old.

The specific nuts and bolts of this entrepreneurial operation are relatively simple. I emailed designs for clothing to Mr. Bonsu, and locally trained seamstresses assembled the beautiful garments. As for the quilts, batik fabric pieces (remnants, often discarded) were stitched together by an intergenerational group of Ghanaian seamstresses into beautiful patchwork-quilt tops. The quilt tops were then shipped here to the U.S. to be sewn into finished quilts by volunteer quilters (including myself). After the products were sold, the proceeds were sent to Mr. Bonsu via money wire transfers. He then distributed the earnings to the women. We could not do this without him!

#### **Intergenerational Connection – The Role of Older African American Women**

I proposed to the Board of Celestial Enterprises Unlimited, Inc., the notion of collaborating with the Celestial Needy Children's Program (CNCP) in Ghana. I wanted to help move the quilting project forward by helping them to raise the needed funds to support the program and to aid with marketing. The Board unanimously voted to partner with CNCP, believing that the partnership would be a good entrepreneurial enterprise to help young women and the local community. I was elected to oversee our involvement with CNCP.

The Board agreed that Mr. Bonsu would arrange to have the patchwork batik quilt tops sent to me in the U.S. The quilts were completed with the assistance of experienced elderly African American female quilters (between 60 and 80 years old) who participated in a quilting class I instructed in Savannah, Georgia, where I resided.

Once finished, the quilts were marketed by Celestial Enterprises Unlimited, Inc.,

through church-sponsored events, conferences, festivals, and word-of-mouth. The funds from the sales were collected by Celestial Enterprises Unlimited, Inc. and wired to The Celestial Needy Children's Program in care of Mr. Bonsu, the CEO. During the time of our engagement, I have insisted on maintaining quality control so that funds are not misspent. Fortunately for all involved—especially my U.S. seamstress and investors—Mr. Bonsu has proven himself to be honest and responsible as a businessman based on his professional dealings with our import/export business. He, in turn, distributes the funds to the workers; submitting records regularly to validate how and to whom the monies have been allocated. Through The Celestial Heritage Quilting Project, the lives of retired senior African American were joined together with young women from Ghana to form an international partnership, bringing lives together cross-generationally, geographically, culturally, and economically.

The elder quilters from the U.S. maintained internet communications with the young women, which allowed them to share stories, quilting ideas, and pictures. The women established caring relationships with each other during the time they worked and interacted with one another. Eventually, the quilters from Savannah yearned to go to Africa and meet their younger counterparts face-to-face, and began discussing the possibility of sojourning to Ghana with me the next time I went.

#### **Older Mentors and Young Mentees**

I planned my second trip to Ghana in 2001 as a member of the Enyimnyam Study Development Project. The project, which has been operational since 1996, is co-directed and guided by Dr. Na'im Akbar, and my cousin, Dr. Wade Nobles. Dr. Nobles, a tenured professor at San Francisco State University and the Executive Director of the Institute for Advanced Study of Black Family Life & Culture, is a prominent theoretical scientist in the fields of African Psychology, cross-cultural and ethno-human functioning. The project's concept comes from the Akan (Ghanaian ethnic group) belief that every person is endowed with a "gift of splendor" from God.

According to Dr. Nobles, this gift of splendor is called "enyimnyam" and is translated as the "radiance of the face." It is believed to serve as a blueprint of one's soul's capacity for success. Participants of the Enyimnyam Study Development Project are encouraged to find and use their gifts from God, and to help others by sharing their gifts in some form of skill, talent, or ability to fulfill their purpose in life. When I shared this information with the volunteers in my quilting group, they thought it would be the perfect opportunity for them to go to Ghana and share their wisdom with their younger counterparts. So arrangements were made for them to accompany me as participants of the Enyimnyam Study Development Project.

These elderly African American women—all natives of Savannah—had never thought in their wildest dreams that they would ever have the opportunity to travel to the "motherland." They were filled with enthusiasm as they applied for their passports, planned and received the necessary shots, and made payments toward the cost of the two week trip. A woman who was in her 70s shared, "I always thought about going to Africa, but I never, ever believed that one day I would really be planning to go." She went on to say with a chuckle, "Just goes to show you that 'nothing is impossible with God'."

In July 2001, six women from the quilting group accompanied me to Ghana. Plans were made for them to meet with Mr. Bonsu and the young women who made the patchwork batik quilt tops. While there, the women would exchange quilting ideas and techniques. It would be a life-changing experience for the African American and African women to meet face-to-face and have the opportunity to get to know and learn from each other.

When the women arrived in Ghana, they were amazed at how modernized Accra was. They were also pleased to finally meet Mr. Bonsu and to have him take us to the town of Madina. Oh, how we laughed and held our breaths as he drove us over roads that seemed totally impassable. Yet, somehow he maneuvered around the huge potholes and narrow red-clay pathways and got us safely to our destination! When we got to the African-

style gazebo where the young women were busily cutting and stitching together beautiful fabric squares into patchwork quilt tops, we were all amazed that they were able to produce such beautiful pieces in what seemed to be a primitive outdoor environment.

After exchanging cordialities, Ms. Brown—a woman in her 70s and our most experienced quilter—quickly pulled out her fabric, measuring tape, and scissors and began teaching the young women how to make a “pillow quilt.” The young women were very interested, paid close attention, and freely shared ideas and asked questions. Then they, in turn, made a “pillow quilt” effortlessly and with precision. Ms. Brown was amazed that they learned how to make them so quickly. She remarked, “You young women sure are good!” This global quilting initiative was a wonderful conduit for uniting the two groups of women of different ages and from different cultures together to share their collective wisdom and resources with each other. A good seamstress/tailor in Ghana (and there are many) can make a western or traditional outfit perfectly simply by looking at a photo of the item; no pattern needed.

The young women were overjoyed that the elder women were impressed with their workmanship, and in turn praised them for their sewing skills. The radiant smiles that spread across the faces of the young women signaled their appreciation of the compliments they received. This encounter served as a mechanism to help elevate the young women’s sense of worth and increased their self-esteem.

One young woman participant in the project pulled me aside during this visit and commented, “I never thought that these little pieces of fabric could ever be turned into such beautiful bed coverings that would be sold and help us earn money.” She gave me a hug and said, “Thank you, Ms. Childs, for all you do.” This young woman’s comments reinforced the idea that it often takes social workers and other helping professionals with vision to work with marginalized populations, teaching them how to turn their natural resources into marketable assets.

The older women had a variety of experiences and adjustments. For example,

one asked to use the bathroom. One of the girls led her to a door, opened it, and bid her to go in. She came out and quietly whispered to us, “There was no toilet, only a hole in the dirt floor.” This situation reminded me of how important it is for social workers and other helping professionals to be aware, flexible, and sensitive of cultural differences when traveling internationally so that the people that they are interacting with will not be offended by their reactions to unfamiliar situations.

Eugenia Morris, an 80-year-old quilter, shared one afternoon, “I never thought that I would ever be blessed to come to Africa, and not at my age. This has been the most exciting experience of my life! I have really enjoyed meeting Mr. Bonsu and him taking us to Madina to meet and share quilting techniques with the young women there.”

All in all, the trip was a once-in-a-lifetime helping opportunity for the Savannah women and me. I had the opportunity of developing and implementing an international, intergenerational, and cross-cultural quilting initiative from the ground floor. I believe that as a result of our project and opportunity, young women without skills or jobs can care for themselves and their families (parents, siblings, etc). Most likely those vulnerable young women felt discarded in their communities; much like the remnant batik textile fragments. Hopefully they no longer have such feelings since gaining a purpose for life and a marketable skill. The benefits of this venture are far reaching. In addition to providing support to these young women, other monies earned from this business enterprise are used to pay for school uniforms and supplies for the community’s needy children.

As time has gone by, The Celestial Heritage Quilting Project has flourished, and the quilts are in demand by tourists and U.S. patrons. The young women became so adept with the quilting process that they began designing and making the quilts entirely under the keen and creative eyes of Mr. Bonsu and Ellen, a young Ghanaian woman who began with the project at the age of sixteen. Through her participation in The Celestial Heritage Quilting Project, Ellen is now an experienced seamstress who is proficient in teaching other

young women the necessary sewing and quilting skills. Ellen remained with the project for four years, completed her education, improved her living conditions, married, and started a similar business of her own in another Ghanaian community, and continues to maintain contact with Mr. Bonsu.

The quilting enterprise advanced to include quilted patchwork bags and other quilted products, which were enthusiastically received in the U.S. for their beauty, workmanship, and uniqueness. The sales from these products were used to not only help empower the workers economically, but also helped to provide educational supplies, fees, uniforms and to meet other needs of disadvantaged youth and their families through The Celestial Needy Children's Program.

The Celestial Heritage Quilting Project has continued to prosper on a micro level under the auspices of The Celestial Needy Children's Program. In 2006, the program's vision expanded to include the Medicinal Plantation Project, in collaboration with Government Plantations, which distributes seedlings for planting. The aim is to raise medicinal and other seedling plants to combat malaria and help the reforestation effort. In 2007, out of concern for environmental waste, the Keep Ghana Clean Project, aka the Accra Trashy Bags Project (Plastic Waste Bags Initiative), started with the aim of clearing the environment of plastic waste (especially pure-water sachets) and recycling them into purses, toiletry bags, tote bags, and handbags. This creates employment and educates people on environmental sanitation and degradation.

In 2008, The Celestial Needy Children's Program turned its focus to the prevention of malaria with its Kick Malaria Out of Africa initiative, whose mission is to drastically reduce the incidence of malaria in the rural and urban areas of Ghana and other countries in Africa in collaboration with local and international organizations. This initiative utilizes funds acquired from the sales of African batik quilted products from The Celestial Heritage Quilt Project to help purchase and distribute treated mosquito bed-netting and repellents to African communities and to move the malaria

prevention project forward through literacy programs.

### **Lessons Learned**

In conclusion, through my involvement with The Celestial Heritage Quilting Project, I have learned not to take any of my skills or life experiences for granted, and to remain open to unexpected possibilities that lead to helping others. I have also come to realize that the role of a social worker to help others obtain a better quality of life does not have to be so narrowly defined as clinical practitioner, community organizer, or researcher, but that it can be all-encompassing in the role of generalist (use of all knowledge, resources, and skills) practitioner. Additionally, incorporating one's God-given talents or passions into the role of social worker can be a tremendous benefit in working with diverse populations, facilitating their empowerment and improved quality of life. Finally, I have learned as a social worker in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to think "outside the box," and to enlarge the borders of my practice through collaborating with groups and organizations nationally and internationally to improve the lives of disadvantaged people and empower communities.

In this changing global world, social workers can play a major role in collaborating and working with other people, communities and societies. The philosophy of "ubuntu" emphasizes team work and collaboration, and enables the social worker to use their interests, gifts, skills, knowledge, creativity, and most of all spiritual nature to undertake leadership in uncertain times.

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