

A Summer Trip to Ghana Inspires a Global Health-care Mission

Date : May 9, 2018

In July 2017, Malcolm Asher traveled to Cape Coast Teaching Hospital in Southern Ghana, Africa. Passionate about global health issues and determined to evaluate the international potential for ArtPass International, an art therapy organization that he had started only months before at Doernbecher Children's Hospital in his hometown of Portland, Oregon, Asher needed to immerse himself in Ghana's health-care culture. More specifically, he wanted to understand how African children experienced the hospital.

"Their hospital experience is very different than our western hospital experience," notes Asher, now 17 and a junior at Cleveland High School in Southeast Portland, Oregon. "More than 5 million kids there die every year from preventable diseases like Malaria and Pneumonia, and part of that is because conditions in hospitals are so poor. All money and donations go toward medical treatment. The emotional well being of these kids is completely ignored. Hospitals don't have the resources to focus on that. This is really bad for the kids' quality of life because some of these hospitals are 105 or 110 degrees. Some kids don't have beds to sleep on because 20 kids are in a ward meant for 10. And even though Malaria could be easily cured in a weekend with a simple pill, kids are not seeking out medical treatment because they fear the hospital experience."

For Asher, seeing was believing. He quickly realized while in Africa for a month that ArtPass, a nonprofit that he launched in 2016 as a way for U.S. children to create and share art to ease their anxiety in the hospital, needed to expand internationally.

"I spent a lot of time observing inside the hospital for my first two weeks in Ghana," says Asher. "I remember this one girl in the pediatric ward who was about 12 years old. She was going through a really hard time. She was paralyzed from the waist down. Sometimes kids who have no relief from their illness will just walk in circles around their rooms, and she couldn't even do that. She had been there for weeks. Her face was so sad, and I saw her crying a couple times. I had brought art supplies with me for about 150 kids. I handed some to her and her entire face lit up for the first time since I had been there. For the next two weeks that I was there, she was completely engaged in drawing. Her whole mood had been lifted, even though she was stuck in her bed and her parents couldn't be with her. That is the essence of what I want so many kids to be able to experience."

The ArtPass model, which was initially to build a network of national, teen-led chapters in hospitals around the country, has expanded through advocacy and distribution into providing art supplies to hospitals internationally. Asher connects with global health organizations that provide essential medical supplies to hospitals to ask if they will simultaneously distribute his art supplies. Since his time at Cape Coast Teaching Hospital, Asher has developed partnerships with 10 hospitals, primarily in Ghana, Nigeria and Tanzania. ArtPass International has registered a total of 29 chapters on four continents.

Experts in business expansion suggest that Asher has followed essential strategies for taking a business global – expanding his vision and working with global connections to understand and evaluate the market before jumping in. "We have seen small businesses do well overseas when they have connected with local manufacturers or distributors they can trust," write Karl Stark and Bill Stewart, founders of Avondale and contributors to *Inc.* magazine. "Where there is a clear opportunity and well-designed strategy, we have seen many small businesses create significant value in their global operations."

As the organization's founder and executive director, Asher has also devoted lots of time and energy to taking ArtPass international. In doing so, he has learned some valuable insights about identifying and penetrating global markets.

- **Build Relationships.** “My biggest advice would be to reach out to other existing organizations by email or Instant Messenger,” urges Asher. “It’s intimidating reaching out to someone and saying, ‘I’m a high school student from America and I have an idea.’ But people are so willing to help out. They really want to make the world a better place. We’ve received so much support from preexisting organizations and hospitals in local communities, simply by sending a quick email and saying, ‘I’m Malcolm and this is my project. I want to help.’ There are so many adults, doctors, nurses, high school students, volunteer organization leaders that have embraced us. They have come together and worked with us toward solutions that work for their communities. Those connections have been so important.”
- **Social Media Strong.** “I’m shocked with how many kids globally are on Facebook,” says Asher. “When I was in Ghana, we did school presentations every day talking to kids about things like not washing your hands in the river because of Cholera –basic global health. After each presentation, I would have a line of kids saying what’s your Facebook? Can I message you on Facebook? Some kids from the most remote areas of the world are contacting us on Facebook. That’s been shocking to me. You wouldn’t expect for somebody from rural Nigeria to reach out and say, ‘I found your organization; how can I help.’ But it’s happened.
- **Speak Up, Whatever the Language.** “Africa has a large English-speaking presence. Even so, the language barrier can be difficult,” notes Asher. “But it’s not too difficult to overcome since there are so many resources out there these days. Google Translate and local translator apps have been very helpful.”
- **Don’t Fear the Unknown.** “A lot of people are intimidated by things that seem so far away,” observes Asher. “I’ve grown up hearing stories of my grandma going to Namibia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania — the villages she visited and the people she met. She has her own organization, and she has a passion I find remarkable. I heard stories of her travels and experiences. When this opportunity to explore our global potential presented itself, I really embraced it. I saw this as a life-changing experience.”

Asher is focused on extending ArtPass International’s reach, marketing largely through social media to South America and across Africa. He receives global ambassador applications from around the world, often from other high school students who want to get involved with the ArtPass global mission to make art supplies available to hospitals across developing nations. A part of the organization also still works on domestic programs in the U.S.

“We’re using art supplies to change how kids perceive and experience the hospital to really diminish that stigma around hospitalization,” says Asher, who plans to pursue a career in pediatric medicine and global health. “Our goal is also to educate and encourage more kids to seek out medical attention and to improve the overall quality of life in hospitals. Once kids have a brighter hospital experience, we can slowly work toward a world where kids are not as afraid to seek out medical attention and more willing to get the care that they need. We want them to see that the hospital is not a scary place.”