

## "I AM SOMETHING"

*A shea butter conundrum unlocks a story of Peace Corps success*

by Maria Karlya

There is a shea butter mystery, and I am going to solve it. A small pink building with several rusting shea butter-producing machines has been locked up for years. Meanwhile, shea butter continues to be whipped by hand under trees (an incredibly long process) before it can be cooked with or made into soap. The Red Cross women I work with have been asking me to get this old factory running since I arrived. Honestly, I don't even know where to begin. I am nearing the end of my service, and I still don't understand why after all the involvement from the local government, all the training, and all the shea nuts donated from Africa2000, this pint-sized factory remains unused. Finally, I decide to contact Adisa at Africa 2000, an NGO that for decades has been empowering people, especially women, to be self-sustainable. Their prior involvement with the factory and my village might cast some light on the situation.

I walk into the office, and am greeted with a smile a mile wide. The creases in Adisa's eyes prove that she smiles like this often. *Do you remember another volunteer named Michael?* I ask her as I shake her hand. *He is the one who gave me your number.* "No, I'm sorry, I don't. I meet a lot of people." Her smile is still there. She speaks slowly, but with purpose. She is wearing a traditional dress and head wrap, and typing on a new laptop. Her English is perfect. "Maria, I have sons and daughters from all over the world. Hundreds of sons and daughters," she tells me. "Hundreds." I was hoping she would extend an invite to be my mother also; she looked like the kind of woman who would fatten me up and give me great guy advice.

"Where are you from in the States?" *Queens, New York.* "I've been to Queens," she says dreamily. "Usually they have us stay in these fancy hotels in Manhattan, but I had a daughter whose parents insisted I

stay with them in Queens one year." *Do you travel to the US often?* "Not anymore. I'm near retiring, I don't have the energy for it anymore. But I used to go about three times a year. They send me all over the world." I can't help but be impressed with this Northern Ghana native, who managed to overcome every obstacle under the sun in order to be an educated woman in Ghana. In a culture where girls are only educated long enough to increase their bride price, Adisa has landed a career that has brought her all over the world, collecting sons and daughters along the way.

I explained the tricky case to her, and it turns out she was aware of our shea nut problems. "Your community has more shea trees than any village I know," she says, shaking her head. "Maria, here is the problem. Making shea butter is a social event for these women. All day, they are in the house serving their men and children. They can't discuss their problems, because the men will hear. They have no privacy. But when they are under the trees making shea butter, the men won't mind them. That's when they can talk. They give advice to their daughters; they share ideas and discuss all their troubles. They cherish that time. Those machines are incredibly loud, and only a few can use them at a time. The process ceases to be social. You can keep bringing in more machines. They will never use them. They won't tell you why and you will think they just don't care. But they are smart, they know." Of course, that makes perfect sense. I would have never realized that on my own.

Case closed.

Adisa won't let me leave until she feeds me lunch. She leaves the spoon next to her laptop, and eats the greasy rice and beans with her fingers. "Americans are very special to my heart,"



Maria Karlya

The author and local students.



The author and members of the local Red Cross chapter.

she tells me. I nod, not knowing where she is going with this.

“I have had a few Peace Corps teachers in training school.” Really?

“Yes, in the 60s.” These had to have been some of the first Peace Corps Volunteers, ever.

“Ms. Amos. She was my literature teacher. She had us translate Shakespeare. She loved me. And Ms. Humpherson, she was a geography teacher. None of our teachers took us seriously in the North. Can you imagine, when I was in teachers training college, I had never seen a map! I told Ms. Humpherson this, and she took an interest in me. She taught me everything she knew about geography, and now I’ve been to many of those places.”

“If it weren’t for Ms. Amos,” she continued, “I wouldn’t have fallen in love with languages. That’s what I was for years, a language teacher. They both told me I could be something. And

now look at me. I am something. I have been trying to reach them for years. Even if they have passed on, a family member at least. They need to know I made something of myself, because they told me I could.” She gave me that eye-creased smile again. I thanked her once more for lunch and for the advice on the shea butter group.

As I traveled home, all I could think was, there is no American or city-bred Ghanaian that could have given me the insight that Adisa has. Her knowledge and experience is a gift to not only girls and women throughout the northern region of Ghana, whom she has served her whole life, but to Volunteers like me with whom she has worked throughout her career. In her opinion, this can be traced back directly to Ms. Humpherson and Ms. Amos, a couple of Peace Corps Volunteers who taught her English and Geography, and told her if she worked at it, she could really be something.

I have had some rough days in Ghana. I could tell you a number of times I was ready to pack up my bags and head home, to the land of sushi, espressos and reliable electricity. I know Ms. Amos and Ms. Humpherson had those days. I know they looked at the students before them, many of whom had never seen a map in their lives, or had even heard of Shakespeare, and thought “What am I doing here? This is such a lost cause President Kennedy! You don’t even know!” They may have no idea the woman Adisa is, because of them, the number of lives she has touched, in her own corner of the globe and all over the world.

Ms. Humpherson and Ms. Amos, I have a message for you from Adisa: Thank you.

*Maria Karlya is a health sector Peace Corps Volunteer currently serving in Ghana.*