

Inspirational Teacher Denney Daetz **A Story by Jonathan Matas**

I wasn't a great student. Teachers imposing their will on me was . . . inconvenient. But then there was this social studies class. Who knew it would change the trajectory of my life? Yes, Social Studies. Frankly I didn't care, but a few weeks into it the teacher extended an invitation that, at age 14, I couldn't ignore.

Before teaching at Saratoga High School, Denney Daetz was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana, West Africa. Now he was inviting twelve students to join him on the adventure of a lifetime. Some teachers take students to Europe for whirlwind tours staying in *hotels* and visiting *museums*. Denney was taking us to actually *live* with African *families* in *villages*! So on June 14, 1976 we boarded a 727 and began a 3-month journey that ruined me for the ordinary.

Twelve students were paired up to live in African homes, rotating every 3 weeks between villages in the mountains, the bush, and the coast. We lived in compounds experiencing daily village life, visiting schools, religious events, funerals, concerts, and festivals. We often came home with pinch marks on our arms from "Obebini" (Africans) who had never seen "Obruni" (white people) before. We visited landmarks and villages that exemplified Ghanaian life, not just re-creations built for tourists. I remember one village built entirely from bamboo on stilts in the middle of a lake. Today I still have the drum I bought there. We attended the annual crocodile festival and fetish priests guided us into the bush to observe their religious rites. We met Osofo Dodsi, a local celebrity we'd seen with our village children on the one black and white TV used by everyone. My 15th birthday was in Swedru village with the Bimpong family who served snails and chicken claws stewed in peanut soup.

Denney's out-of-the-box passion created in me a thirst to see the world, and a drive to be involved with it. That adventure and a faith that wanted something more from life changed my course. Since then I've lived aboard a hospital ship bringing health and healing to nations, including Ghana where I re-visited one of my families. I worked with doctors who performed surgeries for poor and needy children. I've traveled to nearly 60 countries working and documenting water, and agricultural projects. I've helped earthquake and hurricane victims, danced at festivals organized by villagers in gratitude for sanitation projects, and I've wept while lying to rest the lifeless bodies of children overcome by measles.

Seven years after that first African adventure I began my career and now at 51, I'm as passionate as I was then, because of a faith that invites me to participate in life, and a teacher who showed me how I now introduce others to a life of service. Denney's passion changed my life and I have never seen the world in the same way since. He showed me anything was possible and that I could make a difference.