

Wilmot, NH  
Oct. 2, 2009

### **WomensTrust Builds Two New Classroom Additions in Pokuase Village Primary School in Ghana**

When school began in August in one of the poorest areas of Pokuase Village in Ghana, West Africa, children who once attended class outside under a tree were welcomed into two brand new classrooms. The new addition for the overcrowded Nii Otto Kwame Primary School was completed this summer through fund-raising and volunteer efforts coordinated by WomensTrust, a Wilmot, New Hampshire-based non-profit organization that seeks to empower women and girls through microenterprise, education, and healthcare.



WomensTrust, which has operated with a mission in Pokuase since its founding in 2003, broke ground for the school addition on June 18, completing construction on Aug. 17, on budget and in time for students' return after their summer break. WomensTrust founder Dana Dakin, who travels to Ghana each year to assess the needs of the village's women and girls, had been speaking with the school's principal, Felicia, for several years about the need for a new building.

This school lies in an area of town that serves the poorest of the poor families, where many of the students' parents eke out a living at the quarry by breaking rock for cement-making," says Dakin. "As the school became more and more crowded, some classes were moved outside and had to be cancelled whenever it rained."

Through WomensTrust, Dakin began soliciting donations in the United States for the school project, raising \$19,590 in private donations in 2008 and 2009 from three individual donors. She also secured volunteer assistance from retired contractor Vahan Sarkisian, a New London, N.H., resident, who traveled to Pokuase in June to work with a local contractor Isaac

Dodoo and construction manager Samuel Adjete to negotiate a contract and assemble the materials for the building's construction.

Sarkisian, who has worked as a residential and commercial contractor in various states for more than 50 years, has helped with building projects in Armenia, where his family is from, and for Habitat for Humanity while he was president of the Greater Boston Builder's Association. While in Pokuase he had many conversations with Felicia, the school principal, about a new addition. "At first I think she didn't believe me about the construction. I could tell that others had promised her the same thing many times and never delivered on their word," he said.

Sarkisian found the people of Pokuase "very wonderful and friendly" and enthusiastic about the possibility of an expanded school. He enjoyed his role in overseeing the project, humbly suggesting that the workers bore the brunt of the hard work and the challenges of meeting the deadlines in time for the school year. "But the satisfaction came when they were able to get the job done," he added.

In the school project, as in its other activities in Pokuase, WomensTrust created partnerships with local people to meet some of the community's most immediate needs, but the ultimate goal is for the village to move toward self-sufficiency. "The school project is a perfect example," Dakin says. "We started by building a two-room annex with a local team of construction workers, and we brought over an experienced contractor from our town in New Hampshire to go line-by-line on the bid, set dates for completion in phases, and release the money in line with e-mailed photos that proved contract fulfillment."

The villagers in Pokuase were amazed when the schoolrooms were completed on schedule and on budget. "We brought the resources to help them be successful. Now, in the next phase – refurbishment of the original decrepit four-room school building – the town is rallying to raise their own money and to set a schedule," Dakin explains. "WomensTrust is working in the background and providing funds for the two most expensive items, but the balance of funding and labor is being contributed by the interested groups – a newly formed PTA, former students, the District Assembly, royal family and churches. We have challenged them to take progress into their own hands."

*-Kimberly Swick Slover*

