

Breaking the spiral of poverty and underachievement of young girls in Ghana...



...a College for Ama

Why a college for Ama? Because there is a great need for girls in Ghana to break out of the spiral of poverty and underachievement.

As in most of Africa, it is the women of Ghana who hold the key to progress and to change. But many of its young women are deprived of education to help their parents, siblings and members of their extended family survive. They often do the physically demanding work like walking for miles for water, planting and tending the crops and looking after animals. Most will marry young and have children at a young age. At best they will have a limited education and their daughters will carry on this depressing cycle, often made worse by poor health, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS and early pregnancy. And so the cycle continues.

'College for Ama' (CofA) attempts to break this cycle. It aims to change the attitudes of intelligent and gifted young women so they understand the advantages of a better education; getting married later; acquiring more wealth and prosperity, and thus having fewer children who they can look after better including supporting them through secondary and higher education.

Our mission statement: CofA's mission is to provide creative and educational opportunities for adolescent girls in rural areas of Ghana to attain college education. CofA believes access to information and education empowers individuals, their families and communities to make better life decisions, thus becoming more independent and achieving a better quality of life. CofA offers free preventative, educational, motivational and social programmes to meet the developmental needs of adolescent girls. CofA brings together a variety of disciplines including social work, physical and mental health, the law, education and the arts to meet the needs of adolescent girls. As it grows, CofA's model of operating in select rural locations will be replicated throughout Ghana.



photo: Peter Ertmeijer

CofA's Founding Mothers Three inspirational Ghanaian women founded 'College for Ama' (CofA) in 2005. They are:

Helen Lydia Bedwei, a business woman, Afua Eyeson who is a legal practitioner and Professor Nana Araba Apt of Ashesi University.

Helen Lydia Bedwei received her higher education in Switzerland, France, England and Germany. She has worked in the Secretariat of the Association of African Universities and with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ghana. This was followed by a move to Nigeria where she worked for the International Bank for West Africa until 1980.

Helen stopped work to look after her daughter Farida who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. During this period she lived in Dominica in the Caribbean, Belgrade and Ghana, while also guiding Farida through education, including her recent graduation from the University of Hertfordshire, England.

Helen is now involved in running academic bookshops and importing and distributing books.

Afua B Eyeson is a legal practitioner specialising in corporate-, land- and family law at a leading law firm in Ghana.

Afua obtained her bachelor's degree in Law and History in 1998 at the University of Ghana, Legon. She continued her education at the Ghana School of Law and was called to the Bar in 2000. In 2004, she obtained a master's degree in law in the USA at the University of Georgia School of Law where she also provided instructional guidance and counselling for high school drop-outs.

Afua became a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for abused and neglected children, in the State of Georgia in February 2004. Having returned to Ghana, she volunteers at FIDA-Ghana Legal Services as a Legal Aid Officer where she mediates in child maintenance cases. She also trains paralegals and delivers presentations in children's rights, marriage laws and succession laws. She is currently the Secretary to the Executive of FIDA-

Ghana and represents the organisation on the Regional Multi-Sectoral Committee on Child Protection.

Nana Araba Apt is a sociology professor and presently Dean of Academic Affairs at Ashesi University in Accra. Before that, she was head of the Sociology Department at the University of Ghana, Legon and director of the Centre for Social Policy Studies (CSPS), which she set up with support from UNICEF at the university.

Nana, an only child, was one of only five girls in a class of 30 pupils at the Shama Roman Catholic Primary School, an experience that taught her how to compete with boys and ensure her voice was heard. She later attended St Anne's Convent boarding school at Elmina, renowned for scholarship and character building before gaining a scholarship to Holy Child Secondary School in Cape Coast.

In 1962 she won a Canadian African Students Foundation scholarship and studied at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, graduating in 1965. She then took a Masters degree in Social Work at the University of Toronto.

After seven years' extensive nationwide field experience in Ghana's civil service as a community development worker Nana became a lecturer at the University of Ghana in the Department of Sociology. She registered with the University for a part-time PhD degree in Sociology and received her PhD in 1989.

Professor Apt's areas of policy interests are the family, female education and ageing. She has set up HelpAge Ghana and RESPONSE, organisations working to improve the quality of life of older people and street children, and she has also advised a number of United Nations organisations and international development agencies including Save the Children Fund, Action Aid, Oxfam, The World Bank, DfID and the African Union (AU).



photo courtesy of Ryan Whitcombe

How will it work? CofA will create opportunities for girls aged between 12 and 20, especially in rural areas, to attain excellence as they develop from youngsters to adulthood by providing environments promoting the holistic development of young girls by nurturing and encouraging their creativity, social awareness, self esteem and self-sufficiency. This will engender in each girl an authentic and well-founded sense of self-worth.

Poverty is overwhelmingly rural and its incidence varies significantly by region. Poverty levels are highest in the three northern savannah regions: Upper East, Upper West and Northern Region. Nine out of ten people in the Upper East were classified as poor in 1999. In the Upper West and Northern Region these figures are 80% and 70% respectively. In Ghana's Central and Eastern Regions about half the population was classified as poor.

Initially the three founders will visit schools in areas of Ghana that are known to be poor. They will ask primary school teachers to identify girls with the potential to succeed in secondary education but whose family do not have the means to support them through that stage. They will then speak to the girls and their parents to get their agreement to their participation in the CofA project.

Meanwhile mentors will be recruited among female university students and these will be trained to develop and coach the younger girls. Then a residential workshop will give the girls extra tutoring in core subjects and girls will be assigned to their mentors.

CofA will also disseminate knowledge gained about adolescent girls and the effectiveness of CofA's comprehensive model to appropriate institutions and organisations so that the lessons learnt can be applied to similar schemes, and to influence national youth policy.

CofA's multidisciplinary volunteer staff of complimentary professionals will design and deliver a broad range of programmes and services tailored to the needs of each individual pupil. Each residential workshop will provide a physically and psychologically safe environment in which the girls will feel comfortable and confident in developing their abilities and potential.

CofA will grow organically as more professional women join the founders and replicate the process.

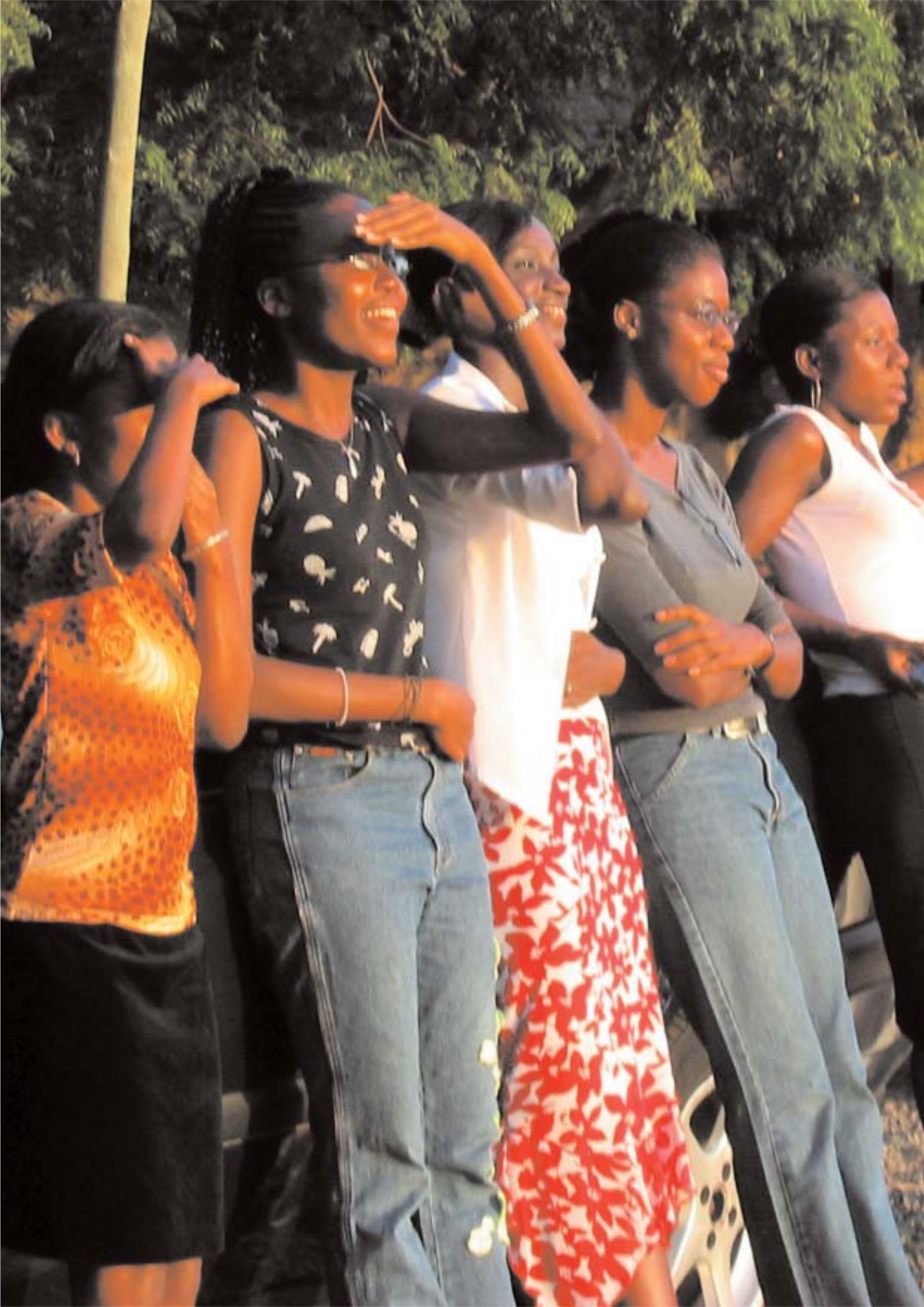


photo courtesy of Ashesi University College

What are its values? CofA does not discriminate on the basis of ethnicity, religion or disability. It creates an environment that celebrates the commonality of the human experience while respecting cultural, ethnic and political diversity. These values are addressed in the context of the young girls' social, emotional, physical, spiritual and educational needs.

How does it achieve its goals? CofA provides four broad programmes:

Education: CofA volunteers will offer basic skills, tutoring, JSS/SSS exam preparation, career counselling, computer skills and college preparation. CofA's educational preparation focuses on three academic disciplines: social studies; math and science; English and English literature.

Health: This will include primary health care, sexual health and awareness, nutrition, reproductive health, HIV counselling and testing. These will be delivered through individual counselling and discussion groups. Emphasis is placed on developing health and nutrition awareness and promoting the growth of self-respect and responsibility.

Human values: Rights-based legal counselling and citizenship and social services.

Creative and physical arts: Participation of creative and physical arts to enhance personal growth and emotional development. Creative arts include painting, music, dance and drama. Physical arts include sports, gymnastics, aerobics and martial arts.

Family counselling programmes to motivate and increase the understanding of parents/guardians of CofA aims and values are also provided.



photo courtesy of the University of Kentucky

What is happening next? CofA will partner relevant government and non-government organisations and educational institutions to fulfil its mission. In particular partnerships will be established with organisations to support needy girls to pursue higher education.

CofA is planning a steady incremental growth, targeting different locations in Ghana, learning lessons from each engagement with each child. Girls who have participated in the CofA experience will themselves act as advocates who will encourage local girls to achieve their potential, and replace the cycle of poverty through poor education and lack of self-worth with an understanding of the value of education, self-esteem and the improvement in the conditions of the family and the community.

For CofA to be able to deliver its mission it needs suitable volunteers and financial support. It is building from a position of strength – its founders' inspiration and the understanding of how young women can be empowered and enabled to fulfil a role that is both traditional and contemporary. And what is a success story in Ghana could be a model for Africa.

'College for Ama' (CofA) is a non-government foundation registered in Ghana.

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