

Formosa woman following life's mission to help others

BY MARY GOLEM

FOR THE POST

FORMOSA - Helping others adds meaning to Jody Benninger's life. That's why, after only being home for a few months following seven months of working with HIV/AIDS sufferers in South Africa and Zambia, the 28-year-old Formosa native has once again packed her bags and is leaving this Friday, July 20, for Ghana.

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JODY BENNINGER

In Ghana, she'll be doing more human rights work, this time working as a program officer with HelpAge Ghana, which attempts to promote a healthy lifestyle for the country's elderly. She'll be in Accra, the country's capital city, and will implement, monitor and evaluate projects being undertaken by HelpAge Ghana, including education, reintegration "and development of awareness tools on the issues of the elderly who are being banished to witch camps."

Benninger, the daughter of Lynda and the late Peter Benninger of Formosa, will be in Ghana on a seven-month internship posting with the International Youth Internship Program, part of the



Contributed Photo

Jody Benninger of Formosa will be leaving July 20 for a seven-month internship posting in Accra, Ghana, the African country's capital city. This photo of Jody was taken in Pinetown, South Africa in November 2006, where she spent time working with HIV/AIDS sufferers.

Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). She had initially applied for such an internship back in 2004 and was rejected, "so I am very happy to have accomplished this goal of mine now, three years later."

When she left South Africa in February, she made a promise to the people she was leaving behind that she would "act as their voice," doing whatever

she could to inform other Canadians of what she experienced and the plight of the people she met. She did so by sharing her story with numerous church and community groups in the area.

"I never, ever thought I would be working in the HIV/AIDS field," Benninger said at that time. "But what I experienced was life-changing . . . once you know something, you can't act like you

don't know . . . I have always wanted to do something for the betterment of someone else's life."

An Honours Sociology graduate from Carleton University in Ottawa in 2004, Benninger began her HIV/AIDS work while going to school in Ottawa, acting as a volunteer at a transition home, "where some of the most rejected members of society would come to die of AIDS."

Her experiences there not only shaped her as a person, but also helped shape her career path. In September 2005, she enrolled in a Development Instructor Program through an international NGO and completed most of her training as a HIV prevention specialist and test counsellor in Michigan by May 2006. A month later, she was in South Africa, trying to teach HIV and AIDS-related information.

When she saw the job posting on the CIDA web site, she jumped at the chance to help again at the grassroots level, this time with the elderly.

"I guess first and foremost this enables me to realize a personal goal and dream of mine," she said. "I don't ever want to limit myself. It's in my heart now to help others and I must follow my heart."

While she is looking forward to working with the elderly in their community to make life more sustainable for them, she does have concerns about the living conditions she will face.

"There's a severe water and electricity shortage in Ghana right now," she

said, adding Ghana is also a major zone for malaria. "I know it will be quite challenging . . . but I also know it will open up new perspectives for me."

Following her seven month internship, Benninger hopes to return to Canada, where she plans to complete her Masters degree, "and then work on this continent helping others."

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