

## Treated like royalty

AIDS prevention worker honored  
for outreach by Ghana town elders.  
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## NEWS

# Honoring a 'mother of development'

## Valerie Papaya Mann works to stem the spread of AIDS in Africa

by Rhonda Smith

On the day after Christmas, Valerie Papaya Mann and a group of medical volunteers flew to Ghana to help residents in a West African region with a population of 5,000 people but not a single doctor, nurse, clinic, or hospital.

Mann and 10 other men and women also are traveling to Akwamufie, a town in Ghana, to begin building public restrooms adjacent to two schools there.

Mann's latest trip to Africa, the executive director of the D.C. CARE Consortium includes being honored by Akwamufie's leaders for her ongoing efforts to make a difference there.

"Dear Daughter," Nana Aku-Brakatu Bremong II said in a letter to Mann, "I, in consultation with the elders, confer on you the prestigious royal title and honor of 'Nkorsorhemaa' of the Gyaase Palace."

The title being bestowed on Mann means "Mother of Development," and is meant to honor her for vowing to improve Akwamufie's collective health and infrastructure.

"You are an integral part and parcel of the Gyaase heritage of Akwamufie," Bremong wrote. "Please take note that your official and formal Installation comes in December 2001 at Akwamufie. Culture and tradition will be at its best so do endeavor to be present."

Mann, who is the executive director of the D.C. Comprehensive AIDS Resource & Education Consortium, which works on ensuring appropriate AIDS services and funding in Washington, coordinated what was to be a pleasure trip to Ghana for 31 women, ages 20 to 70. Most live in Washington. The group traveled to Africa to learn about the culture and spearhead "intervention missions" to help young girls there by creating mentoring and leadership-building initiatives.



by Denise Watkins

Pamela Jafari (left) will act as a linguist, or voice, for Valerie Papaya Mann (right) when she is honored by leaders of the Ghanaian town Akwamufie.

"Girls there are educated a couple years, and then drop out of school," Mann said.

Members of the tour group, which included filmmaker Michele Parkerson, donated \$1,000 to support efforts to educate young girls in Akwamufie.

Mann and others in the group also donated school and medical supplies, and began making plans to help build public restrooms, with up to 20 commodes and sinks, near two schools.

"Any time I go to Africa, it's a spiritual trip for me," said videographer Dai Harmon, who is making a 40-minute documentary about the group's August trip. "It's always about my ancestors and paying my respects to those who never made it back."

Mann and Pamela Jafari, her best friend, sponsored a fundraiser Nov. 30 at a private home in Washington to raise money for the medical intervention project. Jafari acted as Mann's linguist, or voice, during the installation ceremony Dec. 28.

"When a person is enstooled, they have the option of speaking directly to citizens in the town, or having someone speak for them," Jafari said, describing her role as Mann's linguist.

In African traditions, leaders "enstooled" people considered royalty instead of having them take part in a coronation. It is a ceremony with spiritual significance as well.

"By being enstooled as 'Mother of Development,'" Jafari said, "[Mann] becomes part of the energy involved in helping to build the town."

People there are polite and very kind, they said.

"They are very respectful about anything they think is personal," Mann explained. "For example, they don't talk about bodily functions or sex, which is one reason that HIV/AIDS is more prevalent in Africa. There is a reluctance to talk about it."

Mann also said that Ghanaians she met wanted her and other African Americans to know how much they are wanted there.

"Our guide said, 'You're not tourists; you've come home,'" she said.

"It wasn't a hustle," Jafari added. "It was a heartfelt thought."

Before Mann, Jafari and the others made the trip to Ghana in August, a woman from West Africa who lives in Hyattsville, Md., wrote Bremong a letter introducing them.

In the letter, Nana Oye Boadu Akofona I told Bremong that Mann was interested in learning about traditional ways and helping girls in the town become successful women. She also asked him in the letter to choose the girls who truly needed the support.

Mann also enlisted help from OraSure Technologies Inc., Peace Corps volunteers, and Ghanaian embassy officials for the medical intervention project. OraSure donated 1,000 HIV test kits. Peace Corps volunteers are scheduled to meet the medical delegation in Akwamufie to help in whatever way they can.

During the three-day clinic, health care practitioners screen community members for HIV/AIDS, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, as well as for various infections indigenous to that region.

"We plan to provide comprehensive education about HIV/AIDS, and other disease management," Mann said before the trip. "Lastly, we will meet with Ghanaian doctors, nurses, and traditional healers to discuss how to sustain and improve our efforts there."

U.S. residents have asked Mann whether her efforts to help Ghanaians will take her attention away from her HIV/AIDS work in the United States.

"HIV is a global issue," Mann said. "In Africa, it is a particularly serious issue, and there is little help there to address it."

Mann plans to help develop grassroots programs in Ghana to help stem the spread of HIV/AIDS and address other health concerns.

"I am not leaving HIV work here," she said, "just expanding my vision."