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NEWSLETTER #08
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11/10/2026 **Tema, Ghana**

"Akwaaba Obroni!" Today we heard these words, and we even understood them!

Welcome, white person! Originally, it means "the one who comes from beyond the horizon" or "foreigner." It is friendly and not at all insulting.



Since the last letter, the flu epidemic on board has stopped. Five weeks of surgeries have flown by; including ophthalmology, we are approaching 300 operations performed. In parallel with training (Philippe has even become a "BLS instructor"), children are having their legs "straightened" when they used to be completely "twisted." Many adults with hernias, inguinal among others, can now move around without that disruptive lump (sometimes the size of a melon!). Adults and children are seeing again, and since last week, we have started maxillofacial surgeries. These tumors are not only disfiguring but also debilitating (imagine trying to eat or even breathe with a one-kilogram mass as big as a grapefruit/pomelo in your jaw... for fellow anesthetists, you can also imagine the complexity of securing the airways!).

On the school front, it was mid-terms last week, especially for Noâm. No one expected an award of excellence; we tried not to put too much pressure on him, and the results are more than acceptable. There was one clearly insufficient grade, but the teacher was "embarrassed" to have to enter it and clearly explained to us that it did not reflect his true level. His other grades so far even make up for that failing one. In short, school is serious business here and there is "homework," meaning work to be done outside of class hours. Philippe remembers his university days, as the learning method is clearly different. It was difficult for several weeks, but slowly everyone is adjusting, and the children are getting into the groove. Community life helps on this side too, as homework is often done in the "youth lounge" with friends, leaving Mom and Dad in second or even third line...



Photos

Home



Community life also means birthdays almost every day. There is a simpler side to it, due to the resources available and the social circle being limited to this exact community where we live, eat, study, work, and play together. Now, we aren't all 600 of us doing everything together, but groups form and sometimes interconnect: the moms' group, the dads' group, the running club, the family "clan" (a good dozen on board), the francophones, the Swiss, the puzzle enthusiasts... there is something for everyone, and in the end, we find our people. Moments of celebration are therefore often shared and simply open to everyone, leaving the surprise of who will show up and bringing the gift of getting to know (better) people from diverse and varied backgrounds, cultures, and traditions.



There are sometimes brief moments of the blues, emotional thoughts of our "distant loved ones," but also, a privilege of the 21st century, a few warm video calls!

Progress in English for everyone is starting to show. Socializing and finding one's place remains a challenge at times for Philippe and Laura, but even if we haven't reached a steady "cruising" state yet, we have turned a corner.

Philippe has a role with very diverse and varied tasks, but also heavy responsibilities that he must learn to manage. For his debut, he can rely on experienced anesthetists to support him, and the exchanges are rich. What strikes him most is the humility of people with such extensive skills and experience who come on board repeatedly (2–3 weeks, once or twice a year for some, and this for years), yet still ask for Philippe's point of view and are grateful for his work! The other striking thing is the place of family. If we can compare the long-term volunteers to marathon runners (like us) and the "short-termers" to sprinters, it is still touching that the sprinters do not hesitate to tell Philippe, "go eat with your kids, we'll take care of finishing up here," despite a long day of work!



For her part, Laura takes great pleasure in participating in the "Kids and Care" program for pediatric patients: in addition to having a few school-like lessons during their hospitalization, the children are offered times for games, stories, and crafts. Laura cherishes these moments! There are beautiful stories, life lessons exchanged, learning experiences, but also more creative moments. And here too, cultural discovery is part of the journey! Some seem at ease but have perhaps never used scissors before. Crafts that seem obvious back home are not so obvious here. Paper, glue, scissors: back home, probably every child has them from the age of 2. And spread across the population, we probably have a good four or five pairs of scissors per inhabitant?! What is beautiful and touching is that it brings us back to the essentials: the pleasure of the encounter, the exchange, the process, or more visually, the path traveled together! The contact with these children, the shared bond, the time spent with them... it is hard to describe. Perhaps when you have "nothing," you are more grateful to simply have people and time to share with them?! Besides, this afternoon in a shopping mall parking lot, half

a dozen children came up to us just to greet us, the "obroni." With a huge smile (of joy!) simply to see us (and not out of mockery, as some might think).



In parallel, we are waiting on her "application" as a photographer for Mercy Ships. There are personal photos, auxiliary photographers who take photos semi-officially in addition to their responsibilities, and there are official photographers who can then take all types of photos for different events on board or outside. This would be a wonderful experience for Laura and we are waiting for the answer (the decision is not made on board but at the headquarters in Texas!).

And among the volunteers, there are also Ghanaians. Some have even left their paid jobs to work as volunteers with us (just like us). They are eager to help their less fortunate compatriots but also to gain an enriching professional experience for their future. This also means knowledge is passed on and will continue to benefit the population after our departure. It creates bonds too—professional, but also emotional. Even as I write this, a volunteer is with his wife who needs a C-section in a local hospital (by the way, this is a specialty we do not have on board), for a premature baby with a high-risk pregnancy. Given our family history, there is no doubt he needs to be with his family. But this person seems embarrassed and truly regrets not being able to be more present for the mission on board. When we talk about "volunteer commitment," we don't all have the same notion of "commitment"!

In a week, we will have visitors from Switzerland on board. Philippe was able to take a week off, Laura will surely have a few days available as well, and for the occasion, we plan to go out 2 or 3 times to discover the country beyond the city of Tema: the hinterland and its nature, and the capital Accra, which is more historical and cultural (Tema is very industrial, and as a reminder, we are in the middle of a commercial port: containers by the tens of thousands, trucks by the hundreds... if we stay on board or nearby, we will have seen almost nothing of the country except the patients!). On the other hand, our visitors are also interested in the social life on board, the "ship life," and Philippe is also looking forward to having time to enjoy being on board with them. The break also seems to come at an opportune time, both in the operational schedule and in our acclimatization to ship life.





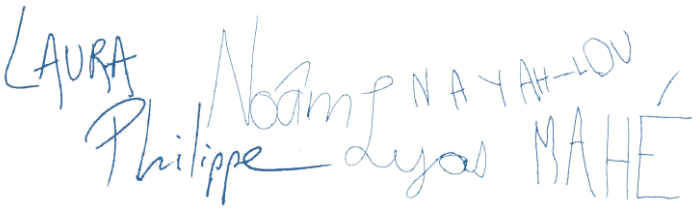
Our vehicles should finally be authorized to drive within the coming week. It has been a real obstacle course for our transport team! But they made it and are a true example of patience and tenacity! In parallel, though it was planned this way, our HOPE Center was able to open a week ago and is welcoming its first patients, who come from further away before their surgery and for post-operative rehabilitation. The first stages take place on board, but when pure medical care becomes less frequent, the rest of the rehabilitation happens in this center. It is a partially renovated building with an added annex (the kitchen area—people have to be fed!). After our departure, it will be used for training (agriculture, if I am not mistaken). In Lausanne, it would perhaps be the equivalent of the "Hôtel des Patients"... just less luxurious! I look forward to going back when the opportunity arises; I went there once during the renovation work... quite an experience! I'm not sure our SUVA experts would have survived the shock!

Challenges :

- **Finding a way to handle homework** efficiently, joyfully, and smartly.
- **Wisdom for Philippe** when dealing with critical cases.
- **"Fine-tuning"** Laura's commitments.

Ideally, we are also ideally still looking for:

- **A few regular donations** or a sporadic "helping hand."



More photos on our gallery (QR code on the bottom left) and more info on our website!

Photos



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