

GRASS ROOTS; Scavenging in America for the Folks Back Home

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Body

NAME: Obomeng Mma Kuo of New York and New Jersey.

FOUNDED: 1995, in the Bronx.

MISSION: To mobilize Ghanaians who have immigrated to the New York metropolitan area from the village of Obomeng, in eastern Ghana, to raise or seek money for Obomeng and its surrounding region. The group's focus is on health, education and infrastructure; monthly meetings are held at the Mary Mitchell Family and Youth Center near the Bronx Zoo.

FINANCING: From member's donations and foundations (the J. Homer Butler Foundation gave \$3,000 this year to renovate a medical clinic in Obomeng), but the biggest source is aggressive scavenging. Anything goes: hundreds of school desks that Fordham University was about to throw away; secondhand computers from the National Puerto Rican Forum in New York; a \$1 million shipment of medicine from the Catholic Medical Mission Board.

Obomeng Mma Kuo, which means Obomeng Citizens' Association in the Twi language, is one of many hometown associations in America, immigrant groups that promote projects in their native towns or regions. Such groups date back to at least the turn of the last century, when European immigrants banded together to help finance projects in the old country.

Experts say that certain benefits, albeit not financial ones, accrue to the immigrants as well. "There's a whole social dynamic underlying this," said Peggy Levitt, associate professor of sociology at Wellesley College who has studied hometown associations. "If you've suffered a decline in status as an immigrant and you work really hard and you're really lonely, it's a big compensating experience to be able to bring home a check."

Ronald Ababio, who operates Obomeng's development efforts, recently lost his contract as a floor-maintenance worker at Rite Aid and is strapped financially. But he is so famous in his hometown, he said, that if he returned he would have to disguise himself to avoid the attention.

When the group sent over its first medical supplies in 1999, consisting of donated medicine that one member carried over in a suitcase, the older men in the village were mightily impressed with what they called a "magic medicine," which they said worked better on their headaches and toothaches than the aspirin they usually took. It was Tylenol.

"They made a request that in the future, when we bring any medicine again, we should make sure we have Tylenol," Mr. Ababio said. Since then, money has been donated to building a public restroom with running water for the village, and the group is working on attracting a branch of a new university that would provide employment for many of the villagers.

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LATEST PROJECT: The biggest coup to date was the \$1 million in medical supplies from the Catholic Medical Mission Board. These included two containers of hospital beds, medicine and other items, all of which are currently at sea on their way over, to be distributed not just in Obomeng but throughout Ghana.

The shipment also includes \$7,320.82 worth of Tylenol. SETH KUGEL

<http://www.nytimes.com>

Graphic

Photo: CLOSE TO **HOME** -- E. Wiafe Kumnipa, left, and Ronald Ababio of Obomeng Mma Kuo, an association that helps their village in Ghana. (Edwine Seymour for The New York Times)

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