

SUCCESS STORY

27 Rescued Children Reintegrated: Dreams of Trafficked Children made Possible

"I was only five years old. Our slave master woke us up early in the morning to the lake and we had to work throughout the week, setting balls, disentangling trapped nets and working under harsh conditions. The work load was too much for me to bear. I always dreamed someone would come to my rescue. After 12 years that dream has become a reality."

- Kwamena, 17 years, Senya Breku



Kwamena being interviewed by Project Officers

Born and raised in Senya Breku in the Central Region of Ghana, Kwamena faced the unfortunate, when his dad divorced his mum. The only way the mum thought they could survive was to give him away to a slave master in Yeji to work on the lake to provide money for the mum and the younger siblings.

The future of trafficked children is always uncertain and hopeless compared to most children their age who are either in school or enjoying their childhood with family, loved ones and friends.

Trafficked children working in the fishing industry in Ghana are forced to work under the searing heat of the sun. Bonded into labour due to poverty, these children (some as young as 5 years old) spend their days on Lake Volta – paddling boats, offloading fish from canoes, diving underwater to disentangle nets, or working as domestic helpers in fishermen's homes. They are not allowed to go to school and are often ill-treated and malnourished.

Under the EU-funded SECRIFISE project, 31 children (23 boys and 8 girls) were rescued on the Volta Lake in August 2020. These children were hosted for 8 months at a secure and child-friendly rehabilitation Centre, where they went through some medical assessments and treatment in addition to psychosocial counseling and therapies. They were also provided with some basic education and skills development. This assisted these traumatized children to move from healing towards

full recovery. The children also underwent some training and capacity building activities that prepared them for enrolment in school and apprenticeship.

After rehabilitation at the shelter, 27 (males:21, females:6) children have successfully been reintegrated with parents, relatives and foster parents. Reintegration of rescued children, if not thoroughly done can result in children being maltreated psychologically, physically and mentally or worse, re-trafficked especially when these rescued victims return to the same environment they were trafficked from. Before the children were reunited with their caregivers, the team traced their parents/caregivers; developed case files on them through direct interaction and observed the general environment over a few months to ensure they are suitable. Needs assessment was conducted on all the families and their minds prepared to receive the children. These children were then reunited with caregivers who have been deemed capable of looking after them.

Following up on the reintegration process, the project also attempted to enroll the children in school. **Twenty-six (26) out of the twenty-seven (27) children** have been successfully enrolled into schools with adequate supply of school materials. One of the survivors, however, opted to learn carpentry as a vocation.

Some of the children who were rehabilitated at the Challenging Heights shelter had this to say;

"From the shelter I got to know I can do a lot of things. I now have a dream of becoming a Carpenter which never occurred to me or crossed my mind as a possibility when I was with my slave master. I would want to thank the European Union, funders of the SECRIFISE project for making this dream a possibility."

-Kwamena, 17 years, Senya Breku.

Initially, I felt my son would be aggressive when he came around but he has been very calm, obedient and cooperative and I know this transformation happened at the shelter.

- Narts Mum

Although I may be the oldest boy in my class and have a lot to catch up on, I will put in more effort to make my dream of becoming a doctor a possibility.

- Kobina, Winneba.

Although there were few challenges especially with children living with foster parents adjusting to their new environment, the general feeling of the children in their new environment was positive and they were thankful for the support being offered to them.

The progress of these children in the family environment, school and apprenticeship will be monitored regularly over two years. In addition, community watchdog committees and surveillance teams have been formed to help prevent re-trafficking of children. Caretakers of these returned children have also been empowered through livelihood assistance in order to cater for their needs.

Names in this story do not reflect the actual identity of survivors