SINGER, DANCER AND NEW MUM

KIMBERLY WYATT

TELLS US ABOUT THE VALUABLE LESSONS SHE LEARNT IN GHANA WITH COMIC RELIEF

Anna leads Kimberly and the children in an exercise. “She taught with such enthusiasm and energy that she turns the class into a kind of learning dance party,” says the former Pussycat Doll.
For former Pussycat Doll Kimberly Wyatt, the chance to visit Ghana with Comic Relief was a dream come true. “I watch the TV event every year and it always brings tears to my eyes,” she says. “I never thought in a million years that I’d ever have the opportunity to go on such a trip and it was truly incredible.”

The four-day visit took Kimberly to some of the schools and villages benefiting from the charity’s work with the Sabre Trust, a Cornish charity that trains kindergarten teachers in the African country. “I met so many amazing teachers who are inspiring kids to want to learn and want to be at school,” she says. “To see all these amazing little faces of children – it was wonderful.”

Her own child, ten-month-old daughter Willow, meanwhile, stayed in the UK with her daddy, Kimberly’s husband Max Rogers. “It was the longest I’ve ever been away from Willow and I missed her immensely,” says Kimberly. “But Max sent me voice notes and pictures.”

Kimberly, who this year won the Celebrity MasterChef crown, shared her experience of being a mum with the women she met. “I showed them pictures of my little girl and it brought home to me that we are connected. We are one and the same, we just live life a bit differently,” she says.

She was also able to draw on her own experiences of teaching and mentoring, having given dance classes since she was a teenager – something Kimberly is now taking into the next stage of her life as she joins the judges’ panel for the new CBBC dance contest Taking the Next Step.

“Tackling the Next Step

At Bronybima primary school in Ghana (left) and taking part in a lesson with teacher Anna (above) as she finds out how Comic Relief’s fundraising, together with investment from the UK government, is transforming education in the country.

For many parents in communities like these, the schools are inadequate, with many kids struggling because of the lack of proper resources. Just three-quarters of four- and five-year-olds are in school and only half of those have a trained teacher.

But that is changing thanks to the £10million raised by UK schools and the public on this year’s Red Nose Day, which is being matched by the British government to improve education across Africa.

In Ghana, the Sabre Trust is now training kindergarten teachers. It’s giving teachers new skills to bring to their classes, with learning based on fun and laughter. Before, kids were quite scared to get answers wrong and the cane was used. Now if a child gets an answer right, they are given a necklace or a little song or are sprinkled with sparkles. The kids want to learn and classes are full.

I met many inspirational
people, but it was Anna, a 30-year-old teacher, who touched me the most. She had struggled at school and was caned and it made her want to stop other children fearing school.

At first, the kids would fall asleep or get restless as she taught, but since being trained, that’s changed. Anna and the teachers are making school fun. They recycle household items to make the resources they need and the rows of desks have been moved. The kids were full of joy and excited to answer questions. Anna taught with such enthusiasm and energy that she turned the class into a kind of learning dance party and kept everybody focused.

LESSONS FOR LIFE
The whole thing inspired me to bring this kind of thinking into my home with my baby girl – the exercises the teachers do and the joy they bring – that’s exactly how I want my home to feel. We want Willow’s imagination to run wild.

“I taught some dance classes, too, just some simple moves. There were a few kids who weren’t too sure about me at first, but once we danced together we had a connection and they taught me their own dance, which was their sort of Gangnam Style. I was very sweaty. It was fantastic.

The next day, I met Agnes, 38, a single mother of three who farms a piece of land and makes and sells local dishes in the village of Ayensudo. Shaking her hand, you could feel her strength – and her callouses from all the hard work.

She gave me a shy and quick hug that was probably the warmest I’ve ever received. We talked about her life and at one point she broke down in tears – I don’t think she’d had that sort of attention in a long time. She was so lonely. I was very close to tears, too. I can’t for a second think what it would be like in her shoes. Seeing her youngest daughter Sarah, who’s six, grow in confidence, question the world around her and learn English with her Sabre Trust-trained teacher Rachael has filled Agnes with hope for her future.

In the neighbouring village of Dwabor, I helped Cynthia, 45, cook a lunch of palm-nut soup and rice for her six-year-old triplets Eric, Erica and Isobella. She told me how they have changed since being with their teacher Dora, whom the whole family adores. As well as learning more quickly than their siblings, they’re also better behaved at home.

My lasting impression flips between the kids and the teachers. Each child I met had an impact on me and the spirit of the teachers is potentially one of the most inspiring experiences I have had.

Seeing the way Comic Relief is spending the money we raise in the UK is pretty incredible. I’m American, but it makes me feel patriotic to live in Britain, in a community that helps change the lives of those less fortunate. I’m proud that Willow is getting to grow up in a country that does something so special.

PHOTOS: JACK LAWSON FOR COMIC RELIEF
For more information, visit comicrelief.com or gov.uk/dfid.

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