



Employee Spotlight

Melissa uses her Peace Corps experience to write book about water in Ghana

Melissa Fischer (*Wastewater & Solid Waste Design*) just completed her first novel about her life-changing experience in Ghana. Read below to follow her journey as an author.

I served in the Peace Corps from 1992-1994, in Obuasi, Ghana, in a region heavily impacted by gold mining. When I came home, people frequently asked about my experience. I always felt frustration because I knew that a brief conversation could not convey the depth of what had been a profound experience. I set about trying to write a novel, choosing fiction because I love a good story. I was one of those kids who always had her nose in a book. When my basketball team had games, I sat in the bleachers reading until it was time to suit up.

My book, *The Advocacy* asks, “Who gets good water? Who decides?” The fate of water for Ghanaian subsistence farmers rests in the hands of West Africa Gold. The book’s protagonist, civil engineer Louisa Lehmann, struggles to fulfill the mandate of her profession to provide the most basic human need. The story intertwines the challenges, disappointments, and triumphs of development work in rural Ghana within the context of multinational mining operations.

I often get asked if this is a true story, to which I say, every time I wrote a scene that was pure invention, I could feel a quantum leap in the quality of the writing. This encouraged me to let go of what, in the early days, felt too precious – the actual events as I lived them. *The Advocacy* is realistic in that it is true to Obuasi, Ghana 1992, a mining boomtown, and accurately portrays conditions in the surrounding villages, many of whose water supplies were impacted by mine operations. Part of what took so many years was learning how to write fiction, learning to discern which words on the page were my personal story and cultivating a swift red pen to strike what did not belong.

Originally, I thought it would take five years to finish the novel. Twenty-three years into my five year plan, *The Advocacy* is complete. I feel that it represents the best expression of my gratitude to Ghana and its people.

Curiosity inspires the question, “Are you the main character?” It is said that every character is the author, that we cannot write of what we do not, on some level, know. Louisa Lehmann, the book’s main character, and I share overlapping histories, but she is her own person. Louisa’s character grew stronger, the more I peeled away the parts of me that didn’t belong. A more crucial question is, is Louisa a believable character? Are her choices and actions throughout the story consistent? Does the reader find integrity in her portrayal? If the answer to that is, ‘Yes,’ then I have done my job.



Melissa and villagers of Fenaso Nkwanta, Ghana circa 1993.

An apology may be due to all those who have endured my attempts to transform design request memos and regulatory reports into works of literary quality. Perhaps with the publishing of *The Advocacy*, I will be able to rest on that count. Many thanks to everyone at the Districts who has offered encouragement over the years.

A special thanks to Professor Daniel B. Oerther, incoming president of the American Academy of Environmental Engineers and Scientists (AAEES), who loved the novel so much, he asked to write the foreword, in which he had this to say:

“...body, mind and spirit comes screaming through the pages of every chapter... *The Advocacy* is a must read for every engineer; for everyone who knows, works with, or loves an engineer; for everyone who knows or has curiosity about Ghana; and for all concerned with environmental and social justice.”

The Advocacy is out in paperback, Nook, and Kindle formats. To learn more, visit www.melissaannfischer.com.