

By Grace Amankwandoh, Ahotokurom, Ghana, West Africa

Grace, a daughter to parents who both suffered from leprosy, grew up in Enyinndakurom with other families affected by the disease. After finishing elementary school in 1978, Grace secured a job working for the ministry of health for one year, and later travelled to Nigeria with her husband for one year. After the break-up of her marriage her return to Ghana, Grace needed to find work to support herself. She was introduced to Br. Vincent who was doing outreach in Enyinndakurom at the time, who brought her to Padre Pio Rehabilitation Centre in 1983. At PPRC Grace worked closely with Sr. Pat as a nursery attendant and later became her deputy at St. Elizabeth's school on the compound, where they worked together for 25 years. When St. Elizabeth's school moved to Atonkwa and the facility now changed its direction to working with children with special needs, Grace received a lot of opportunities from the Sisters that have changed her life. Grace was sent to take courses in the area of special needs care, while being trained by Sr. Pat in which she gained a wealth of knowledge. In 1999 Grace was blessed with the opportunity to travel to Ireland to undertake a work placement at an Irish school for 4 months, where she learned a lot and gained a huge amount of priceless practical experience. With a great amount of knowledge in the area Grace returned to Ahotokurom where she worked hard, and eventually became the manager of St. Elizabeth's when Sr. Pat moved to Uganda. During this time Grace still benefitted greatly from the help of the Sisters of DMJ. In 2002 DMJ provided Grace with a home, while also over the years contributing greatly to the education of her own children by providing sponsorship for their schooling. PPRC and the sisters took care of her elderly parents with great care when they spent the last years of their life in St. Claire's home and also helped to cover the costs of their funeral, lifting a huge weight from her shoulders in a time of grief and struggle. Grace is extremely grateful for all the help and support the Sisters of DMJ have given to her and her family over the years as she would not be the success she is today without them. But she is also extremely proud of the Sisters and all they have done for the community around her. Not only did the opening of St. Elizabeth's centre for children with disabilities provide a safe and loving learning environment for the children, it dramatically helped to lessen the harsh stigma associated with special needs people in Ghanaian society. It began to change the mind-sets of parents of children with disabilities, opening their eyes to the reality that they are equally deserving of love and care as any other child – a lesson that will benefit disadvantaged children for years to come. Grace is very grateful for the presence of Daughters of Mary and Joseph in her life and all they have achieved.

