

Red Chocolate from Cameroon

Stories from the field – Rural lives touched and transformed by Vianne

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My brother JR in Cameroon is a farmer and agriculturalist and works with agricultural associations and organizations. He regularly drives the roads that intersect rural farming villages through a cocoa growing region of Cameroon. Cocoa is our country's main export crop. Cameroon's soils and climate produces a renowned red ochre hued and strong cocoa with a unique and distinctive flavor. This is not your Nestle's Quick chocolate. This is an authentic, formidable cocoa suited for a more refined palate.

My brother and I often speak of the challenges of the cocoa farmer – aging cocoa trees, aging cocoa farmers, trees afflicted with pests, pesticides usage among farmers with little literacy, crop seasonality, climatic events, price fluctuations, a small sustainability movement, food security, and little rural electrification.

I was determined to make an impact on the lives of cocoa farmers. Vianne was born of this determination. I geared up for the challenge.

I enlisted the help of my children to put together Vianne's turn key installation kits, sourced packaging of equipment and panels, strategized for nearly one half year to get equipment from Texas to rural Cameroon, booked my flight from Houston to Yaoundé, made it through customs, landed in high heat and humidity, hired transportation, found lodging, recruited and trained installers, and met with several villagers.

One of the villagers my brother introduced me to Mrs. Ngadena. This matriarch was one of the first settlers in the village Montama, situated in the dense, humid, equatorial forest in the Centre Region. We recognized that Mrs. Ngadena encountered many hurdles to settle in this region. If one was able to cross the river, surprisingly that fertile river basin land was free for claiming. It would have been impossible for Mrs. Ngadena to have made it there alone. Would be settlers needed to travel in groups helping each other through mud jungle terrain and sleeping in shifts to protect each other from jungle animal inhabitants. There were not infrequent encounters with buffalo, elephants, and panthers.

It is also a valley region with floodplains and wetlands. Despite having virtually no infrastructure in the 1980's, Mrs. Ngadena claimed a home here, having assessed the region's soil fertility to be conducive for her agricultural endeavors. She developed and farmed the land, and produced cacao crops that sustained her. She raised a family. She is now a grandmother and continues to farm her land.

Vianne could offer an amenity that most of us take for granted – electricity, an amenity that could ease some of the difficulties of living in her village, working the land, and raising her family. We provided Mrs. Ngadena with reliable electricity for home lighting and running electrical

equipment. She is also now the owner of a small 125 watt off grid solar system. Her family has extended hours into the evenings for work, and study hours for the grandchildren. They now are experiencing an illuminated family life.



Figure 1: Cocoa drying in a rural village in equatorial forest of Cameroon

Figure 2: Ngadena's fortitude was astounding to us. We were filled with appreciation of her stamina as we pondered how we were going to reach her.



Figure 3: We appreciated how she pioneered her way forging streams and rivers without bridges just as we pondered how to forge tenuous bridges with all of our equipment.

Figure 4: We were determined to match her determination. This determination indeed fuels Vianne's determinations



Figure 5: We succeeded – arriving on site with all the solar panels intact at night

Figure 6: Happy Mrs Ngadena. Provided a solar system for basic lighting and plug in basic electricity like AM radio.

