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Up Close: The Challenge to be Human

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Paige Flagge '18, Ellie Erickson '20, Janet Kwami, Yinglu Wang '18, and Associate Professor of Communication Studies Cynthia King show off stamps they made to print Adinkra cloth, a fabric made by the Ashanti people in Ghana.

UP CLOSE

The Challenge to be Human

Associate Professor of Communication Studies Janet Kwami teaches her students that moving beyond the “easy narrative” isn’t always easy.

As I answer a phone call from Janet Kwami I notice muffled conversations and noise in the background.

“Can you hear me OK?” asks Kwami. “I apologize. I’m just sitting down for a treatment.”

I can’t help but be amazed at the irony of the situation. A professor is taking a call from me at the hectic post-Thanksgiving break time. Also during a time when she’s receiving a chemotherapy treatment. And she’s the one apologizing.

But such is the nature of Kwami, who (I realize after only five minutes of speaking with her) is the epitome of strength, grace and quiet confidence.

Originally from Ghana, Kwami began teaching at Furman in 2009 after studying and researching in Ghana,

then the United Kingdom, and finally at the University of Oregon. With a background in international communication, Kwami focuses much of her research and teaching on communication systems globally and the use of digital technologies by marginalized communities in Africa and China, for which she’s received a multiyear National Science Foundation research grant. Kwami also leads a May X study away program in Ghana, where students experience true “backpack journalism,” learning the principles and ethics of multimedia storytelling.

“There’s a tendency by many in the Western culture to think they know best, and I want to encourage cultural humility in my students,”

explains Kwami. “Storytelling is an extremely effective tool. A single story can empower or disempower an entire culture or people. I encourage my students to listen, to collaborate and to really question to ensure they’re telling a multifaceted story.”

Kwami makes her point through the stereotypical illustration of the African child: “How many times have you seen the image of the barefoot, dirty, naked African child, belly protruded? At least a dozen, I’m sure,” she says. “That’s the easy narrative, the one everyone is familiar with. They treat the diverse cultures of the continent of Africa as ‘other’ and keep them in that space because it’s comfortable.

“The Ghana May X trip is eye-opening for my students because they realize that, unintentionally, they’ve bought into the narrative that’s been told to them. Sure, Ghana has its impoverished areas, but it has many developed areas as well, and the students are always amazed to realize that they have been influenced by an uninformed story.”

But for Kwami, it goes beyond teaching her students to be good communicators and storytellers. More importantly, she aims to teach them to be ethical; to be brave; to question; to push for the truth; and then to communicate that truth to an audience who may not want to hear it. She challenges them to be – in her own words – “human.”

“To be a good communicator, you must be open with yourself and open to others,” she explains, citing how she’s dealt with her current battle with cancer.

To be sure, her efforts haven’t been lost on her students. Says Emily Stokes, a 2017 graduate and former student of Kwami, “Dr. Kwami has been very forthcoming with her students about her battle with cancer . . . she even hosts classes over video chat while getting her treatments and makes herself available at all times – no matter what else she is dealing with personally.”

“Life can be difficult, but we are all built very strong,” says Kwami. “I continue to teach through it all because my students give me strength and energy . . . We are all learning together – through our research, through what we study and through life.” ●

– Lindsay Niedringhaus '07