

To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ My Hotel! Interview With Michael Sarpong



Should I start with my name? My name is Michael Sarpong, a citizen of Nkoranza. I stayed in Ghana for a number of years and I want to tell you my own story of why and how I got overseas. My wife had a health problem and she decided to go to the US for medical treatment. That was in 1987. She applied for a visa which was issued for two years and she left soon thereafter. During her stay, which was at the time that Reagan was president of the United States, she, together with many other foreigners, was granted amnesty and received a residence permit, because she had stayed for a certain number of years. My wife was lucky being there at that time and she began processing her papers towards permanent residence in the US. She called me over the telephone one day and told me about this and asked if I wanted to join her. I said all right.

At that time when I talked about my plans, people said: 'No, don't do that! Nkoranza is a village!' 'There is no light, no water, nothing in Nkoranza'. 'There is no road to Nkoranza, too!'. People told me to reconsider and build my hotel in any town but not in that small village of Nkoranza. But I said 'No, you wait and see'. And look at it now! Now there is electricity, now there is a tarred road, and now many people visit Nkoranza and the hotel is always full.

I believe in my goal and I have been right when I said: 'Very soon things will change.' Things changed! As a marketing man I am not short sighted. I plan for the far future and I must see how things are in a few or many years from now. That is my field: planning and concentrating on succeeding.

So even when I acquired the land people did not like it because it was too near to the cemetery. So what I did was this: I looked around and saw a good piece of land nearby. It belonged to the Presbyterian Church but it was not used. I said: 'That is the right piece of land which I need for my hotel!' I saw that the church had not made any lease and did not use the land and so I put sand and blocks on

it. One day they saw that someone was building on their land. I got a letter from the District Council summoning me to come and so I came. I asked 'What do you need me for'. They said the committee of the church had reported me to the Council for taking their plot. So we all met and sat down and then during that time the DS was a woman, Dora Adyei. And I presented my case to her, while the people too presented their case. She said to us: 'Oh but this is a good plan, this is good for the town! The town is developing and we have a lot of visitors and always we have to send them to Techiman so stay overnight. So when you, Michael, have decided to build a hotel here it is a good thing for the town and we should encourage you! People build houses for themselves and you are going to build a hotel which serves not just yourself but the whole town, so I decide to give the plot to you!' She then asked the other people to present their lease and their side-plan and all the papers and they had none. Dora said: 'Okay, this guy has a good project for the town so I am going to divide the plot into two, one is for the hotel and the other is for the Presbyterian Church. Half for you, the other half for you.'

So I started. I was again lucky for this was the time that they brought electricity to Nkoranza and started to improve the roads. I decided to hire the grader and level my land, that's why now the lawn is so beautiful! So that is how 'Mikesap' came into being. It is named after me: Michael Sarpong!

So I joined my wife in Washington and earned more money for my project and also gained more experience in hotel management over there in the USA. In 1990 I went to the States while in the meantime I continued working on my project, for that was my purpose in life, to run my own hotel!

I worked in all kind of different hotels in Washington so as to get as much experience in my field as I could gather. I worked in the Embassy Suite, the Marriott, the Holiday Inn, the Best Western, many of them! I gathered hotel-experience. I worked in housekeeping. I worked in the laundry. I worked at the front desk. I worked as a bellman. I also worked in a restaurant as a chef so, really, I was able to gain experience in almost all of the aspects of managing a hotel. Then I stopped working in hotels and went back to school to learn something about computers because the world is changing.

So now while I'm here in Ghana I put all my accounts on the computer in order to easily check it overseas. Up until now things were different and it was not easy to

supervise my hotel and the money from such a distance. People write things in a file and all kind of things can happen to that file includingly being burned! That's why I applied myself to learn computer science, to keep my accounts correct.

Then I decided to work a little more for the sake of gathering money towards my hotel and in a few years my wife and I will return to Ghana to enjoy life here in my home town. So that is the short story I wanted to tell you.

The hotel is a dream of my youth and now it is not only realized but extended with a conference hall and more rooms. I know why I chose my hotel as my purpose in life. At that time I was traveling a lot. I was the sales and marketing manager of the pharmaceutical company in Kumasi so day and night I had to be on the road. My experience led me to see that there was an excellent opportunity in the hotel business. I saw that there were some towns with nowhere to sleep. At times I had to sleep in my car. I realized then that in Nkoranza too there was no hotel and people slept at the lorry station or anywhere at all, in big lorries during the night. Yes there was the need for a hotel in Nkoranza. I am in marketing and I see that there is a good market here and so I decided to start my project.

Had I been a pharmacist then I would have gone into research or in the hospital-field but since I did marketing I saw that hotel business is where the market is. I had long made up my mind to make my future independently and not to spend my life as a working man for someone else.

So when I saw this hole in the market I immediately started investing in my own hotel here. I studied marketing here in Ghana at the University of Kumasi, after attending secondary school. I needed money to further my education at the university and since I was not all that rich I had to work for it. That was why I came to Nkoranza, my home town, and worked at Nkoranza Hospital. I met you and Dr. Konthuruthy there. At that time you were a young girl with long hair. Very young, maybe straight from medical school, and you were so quick in doing all kinds of operations and you didn't eat! You drank a beer and came back to see the patients and we all loved you! You came in 1973 and you left three months later. I left in 1975 to Kumasi. When you returned to Nkoranza in '83 I was still in Kumasi as the marketing man for this large pharmacy. I worked with them from '76 all the way to '90. My wife had already gone. She is now a US citizen and I am too. We are dual citizens. I've got a lot at stake in the US. I have two houses. That is because I saw that the housing business is good! At first we stayed in a mixed

neighborhood but it was very unpleasant, Africans made the place very noisy, so we decided to move to a better place and I bought a townhouse in a good neighborhood. Its equity has gone up since I bought it. So from the equity I bought a second house. My son is now going to university and my plan is that I will sell the town house and give the other house to my son. From the revenue of the townhouse I can invest in my business in Nkoranza here.

My wife and I are ready to come back to Ghana because we are reaching an age when we should slow down and enjoy our own town. We are in our fifties getting towards sixty and we have built up some pension funds which we can use to retire here. It won't be too much of the relaxing type! Since we have put much in the hotel we have to come home and invest more time in it. So it is not exactly retiring but here in Ghana we will enjoy life better, life is slower and sweeter. Of course I can go many times for a vacation to the US, I will have to do that. I have a lot of contact with the Ghanaian people in Washington who also one time or another want to return home. They don't have a reliable person to invest in Ghana for them. If I return here they can trust me to handle their affairs for them. Some want to build their own house and that sort of thing and they know I can do it. So that will be another business enterprise in a way. Nkoranza people, Kumasi people, Accra people, they all approach me to build for them here in Ghana. So I will have enough to do when I come home.

It is hard when you are old, sixty or more, to keep up the American pace. Here you can come home and do business and relax at the same time for it is home. So roughly in five or six years we will be home, enjoying, going around my business and relaxing. By that time the extension of the hotel will be completed, we'll have the 18 rooms and the conference hall on the second floor. It will be gorgeous.

It is important too keep it neat and gorgeous. That is why I have worked all these jobs in the hotels in Washington. Hotel business means cleanliness. If somebody comes to a hotel room and sees something dirty, that person won't come there again. The rooms, the bed sheets, the bathroom, all of it needs to be clean. I bring everything from the US. When I see that the bed sheets get old or the color is fading I give them away and replace them straight from the US. The rooms, the bath, the floor, I look at everything. I replace the shower curtains every time I come to Ghana. I buy all these things, the detergents, soap and spray, all, from the US.

When you get into a room in my hotel you see that it smells lovely and it looks good. All the time I dedicate them to keep the place clean, both outside and inside. So when I came this time we started painting the summer hut because, you know, that is the first appearance of the hotel business. If somebody comes and sees the cheerful appearance at first sight that person may develop an interest to come here and stay here always. You know last year I met a lady, a lawyer from Kintampo, who came to my hotel for lunch. She said: 'Oh this place is very neat. How much a room?' 'Can I go and look there?' 'Yes of course.' So they opened a room for her and she said: 'How beautiful! I am not going to Kintampo, I will stay here!' So the lady stayed here and said: 'This is my home, I will come and stay here each time I am around!' So she does.

So this is my priority and I am trying to get it through to the staff that maintenance is of key importance, inside out. It is not easy because I am away for a year but every day I talk with them, I call them daily on the phone. Also I ask people in town to go there and see what is happening, so they go there and report to me: this needs to be painted and that broke down and so on. And I call my people and tell them to accordingly. I had a problem with my hotel manager but now I interviewed a new person who is going to take charge as the next manager and I will be in touch with him each day till next year when I return. I used to come every other year but now I come one month during each year. I will lose two weeks pay in the States but I will come for it is important. I need to do the supervision here very well and I can see to the construction of the new wing. I may lose some pay but the loss will pay itself back.

My son too is closely connected to Ghana. Last year he started an internet café in Accra and he does it very well. As a student he has put all these machines together and made something out of it! So it seems he is also an industrious man, like his father. Maybe he is planning for his future. Ghana is a quiet country where you can live comfortably when you concentrate on doing your business well. It is good here, no troubles, it is safe, the weather, the environment, everything 'it is pleasant'.

We can do it, we Ghanaians, but it is hard work and you need to be serious. That is what made America rich, the small businesses like mine. Here too, that is what I tell people, we can do that here as well as in America. You start a small business and you employ some people. You help these people because at the end of the month they take something home as pay. And there is a variety of opportunities,

internet, a restaurant, Mexican food, Chinese rice, there is so much, you can create something for yourself! If only you are serious and keep to your goal then you will succeed.

That's what I keep saying. People don't want to invest with the little resources they have. They don't want to do something. They all want to build their own house and what do you get from a house? Nothing! At least you can invest in something that creates capital for yourself. A house creates no revenue. But my hotel does for every day I get revenue from it and it is an asset for me too, you see.

My mother is here in Nkoranza and is happy. She does not demand anything except transportation to go to the hospital if she needs her check up! You know why, because I look after her. Every month she gets something and so my mother is content. She lives in the village of Dotobaa. My father passed away some time ago. Next week I will go to the funeral of my mother in law and then we will return to the States. My wife is arriving in Accra today. We will be attending her mother's funeral together and then return to the States.

I am changing the restaurant and brought a lot of glasses and cutlery from the States. You know I am teaching them, before I return to the States, for they don't know how to set the table. They misplace stuff, I need to tell them where to put napkins and they need pepper and salt sets on the table. Next week I will buy those things in Kumasi. You will see that the restaurant will change! And next year I will employ a lady who has an advanced degree in catering and she will introduce a lot of new dishes to our customers.

I am always investing; that's how I am, I enjoy it. Whatever I do I use money to invest in the next opportunity and at the same time earn a revenue. That's what I do, invest in projects. How shall I explain that! It is called being an entrepreneur. I get a loan from America. I compare interest rates and I choose the US and I use that loan to keep investing.

Last year I got an award. My hotel got an award! They called it budget before, but now the hotel is a one star hotel. After two or three years, when finishing the building, I will go for the two stars. And so on. That is my goal. I will get another award, for my place is clean! There are so many people who are customers and always return because they love my place. Many are professionals, doctors and

agriculturists and so on. That's why I want this conference room, people ask for space for seminars. There is no such place in Nkoranza and people have to go as far away as Sunyani or Kumasi. They will love my place when it is ready, be sure of that! I will make my dream come true!

From the beginning I say to people you must have a goal! Even with everything I do or wherever I go I keep my goal in mind. For example I was in a store in Washington and saw a solar light and I thought: that is for my hotel and I bought it! Now it is here in the garden. I brought it with me when I came. People admire it and ask 'what is that?' So next time when I come I will bring a lot of them and make it more beautiful all the time. Light in town, no light in town, here in our hotel garden we will have our own solar garden lights where we can enjoy relaxing and drinking our beer! So by just keeping my goal in mind I am succeeding.