

# Spotlight: Robin Farnworth

With a degree in engineering physics, Robin Farnworth imagined that she would design new technology or do research to solve technical challenges in developing countries. She started reconsidering her ideas at the first EWB conference in 2002, as she listened to Bunker Roy, the founder of the Barefoot Colleges, speak about Westerners needing to “unlearn” everything they thought they knew.

“That conference really got me thinking,” Robin remembers. “Yes, you can do technology, and applying that to development is sexy and fun and cool, especially if you’re a dorky engineer. But that’s not what’s needed right now.”

For Robin, her dreams of working in development suddenly changed: from finding technical solutions, to finding a better understanding of the social, cultural, and economic factors at play. “I love the technical side,” Robin admits, “and I still wish it was that easy, that I could just come and solve a neat technical problem, but it’s not like that.”

Robin did go overseas with EWB in 2005. “I remember the day they called me to say I’d been selected. It was literally a dream come true,

something I'd been thinking about for ten years, something I really, really wanted to do – to at least be a part of trying to fix things in the world.”

She immersed herself in work with the agricultural sector in Ghana, learning how crop yields could be increased through improved agricultural inputs and training in agricultural techniques. Partnered with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture in Ghana, she concentrated on understanding how agricultural knowledge could be disseminated amongst farmers, so that more farmers could adopt the practices with the best results. As a result of Robin's pilot work, the Ministry partnered with EWB for a summer program involving EWB Junior Fellows placed in each of twelve districts to work on agricultural extension.

“The week before the Junior Fellows came,” Robin remembers, “I was spending days in meetings arranging everything for their placements, and spending nights arranging materials and documents for their training. I wanted to set those twelve people up for success and for them to have the best work experience possible. I stayed up all night when I had that kind of pressure on me. When it comes to setting people up and supporting others – that's when people in this organization really give'er.”

Before going overseas, Robin wrote a letter to herself. She opened it nearly a year into her placement and read it: “Change is really, really hard, and you probably won't be able to make change, so just learn a lot and build skills so that maybe, later, you can try to change something.”

Upon rereading that, Robin realized she had come to believe something very different. “I could create change. My expectations had gone through the roof about what I could change. And when I read that letter it broke my heart to think about how much more I could have changed, how much more I could have done.

“I think this is key,” Robin says quietly. “It's horrible and it's heartbreaking, but it's key to people continuing on in development. We need to see what we've done and say, ‘I could have done more.’

“That's why I went overseas. And that's why I'm here today. I've got to do more.”