

June 10, 2003

40th Peace Corps Anniversary

Back in Dakar preparing the house for receipt of our belongings, supposed to arrive this week sometime. Hired Mr. Cisse, electrician, to make some changes in lighting. David, the tailor, custom made mosquito netting for our bed. These gentlemen are the ultimate professionals. You call them, they're at the house in hours - not days. Their work is exceptional! David completed the job within 24 hours. He also helped us install it. The cost? I'm embarrassed to even discuss it. It is so reasonable. One of my favorite slogans, which I had printed on my business cards at Kennedy Flow Controls, was: "Cheap, Fast, Good -- Pick Two" That was always the case in the U.S. Here you get all three!

I had the pleasure and honor to attend the Celebration of the 40th Anniversary of Peace Corps in Senegal, and the 42nd anniversary of Peace Corps. Makes me feel old. It was held at Ebbetts Field. This baseball field sits on a cliff overlooking the Atlantic. A lot of softball gets played here. The attendees included everyone from the Peace Corps - Dakar office, volunteers - current, brand new, and former; U.S. Ambassador William Roth (former Peace Corps volunteer), the third highest official from the Senegalese Govt., other U.S. gov't. agencies and NGO's; host families from Thies - the town in which the Peace Corps training center is located. It was a grand affair: several speeches, most with substantial meaning; a band played anthems of both countries; hors d'oeuvres and soft drinks were served afterward.

There were many highlights. Two Peace Corps volunteers (PCV's) who are finishing up their tours gave farewell speeches in native languages: Wolof and Pulaar. I had no idea what they said, but, judging from the reaction of the audience's laughter and applause, they said it well. Four brand new volunteers gave speeches in the languages of Senegal: Sereer, Mandinka, Wolof and Pulaar. I'm sure that, when their training began three months ago, these volunteers had never even heard of these languages. During the program some 30 new volunteers were sworn in and given their assignments. Talk about a diverse group: from recent college graduates in their early 20's to women in their 50's. The majority appeared to be women - probably in the range of 60%-40%.

I hear people who are associated with Peace Corps often speak of the frustrations that confront PCV's. They join the Corps intent upon making significant, macro changes to people's lives in their host country. At the end of their 2 1/2 years they may look back and wonder if the well they helped to dig, if the windbreak they helped plant, if the children to whom they taught English, were all worth it. Gary Engleberg, a Peace Corps Volunteer in the late 60's, never left Senegal. He spoke about the experience of a fellow volunteer, Meghan. After Meghan's tour was complete she returned to Ohio, married and

had a child. Unfortunately Meghan died of cancer while still in her 30's. Her daughter was only 9 years old at the time.

When the daughter completed college, she decided to fulfill a dream. She wanted to visit that little village in Senegal that her mother had spoken of so often. When she arrived, the whole village turned out to meet her. She met one lady who produced a yellowed copy of an invitation to her mother's wedding. Another lady introduced her daughter, Meghan, named after her mother. She met other villagers who shared fond memories of things her mother said or did.

Meghan's daughter collected a few pebbles from the ground just before she left. When she arrived back home, she went to the cemetery. She placed the pebbles on her mother's grave.

I guess it's important to realize that the Peace Corps experience changes the lives of the volunteers, as well as those of the people they work with. From the story of Meghan we can also see that, from seemingly small actions, ripples are created that keep undulating through generations.

A la prochaine, Chuck