

## **Teaching in Sierra Leone: My First Real Job**

### **By Joy Marburger**

I decided to join the Peace Corps in 1969, after graduating from Allegheny College in 1968 and during my M.S. program at Bowling Green State University. My decision was based on several factors: disillusion with the Vietnam policy, a need to explore the world, and dissatisfaction with my M.S. program. A question in the Peace Corps application asked in which country I wanted to work – my response was India or somewhere in Africa. Needless to say, I had no clue that Africa was so diverse in geography, cultures and nations.

I ended up in Sierra Leone, or “Salone” in Creole, where I would be a secondary school teacher. Sierra Leone is a West African country about the size of South Carolina located about 7-10 degrees above the equator. The name Sierra Leone dates back to 1462, when a Portuguese explorer sailed down the coast of West Africa. There seems some dispute whether it was the shape or climatic conditions that influenced Pedro da Cintra to come up with “Sierra Lyoa” meaning Lion Mountains, since the coastal regions looked like “lion’s teeth”. Sixteenth century English sailors called it Sierra Leoa which evolved in the 17th Century to Sierra Leone. The British, who took over the country from the Portuguese, officially adopted the name Sierra Leone in 1787. British philanthropists founded the “Province of Freedom” which later became Freetown, a British crown colony and the principal base for the suppression of the slave trade. The local name for Freetown before the Europeans came was “Romarong” meaning the place of the wailers. This name came from the sounds of the constant weeping and screaming of victims of storms and cross current disasters at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River.

When I arrived in Sierra Leone, in the capital city, the heat and humidity overwhelmed me, since I grew up in the cool temperate climate of Meadville in Western Pennsylvania. All of us on the Pan American Airlines were exhausted from the 21-hr flight, which had a layover in Spain. The Sierra Leone government was under single party rule and a military coupe was occurring when we landed at Lungi Airport in Freetown. We eventually cleared customs and began our 6-wk training adventure by living with a family in the capital city to undergo “cultural adjustment” and learning the Creole language. The training experience was very memorable: first, the very hot food with staple ingredients of rice, cassava, and palm oil; second, the custom of eating the food with your hands; third, the very different attitude about what is “personal property”; and fourth, the total submersion in inquiry-based teaching methods we were supposed to use during our teaching assignment.

Sierra Leone is divided into four provinces, Northern, Eastern, Southern, and Western. There are 16 ethnic groups in the country; the Mende people are the largest group in the Southern and Eastern Provinces. My assignment was to teach biology and general science at a girl’s secondary school in Moyamba, the provincial capital of the Southern Province.

The school was operated by a Catholic order of nuns, the Sisters of St. Joseph. I lived in a modest cement block house equipped with electricity and running water. I had three other

female housemates, also teachers at the school; two were also PCVs and another was a Canadian volunteer. Since the Canadian and one of the PCVs had been there for a year already, they had hired a “steward” whose name was Brima, who took care of all the household tasks. This was a common practice among ex-patriots in the country. Brima had a great sense of humor, as did the other three volunteers. After dinner in the evening we would tell stories of all kinds, including Brima’s. Local neighbors would drop in unannounced, and the stories would continue. We had a local “band” in the neighborhood, which would play traditional SaLone songs at least once a month with hand-made instruments. I made a tape recording of their music, but by today’s standards, the audio quality is pretty bad.

Teaching science to Sierra Leonean girls ranging from 12 to 21 years of age was a real challenge. The educational system was based on the British System. Instead of grade levels 7-12, there were forms 1-5. The whole point of students going on to high school after elementary school was to pass the Ordinary Level exams to get into a college or technical school. These girls were a select, small minority of the general female population given the opportunity to get an education. They were attending school through government scholarships or family savings to pay for their schooling. Some students came from wealthy families living in Freetown. Many came from the rural areas around Moyamba, whose family income amounted to about \$360 a year. The school fees were around \$30 a year, so this was a substantial sacrifice for the rural families to send their daughters to school. Many did not finish high school, either because of family responsibilities, or they were married off.

What were my most memorable experiences as a teacher? I had the opportunity to start the fifth form science program at the school, which at that time had only forms 1-4. I had to work hard to learn the nuances of the British system of education, while at the same time, trying out the Socratic, inquiry based methods I had been taught during training. The students showed some resistance to inquiry thinking at first, since they had been taught to memorize all information since elementary school. I had more success teaching biology and general science in the lower forms (3 and 4) using inquiry based methods, since the students weren’t so pre-occupied with passing the exams that qualified them for college.

My encounters with the fauna around the area were also unusual. I became known as the “rescuer of animals in captivity”. Local people who had captured wild animals to make pets of them (or eat them) would bring them to me. I would pay them a leone or two (one or two dollars), and after observing the animals for awhile, I would release them back to the forest, where no one would see me doing this. I had at one time or another, a bush baby, mongoose, python, and an African falcon. The students and myself also had encounters with dangerous animals coming onto the school grounds: one day a tsetse fly (that causes sleeping sickness) came into the classroom through an open window and all the third form students ran from the classroom. One student killed the fly, and I insisted on inspecting it so I could identify a tsetse fly. We also had a green mamba come into our library. That snake was quickly removed from the building by the grounds-keeper. My most memorable experience with poisonous snakes occurred when I was preparing

lesson plans in our dining room. All the other volunteers were into town. Brima had finished cleaning up after dinner. I happened to look up from the paperwork, just as a snake slithered under the front door, and then went under my bedroom door. Brima entered the room and killed a 6-ft spitting cobra with a broom!

I try to keep abreast of what has happened to Sierra Leone since I left in 1972. I feel sad about the civil war conflicts that ravaged the country from the late 1980s until 2002. I am currently a member of a friends group working to return the Peace Corps to Sierra Leone. Much has changed there since I was a Volunteer. There are now websites and other electronic information about how the country is rebuilding itself. I often wonder what happened to my students, and whether they and their families survived the conflicts.

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