

I love helping students, which is the goal of another one of my projects: Camp SKY (Successful and Knowledgeable Youth). Organized by Peace Corps teachers, this annual nationwide camp brings together the best and brightest village students from all over Malawi to supplement their educations with two weeks of intensive learning. It fosters an environment where Volunteers are motivated to teach, students are eager to learn, and everyone has fun. At the end, exhausted but energized teachers and campers return to their communities with new skills and a renewed sense of hope. In theory, it's a win-win for everyone, especially the kids.

Camp SKY 2007 is my baby. With a skeleton team of devoted Volunteers, on a shoestring budget, I lead its planning and implementation, a monumental and maddening undertaking that tests every ounce of my patience and commitment. Within a limited third-world environment, we achieve the impossible from start to finish: organizing committees, holding meetings, visiting venues, drafting contracts, soliciting funding, transporting participants, writing curricula, teaching subjects, feeding hungry stomachs, fixing toilets, nursing illnesses, massaging egos, graduating proud youngsters — you name it, we do it. It is shitty and beautiful and worth every minute.

It all starts with a carefully chosen venue. Ours is Zomba Catholic, one of Malawi's best boarding schools, which sits on a quiet campus a few miles south of Zomba, the former colonial capital. Campers who usually make do in crumbling, rural schools without electricity and running water, receiving a barebones education (whatever teachers have the time and training to cover), luxuriate at Zomba Catholic in the opulence of landscaping, electricity, running water, science laboratories and a computer room. They gorge themselves at a buffet line of course offerings taught by Peace Corps Volunteers and, for the first time in their lives, experience what a good education feels like.

At camp, days are long. Energetic campers rise before dawn to sing and dance in the courtyard, meters away from the beds of exhausted counselors, who continue sleeping like corpses until breakfast. Starting immediately after breakfast, campers scurry to assemblies, classes (traditional, vocational, and arts), laboratories (computers and science), and events like movies and scavenger hunts. After putting them to bed, beleaguered organizers meet to commiserate, plan, and reload. It is an arduous, undeniably successful grind. But the truth is that most people don't know the half of it.

A BIG secret hangs over Camp SKY 2007, threatening to shut it down. Friends and family from the States have donated money to finance the undertaking, but days before the start of Camp, our local Malawian bank won't credit their American checks. Unbeknownst to our campers, suppliers or venue hosts, we are effectively broke, living day-to-day and tracking every expense. After countless meetings and pleas for help, the bank not only refuses to budge, but patronizes us with pithy overdraft protection (at a predatory interest rate) should we sink into the red.

"I have a question," I say to Stephen, our trusty Camp SKY treasurer.

"What is it?" he asks.

"How are our finances?"

"Hmm...I think we won't go bankrupt for another day or so," he replies, "But if we end the camp early, we don't have enough money to get everyone home."

"Wow, better than I expected," I shrug, "Keep up the good work."

For several edgy days, every penny is precious. We have planned to run the entire camp (hosting eighty students, ten Malawian teachers, and thirty Peace Corps Volunteers) for under ten-thousand U.S. dollars. Yet, given the circumstances, we have to make do with a fraction of that amount. Then,

at the eleventh hour, after flying for days on fumes (financially speaking), the money miraculously appears in our account. With a collective sigh of relief, we pay outstanding bills and resurrect expensive camp activities. A cloud has been lifted.

Throughout the ordeal, we maintain our composure with adept crisis management skills, which were honed by a major misfire that occurred prior to Camp. The occasion was an upscale fundraising dinner for Camp SKY in Lilongwe (the capital city), which drew well-to-do members of the American community, such as diplomats and NGO workers, to socialize and support the efforts of their lowly Peace Corps counterparts. The cause of the crisis was our cook — Norman, a lovable, but ornery and unapologetic, Peace Corps teacher from Puerto Rico. I should have seen it coming.

Norman is a Latin firecracker with long, straight hair and distinguished service stints in the United States Marines and Peace Corps. Looking for something original, he decided to cook drunken meatballs, a dish he learned to make as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Moldova. There was little resistance to the idea — when Norman decides to do something, you pretty much have to go along with it. And, honestly, it seemed like a good idea at the time. But, in hindsight, “seemed like a good idea” were famous last words.

“How are the food preparations coming along?” I asked him, entering the kitchen of our hosts, the Peace Corps Country Director and his wife.

“Get outta my farken kitchen,” he shouted me, “I like to work alone.”

“Norman, I just want to check on your progress, that’s all,” I said in a soft, compromising tone.

“Yeah, thanks for thinking of me, but I’m a big boy” he replied, kissing me on both cheeks, “Now get out!”

“Ok, you’ve got it under control,” I backed off, “The food smells delicious. I’m sure it will be a big hit with the guests.”

Turns out that I was wrong. A fabulous chef with no concept of kitchen sanitation or established food handling practices, Norman left the drunken meatballs sitting out overnight to “ferment.” Whatever this method did to enhance flavor, it also created a fertile Petri dish for harmful African bacteria. At the fundraiser, most of the attendees ate the meatballs and loved them. But the following morning, several of the organizers suffered intense stomach cramps interspersed with frequent, diarrheal sprints to the bathroom. After learning that most of our distinguished guests (including the U.S. Ambassador’s wife and son) were similarly afflicted, we promptly circulated an apology.

“On the evening of Thursday, October 11, Peace Corps Volunteers held a fundraising dinner at Dale and Jeanne Mosier’s house. Approximately 60 people attended, and proceeds went to Camp SKY 2007, a summer camp for under-privileged Malawian secondary school students. The event raised about 1,000 us dollars, which will greatly assist Volunteers to organize and manage this year’s camp. We earnestly thank all of those who attended and especially Dale and Jeanne for hosting the event. After the event many individuals experienced stomach problems. We sincerely apologize for this mishap and for any discomfort experienced by our guests. The cause of the problem has been discussed, and we have taken steps to ensure that it does not happen again. Hopefully this unfortunate incident will not reflect badly on Peace Corps, Camp SKY or our generous hosts.”

Little did our guests know, the “steps” taken were to graduate Norman from Peace Corps Malawi (his two years were up) and remove him from the country. As of 2010, he was living in the Pacific-island nation of Vanuatu, in the middle of a third Peace Corps tour. To the good people of Vanuatu, I say, “Beware of the drunken meatballs.”

So, was the camp worth it? Honestly, it’s hard to tell and probably impossible for us to know for sure. Yet, the camp was cheap (about eight-thousand dollars), and removed from our bank and gastrointestinal problems, most of the participants had a great time and got a taste of possibilities that lie ahead if they score well on the college entrance examination. Speaking for myself and my school, I notice important changes in the kids who attended. They are more self-assured and determined to succeed. They also seem to be taking what they learned from Camp and applying it to their village lives.

Gift is a perfect example. He has a proclivity for risky sex, and before attending Camp SKY, he was getting lots of it with young ladies deep in village fields. But at the Camp, he befriended a Volunteer from Minnesota named Bryce, who works at a health center in Southern Malawi. Bryce, a congenial guy and dedicated health teacher, took a liking to Gift and taught him about HIV transmission. After Camp, armed with this new knowledge, Gift decides to adopt a chaste lifestyle that just might save his life.

Back in Khwalala, I ask him how he’s faring.

“Are you still following Bryce’s advice?” I inquire one day after school.

“Yes, sir,” he replies, “I am very good since Camp SKY.”

“What is your secret? How do you avoid risky sex?” I wonder.

“Well,” he responds, “When I get excited, I exercise like you and bathe with cold water.”

I guess cold showers are universal.