

## **Everyone Thinks You're Slightly Crazy**

**By Neal Christiansen (Jordan, 2007-2009)**

Serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer is not an easy experience to relate. As a volunteer you find yourself trying on various roles but never fully adopting any one of them. You're a wide-eyed foreigner in a new land, but not a tourist. You're a US government employee, but aren't bound to officially represent American policy like embassy staffers. You're a development worker, but one who becomes a part of the village you're serving for two years. You're a member of the local community, know the language and customs and have made wonderful friends, but you're still ultimately that wide-eyed foreigner.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in Jordan (smack dab between Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the Palestinian Territories), my fellow volunteers and I struggled to come up with a simple and succinct explanation of what life is like for us serving in the Middle East. I think I've come close.

One summer midway through our service, the Peace Corps staff and Volunteers were invited to join the 4th of July party being thrown at the US embassy. Traveling from the humble farming village (population 400) where I spent most of my days to the razor-wire and machine-gun festooned embassy was odd enough; venturing past the security checkpoints to find barbecues, swimming pools and face-painting stalls was downright surreal (but boy oh boy, there is nothing quite like biting into that first hot dog when you haven't seen one in over a year).

The party was in full swing as the embassy's many American and Jordanian staff members and their families mingled. As the sun began to set a DJ was brought out who started playing American dance hits, disco, and even some salsa. As Volunteers living in conservative rural villages where "Western-style" dancing was frowned upon (and dancing with members of the opposite sex might get you expelled from the village) we seized the opportunity and raced to the dance floor to join the embassy's American staff members. The Jordanian staff, meanwhile, stayed on the sidelines and looked at us as though we were all slightly crazy.

Just when we thought we had had our fill, the DJ put on a new disc of Jordanian "debka" music (the debka is a traditional dance, most often seen at wedding parties, wherein a line of men or women-never mixed-hold hands and stamp their feet in rhythm with the music). At this, the Jordanian staff members came out to dance while the American staff members (some of whom rarely leave Amman, the relatively liberal and less-traditional capital of Jordan) took their seats. Of course having lived out in villages for so long and attended so many weddings, all the Peace Corps volunteers stayed out and joined the debka lines. The Jordanian staff and we had a marvelous time. The American staff, meanwhile, stayed on the sidelines and looked at us as though we were all slightly crazy.

That, I believe, is the Peace Corps experience in a nutshell: everyone thinks you're slightly crazy.

Though it may seem crazy to some, I've never had any regrets about coming all the way from my small Californian hometown to Jordan to spend two years of my life. Granted, this is not to say that my months here haven't had their difficulties. Finding a nest of venomous centipedes living in my bedroom last winter wasn't much fun. Nor was discovering for the first, second, and third (and fourth!) time that the classroom aids I made from scratch for the school where I teach English had been destroyed by some unattended students. Vexing also was trying to follow the 2008 presidential campaign (I'm a big politics buff) with only a tiny, crank radio at my disposal.

Yet in each of these challenges there have also been wonderful opportunities. Explaining in Arabic the intricacies of American democracy to folks in the village and watching the inauguration

of Barack Obama on a tiny TV with a neighboring family was a privilege and a joy which I will always treasure. Rebuilding those classroom aids time and time again allowed me to show my coworkers how they could incorporate such tools into their own lessons. And living with dozens of centipedes for a month taught me...that I never want to see another centipede for the rest of my life!

The Peace Corps likes to bill itself as a medium for encouraging friendship and understanding between people all around the world. Perhaps it is, but I've found that if all a Volunteer has to cling to are the big, esoteric ideals then they'll find their two years abroad tedious and grueling. What my colleagues in Jordan and I learned is that you have to be able to appreciate the small accomplishments.

Case in point: Ahmed Ali.

I am very proud of all of the students I taught at my small school. However, I was particularly pleased with the progress of one in particular, a shy fifth-grader named Ahmed Ali. When I first came to the school, Ahmed Ali was one of the lowest-performing students. He never raised his hand to answer questions and would often stare blankly at the wall or absentmindedly doodle on the pages of his school book during lessons. He, along with several other weak students, had pretty much been written off by most of the other teachers who would openly call him "stupid" and "very bad." Even my more sensitive coworkers expressed skepticism of his ability to ever improve.

Nevertheless I tried to encourage Ahmed Ali whenever I could. I would call on him to answer questions in class, even when he hadn't raised his hand, gently correct his mistakes, and praise him on the (unfortunately few) occasions he would answer a question correctly. Yet at the end of the first semester he still ended up with a final grade of a meager 34 percent.

Undeterred, I redoubled my efforts once the second semester began. I not only looked for ways to better Ahmed Ali's grasp of English but also for opportunities to make him a more active and responsible member of our class. He along with all of the students was at one point our Student of the Week (a concept my counterparts and I introduced to the school), charged with making sure all of his classmates were prepared and quiet for class each day. His face lit up when tasked with leading the other boys, which he excelled at. I would ask him to help me with special projects such as designing posters for our room; he particularly liked drawing a small picture of himself as part of a poster about ordinal numbers. I also congratulated him for his excellent efforts on assignments like our alphabet handwriting charts (a side project I created where each student had to complete handwriting charts for all the letters of the alphabet, their progress charted on a classroom poster to encourage friendly competition).

Before long, Ahmed Ali began to show more signs of improvement. He started raising his hand and participating during lessons, coming to me outside of class to ask for help, and he seemed to be in higher spirits throughout the day. When we had our second semester mid-term exam, Ahmed Ali scored a mark of 55 percent, a vast improvement over his previous exam. We were so proud of his accomplishment that my counterpart and I wrote a note home to his parents (an unusual occurrence at Jordanian schools) praising Ahmed Ali for his hard work and encouraging more of the same. He continued to show improvement throughout the remainder of the semester, and I was very happy to find that Ahmed Ali's final grade for the second semester was 68 percent, exactly double his score in the first semester.

Was it worth it? Two years of my life and thousands of taxpayers' dollars to help Ahmed Ali and his handful of classmates at a tiny school nestled in the mountains of northern Jordan? It's not an easy question to answer until you've experienced it for yourself. For my own part, I consider it an

honor to have served in the Peace Corps and I would do it all again in a heartbeat - though maybe without the centipedes next time.