

You Can Go Home Again

By Janet Lee

RPCV Ethiopia 1974-76

“Once a Peace Corps Volunteer, always a Peace Corps Volunteer.” Those words could not have rung more true as I returned to my adopted home country of Ethiopia in August 2009 and connected with current volunteers in Mekelle, Tigray Region. I returned to dedicate a library in memory of a colleague, Dr. Thomas Hooyman, a fellow faculty member at Regis University where I am a librarian and he a member of the Rueckert-Hartman College for Health Professions.

Nearly a year earlier, I had introduced Dr. Hooyman to Ato (Mr.) Yohannes Gebregeorgis, the Founder and Executive Director of Ethiopian Books for Children and Educational Foundation (EBCEF), an organization that is establishing children’s libraries in Ethiopia and working to build a reading culture through the introduction of high quality, locally-published bilingual children’s books. Dr. Hooyman conducted an interview with Ato Yohannes on the university radio station and during the interview the two men became fast friends and dreamt of building a literacy radio station together. A week later, Dr. Hooyman was killed in a motor vehicle accident and the task began of raising funds to establish a library in his memory.

During my Peace Corps days, I had never been to Mekelle. Volunteers were restricted from going that far north, after all I served during the overthrow of Haile Sellasie and the initial reign of Mengestu and the Derg, more formally referred to as the Provisional Military Advisory Committee. Times and circumstances have changed and Peace Corps Volunteers are once more assigned to Tigray. Mekelle turned out to be the perfect spot for building a memorial library to my friend, not too small and not too big.

Because the Peace Corps had been reintroduced into Ethiopia a year or so prior to my return, I contacted the Country Director who in turn forwarded to me email addresses of the volunteers in Mekelle, email in Ethiopia being my first hint at culture shock. I contacted the volunteers, Shelly McCreery (Illinois), Danielle Hoekwater (Michigan), and Nick Strnad (Ohio) to alert them of my arrival and the project at hand. They promised to set that week aside to help with the project and emailed me their cell phone numbers. Cell phones???? I didn’t even have electricity or running water during my stay. I was quickly set straight...the cell phone coverage was bad. There were rolling brownouts every second or third day. There were issues with the water. Perhaps things hadn’t changed so much after all.

I thought back on my days as a volunteer and reflected on niceties that I or others might have missed. So, I offered to bring any needed supplies: sanitary products, contact lens solution, chocolate? The response? Reese’s peanut butter cups, Cheez-Its, Peanut butter M & M’s, pretzels with salt. Would it be asking too much to ask for a Dr. Pepper? I tried, but it was confiscated in Amsterdam. I also remembered how difficult it was to find current reading material. Books would be passed on from one volunteer to another, often read by the light of a kerosene lantern. I carefully packed several copies of

Barack Obama's *Dreams from my Father* and Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*. I had met both authors, but their signed copies were securely left at home.

It is a pleasant 45 minute flight from Addis Ababa to Mekelle. We arrived the obligatory two hours ahead of time, took off, and enjoyed the smooth ride. As the plane neared the airport, the pilot circled the airport once, twice, three times as he made a determination that it was not safe to land due to the heavy rains. So, the plane flew back to Addis to wait it out. Everyone took this in stride. It was the rainy season after all. A few hours later, we boarded the plane and took off once again. This time the pilot could see the runway and we landed safely.

After we gathered our luggage, supplies, books, and computers, we proceeded to find taxis. All of a sudden I realized that I didn't speak the language. We were in Tigray and they were speaking Tigrigna, not the Amharic that I had studied further south. Then the rains hit again, a great deluge. The taxi driver took off, the muddy rain pelting the windshield. Only one of the two wipers worked; fortunately, it was on the driver's side. As he pulled over to the side of the road, I hoped that there was indeed a side of the road since the area was somewhat mountainous. All the while my young companion, Rachel Scott from the Seattle Public Library, held her hoodie over her head. I had visions that soon Ato Yohannes would be building "The Rachel and Janet Memorial Library." After a few more delays for the driver to pull in rain-soaked luggage from the roof of the taxi or clean off the wiper blades, we arrived at the hotel safely and took a deep breath.

The Volunteers came quickly to meet us and I distributed the goodies. The chocolate was a definite hit as were the books which would surely make the rounds. We made introductions all around and made plans to find places to eat, review the library project, and arrange site visits of the current Peace Corps projects. We were later joined by Cauchavius Watts (St. Louis) as he passed through Mekelle for a day on his way to Addis Ababa.

But first a visit to a typical Peace Corps residence in Mekelle. My first house as a Volunteer had a thick thatched roof; the second house was made of mud and eucalyptus branches. When the rains came I would stand at the door and listen to the rain pelt the roof. I was mesmerized by the heavy rain since it is a rare occurrence in Colorado. The houses in Mekelle were made of stone rather than mud, but a Peace Corps residence is much the same on the inside no matter what the region of the country: a couple of chairs, a table, a three-burner propane gas stove, open shelves rather than cupboards, a bed, a poster or two, and a map to remind the volunteer just exactly where he or she is. An outdoor kitchen was nearby, complete with a small wood pit for making injera, the local bread. And everywhere we walked we were followed by children yelling, "Camera! Camera!"

Still there was work to be done and we were on a mission. The Volunteers quickly jumped into organizing the books on the shelves, setting up two computers and a DVD player, cleaning, and interacting with the young students from the school. This gave us time to compare our experiences, frustrations, joys, and worst case illness (schistosomiasis, giardia). Many things had changed for the better. Much was still the same. Ethiopia is still a beautiful country with children who will easily steal your heart. Surprisingly, I think my living allowance was higher thirty-five years ago. We soon became a

true Peace Corps family, sharing my shower (not at the same time) complete with hot water, lip balm, water bottles, and Ethiopian food. The library dedication was beautiful, made all the more powerful because of our shared experiences. Shelly thanked Ato Yohannes profusely for bringing the library to Mekelle rather than setting it up in Addis Ababa.

The City of Mekelle was so impressed with our work and commitment, that it offered EBCEF the use of a magnificent building for a future library. As Ato Yohannes, Nick and I toured the facility, Nick commented, "Why do I get the feeling that I will be involved in this project?" Because Nick, you are my right-hand man. He later admitted that it was one of the best weeks he had in his Peace Corps experience.

Not only did we become a Peace Corps family, we continue to work together by proposing a Peace Corps Partnership grant in support of the new Mekelle Children and Youth Library which we will dedicate in August 2010, only a year after we first met.