

The world can be changed without everyone joining

When people find out about my early days in West Africa as a volunteer in the U.S. Peace Corps, questions range from "why'd you join?" to "weren't you afraid to travel halfway around the world?" My responses to those questions pretty much remain the same even after 35 years: I wanted to make a difference in the world and, yes, I was afraid. In fact, I was terrified. But fear of the unknown proved to be a miniscule part and easily slips into the background when I think of all that I came away with during those exploration years of my youth.

West Africa, much like today, was going through a difficult time, especially in Nigeria, the first country I settled in. It was just after the Biafran War and the country was trying to heal. Although the tribal war had left a country torn and battered, the spirit of the people was as strong as ever, and I was met with warmth, friendliness and an eagerness to learn about me and my Americanism as much as I hungered to learn about the West African culture and tradition.

After three months, I was trans-

ferred to Freetown, Sierra Leone, on the coast of West Africa, which is where I spent the bulk of my Peace Corps tour.

The people were equally friendly and the beauty of the land with its magnificent, deserted beaches and high-crested mountains rivals even the most exquisite scenery of our own Hawaii. During my tour, I was privileged to teach English to some children and secretarial skills to eager-to-learn young ladies.

Contrary to what we see in our newspapers and hear on news reports today about negativism towards Americans, the West African opinion of us was overwhelmingly friendly and curious about our American way of life. Not once was I ever made to feel unwanted or uncomfortable in either Nigeria or Sierra Leone.

The former President Kennedy's

dream was to promote peace and reach out to Third World countries in an effort to not only lend a hand, but to share with them the knowledge and good fortune that we, as Americans, experience daily living in this great country of ours.

That's why it saddens me when I see those dreams quashed by not only the horrors of war and terrorism, but also by the apathy of many adults toward the good fortune they take for granted in living in the land of the free.

Yes, there are trials and tribulations we must face every day across the nation that may get in the way of paying homage to our country: unexpected unemployment, the high price of gasoline, rising health care costs, skyrocketing grocery bills, college loan debts, tax bills that must be paid and everything else that makes us shake our heads in disgust and mutter under our breaths.

I'm as guilty as everyone else. I tend to forget what it was like living in a country that had most of its people on unemployment, no cars for that high-priced gasoline, little or no health care, outdoor markets rather



As I
see it

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SUNDAY, AUGUST 1, 2004

Peace Corps

than large grocery chains with shelves filled with hundreds of products, colleges filled with only the privileged able to afford an education and little tax bills attributed to little ownership. Most important of all, I forget that we have a government bent on democracy rather than a government not willing or able to turn the country around so that prosperity replaces poverty.

We may not always agree with the way our government works. Aside from the challenges of war and terrorism, justice often gets swept under the rug and wealth overshadows pride and craftsmanship. But when these thoughts creep into our minds, perhaps that's a good time to remember what we have and not what we don't have.

"Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." Those were Kennedy's words when he formed the Peace Corps, but you don't have to travel halfway around the world to share in the wealth of our great nation. We can start right here at home.

How? We can make a pact to encourage our sons and daughters to

appreciate what they have rather than listen to them wish for more. Instead of watching your son sit in front of a big screen television clicking on the remote and jumping from basketball to baseball, how about encouraging him to volunteer at a hospital or at a soup kitchen?

Rather than driving your daughter to a fancy department store for a new dress that could feed a family of four, how about helping her clean out an overflowing closet and packing up some unused clothing for the Salvation Army or the Red Cross?

And paying homage to the wonderful men and women of our Armed Forces that we celebrate and honor not often enough, how about asking both of them to give up those high-priced concert tickets and instead make a donation to a Veterans organization?

Perhaps the spirit of giving will bring enlightenment to our children and turn apathy into interest. It's worth a shot, isn't it? Kennedy thought so.

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