

## Alone is just a five-letter word

By Peg DeMarco - Special to The News Herald | Posted: Friday, June 3, 2016 10:31 pm

Have you ever been completely alone? Truly alone and about to panic?

In November 1969, three young women stepped off a jet in Lagos, Nigeria, to begin a two-year secretarial tour with the Peace Corps. Greeted by armed military through customs, the three, which included me, climbed into a Land Rover and traveled to their new temporary home, the third floor of an apartment building in the center of the city.

Lagos was recovering from the Biafran War that had taken its toll on one of the most prosperous nations in West Africa. Although there were still remnants of a war, the city bustled with activity from outdoor street markets, heavy foot traffic and honking horns of impatient drivers trying to gain an inch in the packed streets of the struggling city.

The Corps was being phased out of Nigeria due mostly to anti-war rallies in the U.S. and the Nigerian government was fed up. Three of us were sent to help close up shop.

We were curious, but didn't ask questions and instead unpacked. There was no electricity in parts of the city, including our apartment, so we shared stories by candlelight. The plumbing worked, but only between 3 and 7 a.m., so we took turns filling up the bathtub for use by all of us the next morning. Yes, it was a struggle, but we were determined 21-year-old women on a mission.

The temperature was hot and sticky 24 hours a day with no relief. The March rainy season was a long way off.

I was in Lagos for two weeks before the director told me I was being transferred to another location in the north. It meant settling in all over again and now I had to leave my two friends behind.

I stayed at the director's home in Kaduna and enjoyed a couple of days with his family. Then, one morning when he figured I was ready, he handed me the equivalent of \$100, told me to use it to



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“furnish my new apartment,” and dropped me off in front of a store called Kingsway. He pointed to one of three dirt roads off a roundabout and told me to find my own way back to the office.

I purchased pots, pans, sheets, and towels and was proud I had money left over. Once outside, however, I couldn't remember which road the director told me to take.

It was noon and the mercury was rising to its normal 120 degrees. I decided on the closest road and soon found myself quite alone with two heavy shopping bags in my arms and nothing but a panoramic view of dry parched land.

I was stubborn and didn't panic right away. However, fear has a way of quelling best intentions and soon thoughts of, “What on earth am I doing here,” took over.

I dropped the bundles, sat on the side of the road, and began to cry. The terror of being alone had replaced all the months of training the Corps had tried to instill in me.

The desert plays tricks on people who trespass on it and my sobs echoed around me. But then, suddenly, they mixed with the sound of children's laughter.

I looked up and two young Nigerian boys were in front of me and one was seated on a blue bicycle.

After a couple of minutes of trying to communicate with the boys who spoke Hausa, a tribal language that I had not yet mastered, one pointed to my sleeve and asked, “Peace Corps?”

“Yes!” I said, jumping up, knowing that my tie-dyed dress was the unofficial uniform of the volunteers.

One took my bundle while the other juggled the other bag on the handlebars of the bicycle. He then pointed in the direction which I started out from and, eventually, we were on the right road off the roundabout.

They handed me the bundles once we were in front of the Peace Corps office and the director, smoking his pipe, watched in the doorway as the boys bicycled away.

“Any problems?” he asked and I swore he chuckled.

“No,” I responded briskly, walking past him into the office.

I had survived. And that's when I realized that one is never truly alone as long as kindness exists in the world.

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