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Generation

Memory of the Peace Corps

Lots of people ask me about what life was like during my two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa during the late 1960s



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and then another two years in the early 1970s.

There are many stories and it's difficult to narrow down what to write about in a

short column, so I'll start with my favorite.

It was a time of unrest in America and in me. Like everyone else, I grieved when President John Kennedy was assassinated. He created the Peace Corps and his words, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country," rang out often as we sat glued to the TV watching his casket make its final journey to Arlington National Cemetery.

When his brother Robert Kennedy was assassinated, it was another blow to the unrest in all of us.

It was then, in 1969, that I joined the corps and picked the farthest place in the world to escape.

My first post was Nigeria, healing itself after its own civil war, and then another post in Sierra Leone to finish out my tour.

I ended up in Freetown, which was then a bustling city surrounded by beautiful mountains and sun-kissed beaches and not the war-ravaged city you see today on CNN.

I could easily write about the natural beauty of the land and the people of Freetown's kindred spirit as it was then, but this story is simply about a street beggar.

The beggar, whose name I never came to know, had a horrible case of leprosy. His fingers were almost all eaten away, and he could walk only with the help of a cane.

His clothes were ragged, he wore no shoes, and daily I would see him limping through the busy streets of Freetown, begging anyone who passed for money.

People were repelled by him and threw money on the ground just to get away from him. After weeks of trying to beg money from me without success, he blocked my way one morning and demanded that I give him some.

I threw a few pennies onto the ground and rushed away, but I knew that I could not continue

to do this for two years. I had to find a way to communicate.

I relayed my dilemma to Christie, my pupil to whom I was teaching secretarial skills.

"He doesn't want your money," she said with a sly grin, happy she could teach me a thing or two in exchange for learning the keyboard.

"Doesn't want it? He demands it!"

"This man eats well. I see him at every store in town, and the storekeepers throw him food. This man wants something more from you, and it isn't money or food. He wants your respect."

I thought about what she said, and the next day when the beggar came up to me, I shook my head no.

He started carrying on, yelling in his own language, and a crowd formed, but I kept shaking my head and folded my arms across my chest. It would have been easy to reach into my bag for three or four pennies and we both knew it.

Suddenly, the Freetown skies opened up and it began to rain. I flicked open my umbrella and turned to walk away. The beggar had grown quiet as the heavy, tropical rain beat down on him. I spun around and stepped closer to him.

"Stand under my umbrella until the rain passes," I commanded.

He gave me a surprised look, but inched his way under the umbrella.

We were silent for the few minutes it continued to rain and when the sun reappeared, I closed my umbrella, smiled, and walked away.

The following day I saw him again. This time, instead of demanding money from me, he put up his fingerless hand in a sort of wave and continued limping down the street.

This story may seem insignificant. I didn't change the world. I didn't help feed a nation or teach a school. But maybe that beggar and all the other African lives I touched during my years there remember me as I can, clearly and fondly, remember them.

Note: Portions of this story were delivered by Peg DeMarco during the "Journals of Peace" ceremonies, a 24-hour vigil of readings by Returned Peace Corps Volunteers held in the Capitol Rotunda in 1988 to mark 25 years since the death of John F. Kennedy.

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