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PASS THE TORCH: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT FROM MENTOR TO MENTEE

A Personal Account

On a quiet weekday, Sharon Milligan, a lifelong teacher and mentor met with myself, a former student and alumnus of The University of Findlay, Elisabeth George, to discuss one way of developing social responsibility through the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps is “an organization, designed to serve other countries, to teach others about America, and to educate Americans about other countries and its people.”¹ The main purpose of this interview was to provide a personal account of a volunteer experience in South Africa.

The interview took place on a Monday morning in a comfortable local restaurant that was calm and relatively quiet. Prior to the meeting, 14 questions were constructed and reviewed by a faculty member who has had volunteer experience. All questions were shared with the interviewer ahead of time; no changes were made.

First question was: *When did you develop a passion for missionary work?* Two past experiences motivated my mentor to join the Peace Corps: A speech by President John

Kennedy in 1961 and the loss of her mother in 1999. At a young age, Sharon recalled hearing a speech about the importance of the newly created Peace Corps and knew that one day she would participate. Delays occurred due to her education and work commitments. Then she lost her mother in 1999, allowing her to reflect on her mother’s life of community service, such as delivering meals-on-wheels and teaching Sunday school. Finally, at the age of 69, she started her training for this international adventure.

Preparation for the Peace Corps

She next described *her preparation for The Peace Corps*. From 2011 – 2013, my mentor went through an application period and received intensive training. The Peace Corps provides training that requires competence in various areas, including “technical, linguistic, cross-cultural, health, and safety and security.”¹ She needed to have a successful physical exam, provide appropriate references and education transcripts, and write two essays defining why she wanted to join the Peace Corps. At first she spent time studying Spanish due to the fact that with a college major in Spanish she thought that she would be assigned to a South American country. However, South Africa was offered to her and she chose to take it because she did not want to wait an additional year for a new assignment. After her application was approved, she had to get a series of shots and receive initial training in Philadelphia where she met her cohort group, then two months of training in South Africa before being placed in her village.

I was curious about the difficulty with joining the Peace Corps and asked about *the criteria for acceptance into the Peace Corps*. First, the applicant must be a USA citizen, older than 18 years, and have a bachelor’s degree or higher. The Peace Corps web site indicated that most positions required four years of college education and a foreign language, but not all required these criteria.¹ They needed to have



good physical and mental health; however, Sharon reported that they were not very strict about it. For example, one could have diabetes mellitus and could be approved, as long as the disease is controlled with medication. The applicant also had to be successful with their training. The training was very useful, teaching practical skills like how to take bucket baths (most living arrangements did not have showers or bathtubs), and how to kill, clean, and cook a chicken over an open fire. Luckily a modern KFC restaurant was in her shopping town!

Life in South Africa

I asked her *how long it took for her to assimilate to the life in South Africa*. My mentor relayed to me that when she first arrived in South Africa, she wondered what she got herself into, feeling a bit unsecure about her age and abilities, as almost all participants were in their twenties. Sharon explained “I cried three times...” The first time was in Detroit, MI when I was about to board the plane for South Africa, the second time was when I stepped into the room that was to be my home for the next two years. There was no electricity, a floor filled with ants, a noisy dog outside, no curtains, and only meager furniture (i.e., a bed and wardrobe). “However, after that first night she met some of the community members and other teachers, and her situation quickly improved. She was able to buy electricity for lighting and utilities, and at a modern department store affiliated with Walmart, buy all of her needs, including linoleum for the floor, a small stoven (combined oven and 2 burner hotplate), refrigerator, microwave, dishes, curtains, a chair, and a 25-gallon jug of drinking water. The school provided two desks/tables for my “kitchen supplies”, and one for school work. With a chair, toilet seat and bucket she was even able to rig up an indoor toilet. Her third time that she cried was the day that she had to

leave her little community in South Africa to return home after completing her 2year experience.



Figure 1. Sharon in her South African community

She next described what *her daily life was like in South Africa*. She explained that she could get almost anything at the “Game” store, a branch of Walmart, in her shopping town, (Lay potato chips, Oreo cookies, Rice Krispy cereal, KFC), 30 minutes by taxi from her village. However, the school lunches did not consist of this American type food, but typically the students would eat either rice and beans or “pap” a corn meal porridge plus boiled cabbage and butternut squash. Once a week, they would get a piece of fruit. “There was absolutely no waste”, everything was completely eaten. Lunch was at 9:45 a.m. because most children came to school hungry, without any breakfast.

With no proper bathroom, she would bathe using a large bucket after heating some water in her hot pot. At first, she did her own laundry by hand and hung it to dry outside, but soon the house girl of her host family offered to do the laundry for \$5 a week to supplement her income. After washing bed sheets by hand several times she considered this offer a bargain. During her training it was recommended that she wear long skirts or dresses but in her village it was acceptable to wear slacks and blouses so daily life was completely doable.



I was also interested in finding out about *her transportation in South Africa*. Peace Corps volunteers were not allowed to drive or own cars, but public transportation was inexpensive and dependable. Taxis (Toyota vans) passed by her home about every 15 minutes. The trip to Groblersdal, her shopping town, was 30 minutes from her village and cost 10 rand, about \$1 each way. She made a round trip on Saturdays for grocery shopping and supplies, and one on Sunday for service at the Methodist church. The traffic pattern is the reverse of the USA pattern, with cars driven on the left side of the road. So, for the safety of the American volunteers not accustomed to this driving pattern, and also to keep the volunteers bound closer to their villages and not traveling when they should be in their villages, owning and driving cars was banned.

Fun Times

She also described *the activities she did for fun*. Every Saturday, she would meet up with several other Peace Corps volunteers at a restaurant, catching up on their experiences. Back in her community she started a school garden that the students helped her tend. She would attend school athletic events, such as soccer, track and field, and cricket. She kept involved with her fifth-grade class through a book club, gardening and celebrating birthdays.

She also kept busy with her pets, a baboon named Julia, a female dog named Brownie and a little kitten named Pumpkin. Julia was owned by the grandfather of her student Prince, who got it from a shepherd. The shepherd had taken it because it was in response to the mother baboon stealing his food bag. He thought the mother would come back for the baby and he would get his food bag back. The shepherd had sold it to the grandfather for \$100 and in turn the grandfather tried to sell it to Sharon for \$200.

Brownie was owned by the grandson of her host family. Although very thin and full of fleas, she had a sweet disposition and was quick to learn to retrieve a tennis ball, sit, come, and lay down. Finally, little Pumpkin, a kitten, was found in the school garden pumpkin patch on Thanksgiving Day... (not celebrated in South Africa,) so school was in session. Julia was eventually taken to a baboon sanctuary, Brownie still lives with the host family, and Pumpkin was adopted by a vet technician. So, all have good homes after Sharon returned home.



Figure 2. Sharon and Little Pumpkin

Communication

Communication with the USA was relatively easy. The Peace Corps explained how to get proper phones and Sharon was able to call home on a daily basis with a calling card. She had her own mailbox in her shopping town and when her Visa card was compromised, a new one was delivered within one week via FEDEX. Internet service was available so she did not feel isolated.

Her communication with the students and community members was not too difficult as English was taught at the school beginning in kindergarten. Sepedi was their first language and students also had to learn *Afrikaans*, a combination of Dutch and German. Beginning in grade 4 all subjects were taught in English. Sharon's job in Peace Corps was to teach English to all 5th graders. That included



speaking, listening, reading comprehension, writing, and grammar. Students were hesitant to speak English in class until they were given pretend cell phones to talk with a partner. Book clubs were another example of involving students in reading and they loved watching videos in English, a reward on Fridays for good behavior during the week!

Special Experiences Outside the Community

My mentor relayed some of her *special experiences* that she had in South Africa. During school holidays Sharon had the opportunity to travel with several other Peace Corps volunteers to Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, the Seychelles Islands, Mauritius, and Madagascar in the Indian Ocean, Cape town, and Kruger National Park for a safari. Since school is year-round, divided into four terms, travel time was limited to the two week breaks in between terms. Volunteers were only allowed to be away from their villages two days a month so they had to stockpile their free days for travel.

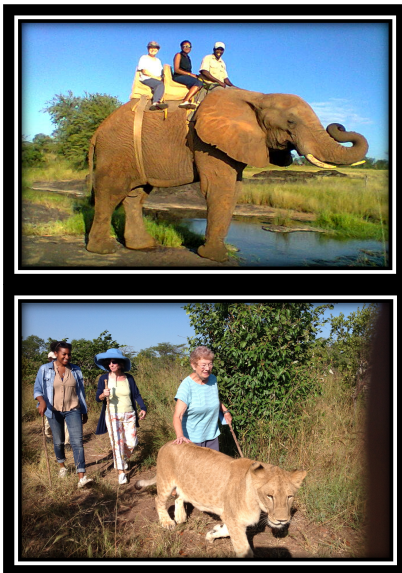


Figure 3. Riding an Elephant
Figure 4. Walking a Lion

Politics in South Africa

She explained the *political situation between the different races and communities*. Sharon's village consisted of native black Africans who had been displaced from the Durban area by the wealthy German, Dutch, and English white immigrants years ago, after years of enslavement and civil wars, tension still exists between these populations despite progress made by Nelson Mandela, making all citizens free. And the South Africans are prejudiced against the poorer immigrants from Zimbabwe who are now entering South Africa in search of jobs that would otherwise be filled by the local population. Unemployment is high as is alcoholism. The American Peace Corps volunteers however were accepted and not affected by this hatred from either group as they have over the years earned the respect from both groups based on their humanitarian efforts.

Benefits and Growth

I asked about *the benefits of her personal experience and the Peace Corps*. In short, my mentor explained that her Peace Corps experiences were "the best years of my life!" Many wonderful friendships were formed that will last a lifetime. From a practical standpoint, she said she became a better person, experiencing the importance of not wasting any resources, such as food, water, paper, and electricity. She returned home to the USA with a deeper appreciation of how blessed we are to live in America, enjoying a lifestyle of freedom and abundance.

Sharon also explained that the young college student could benefit both intellectually and financially. It is possible to work on a Master's degree through online classes offered by various universities while completing the Peace Corps experience.¹ If a student has loans from their undergraduate degree, they can be deferred until the Peace Corps experience is completed. Volunteers are paid a modest



monthly stipend for living expenses and an equal amount is deposited in a savings account to be given to the volunteer at the completion of their experience as a resettlement stipend to help with the transition to life back home.¹ Finally, health insurance, (i.e., medical and dental) and all medications are covered.¹ All of these benefits make the Peace Corps quite tempting!

Drawbacks and Challenges

I also asked about *the drawbacks of her experience*. One drawback had to be the ongoing anxiety that one feels when in a foreign country. Not being fluent in Sepedi or Africann made it difficult to relax although most people in her village did speak some English. In the bigger cities, pick pocketing was common. Sharon felt that because of her older age and the common misconception that all Americans were rich, that she was an easy target. She was bumped down once and her purse stolen but fortunately she attributes her guardian angel for getting everything back! The thief grabbed her purse, threw it over a wall, and it landed at the feet of several taxi drivers who were on the other side of the wall washing their taxi, and who returned her purse and all contents to her. So her daily prayer was answered that day to “keep me healthy, keep me safe, and surround me with good people!”

Future Plans

Lastly, I asked her about her *future plans*. Even though Sharon had an amazing experience in South Africa, she has no plans to return for another long-term experience. She did return to her village for a two-week visit in January, 2018 and was amazed by all the changes, especially a new, modern mall in her shopping town, and how much her former students had grown and matured in 2.5 years! Since returning to the USA she has participated in a one-week mission trip to

Nicaragua, and has enjoyed traveling with her brother to Russia, Greece, Israel, and Italy. In 2019 she took classes to become a certified Hancock County Master Gardener Volunteer. She has a passion for rescuing stray neighborhood cats and currently has 7 that she has tamed, named and now claims. Her mantra is “SPAY AND NEUTER!”

After reflecting on Sharon’s experience in South Africa, I think that one can benefit greatly by experiencing all that the Peace Corps has to offer.^{1,2} Not only did I learn from my mentor about the Peace Corps, I was encouraged to follow my dreams, no matter my age or life situation. There is great value with sharing yourself with others from different countries. Most importantly, one can learn more about yourself and the meaning of life, while serving others.

References

1. Peace Corps. *Work for the World*. <https://www.peacecorps.gov/> Accessed March 14, 2020.
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