



Newsletter of the Friends of Ghana

The Talking Drum

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Ken Autrey, Editor: autreyken@gmail.com**In This Issue...***(Click on the headline below to be taken to the article.)***50th Anniversary Events in D.C. and Ghana****Delano Gathers Information on 1967-69 Ghana PCVs****Message from FOG President Frank Yates****Friends of Ghana Privacy Policy****RPCV Dixie Brackman Serving with Peace Corps Fellows Program****Dance, Laugh, Drink. Save the Date: It's a Ghanaian Funeral****What the Peace Corps has Meant to Me: A 50th Anniversary Feature****50th Anniversary Events in D.C. and Ghana***Submitted by Ken Autrey*

The Peace Corps and the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA) have planned a multitude of activities through the summer to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Peace Corps. Because Ghana hosted the first Peace Corps Volunteers in 1961, this anniversary year is especially important for all who served in Ghana. On August 30 in Accra, there will be a Peace Corps Swearing-In Ceremony and a celebratory gathering of current and former volunteers.

Summer events in Washington and elsewhere in the U.S. are detailed in a schedule at <http://peacecorps2010.sched.org/>. Anniversary recognition in the nation's capitol will culminate in a series of events September 22-25. Some of the highlights include:

- NPCA Advocacy Day on the Hill - Thursday, Sept. 22
- NPCA Service Day - Friday, Sept. 23
- Conversations: The Future of Peace Corps - Saturday, Sept. 24
- Promise of the Peace Corps Gala Saturday - Sept. 24
- Arlington National Cemetery Presentation, Wreath Laying & Procession of Flags - Sunday, Sept. 25 (organized by RPCV/W)
- NPCA Closing Ceremony, Sunday, Sept. 25

Various dates through the summer are set aside for country of service reunions. See <http://www.peacecorpsconnect.org> for information on all festivities. FoG Treasurer Debby Prigal and others are working on a place in D.C. for a Ghana reunion the evening of September 23. For unfolding details, check the Friends of Ghana page on the Peace Corps Connect website and/or the Friends of Ghana website (<http://friendsofghana.org>).

Some Ghana RPCV groups are planning reunions concurrent with the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall on June 30. This is the date set aside for special recognition of Peace Corps programs in West Africa. For information on the group that served from 1967 to 1969, see related article ("Delano Gathers...").

FoG Vice President Craig Vickstrom has taken the lead in planning 50th Anniversary arrangements in Accra for late August. Under the "News" heading at the Friends of Ghana website, volunteers may access information on hotels and events. ★

Delano Gathers Information on 1967-69 Ghana PCVs*Submitted by Ken Autrey*

Frank Delano is gathering information on RPCVs who trained at Teachers College/Columbia University and went to Ghana with a secondary education group in 1967. Delano, with the assistance of Terry Fischer and others, has found contact information for 31 of the approximately 50 members of that group. At least three are now deceased. Anyone interested may contact Delano at fjdelano@gmail.com for the list.

He is arranging a reunion for noon, June 30, on the National Mall in D.C. This corresponds with the recognition of West African Peace Corps groups scheduled for that day in conjunction with the Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Those planning to attend should contact Delano, who is calling this gathering "Fufu 4U."

According to Delano, "Bob Montminy found the Rosetta Stone of our group, a version of the group photo with names listed by number." In addition, he says, "Terry Fischer dug out a copy of the group directory." ★





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Message from FOG President Frank Yates

Greetings to fellow Friends of Ghana members. Craig Vickstrom has been hard at work organizing the 50th Anniversary of Peace Corps activities in Accra, Ghana, around the August 30, 2011 date. Information about the planned events and recommended hotel accommodations are on the Friends of Ghana website, our page on Facebook, and our page on Peace Corps Connect.

Debby Prigal is also working hard to organize a reception in Washington, DC on Friday evening, September 23rd. We will announce the location as soon as it is confirmed. There will be many other 50th Anniversary activities in Washington, DC during that weekend, from Thursday, September 22nd through Sunday, September 25th.

Mary Jayne Cassidy has been working on a redesign of the Friends of Ghana website. She will roll out the new website about the same time as this newsletter comes out. The website address will remain the same.

We have also agreed to host a newsletter produced by current PCVs in Ghana, GYDlines, for the Gender & Youth Development project of Peace Corps Ghana. You can download their most recent issue [here](#).

The Friends of Ghana group on the Connected Peace Corps [site](#) now has 97 members, up from 92 last quarter. To join the Friends of Ghana group on the Connected Peace Corps site, click on the blue link "Join Friends of Ghana" on the right side above the array of Members photos. If you haven't yet joined, you can show brief information about yourself in your profile, post text messages, photos, videos, blogs, and comments to other members. As more of our members join this site, we can provide lists by year of service to facilitate the organization of reunions.

Friends of Ghana Privacy Policy

Submitted by President Frank Yates

Annually, the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA) provides Friends of Ghana (FoGh) access to the NPCA Database for the purpose of sharing the names and contact information of FoGh members. This exchange of data is essential for maintaining a complete, up-to-date database. The information shared include, but is not limited to: full name; country of service; dates of service; home mailing address; email address; phone number; and spouse/partner name. This information is not sold or transferred to any third party by FoGh and has been and will be used strictly for communication purposes with our members.

FoGh will use the shared information received from NPCA and our members for 1) Recruitment and retention of members to FoGh and NPCA; 2) Helping Ghana Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) to organize reunions of their Peace Corps groups; and 3) Assisting requestors to find Ghana RPCVs by sharing the requestor contact information with the Ghana RPCV (allowing the Ghana RPCV to decide whether to make contact with the requestor).

FoGh may be asked to provide the information in our database to NPCA. The use, by NPCA, of the information contained in our database will be governed by the same policy as FoGh. Members of FoGh have the opportunity to decline to have their data shared with NPCA. If you do not wish to have your data shared with NPCA, please email Ron Yamamoto at rkyamamoto@aol.com, or write Ron at 742 Arce Street. Watsonville, CA 95076 to opt out. ★

Ghana RPCV Dixie Brackman Serving with Peace Corps Fellows Program

Submitted by Kate Shachter

For some RPCVs, the Peace Corps Fellows program is one of the best options around for reevaluating life options after Peace Corps service. Dixie Brackman (Ghana 2005-2010) was a Small Enterprise Development volunteer at Kakum National Park, but is now teaching second graders through the PC Fellows program in Gallup, NM, as part of the Western New Mexico Gallup Graduate Studies Program to obtain her MAT degree.

She is in the same program as Chris Bosse, (Ghana 2005-2007, Ullo-Jirapa, Upper West) who is a year ahead. After accepting the first teaching job that was offered, Dixie's co-teacher left the school a few months later to have her baby. Dixie has had a steep learning curve in her new career working with the second graders, and the graduate classes have been demanding. But life has become easier over the year as the school, curriculum, procedures, and children all became familiar. Getting silly with Pajama Day is only a small piece of the fun. Still, according to Dixie: "I have never worked this hard in my whole life for so little money." ★



Dixie Brackman's second graders on Pajama Day



Dance, Laugh, Drink. Save the Date: It's a Ghanaian Funeral

From an article by Sam Dolnick in *The New York Times* (April 11, 2011)

At 2 a.m. on a Saturday in the Bronx, the dance floor was packed, the drinks were flowing and a knot of young women with stylish haircuts and towering heels had just arrived at the door, ready to plunge into the fray.

It could have been any nightclub or wedding hall — except for the T-shirts, posters and CDs bearing the photo of an elegant older woman. The raucous party was, in fact, a funeral for Gertrude Manye Ikol, a 65-year-old nurse from Ghana who had died two months earlier. A few blocks away, guests spilled out of an even more boisterous memorial.

The Irish may be known for their spirited wakes, but Ghanaians have perfected the over-the-top funeral. And in New York City, these parties anchor the social calendar of the fast-growing community of immigrants from that West African nation.

Held nearly every weekend in church auditoriums and social halls across the city, they are all-night affairs with open bars and window-rattling music. While the families are raising money to cover funeral expenses, teams of flourishing entrepreneurs — disc jockeys, photographers, videographers, bartenders and security guards — keep it all humming while turning a tidy profit.

There may or may not be a body present, or a clergyman. The beliefs expressed may be evangelical Christian, Roman Catholic or secular. The deceased may have died in New York or in Africa, a few days or a few months earlier. But the funerals all serve the same ends — as festive fund-raisers for bereaved families and as midnight reunions for Ghanaian nurses, students, scientists and cabdrivers looking to dance off the grind of immigrant life in New York.

“To us it’s a celebration, but to an American they see it as a place of sadness,” Manny Tamakloe, 27, an aircraft mechanic, shouted over the music as he sipped a Guinness at Mrs. Ikol’s funeral. “If you’re Ghanaian and you come here, you’ll see 10 or 12 people you know and they’ll introduce you to somebody. And before you know it, you know everybody.”

“Why go to the bar,” he asked, “when you can come here and get it for free?”

Weddings, christenings and birthdays are all celebrated heartily in Ghanaian circles, but few match the scale and decibel level of the memorial service. When Kojo Ampah, 34, finds himself without weekend plans, he phones his wide circle of fellow expatriates to ask, “Hey, is there any funeral?”

Generally come-one-come-all, the memorials have become larger and more frequent in recent years as New York City’s Ghanaian population has grown and become more settled, community leaders say. The latest census estimates show that there are about 21,000 Ghanaians in the city, mostly in the Bronx, up from 14,000 in 2005.

The parties are fervently anticipated, promoted weeks in advance with online advertisements or with stacks of glossy fliers that pile up at African restaurants and groceries. The fliers often resemble theater playbills, with photos of the grieving family and friends, known as the “chief mourners,” as well as credits for the M.C. and technical staff.

A well-attended funeral carries great social prestige — and the bigger the party, the better. On a Friday night when Mr. Tamakloe had already been to two, he described the arrangements for a stranger’s coming memorial in the Bronx.

“Everybody’s saying this is going to be the hottest funeral of the year,” he said.

Henry Boateng, an engineer, has spent months planning a funeral this Saturday for his father, Albert Ernest Boateng, who died in July in Ghana. At least 300 people will show up, he predicted.

The parties are a direct import from Ghana, where funerals are world-renowned for their size and extravagance. Coffins there sometimes resemble Mardi Gras floats; an athlete’s might be shaped like a soccer ball, a fisherman’s, like a canoe.

In Ghana, “the most significant cost you’re going to incur in your life is not going to be your wedding — it’s going to be your funeral,” said Brian Larkin, a Barnard College anthropology professor who studies West African culture.

“People get caught up in a competitive display,” he continued.

As in Ghana, funeral guests in New York need not know the deceased or even the family. But they are expected to pay respects to the bereaved, cut loose on the dance floor and donate \$50 to \$100 — though many do not pay — to help fly the body back to Africa or cover other costs. A big party can raise thousands of dollars. ★



Young dancer at a Ghanaian funeral in New York



What the Peace Corps has Meant to Me: A 50th Anniversary Feature

Submitted by various Ghana RPCVs as noted below

Life in a Compound House in Ghana (a journal excerpt)

Submitted by Tracy (Bever) Frank (Likpe-Mate, Volta Region, 1996)

It is a hot afternoon as I pass by the Mandor's compound and Mrs Mandor is making zomi (palm oil). She says I am to come learn how "so I can make it for my family when I return home". I am tired from my day of teaching but am excited to learn so I stay. First I watch and then I have to mash the already pounded palm fruits to make the "oil come out on time". I use all my strength and as people pass they comment on my work. "Oh you have tried" says one, another looks at me with an amazing accepting smile.

As we continue with the process (which is more important than the product) a lot is happening around us. The pregnant lady had twins last night and I am told "all of them girls". The old man in the compound seems ill and people are coming by to visit him. Daniel, age 4, comes and puts his head on my lap. He is tired and after months of me spending evenings here he sees me as a place to be comforted. I feel excepted. A small girl squats to the ground and an older girl pulls up her dress as something shoots out of her tiny black bottom. The grandmother brings a broom and metal sheet to clean it up and she wipes and washes the girl. Not all would agree but to me this is a very healthy and clean communal way of life. People pass and say "Bsia" the afternoon greeting in the local dialect of Sekpele and we reply "Wakato?" and then say "Uto", all is well.

The neighboring kitchen has finished cooking their meal but we are late to eat because of the palm oil process. I am invited to eat with them as 3 men sit down on stools around a big bowl of banku that sits on the ground. I graciously decline, but I know that a Ghanaian meal involves cooperation and joyful sharing. We finally eat our rice and kontomere stew with the fresh zomi and it is wonderful. It is getting dark as the dishes are finished, Mr Mandor listens to the news, and Daniel is almost asleep. "Abue", "abueo", goodnight I say as I go home and look forward to another day with my Ghanaian family at their compound where they so graciously welcome me.

Why I Value My Peace Corps Experience

Submitted by Frank Yates

The NPCA Peace Corps Service Questionnaire that I filled in a couple of months ago has made me think more retrospectively about my own Peace Corps service than I had previously. My major accomplishments were teaching my host-country counterparts how to do road surveying, drafting of roadway design plans, construction of wood-frame buildings, and steel-reinforced concrete construction. I was able to build a two-room office building in Takoradi on the Forestry Department compound.

I also built a two-room office building, two junior technical staff duplex houses, and three senior technical staff three-bedroom bungalows in Daboasi. I gained a great appreciation for the Ashanti/ Akan culture, including learning some of the language (I was never fluent), the kente and adinkra cloths, carved wood stools, talking drums, gold weights, the cuisine, and the traditions of the chiefs and queen mothers. I enjoyed getting to know the friendly people.

I enjoyed traveling around the country by public transport to "the four corners" of Ghana: Half Assini, Tarkwa, Obuasi, Kumasi, Sunyani, Wa, Lawra, Navrongo, Bolgatanga, Bawku, Tamale, Yendi, Mampong, Nkawkaw, Koforidua, Akosombo, Ho, Hohoe, Keta, Tema, Accra, Winneba, Cape Coast, and back to my post in Takoradi in about a month's time. I traveled by tro-tro, train, Benz bus, river ferry, minibus, lake ferry, and Ghana Transport bus.

My service was not all success. The four-mile road that I surveyed and designed was not built because the bulldozer was not delivered until two months before I left Ghana. I was unable to complete my building projects, even after three years of service, because window glass and other hardware items were in short supply. I purchased concrete pipe to construct a culvert as part of an access road across a stream. All the pipe sections were round on one end and oval on the other end! They were also made without any reinforcing steel. I had no power to reject the pipes in favor of well-made construction materials.

All-in-all, I really value my Peace Corps service, and still consider it one of the highlights of my life.

What Being a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ghana Has Meant to Me

Submitted by Craig Vickstrom

I learned patience. Events and people do not happen as you would like or expect. You need to accept that and be happy that you are still alive to be inconvenienced. I increased my sense of humor. If I had not, I would have been miserable with the seeming absurdity of the some of the situations I found myself in.

I gained a family. I had a surrogate father, mother, sisters, brothers, uncles, and cousins. People that I love and who love me to this day. We are in contact now just as family would be. My rooms in the family house are always waiting for me when I come home. Indeed, they are kept much the same I left them 16 years ago.

I gained friends. I was thrown together with the most intelligent, educated, self-aware, funny, independent and cool people I have ever met. I have not met their like; never before and never since. I am a bit of a misanthrope, and I generally do not like the human race. I find

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most people I meet to be rather boring and pedestrian, but not these people. My fellow PCVs were the epitome of interesting.

I had the ultimate job. I see in retrospect that I should have been a professional PCV. I did something useful and cool for my people, all of them. I opened up young minds to a greater awareness of the world in which we find ourselves. I haven't done anything better with my life, before or since.

PC ultimately inspired me to pursue a career in medicine. This is bittersweet. Practicing medicine in Ghana is extremely fulfilling and useful. I actually helped people, and saved lives on a daily basis. Practicing medicine in the USA has been an exercise in cynicism, futility, uselessness and waste.

I learned to eat hot food. I would never have understood the joy of chili peppers if not for PC. I can now eat food my family cannot even stand to smell. It broadened my culinary horizons to include Indian, Thai, and Mexican cuisines. The hottest of these cuisines are mild compared to the power of shitto.

I learned how to deal with want. Growing up in a working-class household in the Midwest, I always had electricity, food, telephone, television, water, refrigeration, air conditioning, light and sewage. I had to learn to do without while in the PC. It was useful to learn how most of the world lives. It certainly informed my politics with respect to public health and infrastructure spending. It also put in perspective just how much we waste back home. We squander precious resources like there is no tomorrow. Then again, to many Americans, there IS no tomorrow. The Rapture is coming, so we can just waste everything and pollute the planet with no repercussions. Religious nihilism, anyone?

I also had to deal with isolation, homesickness and loneliness. Now, this was really only an issue for the first few months. Going back to being a baby, of not knowing idioms, body language, basic customs and language was a lesson in humility. While it was no fun at the time, I realize humility is something I could do with a bit more of. In the long run, it provided a sense of accomplishment, because I was able to integrate myself into a different culture.

I dealt with debilitating illness for the first time in my life. Having grown up healthy in a public health and sanitation conscious Iowa, I was never truly sick growing up. I had the usual ear infections and sore throats, but no real, extended debilitating illnesses. Now for the first time I had dysentery, malaria, and numerous viri. I can remember being so weak after a combined bout of shigellosis, amoebiasis and malaria that it was all I could do to walk from my cot to my table to eat once a day. That lasted an entire month. I had never in my life been so weak. It was yet another lesson in humility.

I gained a new view of home. Standing outside, I could see the USA from a different perspective. For the first time, I could see clearly now what I loved most and admired my native country. I could see our well-paid, honest and efficient civil service. I could see the public health infrastructure that had been invisible before. I could see the exploitation, ruination and degradation that our neocolonial, imperialist foreign policy produces. I also gained an awareness of the pervasive racism in our culture. This new awareness has profoundly affected my politics for the better.

What my time as a PCV in Ghana means to me is the opening of my mind that I experienced. I learned a different metaphysics, in which the laws of nature can be set aside if one's actions are not approved by one's ancestors. In this metaphysics, the laws of nature as we know them can be set aside, often unpredictably. This has a profound impact on a person's worldview. I learned how differently a human life can be lived compared to what I was socialized in, and that it can be a very good life indeed.

I learned that although people may look different from me, their needs and wants are no different from my own. Their ways and means of fulfilling those needs may be different, but they are all just variations on a theme. Which brings me to the ultimate point: I learned that people are people, that human nature does not change (for the best and the worst), and that people really aren't that different, no matter where you go.

I realize this "oneness of humanity" is a trite, little bromide. But there is a difference of sincerity, of authenticity, of legitimacy when you have lived this and KNOW this, than when you come to this conclusion as a matter of political philosophy (however correct you may be in this). This certainty of knowledge is pervasive, and fundamentally alters the way you view the world and your actions within it.

Two Lessons Learned in Ghana

*(originally published as part of "Peace Corps Volunteer to Community Psychologist" in **The Community Psychologist**, 2004)*

Submitted by Paul Flaspohler (Liberia 1990 and Asamang, Ghana 1990-92)

Like many West African markets, the market in Asamang has thatch and bamboo market stalls where goods are sold. Unlike other village markets, a thirty foot water tower overlooks the market square. I understand that water towers serve one purpose: creating water pressure which drives water through pipes, valves, spigots, faucets, and toilets. But Asamang had almost none of these. I happened to have one of the few "flush" toilets in Asamang, which I was able to flush once a day with water carried from the nearest well. With no pipes to run through or spigots to turn on, the water tower was about as useful in Africa as a sunlamp.

The water tower emerged from a good idea. Someone became convinced that this was the key to moving Asamang into the modern age. Imagine, the person might have said, no more hauling buckets of water from the creek each morning. The villagers, inspired by the possibility of water on demand, joined together and erected the tower. But having used all their money and resources to construct the water tower, nothing was left for pipes, pumps, and plumbing. So the people continued to haul water each day in the same way they always had, in buckets balanced on their heads. The failure to deliver on promises of progress poisoned the well (so to speak), leaving the community reluctant to engage in future change efforts.

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The water tower was only one of several examples of development that moved in a direction opposite to the best of intentions. It was an object lesson that changed me from naively believing that wanting to do good things is enough. I learned that the best of intentions could often create something worse than nothing at all. But, in destitute countries, the “good intentions gone awry” scenario could render the community even more impoverished, materially and spiritually.

In West Africa, you learn that waiting is an active process. The deafening roar of rain on the corrugated metal school roof rendered teaching impossible for hours at a time. A bus only left when the bus was full. Letters home took weeks, making the time lapse between an information request and the response often more than a month. Success was really predicated upon an individual’s ability to “wait small” and “take time.” This was probably the most difficult lesson for many of us impatient Americans to learn. The deliberate deceleration was difficult to stomach, but real change rested on the ability to adapt to the pace and demands of life in West Africa. This meant learning to wait.

These lessons in patience are most useful when working in the community. It is said among community psychologists that 90% of the work that we do is “showing up.” In Ghana I learned about how to show up, about building and sustaining relationships in the community. Though I worked as a teacher during the day, my presence in the village during the evening was far more important. Little things like taking time to greet the elders, watching football matches, “chopping” fufu, and bargaining for a fair price for tomatoes in the market opened the door to bigger things like talking about using condoms to prevent the transmission of AIDS or promoting the benefits of fuel efficient cooking fires. ★

