

THE PEACE CORPS-INTERVIEW

Part 1

Independence Public Library

By Michelle Toale-Burke



“But if the life will not be easy, it will be rich and satisfying. For every young American who participates in the Peace Corps—who works in a foreign land—will know that he or she is sharing in the great common task of bringing to man that decent way of life which is the foundation of freedom and a condition of peace.”

-John F. Kennedy

Caitlin Britwum, Program Coordinator at the Independence Public Library, heard the call to join the Peace Corps in 2012. As a pre-med student at the University of Doane in Nebraska, Caitlin had a skill for readily adapting to new circumstances, an ability to persist through difficult situations, and a background in science. She felt these qualities would help her succeed as a Peace Corps volunteer.

With thoughts of travel and exploring other countries, Caitlin began reassessing her future plans to attend medical school. Being unattached with no ties to any particular location was also a consideration leading her to travel abroad. Although it would be difficult to get accepted, as it was a highly competitive program, it did not deter her. Those who knew Caitlin were not at all surprised to find out she was interested in bettering the world by traveling to foreign lands to do the hard work that is necessary to be a part of the Peace Corps team.

Let’s travel a bit further back in time. Caitlin was raised in Nebraska, although neither of her parents were originally from the area. Her mom was from Canada and her dad from Colorado. Without extended family nearby, long road trips were a normal part of growing up and necessary to visit relatives. Caitlin, her younger sister, and parents traveled to Canada twice a year. One way, this was a twelve-hour trip. They also traveled to Colorado about four or five

times a year, an eight-hour trip in each direction.

“As a kid she learned very quickly that there was a world outside of her backyard, simply by going to visit her family.”

Caitlin also attended summer camp each year. She met people from all over the state, which she said helped her to realize “there are people just like you all over the world, even if they don’t look like you.” Between high school and college, she traveled for extra-curricular activities. In college, she was part of the Honors Program which encouraged international travel. Previously, she was fortunate enough to study abroad in Ghana and also went on a service trip to India. Each of these experiences led her to realize she was not afraid to travel abroad and, in fact, she enjoyed cross-cultural interactions very much.

Caitlin applied to the Peace Corps in April 2012 and was officially accepted in January 2013. The process was long and tedious between the time of applying and her acceptance into the program. The first step was an in-person two-hour meeting with a recruiter that was recorded. Caitlin was asked many questions about her life history and her thoughts on many subjects. According to Caitlin, her recruiter was looking for a history of volunteer experience and also previous international travel. Caitlin emphasized that she “got the feeling that they would be a little hesitant to send someone abroad who had never traveled abroad before.” Although, she added that if you were accepted and found it wasn’t for you, they would allow you to go home without any judgment.

Caitlin met with her recruiter for a second time in September 2012. Hoping to help boost her application, she began to tutor a gentleman from Vietnam during this time. Besides these two meetings with her recruiter, she had no other contact with anyone from the Peace Corps until shortly after Christmas in 2012. Out of the blue she received an email that a woman out of D.C. would be doing a phone interview with her that also would be recorded. To her delight, in January 2013 she finally received an email telling her she was accepted to the Peace Corps!

“There was nobody there nudging you to turn your things in. If you missed a deadline, that was it and you were out. Many people said the long arduous process was a way to see if you would continue through the entire process and not give up.”



In June of 2013, Caitlin boarded an international flight to Kakata, a city in Liberia, where she would begin her Peace Corps training. After ten weeks of training, she would be ready to travel to Pleebo where she would be stationed as a secondary science teacher. Several volunteers in the group she trained with were licensed teachers, but they also had engineers and environmental scientists on the team. Caitlin was

twenty-one and the youngest in her group. The oldest there at the time was thirty-seven. In the group that followed her was a retired couple in their sixties that came to volunteer. Caitlin enjoyed the diversity of people she trained with.

Learning the ins and outs of daily life in Kakata was quite an experience. Life there was completely different, so the learning curve was high. Something as simple as grocery shopping was eye opening. “You weren’t sure what you could get at the market or how and when you could get your groceries”, according to Caitlin. This is just one of many things she had to learn in order to adapt and thrive in this new land.



Once she was ready to travel to Pleebo, located in Maryland County, Liberia, she embarked on the two-day trip. In the states traveling this far would have only taken about six hours, but due to poorly maintained roads and the rainy season, it was a long, arduous trip. There were times they were pushed through rivers because the water had crossed the road. Other times there would be a semi stuck up to its axles in mud that had to be dug out before they

could pass through. Her final destination, Pleebo, was thirty minutes from the ocean. The population was approximately fifteen thousand and was the economic hub of Maryland County.

Caitlin soon found out how important the ten weeks of training were, as she was now living without running water or electricity. Luckily, her neighbors had a well with a pump that was open for about thirty minutes in the morning. If she got up in time she was allowed to use it. If for some reason she missed the thirty-minute window in the morning her other neighbor also had a well she could draw from, although during the dry season it would get very low which then required double or triple filtration.

Shopping at the local market required bartering skills and learning how to navigate the market and not to get taken advantage of. Cooking was done in a coal pot shaped like a square stove that funneled down at the bottom where the ash would fall. This required buying giant bags of coal made by the locals and pieces of rubber to use as a fire starter. They would light the pieces of rubber on fire and fan, fan, fan. Hopefully, this would result in a fire. Between learning how to build, start, and cook with a fire, carry water in a five-gallon bucket on your head, and wash your clothes by hand and cook with fresh ingredients, perseverance and tenacity was very important.

Caitlin was beginning to hit her stride. She felt like she was making headway with her students and adapting well when Ebola hit the area.

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