

THE PEACE CORPS - INTERVIEW

Part 2

Independence Public Library

By Michelle Toale-Burke

When Caitlin arrived in Pleebo to teach tenth and eleventh grade physics and chemistry, the Peace Corps had only resumed their presence in Liberia for the past four years. This was due to the unrest of a long-running civil war.

Caitlin was teaching at the only public school in town. The school itself operated as an elementary school in the morning, a high school in the afternoon, and a night school in the evening. As Caitlin would arrive in the morning, the children would still be there and liked to gather around her as they found her fascinating and just didn't know what to make of her.



Word traveled fast in Pleebo, as everyone in town seemed to know where Caitlin was living. This was both a good and bad thing. The local children would gather right outside her house in front of the porch area. Most of the children had never met a white person in real-life before so they kept asking her questions such as: Do you drink water? If you cut yourself do you bleed? Can I touch your skin? Caitlin found all these questions quite interesting.

Effectively communicating with her students was a struggle at first, due to the language barrier. Liberians speak what is called Liberian English, which is a type of broken English. It's a very quick sounding language where they cut off a lot of words and use slang terms. For instance, asking someone "how are you?" is pronounced as "howdabody?", which literally means how is your body?

Liberia has a very hot and humid tropical climate all year with a rainy season from May to October due to the African monsoons. The rainy season made teaching much more difficult.

The building Caitlin taught in had an open ceiling plan with exposed tresses and no insulation, which made it impossible to hear one another over the sound of the torrential rain slamming the tin roof each day!

Teaching during the rainy season involved filling the chalkboard with notes for her students to copy down and then erasing it all and doing this again over and over. The following day Caitlin would hope for the rain to subside for at least an hour so she could get her lecture in before continuing with more notes.



A chalkboard and chalk were the only teaching aides available to her. There weren't any textbooks, pictures, or multi-media slides to use. If Caitlin needed to use a diagram she had to draw it herself. Experiments were a bit trickier. She would have to build her own model and figure out how to set-up the experiment with whatever items she could find. Every day it was necessary to just go with the flow.

Lunch consisted of authentic Liberian food made and brought in by a local woman that Caitlin could purchase for fifty cents a bowl. Caitlin ate exactly what the kids ate for lunch. If they got fish, she got fish. If they got chicken feet, she got it too.

In Liberia Caitlin traveled by bush taxi, which was a battered ancient sedan with two seats in the front and two in the back. If you didn't want to sit two in one seat, you would need to pay the driver double. Traveling also meant dealing with the checkpoints along the way. Caitlin soon found out that if the guards saw a white person in the taxi, they would want a bribe before letting them continue on their way. They also came up with any reason to charge the driver, which meant they would often look through the trunk to see what was there. For these reasons, Caitlin didn't like to travel much.

Rumors were beginning to surface that the Ebola virus was in surrounding countries. With no access to the internet, they were mostly in the dark about how severe the outbreak was and

how dangerous it was. Caitlin began to hear stories from her other Peace Corps friends stationed in Liberia that Ebola was in their town and people were dying.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the Ebola virus disease (EVD), formerly known as Ebola haemorrhagic fever, is a rare, severe, and often fatal illness in humans. The virus is transmitted to people from wild animals and spreads in the human population through human-to-human transmission, with the average EVD fatality rate being around fifty percent. EVD first appeared in 1976 in two simultaneous outbreaks, one in what is now Nzara, South Sudan, and the other in Yambuku, DRC. The latter occurred in a village near the Ebola River, from which the disease takes its name.

The 2014–2016 outbreak in West Africa was the largest Ebola outbreak since the virus was first discovered in 1976. The outbreak started in Guinea and then moved across land borders to Sierra Leone and Liberia.

In August 2014, the U.S. Ambassador to Liberia declared Ebola a disaster. This is according to the National Center for Biotechnology Information, a branch of the National Institute of Health. On August 6, the president of Liberia declared a state of emergency; and on August 8, the World Health Organization called Ebola in West Africa a public health emergency of international concern. The Western African Ebola virus epidemic was the most widespread outbreak of Ebola virus disease in history.



After completing her first year of teaching, Caitlin traveled back to the training site in Kakata where she would receive additional training for her next year of teaching and to assist with training a new group of Peace Corps volunteers. She was beginning to hit her stride and feel excited about the future when she got the call that Ebola was moving in on them.

To be continued...