

# THE PEACE CORPS INTERVIEW

## Part 3

### *Independence Public Library*

By Michelle Toale-Burke

*“Don’t ever let somebody tell you...You can’t do something. Not even me. All right? You got a dream, you gotta protect it. People can’t do something themselves, they wanna tell you you can’t do it. If you want something, go get it. Period.”*

-The Pursuit of Happiness

As Caitlin prepared to travel back to Kakata, a city in Liberia, around the end of July 2014 for additional training, she was unaware of the brewing storm called Ebola moving her way. With limited access to any news, she gathered enough clothes and supplies for the week, hailed a bush taxi, and was on her way.

Caitlin had been at the training site for three to four days when she received a message that there was a mandatory meeting for all volunteers on campus that evening. They all gathered together wondering what was going on. The Country Director told them that, as of that afternoon, the Peace Corps had decided that they were doing a mandatory evacuation of about two hundred Peace Corps Volunteers in three countries, which included Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. They were informed that there was no option, and everyone had to leave the area by the following Wednesday.

The group of volunteers in Kakata included the new trainees that had just arrived for their ten weeks of training, along with the other volunteers that had been stationed in Liberia for the past year. Everyone was shocked by the news, and the meeting ended as quickly as it began. Caitlin immediately tried to reach her roommate back in Pleebo by cell phone, but due to spotty service it took her some time to connect. Caitlin’s roommate informed her that she hadn’t heard anything about evacuating yet. Things were still a bit unclear as to the details.

Upon returning to campus, Caitlin searched out the Country Director to find out more about the situation. The Director reiterated that they were leaving by next Wednesday. Caitlin was adamant that she needed to return to her site to gather the rest of her things and say her goodbyes before leaving for the States. Caitlin was informed that she could not leave and

return to her site. Because they did not know exactly when their flight would be leaving, the Director told her that she absolutely could not return.

Needless to say, this didn't stop Caitlin from attempting to find a way to return for her things and say her goodbyes. She and others were very emotional at the thought of leaving so abruptly. Caitlin found the the Host Country National Director of Programming to see if she could get anywhere with him. He informed her that he was working on a way to get her back to Pleebo, as he was from the region. Finally, late that night Caitlin received a message that she would be leaving at 6:00 am the next morning with a driver. They would be taking one of the land rovers back to Pleebo straight through with no stops unless the driver needed a break. Caitlin was told she could not get out of the car except to use the bathroom, which would have to be along the road. If she needed anything else the driver would have to get it for her. They packed her food and water for the drive straight through. The driver would drop her off at her house to get her things and then pick up four more volunteers and head back. They pushed the flight as far out as they could.

Caitlin took off with the driver the next morning, driving straight through to Pleebo. Caitlin recalled having a strange feeling during the drive. She described it as feeling like an "other." She added that she still struggles to this day, as she felt like she put the driver in danger getting her there. Since it was the rainy season, they encountered water over the road, making it impossible to pass through. Luckily, they wound up finding two guys to push them through the water which was about four car links wide. The Land Rover had a snorkel on the engine to keep it from flooding out, which was wild. The water had risen all the way up to the windows of the vehicle as they were pushed through. The roads were in bad shape all the way.

They arrived in Pleebo around noon, which gave Caitlin ample time to gather her things and say her goodbyes. Not knowing if she would be returning or not, she gave the key to her house to the neighbors. They loaded up the land rover with all their things and they all sobbed at the thought of not knowing if or when or if they would return. Many of Caitlin's students were out of school at this time and working on farms, so she was unable to say goodbye to them, which was difficult for her.

The same rules, like no getting out of the vehicle, applied on the return trip. Bathroom stops were along the road, if needed. Upon returning, the volunteers gathered together in the campus compound awaiting their international flight back to the states. Once arriving in the States, Caitlin was still unsure if she would get the opportunity to go back. Soon she found out that the Peace Corps would be giving them all sixty days of administrative leave at \$30 a day. This wasn't too bad for Caitlin, as she was living back at home with her family. But Caitlin had a friend who was dropped off in San Diego and had no family there to help him. Thirty dollars a day was not enough to get by. Luckily, he had saved enough money and was able to fly to a

relative's house. The Peace Corps automatically sent volunteers back to their home of record, which was the address put on the application when they applied to the Peace Corps.

It was August when Caitlin returned home. By September, the Peace Corps had gotten word to all the volunteers that their service would end in September as an honorary discharge, so to speak. The reason stated about the time being cut short would be completion of service. As their service officially ended at the end of September, they were told they could apply again to the Peace Corps with no guarantees of acceptance. Six to eight months later, the Peace Corps officially ended service in the world with the exception of response volunteers that did short assignments of six to eight months.

Before leaving for the Peace Corps, Caitlin had sold her car and many other possessions. Now that she was back home, she had to figure out what to do and how to get around. Caitlin didn't have many options other than to quickly get a new job, which basically shut the door on any future Peace Corps plans. Without warning, Caitlin's life had drastically changed, and she struggled with the thought of not being able to complete the rest of her time in the Peace Corps. Caitlin loved her time and thrived as she served in Liberia. She was saddened at having to pivot so quickly into something else entirely.

After all was said and done, it turns out the county in Liberia that Caitlin lived in only had a small number of people infected with Ebola, and only two deaths. Looking back, Caitlin feels that the reason her area wasn't hit harder was due to the remote area and the poorly maintained roads. It kept them isolated from people coming to the area and spreading Ebola. This in itself was remarkable, as Ebola is very contagious. For example, if you had a paper cut on your finger and touched an infected person's sweaty arm, you could become infected with Ebola. Ebola is spread through all bodily fluids, including sweat. People had to cover their ears, nose, and eyes as any aspiration of fluids could spread it. Even after death, Ebola could be transmitted. This required them to revamp funeral practices, as the custom grieving process normally was very hands-on and involved touching the body and kissing the loved one goodbye.

Liberia had a lot of corruption in its government. Governmental officials took large amounts of incoming personal protection equipment (PPE), meant to help with the Ebola pandemic, and kept it for themselves. Meanwhile, others were struggling to get the facts out regarding Ebola to help put an end to the pandemic. Caitlin said there was a popular song on the radio at the time that was all about Ebola and washing your hands, etc. It was a catchy tune and people would go around singing it. When vaccines were disbursed to the area, the locals were slow to trust them. Some felt it was a way for the government to track them. Mistrust of local officials was rampant.

Caitlin looks back on her time in the Peace Corps with fondness. It was an experience of a

lifetime. The people she met and the things she learned while there would never have happened if she hadn't taken a chance and applied, even knowing how difficult it would be.

If you're a teen thinking about joining the Peace Corps, and you would like more information, please reach out to Caitlin at [iplprocoordinator@gmail.com](mailto:iplprocoordinator@gmail.com). You can also reach the library at 319-334-2470 or check for events and information at [www.independenceia.org/library](http://www.independenceia.org/library).