**BRINGING THE PEACE CORPS TO WESTERN NEW YORK**

**BUFFALO RPCV**

**NEWS OF THE RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS OF BUFFALO, NEW YORK**

This introduction will be short and sweet. We had a fantastic Annual General Meeting on Sunday, September 10th at Five Loaves Farmhouse - ideas were shared, laughs were had, and conversation ensued. Thank you all to attended. In this newsletter we have a comprehensive with new-to-Buffalo RPCV Brian VanDeBogert (Kenya ’05-’07), photos from our AGM, an invitation to a local Halloween party and all sorts of upcoming things to do and news from NPCA and Peace Corps.

Please enjoy this newsletter and I look forward to receiving essays, articles, musings, and more from our community. Any happenings, updates, social events, recipes or items of interest can be sent to RPCVofBuffaloWNY@gmail.com to be included in the newsletter. Thank you for reading and hope to see you soon. Go Bills. Squish the fish.

- Brett Claydon

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**2024 International Calendars and Note Cards for Sale!**

Everyone’s favorite annual gift, stocking stuffer, note cards for everything are here for the 2024 calendar year. Calendars are on sale for $20 and Note Cards for $10! Please email your order to jerititus@yahoo.com with pick up or delivery instructions.

Payments can be made in cash, check (to RPCV of Buffalo & WNY), or via Venmo (@Buffalo-RPCV). Get them before they’re gone!
Upcoming Events & Save the Dates

Sept 29: National Broadcast of A Towering Task on PBS World

Sept 30: National Broadcast of A Towering Task on PBS World


Oct 19: Jericho Road's Report to the Community Breakfast

Oct 1-8: Returned Peace Corps Volunteers Alliance for Ukraine | Peremoha Auction for Action

Oct 15: Peace Corps Tribute Garden Opening Celebration

Oct 26: WNY Refugee Film Festival Premiere: Strange Fish

A Note from the Editor:

Interested in writing an essay or article for the Buffalo RPCV Newsletter? Please send your typed piece with a title and your name to RPCVofBuffaloWNY@gmail.com. The article/essay can be a story during your service, an op-ed, a historical account, etc.

We want to hear from you! Any writing is welcome. This newsletter serves as a platform for RPCVs (and current PCVs) to express themselves fully.

We look forward to your Peace Corps musings, media, and anecdotes.
Tell us your name, your country of service, length of service, and the program that you were involved with in Peace Corps.
My name is Brian VanDeBogert, and I served in Kenya from 2005 to 2007. My Peace Corps cohort were focused on public health, with particular emphasis on HIV/AIDS. I was assigned to a health dispensary run by the African Inland Church in a rural Maasai village called Orinie. Orinie is located in Kajiado County, about 90 minutes’ drive south of Nairobi, Kenya’s capital city.

I was back in Kenya from 2016-2022 working with Catholic Relief Services and living in Nairobi. Thanks to that proximity I’ve had the pleasure of staying connected to my friends in Orinie in recent years.

During your time in Kenya, what was your 'typical' day like?
Every day was different. I worked closely with the staff of the dispensary, especially the head nurse Timothy. In Peace Corps lingo Timothy was my ‘counterpart’ but in my reality he was my mentor, cultural ambassador, interpreter, and friend rolled into one. I’d usually start out with Timothy at the dispensary and see where the day took me. I’d often meet with one of the local community groups in the afternoons. We worked particularly closely with a group of traditional birth attendants, who delivered most of the babies at home in Orinie. If I didn’t have anything else going on, I’d sometimes teach lessons on HIV and basic sanitation at Orinie Primary School. After my initial settling in period, I spent a lot of time moving around in support of my main project, which was promoting HIV testing services.
Give us an overview of Kenya. What’s the geography like? A little bit of the history, major industries, and demographics.

Kenya is like the world in miniature, with seven eco-climatic zones and incredible biodiversity shoehorned into an area twice the size of the state of Nevada. The equatorial landscapes range from some of the most inhospitable territory on earth to some of the most fertile. The built environment is also a study in extremes, from wide swaths of virtually ungoverned frontier territories to stiflingly crowded urban settlements. Giant ranches and factory farms blanket the land, leaving only scraps for the tiny subsistence plots in between. The spectrum oscillates from desperation to decadence across one of the world’s largest income divides. The country hums with a mix of tradition and modernity resulting from 42 recognized and interconnected ethnic groups.

Kenya’s economy and history has been shaped by rapid demographic growth, widespread reliance on rain-fed agricultural livelihoods, and natural limitations of its ecosystems. Especially in recent years, much of Kenyan society has become highly vulnerable to the impact of climate change. I’ll share three statistics that begin to illustrate the reasons for that vulnerability:

- **89 percent**: this is the portion of the Kenyan land that is categorized as either ‘arid’ or ‘semi-arid’, an area collectively known as the ‘ASALs’. The ASALs are particularly vulnerable to recurrent drought, especially in recent years.

- **2.2 percent**: This is the current annual population growth. While it has slowed considerably in recent decades, Kenya’s population has more than quadrupled since the first national census in 1969 and is squeezing the carrying capacity of the country.

- **Over 70 percent** of Kenyans work in the agricultural sector. Most eke out a living on small subsistence plots, picking tea or coffee, hacking at sugarcane, cutting flowers for export, or raising livestock. Over 98 percent of Kenyan agriculture is rain-fed.

This is always a question that I’ve encountered when discussing Kenya, and that is the Mau Mau uprising and the current, albeit, decreasing levels of tribalism that exist. Can you give us a summary on the Mau Mau uprising? Also, what is President Ruto doing to combat persistent tribalism?

Britain set up a protectorate over Kenya in 1895. Kenya’s first colonial governor Charles Eliot spoke of East Africa as “a tabula rasa, an almost untouched and sparsely inhabited country where we can do as we will”. Eliot’s administration launched a campaign to attract settlers from Britain to settle in East Africa and build a profitable export economy. Fast forward to the 1950s and the ‘White Highlands’ made-up 75 percent of the high-potential land in Kenya. Much of the land had been stolen from the Kikuyu, Kenya’s most populous ethnic group. The Mau Mau rebellion had its roots in the increasingly desperate situation the Kikuyu found themselves in.
For the Kikuyu, it was a fundamental battle for *Ithaka na Wiyathi*: land and freedom. The military response to the rebellion played out in the densely forested Aberdare mountains. Cloaked by the camouflage of the forest and sustained throughs secret supply chain from surrounding villages, the Mau Mau fighters held out for over two years. It took an entire battalion of soldiers imported from Britain and extensive cover from the Royal Air Force to defeat the Mau Mau forces in 1954.

The colonial authorities also set up a network of detention camps to house anyone suspected of involvement in Mau Mau. The torture and deprivation in the camps rivaled that of the Soviet Gulags. Denied due process, many were held long after the forest military operations had finished. No record survives of how many people died from the torture, hard labor, sexual abuse, malnutrition and starvation associated with the detention. However, anecdotal accounts and demographic analysis point to a death toll far greater than the official figure of 11,000 claimed by the British. I highly recommend Caroline Elkins' book *Britain's Gulag*, for the whole story of Mau Mau and the detention camps. The extent of the brutality of the camps had been covered up by the British for decades, until Elkins began interviewing Kikuyu survivors and uncovered the truth.

Kenya became independent in 1963, a few years after Mau Mau. Unfortunately, Kenya's first president Jomo Kenyatta embraced the colonial lesson of 'Divide and rule'. Successive administrations have followed suit, giving lip service to unity while fomenting tribal hatred behind the scenes. The exploitation of tribal divides is the primary approach that each administration has used to paper over poor governance and to resist a more equitable sharing of resources for all Kenyans. William Ruto assumed the presidency last year and has yet to demonstrate any meaningful change in direction. Ruto's credibility in this regard was already weak, as he was indicted by the International Criminal Court for inciting tribal violence in Kenya's infamous post-election riots of 2008.

**What was the most rewarding part of your service?**

At the time, the HIV prevalence in Kenya was over 6 percent nationally. However, it was (and is) a patchwork epidemic, with some areas well over 20 percent and others less than one percent prevalence. The rural Maasai communities in Kajiado were thought to be at the low end of the spectrum, although quality data was hard to come by. The concern was that the undetected HIV prevalence among the rural Maasai was higher than the reported figures, largely because of lack of testing. The nearest facility to provide HIV testing was the Kajiado district hospital, around 30 kilometers away.

Timothy and I set about establishing a voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) facility within the Orinie dispensary. We secured a bit of grant funding to support two community members to be trained as counselors and converted the dispensary storage closet into a testing room. We held a flashy launch event, in conjunction with World AIDS Day. We made announcements at all the local churches. I felt a rush of pride as our newly trained counselors reported for work at rural Kajiado's very first HIV testing center. And then...nothing. Nobody showed up. Weeks passed before getting even a single client. We had clearly not figured out the 'Voluntary' part of VCT. Everyone knew everyone and nobody wanted to be seen anywhere near our little testing station.
Patients arriving for other primary health care services would avert their eyes as they passed us. No amount of community mobilization seemed to make a difference.

One afternoon I escaped our floundering testing center to tag along with Timothy to Bissil, a highway town 20 kilometers south of Orinie. Bissel boasts the largest cattle market in the area and draws in buyers and sellers from all directions. Cattle are everything to the Maasai: financial stability, social status, pride, and tradition. Timothy and I realized we had stumbled upon our last, best chance to make HIV testing work in rural Maasailand. If clients wouldn’t come to us, we’d have to bring services to them. We used what was left of the grant money to buy tents and drew up a travel schedule. Our counselors began rotating through the cattle markets across the area, setting up tents just on the edge of the livestock pens. A switch flipped. Suddenly we had clients lining up well into the evening hours. Somehow, the kinetic energy of the livestock pen helped us get people excited about HIV testing as well. We ran with it, expanding into markets in the distant interior. On the longer journeys we’d test in the tents by day and sleep in them by night.

Nowadays there are much more extensive HIV testing and treatment services available in the area. However, mobile testing at the cattle markets is still widely used as one of the best means of promoting HIV testing in Maasailand.

And what was the most challenging part of your service?
Orinie was at the center of a historically devastating drought that stretched across the Horn of Africa in 2006. Though I had nothing to compare it to, everyone in the village said it was the worst drought in living memory. When the second consecutive rainy season failed to materialize, I started to notice that everyone in the village seemed stressed. Gone was the easygoing laughs and endless curiosity questions, replaced by tight smiles and frayed nerves. The weather became the only topic of conversation in Orinie. Everyone was worried about losing their cattle to starvation. Most of the young men ventured out for weeks on end with their emaciated herds, driven by rumors of greener pastures. Orinie became largely a village of women, children, and the elderly. As the slow-motion disaster dragged on, many families in Orinie lost their entire herds.

As tough as the 2006 drought was, Orinie has weathered even longer and more withering droughts in more recent years. Each year from 2019 through 2022 was a grab bag of partial rains, with the March-April season being particularly unreliable. Each cycle of disaster built on the scars of the previous one. Fortunately, 2023 has been better, with strong rains providing a semblance of recovery for the livestock economy. However, its painfully clear that climate change has become an existential threat to the Maasai way of life.

What was your favorite project? And why?
The mobile HIV testing campaign was my favorite project. However, I had a fun side project also. I raised money through the Peace Corps Partnership program to build a community center on the AIC Orinie compound. I remember being amazed that we could build a 2-room stone structure with less than $5,000, all funded through friends and family back home.
Over the years the facility has been used as a nursery school, a library, a youth center and a general meeting place for various groups. It's currently being used as office and meeting space for a local NGO that is working on building climate resilient livelihoods within the community.

**Let’s talk about food, what are some of the staples of the cuisine in Kenya?**
Kenyan cuisine has the reputation of being boring and bland. While I can’t argue with the fact that most of the staple foods are prepared without any spices, I do love Kenyan food. Most meals tend to be fresh, simple and made with local ingredients. The main staple is *Ugali*, which is corn meal boiled with water and solidified into a starchy mush that you eat with your hands. Ugali is often served with *maharagwe* (beans), *sukumawiki* (kale) or *nyama choma* (roasted meat, usually goat).

Tea is also huge in Kenya. It is usually served with the milk and heaping amounts of sugar already pre-mixed together. At tea break Kenyans love to also eat *chapati*, which is fried dough flattened out into a circle like a tortilla. I feel like chapati is like the pizza of Kenya, because everyone loves it. I wish I had chapati right now.

**And what was the food you wish you could have shared with the people of Kenya? And why that food?**
I come from Massachusetts’ north shore, where the most famous local delicacy is our roast beef sandwiches. North Shore beef is like a cousin of the Western NY beef on weck, but not quite the same. I would have loved to teleport some North Shore roast beef sandwiches to share with my friends in Orinie, especially because the Maasai are such big meat eaters to begin with.

**Describe one of the most comedic instances during your service:**
It is hard to choose one as I had a lot of misadventures that my Maasai friends still laugh about to this day. In one particularly memorable miscommunication, I promised a women’s group that I’d try to sell a few pieces of jewelry on their behalf to my friends and family back at home. I told them I thought I could move around 25 pieces. A week later the group’s chairwoman showed up at my front door, looking exhausted. She told me that all the members were working around the clock, but that they were struggling to fill the order. Only then did I realize they thought I’d asked EACH woman to produce 25 pieces of jewelry, rather than 25 collectively. I had unwittingly created a Maasai jewelry sweatshop.

**Last one, what is one thing that you wish Americans knew about Kenya?**
I’ll come back to the climate theme since that has been such a dominant narrative of my more recent visits to Orinie. I’d want people in the US to realize the impact climate change is already having on people’s lives and livelihoods in Kenya, and particularly the Maasai. For nearly two decades, I’ve been visiting my Maasai friends and watching as they march into the unknown of a new planet. After each trip I go back home to the US, where the attitudes around climate change really are from a different planet. For a disaster that is so much our own making, we are remarkably removed from it. Most in the US have not yet been forced to make meaningful sacrifices to their lifestyle. For most of us, climate change exists in the realm of abstract perception, especially when compared to the lived reality of the Maasai.
The Maasai take on climate change, on the other hand, is not beholden to atmospheric measurements or economic forecasts. They don’t need climate science to tell them what is happening to their animals, their land, or their weather. There is no climate denial in Maasailand. Nobody can deny what they can see, hear, and feel every day.
RPCV of Buffalo & Western New York
Annual General Meeting

Thank you to all the RPCV of Buffalo & Western New York members who attended the recent Annual General Meeting on Sunday, September 10th, at the Five Loaves Farmhouse. We look forward to seeing you at our next event!
Points of Interest

Hispanic Heritage Cultural Center Satellite & Buffalo Sunrise Rotary Club

The Buffalo Sunrise Rotary Club is interested in establishing a satellite club on the Westside in coordination with the Hispanic Heritage Cultural Center. (HHCC) The HHCC steering committee that is organizing the satellite group is searching for RPCVs who served in Spanish speaking countries and are interested in joining Rotary. Partnering for Peace, the Friends of Rotary and Peace Corps, is the nexus NPCA affiliate organization of Peace Corps and Rotary International. Both organizations are dedicated to promoting interpersonal friendship, intercultural understanding, and world peace.

If you are interested in joining the Westside Rotary Satellite Club though the HHCC, contact RPCV/Rotarian Anthony Agnello at (tony@afghanconnections.org) for more information.

PEACE CORPS JOB OPENING

Recruiter (FP-0301-7/5)
Office of Volunteer Recruitment and Selection
Office of Recruitment and Diversity

• Status Job Announcement Number: 23-12140615-JB (ST)
  “Who May Apply”: Federal employees—Competitive and Excepted Service Employees

• Public Job Announcement Number: 23-12140620-JB (DE)
  “Who May Apply”: Veterans, Individuals with Disabilities, and Open to the Public

This position reports directly to the Regional Recruitment Supervisor (RRS). If you meet the eligibility and qualifications requirements and you’re interested in being considered, please make sure to apply for the appropriate vacancy and follow ALL instructions correctly and completely. This opportunity has been posted to USAJobs.gov and can be accessed via the hyperlinks above.

The complete application package must be submitted by 11:59 PM (EST) on 10/06/2023 to receive consideration.

Tim Hartigan’s Hideaway

Tim’s article on improving the Peace Corps published in the Addison Independent

Tim’s blog about his service in Rwanda
Attention All Buffalo RPCVs!

Please Join us for a Halloween PARTY

OCTOBER 28TH  6:00 PM

105 Donaldson Road
Buffalo, NY 14208

RSVP on Facebook or to 716-725-7548
**BYOB and please bring a spooky treat to share
[WATCH] Peace Corps Connect 2023

On September 8–9, NPCA hosted more than 400 members of the Peace Corps community for the Virtual Peace Corps Connect 2023. During our virtual conference, we showcased a key continuation of service initiative that NPCA is implementing; announced the Loret Miller Ruppe Award finalists and the inaugural Ruppe Lifetime Achievement Award recipient, Peace Corps Worldwide; and joined leadership and members from the vibrant network of affiliate groups for the Affiliate Group Network Annual Meeting. We also welcomed an incredible line-up of guest speakers, including StoryCorps CEO Sandra Clark (Guinea-Bissau 1990–94) who gave an inspirational keynote address and moderated the engaging Raising Peace Corps Voices panel discussion, featuring RPCVs Nicole Banister (South Africa 2013–16), Alana DeJoseph (Mali 1992–94), and Andrew Wilson (Senegal 1994–97). Read more and find select videos from Peace Corps Connect 2023 below:

Annual General Membership Meeting | Opening Remarks with Carol Spahn | Continuation of Service Program Update | Ruppe Lifetime Achievement Award | Affiliate Group Network Annual Meeting | Women of Peace Corps Legacy Awards

Sunday, October 15 @ 11:30 a.m. MDT: Join Colorado State University in celebrating the opening of the Peace Corps Tribute Garden. All community members are welcome. Learn more and register.
THE PEACE CORPS UNVEILS AN INNOVATIVE PROGRAM THAT BRINGS AMERICAN PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS SHOULDER-TO-SHOULDER WITH FUTURE LEADERS AT CORPSAFRICA.

This historic partnership, announced amidst Peace Corps leadership participation in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and Climate Week events, reflects the agency’s commitment to global collaboration and sustainability.

Led by Liz Fanning (Morocco 1993-95) and recipient of the 2019 NPCA Sargent Shriver Award for Distinguished Humanitarian Service, CorpsAfrica joins hands with the Peace Corps to empower volunteers and African leaders embarking on a year of service.

As the Peace Corps continues to expand its footprint, it proudly announces the imminent arrival of volunteers in Sri Lanka, bringing the total number of actively serving volunteers to over 2,200 across 60 countries. This initiative marks a significant stride towards advancing development, nurturing friendships, and achieving sustainability goals on a global scale.

The CSIS Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs Project launches Driving Impact, a new podcast series that explores how Washington’s most influential policy leaders got their start. For the first episode, the Hon. Aaron Williams, shares his journey to becoming the 18th director of the Peace Corps.

Listen on Apple Podcasts and Spotify.
Vintage Peace Corps Poster of the Month

PSST.... HOW ABOUT A LITTLE ACTION?

ACTION is the Peace Corps. ACTION is VISTA. And 5 other volunteer programs. For more information, contact your Peace Corps and VISTA representatives.

B.C. FOR ACTION.
Do you have an announcement or item of interest to RPCVs?

All area RPCVs, Peace Corps supporters or interested persons are invited to submit event announcements, news items or other items which may be of interest to the Western New York RPCV community.

You may request for the information to be placed in the newsletter or as a separate email. Items submitted may be subject to editing and/or editorial discretion.

Submit to: rpcvofbuffalowny@gmail.com

RPCV Buffalo Board of Directors

Brett Claydon (Namibia), Chairperson

Ryan Ried (Lesotho), Treasurer

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Brett Claydon (Namibia), Newsletter Editor & Membership Webmaster

Alessandra Santarosa (Kosovo), Social Media Coordinator

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Audrey Seidel (Colombia), Programming

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Follow Us!

Visit Our Website!
RPCV/Buffalo membership is open to all returned Peace Corps Volunteers, active and friends of Peace Corps. Please complete the following and return with your membership dues (25.00 annually) payable to RPCV/Buffalo:

RPCV/Buffalo

105 Donaldson Road

Buffalo, NY 14208

Please check

Renewing Member ______  New Member ______

Are you a member of the National Peace Corps Association? Yes _____ No _____

I. Personal Information:

Name: (first) ____________________________  (last) ____________________________

Address: _________________________________________________________ (apt)

City:_____________________________________________________________________

State: __________________________________________    Zip: ____________________

Telephone: ___________________________ Cell: ____________________________

E-Mail: ______________________________

I. Peace Corps Service Information (if applicable):

Country(ies) of Service:

________________________________________________________

Dates of Service:

________________________________________________________

Primary Service Role:

________________________________________________________