

## Life and Art Enriched by Peace Corps



Bill and I talked about joining the Peace Corps when we were dating, 38 years ago. A very happy life together followed with an occasional, “We must stay healthy so we can join Peace Corps someday.” That day came July 1, 2007, at age 60, when we left for training and service in Jamaica.

The first month in Jamaica, we got to know our fellow group members, learned about the Jamaican culture and Patwa language. We lived with a Jamaican family of four in Danvers Pen in the parish of St. Thomas, southeast Jamaica, where we learned about Jamaican cooking, traditions, religions, and values. Our hosts, the Thompsons, are lovely people who took us to the river to bathe, helped put together a much needed fan and shared many a delicious fruit juice combination with us. We played with their young son and their teen daughter helped us with Patwa. After hurricane Dean and the loss of their water and electricity, and since we are “over 50” and use to our own space, we moved to an apartment in a nearby town, Seaforth.

Our jobs centered around the local primary school, Prospect Primary, grades 1-6, where Bill kept alive the 8 old computers, held computer classes and I was in charge of the library and literacy. Bill developed a wonderful, user-friendly computer program to track library books. With this, the students could use the computer in a productive way, learn to recognize and type their names and book titles, and feel a good sense of independence. Bill shared this program with other Peace Corps Volunteers and became the ‘go-to man’ for computer program development.

Thanks to lots of suggestions from former teacher friends, we used Winnie the Poo as positive reinforcement for good behavior in the library, we presented ‘Reader of the Month’ awards to students who showed a desire to read, we held a spelling bee and a reading contest, and we had Sight Word games available before and after school. For their new library building, we received a USAID grant to build more book shelves, tile the floor and fund a project to drain rainwater from the library area. Our home town supported our efforts with a “Book Fund” which funded over 100 books for the library.





While we developed an attachment to the town of Danvers Pen and to most of the students, it was obvious that we knew nothing of the complex art of teaching so, after the school year ended in July, we asked for a transfer out of the Youth Sector.

We were then assigned to the Environmental Sector and to Castleton Botanical Gardens in the parish of St. Mary, an hour's bus ride north of Kingston. Here, Bill was assigned to the Garden to help improve it. This would attract more visitors and therefore, uplift the local economy. I was assigned to the Community Development Committee which was interested in using local clay to provide employment in the area. As it actually worked, Bill and I worked in both places together.

We researched several versions of a Clay Project and in many forms. We talked with five potters, becoming very close to two, Belva and Donald Johnson, whose

knowledge of clay and glaze ingredients is beyond anything I have ever seen.



The Johnsons were open, giving, and so supportive of this project. We cannot say enough about their generosity, integrity, and impressive hard work.

One day, they taught us all the steps needed to get from raw, freshly dug clay to a clay body used to slip cast pottery pieces. This involved not only arm strength in mixing, but especially the ole brain muscle to determine how much water, soda ash and metasilicate (for deflocculating the clay) is needed and getting the ph right. All measuring and calculations were done with Donald's relationship charts and a kitchen scale. This was most impressive from my point of view as a potter with a ceramic supply business just down the road.

We developed a nice clay body using 50% Castleton clay/50% imported ball clay and we had a good plan for a clay processing business. Our grant request to the European Union was denied with questions of the environmental impact on the project at the clay digging site. This concern opened up too many regulations, fees, taxes and reports for us to continue. Another problem was that we needed to import ball clay to make the Castleton clay more useable. Importing and exporting to and from

Jamaica is exorbitant. The start-up capital we needed to import clay, buy a kiln (L&L Kilns of New Jersey offered us a 40% discount on a new electric kiln), and build a few tables, shelves and racks was very expensive compared to the seven or so people we could employ. The disparity was disappointing. Our final recommendation was to abandon the Clay Project.

On the bright side, we were able to start a plastic recycling project which is easy for people to use. We feel this project is sustainable. We were also able to register local farmers in hopes of obtaining government farmer benefits; started the acquisition of homes with Food For the Poor for two families; received a Jamaican grant to label Garden plants; convinced a distinguished, English, tropical plant horticulturist and his wife to visit and correctly inventory plants; and received a USAID grant to refurbish a Garden focal point, the 100 year old lily pond.

This last grant had an educational component so we convinced a third PCV to help us present a lesson on the merits of frogs to the local 9<sup>th</sup> grade class. We then asked the students to enter our frog contest to make posters about the life of a frog and the benefits frogs add to the world. We received 13 entries and displayed them during the Garden's annual exposition. The students seemed to have some fun with this and we feel they have a little more respect for amphibians.



Overall, there were lots of challenges to my sense of justice, challenges to my old ways of thinking of where I stand in the world, challenges to relationships and what is important. The most important thing we did, I believe, is to connect with and deeply care about people of Jamaica. In a world with so many culture clashes, this must be our most satisfying accomplishment. End

