

# THE AFRICA FILE, PART II: HELPING TO BUILD SUCCESS

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MEMBERS SHARE MORE STORIES OF PROGRESS FROM AROUND THE AFRICAN CONTINENT.

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*Last month, we presented some of the responses to our AFSANet invitation for Africa hands to share success stories. Here are more of those vignettes. Again, our thanks to all who contributed.*

— Susan Maitra, Senior Editor

## **Bicycle Diplomacy**

John Osiri is a village elder in a remote region of western Kenya, who is also the chairman of a rural AIDS support group. He became HIV-positive after inheriting his dead brother's wife, who had been infected by her husband. Osiri knew he could get the disease but was caught in a dilemma, as the culture of his Luo tribe dictates that the family line be continued through the practice of wife inheritance.

In June 2001, Osiri met an American photographer, Andrew Petkun, who had been documenting the human face of HIV/AIDS since 1999 throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Petkun was touring Kenya on behalf of Embassy Nairobi's public affairs section, working with local photojournalists.

"We are sometimes visited by people who take our pictures and show their concern, but then they go, and we never hear from them again," Osiri told Petkun. "If only we had a bicycle, so that we could visit other members of our group in the countryside whom we comfort..."

"You come from the land of Mr. Bush," Osiri continued. "All we ask is to live what is left of our lives with some dignity."

Petkun explained that working independently, without the backing of a charitable organization, he would be unable to help in a sustained way, but said he would tell Osiri's story to anyone who would listen back in America. In addition, from his own pocket Petkun gave Osiri \$100, enough money to feed the elder and his group for a month.

Petkun kept his promise and told Osiri's story to the people he lectured throughout the U.S. One State Department

colleague in Washington was so moved that she offered to help pay for a bicycle, as did Embassy Nairobi employees.

In March 2004, Public Affairs programmed Petkun once more, this time to travel with another group of Kenyan photojournalists to visit urban slums and villages and to talk to sex workers, widows, students, orphans, as well as volunteers and scientists who are making a difference in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

In three years, considerable progress had been made, with greater acknowledgement of the disease and positive actions being taken at numerous counseling and self-help centers throughout the country, with the commitment of the U.S. mission in Kenya, including USAID, the Centers for Disease Control, the U.S. Army Medical Research Unit and the Peace Corps.

There was also hope and progress for John Osiri. When Petkun returned to Osiri's village, the first words from a healthier and younger-looking Osiri were: "This is the bicycle." He then proceeded to introduce his two-year-old son, Andrew Petkun Osiri.

*Richard Mei Jr.  
Information Officer  
Embassy Nairobi*

## **The Last Flight to Enugu: A Slice of Life in Lagos**

Anybody who knows anything about Nigeria and Nigerian politics, an admittedly deep and perplexing topic, knows that April 18, 2003, was the day before Nigeria's presidential elections (and Good Friday to boot). Yet, I was foolhardy enough to think that we could leave our place on Victoria Island at 2:30, make an intermittent stop on Ikoyi to collect my colleague Kate, her husband Larry and their 2-year-old daughter Sara and still make a 5:30 flight. Boy, was I naïve and in for some very interesting life lessons. ...

As we meandered toward the airport, we became increasingly entangled in a traffic standoff with what I would

call a “crushmobile.” You guessed it: a small sedan maneuvered its way into the intersection blocking our heavy truck. Ahead of us lay the open road. In the midst of a gentle rain, I jumped out of the vehicle and, taking advantage of my thick American accent, appealed to the driver’s sense of patriotism. “We’re international election observers here to support Nigeria’s democratic dispensation; please let us pass.” (I later learned that was too much grammar. I could have just said “ejo-o” or “A-beg-o.”) Finally, she relented. Relieved, I signaled to our driver to move, but no sooner had the first obstacle been removed than another took its place.

Finally, we reached the airport, which was, in a word, chaos: people, cars, luggage. Our travel assistants said that as they did not have our tickets, they could not get boarding passes and that we had to talk to the airline manager, Chase. Despite our appeals, he did not or could not help us. At last he said, “Just go. We’ll work it out.”

We waited and waited, until finally the call came: “EAC Airline announces its flight to Enugu.” The ground crew had us queue in about four different lines and locations, ever careful to keep us off the plane. “Mothers with young children, please form a line here,” one attendant said. This game went on and on for an hour and 25 minutes. We could have flown to Enugu in the time it took us to queue. At one point, the word came that there were no more seats. Sorry-o. Kate was beside herself: she, Larry and Sara left.

Then, as the ground crew began to remove the stairs, a rich oga clad in a beautiful agbada appeared asking for seats for the family. I believe he ordinarily would have succeeded in getting his way but his entourage, including a wife and three children, was just too big. Watching the oga, my husband Zac said: “Wait here. We’re going to make it.”

And, almost as if by magic or divine intervention, Nigeria again surprised me. The crew returned the stairs and allowed us to board. A member of the flight crew gave me his seat and escorted Zac to the cockpit. We had boarded the last flight to Enugu.

The journey, I believe, holds lessons for Nigeria’s democratic dispensation. There will be obstacles along the path to national development. No sooner do you clear one than another will emerge. There will be points along the way where you won’t agree or don’t communicate effectively. Nevertheless, drawing upon your spirit of creativity, resourcefulness, persistence and love of country, I

am persuaded you will soar to even greater heights.

*Atim Eneida George  
Public Affairs Officer  
Consulate General Lagos*

### **Protecting Child Witnesses in South Africa**

Thousands of child witnesses pass through South Africa’s courts. As 33 courts handle sexual offenses alone and crime is endemic, the justice system depends to a great extent on the testimonies of young witnesses and victims of crime. Child witnesses, many of whom have endured abuse and

emotional trauma, lack an understanding of the court process. As a result, they provide ineffective testimony which, in turn, leads to fewer convictions.

With the support of USAID, the Unit for Child Witness Research and Training has developed and piloted South Africa’s first child witness preparation program. Dr. Karen Muller, a lawyer and researcher who

has devoted her career to assisting child witnesses, stores her most useful tools in a plain white plastic box in the office she and a colleague share at Cape Town’s Vista University. From the box emerge a puzzle, a court procedure timeline, role-playing games and “Zack and Thandi,” characters from a story of two child witnesses that allows children to feel they are not alone in witnessing crime.

Extensive research, 500 interviews with young witnesses and consultative workshops with judges, prosecutors, defense lawyers and police, have helped Child Witness Research gain an understanding of the fears and misperceptions that hamper children in the court room. Common misunderstandings relate to court terminology; many children, for example, confuse prosecutor with executor. Ninety percent of young witnesses wet themselves on the stand. Most children suffer emotional stress during long waiting periods before trials.

By law, child testimony in South Africa must take place in a separate room and be broadcast live in court on a closed-circuit TV system. Only the most distraught youngsters have access to an intermediary — a trained social worker who simplifies complex questions. Most children endure the intimidating trial process alone.

Child Witness Research developed a witness preparation program for children between the ages of 6 and 12. The children are introduced to the courtroom and its procedures; they are told how to talk, what to wear to trial, the meaning of an oath, their role in court and what happens on trial day.

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From the first trial test, the behavioral transformation among the children was beyond what any of the team had hoped. Children previously isolated by abuse and fear learned to trust each other. Reticent children started to speak, interact and participate. The program's impact may be best described by a mother interviewed after the pilot, "This program has given me back my child; her character has come back."

The Child Witness Research unit has finalized 10 hour-long modules that are highly adaptable to any context of work with young witnesses. The South African Justice Department has been closely consulted throughout the design of the program. New legislation is under consideration that would grant all child witnesses assistance from a court intermediary. The innovative child witness preparation program has already attracted the attention of international donors who have suggested it be adopted in other regions of Africa.

*Reverie Zurba  
Information Officer  
USAID, Pretoria*

### **Adventure and Hard Work in Niger**

Niger's problems remain enormous, perhaps insoluble. It's the world's second poorest country, with fragile institutions, and it's located in an environmentally harsh and politically turbulent region.

I title my orientation presentation to newly arrived Peace Corps trainees "Adventures in Service," emphasizing that to be successful in Niger they will need a taste for adventure as well as dedication to serving others. Most of them seem to have both in abundance. One recent event highlighted the adventure side of the ledger.

Three of our current Volunteers decided for their vacation to retrace the voyage down the Niger River of Mungo Park, the 19th-century explorer

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## ***The people of Volunteer Brendan St. Amant's village wanted one of these health huts, and Brendan made sure that they got it.***

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er who discovered and mapped its course. They took a bus from Niamey to Gao, in Mali, where they rented a bush taxi to take them to Timbuktu. After a couple of days there, they purchased a typical wooden pirogue and spent the next 18 days floating down the river from Timbuktu to Niamey. Just writing the place names evokes *National Geographic* images. What an adventure!

But the Peace Corps experience in Niger isn't all adventure. In fact, it's mostly hot, hard, frustrating work in difficult conditions and with few resources. Yet the Volunteers are able to accomplish a great deal for the people they are here to serve, and the satisfaction they get from this service matches the excitement life here can bring.

In Niger, the health system is rudimentary at best. There are hospitals, staffed by doctors, in a dozen of the largest towns; and clinics, staffed by nurses, in some of the larger regional villages. Most people, however, have little, if any, access to health care. Niger has fewer than 250 doctors (about the same number you would expect to find in an American city of 100,000 people) to serve a population of 12 million; and annual per capita expenditure on health care is about \$10 (compared to \$5,440 in the U.S.).

To bring some limited, very basic

health care to more of the population, the government has a program to build "health huts" in 1,000 rural villages over a five-year period. These are one- or two-room buildings staffed by a high-school graduate with a few weeks of medical training and stocked with some basic medicines and first aid supplies.

The people of Volunteer Brendan St. Amant's village, located 17 kilometers from the nearest rural clinic, wanted one of these health huts, and Brendan made sure they got it. He went with village leaders to approach government officials (access is much easier if you have a foreigner along), worked with the building contractor during construction, arranged training for a young man from the village to become the health worker, and persuaded Catholic Relief Services to provide the initial stock of medicine and supplies when the government proved unable to do so. In short, he was the driving force behind the project.

We visited Brendan and his health hut in December 2003, and he told us about some of the many obstacles he had to overcome and the frustrations he experienced. Such a facility might not be a very difficult project in America, but in rural Niger it is a monumental accomplishment.

Activities like this — multiplied by an average of 100 Volunteers a year and extended over the 42 years that the Peace Corps has been active in Niger — have surely had a positive impact on how Americans and America are perceived by the people of this country.

*J.R. Bullington  
Peace Corps Country  
Director  
Niamey*

### **Tennis as a Tool of Diplomacy in Madagascar**

Upon my arrival in Antananarivo, Madagascar, in August 1981, it was clear that the government of President Didier Ratsiraka adhered to a policy of

anti-Americanism. Public pronouncements and media coverage left no ambiguity on the subject. Ratsiraka, a self-proclaimed Marxist, admired North Korea's Kim Il Sung and counted as his allies the Soviet Union, East Germany, Cuba and Libya. Madagascar was one of the few countries voting at the U.N. in favor of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

I was the chargé d'affaires and, as a keen tennis player, I made friends with several tennis buffs among President Ratsiraka's more moderate advisers. Both the president and I exchanged views and information through these individuals, minimizing the need for face-to-face contact where Ratsiraka might have become defensive. Gradually he came to realize, through our persistent personal diplomacy, that we were not working at odds with his regime.

With Ambassador Fred Rondon in

Washington, I led the first bilateral negotiations (PL-480, Title I) with the socialist regime as my initial task in the country. The Reagan White House and the Malagasy leadership fully expected the negotiations to break down, though for different reasons. Our team remained steadfast, however, determined to see an agreement come to fruition. An agreement was achieved through a lot of tweaking and resulted in unexpected favorable publicity for the U.S.

Natural disasters, such as a series of five cyclones, subsequently gave us an opportunity to build upon this initial gesture of good will by providing economic and humanitarian assistance. As we worked to assist Madagascar in recognizing its self-inflicted economic problems, Ratsiraka remained obstinate, but his resistance gradually wore down.

The keys to American efforts in

turning his pro-Soviet regime to a more acceptable nonaligned policy were several. The constancy of the message delivered in a non-provocative manner to the Malagasy government by the U.S. embassy along with our Western allies and neutral colleagues was a major factor. The great support that we received from USAID's Regional Economic Development Support Offices in Kenya and backup in Washington provided the embassy with the means to demonstrate our good intentions.

President Ratsiraka's position on the U.S. softened to the point of acceptance of a greater American role in his country. This led to initiating a self-help program, inviting a Peace Corps contingent, establishing a USAID mission and close ties to American and French military training programs. Such activities were impossible to achieve in the political

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climate that existed in 1981.

One particular event stood out and was cited on numerous occasions by Ratsiraka as proof that he was attentive to American concerns. The question of Puerto Rico seemed destined to become an agenda item at the U.N. General Assembly in the autumn of 1982. It was an issue being monitored closely by the White House. As chargé, I explained the status and circumstances of Puerto Rico to several of my Malagasy tennis partners, asking specifically that this information be conveyed to Ratsiraka. He had already committed his support to his Cuban friends who were behind the initiative.

However, Ratsiraka became convinced by my argument and changed his position to an abstention. Although he felt he was betraying Cuba, President Ratsiraka used his change of vote as a showpiece of his good will toward the U.S. He was actively lobbying the radical non-aligned leaders for elite status in their select club at the time.

*William Boudreau*  
*FSO, Retired*  
*Seabrook Island, S.C.*

### **Assisting Nigeria's Gum Arabic Exports Boom**

"Two years ago, Nigeria could not export its gum arabic to the United States market, but today the story is different. We cannot even meet the U.S. demand," says Bello Abba Yakasai, national coordinator for the U.S. Agency for International Development's gum arabic program.

In early 2002, USAID began a gum arabic farming training program to ensure both higher yields and better quality of Nigerian-produced gum arabic, a natural compound used in many processed foods. Yakasai says the program helped establish the National Association of Gum Arabic Producers, Processors and Exporters of Nigeria, developed and upheld

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industry standards, enhanced the gum arabic trade and created jobs.

Working closely with private companies, the program has developed a profitable gum arabic market in northern Nigeria, Yakasai says. While Nigeria has exported 11,000 tons of gum arabic to the U.S. since the program began, he says U.S. companies are placing more orders for Grade 1, which is the highest grade.

"The U.S. market is ready to buy every ton of Grade 1-type gum arabic produced in Nigeria, but we do not have the capacity to supply them," says Bello Dantata, NAGAPPEN assistant national secretary and export manager of Dansa Food Processing, a subsidiary of the Dangote Group.

Dansa's collaboration with USAID is an excellent example of the program's benefits. Just two years into the program, Dantata gives proud tours of the Dansa quality control laboratory and of gum arabic warehouses, where scientifically produced, high-grade Nigerian gum arabic is ready for export to the U.S. and European markets.

Overall, the USAID program trained approximately 200 farmers and traders from Bauchi, Borno, Jigawa, Kano and Yobe states. These stakeholders learned better practices for the management of gum arabic

plantations to improve output and marketing. Meanwhile, the U.S. private sector helped by defining product standards, preparing training materials and providing technical advice during training workshops.

USAID also bought and installed laboratory equipment used to ensure and certify the quality of gum produced.

*Sani Mohammed*  
*Embassy Abuja*

### **"The Patient Dog Eats the Fattest Bone," Says U.S. Scholarship Winner**

Mercy Ighodalo was born on June 15, 1988, in Uromi, a village in Nigeria's Edo state. Her mother was a hairdresser, but due to financial constraints Mercy was handed over to a friend of her mother's in Lagos when she was 4 years old.

For seven years, Mercy lived in Ikeja, where she attended primary school until her mother's friend suddenly traveled overseas. Before traveling, the friend placed Mercy in another house and left money for Mercy to continue her education. However, the new guardian refused to further Mercy's education and decided to use her as house help instead.

In the new house, Mercy's foster siblings treated her badly, teasing her that she was an orphan. One day, after a bout of incessant teasing, Mercy fought back. Unfortunately, her will to stand up for herself prompted this newest guardian to throw Mercy out onto the Lagos streets. At the age of 12, Mercy found herself living on the streets of Lagos with no education, no family and no home.

Luckily, a policewoman found Mercy and took her to a police station, where she waited two months for the police to track down her guardian. By that time, the guardian had moved, forcing the police to place Mercy in

the Government Remand Home in Lagos. A social welfare officer there interviewed Mercy, discovered she was from Uromi and transferred her back to the Government Remand Home in Edo State.

In Edo, though, no one accepted Mercy's identity. Rejected by her own people in Uromi, she was placed in the St. Maria Goretti Girls Grammar School in Benin City. The principal of the school graciously accepted her, even though money was lacking to pay for her studies.

Finally, in January 2003, Mercy received an application for the U.S. ambassador's Girls' Scholarship Program. The program offered Mercy the possibility of finally completing her education. She applied and was accepted.

"I never knew of the possibility of having a scholarship," Mercy says. "It is a surprise to me and I thank God for

it." Mercy's scholarship was disbursed this year and is intended to cover one term's school fees.

"So the patient dog eventually ate the fattest bone," Mercy says, thanks to the U.S. scholarship program.

*Mike Hankey*  
Information Officer  
Consulate General Lagos

### Exchange Program Fuels Progress in Ghana

As a participant in this year's Senior Seminar, I did an individual research project that looked at the impact of time spent in North America on 12 Ghanaians who studied or worked abroad and then returned home, where they became agents of social change. My research focused not on the technical skills and knowledge the Ghanaians acquired in the U.S. and Canada, but on changes in their perspectives, attitudes and

values, and on how those changes affected their behavior and their aspirations for themselves and their country.

Their experiences provide valuable insights into how the United States, by offering academic and work opportunities to people from other countries, can contribute to building better, more liberal societies in the developing world.

These 12 (and many more like them) are putting into practice their new liberal values and attitudes in a broad range of fields, contributing to Ghana's development and serving as role models for the wider society. Their actions support and strengthen Ghana's reform program, which our government endorses and supports. With their American-style "can do" approach and a new willingness to take risks for change, they are setting a new standard, and paving the way

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for yet further progress. And where they can, they are building institutions inspired by their American experiences.

Without exception, they believe that their North American exposure is a key factor in making them who they are today. One of them summed it up nicely: "A lot of the people in Ghana who are making a difference are people who've developed a certain 'Western edge' to their skills, knowledge and values. Those who have lived and worked abroad, in responsible jobs where they had to be accountable, had to operate in a more democratic environment; they tend to bring something extra. ... There are very few people in Ghana [otherwise] who are likely to approach their work in a like manner."

For us as Americans (and as foreign policy professionals), an impor-

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tant lesson to be drawn from the transformation these Ghanaians experienced is that U.S. government exchange programs — and policies that make it possible for foreigners to come here through other means — are important tools in our foreign policy package. When foreigners

come here, they do more than gain skills and learn what America is like. Living and working in the United States can help them become people whose values, attitudes, and aspirations for their own countries are in harmony with our country's policies.

By practicing democratic values and modeling participatory citizenship — in big ways and small, in their classrooms and offices, in their everyday lives and on the public stage — these pioneers are building an environment in which democracy as a political system will have a better chance of surviving. And this is all part of a process that can help build a world that is better, and perhaps ultimately safer, for all of us.

*Brooks Anne Robinson  
Senior Seminar  
National Foreign Affairs  
Training Center ■*

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