



## **The Peace Corps, Botswana, Humility**

Mike Willegal, April 2020

In April of 2008. Kathleen Geenmun along with other new Peace Corps volunteers, arrived in Botswana, a landlocked country in the southern part of Africa. They were there to help stem the AIDS epidemic that was sweeping the country. Most of them did not know what they were getting into.

The first two months was spent learning the local language and culture. The Peace Corps trains their volunteers to lower their expectations. They are taught that they should not think that

they will change the people or make a difference. Greenmun was also taught that due to cultural differences, from time to time, she would surely offend the Batswana.

One cultural difference is dress, where Americans tend to be sloppy dressers compared to even the poorest Batswana. One morning, there was a small incident as she was about to leave her hosts home. Geenmun recalls, "I started walking out, and they have a panic because I was very wrinkled and they wanted to iron my clothes." Before she was allowed to go, they fired up the wood stove, which was then used to heat up their old-fashioned iron. Once the iron was hot, they were able to press her clothes and Geenmun was allowed to leave.

In 1966, when Botswana became independent from the United Kingdom, the American Peace Corps was invited to help establish the new government. The new government was led by an honest and far-sighted leader, Sir Seretse Khama, who set the country onto a unique, for Africa, track. Corruption in government was and remains low, and tribal rivalry greatly reduced when compared to other African countries.

At it's start, Botswana was the third poorest country in the world. From a very humble start, a moderate level of prosperity had been attained by the 1990's, partly due to the stable, honest, far-sighted government, and partly due to the discovery of some the world largest diamond deposits. With a stable government in place and an improving economic outlook, the Peace Corps left in 1997.

Starting in 1985, Botswana has had to deal with a serious AIDS epidemic. The country has the third worst rate of AIDS infection in the world and it threatens the country's economic progress. In 2003, the government of Botswana invited the American Peace Corps back to help.

Jenifer Jordan lived a sheltered life, first protected by her six older siblings and then by her husband, who managed their life and finances. She started seriously thinking about joining

the Peace Corps as her marriage began to fail. As married life got harder and harder for her, she got more serious about the Peace Corps and did some research. The first obstacle she encountered was that the Peace Corp only selected volunteers that had college degrees and she didn't have one. The day her marriage ended, she started college, partly with a view toward joining the Peace Corps. She says, "I wanted to get out of my bubble."

As college graduation neared, Jordan started the application process for the Peace Corps, which she found out, is not simple or rapid. It took a year before she was accepted. As part of the process she was able to declare her most preferred locations for assignment. Her top preference was southern Africa. She really wanted to get out and see the world and experience life on her own. She got her wish and was selected to go to Botswana as a life skills technical advisor. Her job would be teaching life skills to kids in a junior secondary school.



### Jordan's House was Part of a Family's Compound

The geographic feature in Botswana best known to westerners is the Serengeti Desert. Jordan hoped she would be posted out in the desert somewhere, far away from civilization. Instead, she was posted to Molepolole, a village of 70,000 people about an hour's ride in a crowded bus from the capital of Gaborone. She was given her own house within a family compound. In retrospect, she says that this posting in a moderate sized village was fortunate, as there were periods during the two years where she says, "I experienced loneliness like I never experienced loneliness in my life."

Jordan's teaching assignment was complicated by a headmaster that was not interested in her job. Even though the Botswana Ministry of Education had asked for Peace Corps assistance



in making change, the local administrators weren't interested in this change. The relationship between Jordan and the headmaster was limited to a strained tolerance that sometimes broke down.



### Jordan Got Along Well With the Young Batswana

At one point, a student approached Jordan and wanted to help after school. The idea was that she could volunteer at a nearby primary school and help the kids there. Jordan explains what happened, “the next thing I knew I was being hauled into the office of the headmaster and he was tearing my head off.” The headmaster declared that a witch might steal that girl as she walked down the street to that primary school. Jordan still doesn't understand this point of view, as every day this student walked to school down these same streets.

There is a lot of superstition and belief in magic in the Botswana society. For example, children are thought to possess strong magical power by many Batswana. As Greenmum explains, “There’s a myth that if you have sex with a virgin, it will take away HIV.”

During one election season, Peace Corps volunteers noticed a poster. It asked that the political candidates leave the children alone. It turns out that the perceived magic that is present in the bodies of children is so powerful that there is a black market in children’s body parts. Only the most well-off Batswana could afford to deal in this market, but that group includes some politicians.

Like many of the Peace Corps volunteers in Botswana, Jordan had difficulty learning the language, Setswana. The young Batswana people knew English, though communication with older people who often didn’t know English, could be difficult. At one point, Jordan was teaching a class in place of some absent Botswana teachers. The kids were not responding to her questions and she didn’t know if the kids didn’t understand her or what exactly was going on. She came up with the idea of giving out candy for correct answers, and suddenly the kids become expert linguists.



Jordan and the Assistant Headmaster

Jordan recalls that it took the first year of the two year assignment to establish good relationships with the local people. When she left, she was not sure if her presence made a difference or not. Though the life skills she was expected to teach were intended to stem the spread of AIDS, she thinks what really has made a difference is the government's free distribution of ARV drugs to anyone that needed them. Jordan left Botswana depressed, having learned that she wasn't the superwoman that she thought she was. She also left with a Zimbabwean finance.

Tom Bergdall was a lawyer working for the City of New York. Tom had always wanted to join the Peace Corps. When young, he had done volunteer work in Chicago, working in a settlement house, running community projects and setting up a safe street patrol.

After their son grew up, Bergdall and his wife, still in their 50's decided they should join the Peace Corps before they were too old. They applied, and after the usual lengthy application process, they were both accepted. Bergdall had been studying Spanish with the hopes of going to South America, but was told that only those with fluent Spanish language skills would go there. He found out later that strict language requirement was not true. Assigned to Botswana, Bergdall learned as much as he could about the country and the language. He had learned so much that, during the training period, he taught a class in the history of Botswana.

Bergdall's job was to work in the office of the district AIDS coordinator. He was there to help the various AIDS programs that were in progress. Bergdall found that it took 9 to 12 months to establish trusting relationships, but his focus on learning the language helped. Though he wasn't fluent enough in Setswana to hold a conversation, he did learn some Setswana prayers. All the meetings that he attended started and ended with a prayer. One time he was asked to lead the group in prayer, and the fact that he was able to do this in Setswana, greatly impressed the Batswana attendees.

Bergdall says, "they were really, really focused on meetings and democracy." These meetings were very different than a typical meeting in America. Centuries of tribal council type government has carried over to the present day. Traditional meetings were conducted by the local chief, known as the Cosi, who asked everyone for their opinion. Anyone present could discuss his point of view at length and they talked for as long as they wanted. At the end of the meeting, without taking a vote, the Cosi would announce the consensus decision. Bergdall says,



“This kind of meeting tradition is almost nauseating. A four hour meeting is nothing, and a meeting that goes six hours a day for two days is not unheard of.”

Tom also learned that once they had the basic needs of life, very few Batswana were troubled about making money or improving their position. If a friend or relative asked for money, the Baswana gave it. He thinks that because the desert environment didn't attract many white people during the heyday of colonialism, there is little resentment against whites.

When asked if he would go again, Tom responded, “It's primarily a culture exchange program... I think we should want as many people as possible to participate in this program and no one should take space to do the same thing twice.”

Kathleen Geenmun also left for the Peace Corp after raising a family. She had an aunt who was a missionary and other family members who were ministers. Growing up, she had heard her Aunt's stories and always wanted to join the Peace Corps. She had lived on a farm and knew how to milk a cow and cut down a tree, so the Peace Corps representative that interviewed her told her that she was the most qualified candidate that she had ever talked to. Turns out, in actual practice, those skills made no difference.

Like Jordan, Geenmun was assigned to teach life skills to students. Unlike Jordan, she soon realized that this was pointless. Among other things, she was to preach the benefits of a monogamous relationship. The Botswana culture is such that the people openly share multiple sexual partners. Only about 12% of Batswana are married. Geenmun realized that the Batswana would never accept this sort of change, so she shifted gears.



Hauling Firewood

Geenmun started a program to help educate people about the evils of domestic violence. One of the highlights of her program was to get people to talk about it. She helped organize some debates. She also established a safe house where women could go and talk about their problems. She wanted to educate women, so that they could say no, and educate men to understand that women could say no. Geenmun is very proud of this program and hopes that it is still running.

She says, “We, as a country are incredibly ignorant about the rest of the world and yet we are willing to say that we’re the best and we’ll tell you what to do. We are more alike than we are different and we are not willing to recognize it.”