Return to Ethiopia, 37 Years Later: The Trip of a Lifetime


My 1973-75 Peace Corps Ethiopia service came to life again for me in dramatic ways in 2011 and 2012. In March of 2011, I published my first novel which focuses on a former Peace Corps Ethiopia Volunteer who relived milestone events in his life, including his Peace Corps service. Then I joined the Association of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers nationally and locally to reconnect with others who served. In doing so, I learned that there was a former PCV living in my state (Michigan) who had served ten years before me in the same town and the same school where I served. Marvin Vinande and I became friends.

These events compelled me to participate in Peace Corps’ 50th Anniversary celebration in Washington DC last October. One of the events was a dinner at the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington DC. While there I met several PCVs for the first time since we had trained together in Ethiopia some 38 years ago. To make it even more special, we bumped into one of our in-country trainers who now is the communications officer for the Ethiopian Embassy in DC, Tsehaye Debalkew. The memories that had been stored away for almost four decades soothed me like a cool breeze on a hot day. I was thrilled to learn that a return trip to Ethiopia in 2012 was being discussed by former Peace Corps Ethiopia volunteers.

Within a week of my return from Washington DC, I received an email from Alemu Hailemariam, who had been a top student in my Eighth-Grade English class during my first year of Peace Corps service. We had lost touch after the Derg took control of Ethiopia in 1975. He told me that he had been trying to find me since 2001 to thank me for supporting him during my Peace Corps service. Eventually he found my contact information on my website. He informed me that he had been the last surviving child of a peasant family and an orphan at the time we had met. I had only known that he was an excellent, deserving student. Today he is a health services quality officer with five hospitals in Addis Ababa and married to a government employee, Maledu. Together they have two college-educated daughters (Kidist and Andnet) who are a clinical nurse and a geographer, respectfully. This past spring they each provided their parents with a grandson.

When the return to Ethiopia trip was confirmed in the spring, I had to participate. The reunion with Alemu at the airport was very emotional. The following day, we met Ethiopia’s president, Girma Wolde-
Giorgis, at Haile Selassie’s former palace and had our photo taken with the president. He was sincerely interested in the relationship Alemu and I had developed. Two TV and radio networks must have also thought our story was interesting because they shared it with their audiences.

The time Alemu and I spent together in Addis with his family and on our trip back to Nekemte, the town where we had lived, was too good for words. On that trip, we were joined by two other former PCVs who had also served in Nekemte (Marvin Vinande and Doug Worthington), along with their wives and the three students they had supported.

The most memorable moments of that trip included touring our old school, visiting the spot where my old home had stood (It is now a computer training center), meeting old friends, and learning the terrible news that my best Ethiopian friend, the high school wood shop teacher, was killed by the Derg about four years after I left Ethiopia. Tadesse Tiruneh had been the model for one of the main characters in my novel. His death, and those of some 500,000 others, during the Red Terror, served as a grim reminder of a time that thankfully has passed.

During my two-week visit to Ethiopia, I also toured the historic northern cities for the first time: Bahar Dar, Gondar, Lalibela, Axum, Dire Dawa and Harar. And while these places are truly spectacular and inspiring, it was Alemu and his family, the many kind Ethiopians I had come into contact with and the caring Peace Corps Volunteers, former and present, who I had met, that made this the most memorable, meaningful trip of my life.

Alemu and I don’t want it to end, so we are developing a water project proposal for the school where we had met. If successful, it could serve as a model for others around the country. I also hope to use my public relations, media relations and marketing communications skills to help promote Ethiopia in America as a great place for businesses to invest and for tourists to visit. Ethiopia has changed a great deal for the better since the Peace Corps first arrived in 1962 and Americans owe it to themselves to learn much more about this wonderful country and its beautiful people.