

SPEAKING MY TRUTH

HIV positive and serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer

by Elizabeth Tunkle

When you join the Peace Corps, many people ask you “Why?” I never had a very good answer, and in retrospect, I really had no idea what I was getting into. I thought two years would go by in a flash and I would come home better for having gone so far from home and for having done such a “noble” thing. Two years did not go by in a flash and I came home changed-but not how I’d imagined I would.

As I was settling in to my village in Zambia, I met my future boyfriend. We started dating and I asked him if he had been tested for HIV. He told me, “Yes.” The previous year, he told me, he tested negative, and had not had unprotected sex since. Knowing that, we mutually decided it would be safe for us to use birth control without condoms. We were wrong. Despite the fact that I knew all about HIV prevention I had unprotected sex with him anyway.

A few weeks later, I decided we should get tested. I tried telling myself that it couldn’t be me. I was going to be fine. Too many times in my life I had played with all kinds of fire and survived. Not me. I was too nice and honest and fun and giving and I practiced yoga and meditation. We get bonus points in life for being good, right?

No, I guess we don’t. HIV doesn’t just choose mean people or people who tell lies. It turned out it chose me. We found out my boyfriend was positive and that I was also infected. As if that news isn’t devastating enough, the Peace Corps

told me I had to go home and that I would not be able to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer anymore, anywhere. I was too shocked to fully understand what was happening, but I did feel that Peace Corps was acting contrary to what they teach us: “Fight the virus not people with it. Treat people with HIV just like you would treat anyone else.” Yet, here I was going home.

I was shocked and traumatized as I packed up my things and said goodbye to my life in Zambia. I felt like a failure. I had come to teach prevention and here I was infected. I was asking myself that “Why?” question all over again. Why did I come to Zambia? Did I come to ruin my life? Who did I think I was coming over to Africa to tell people how to live? I didn’t even know the meaning of my own words.

As soon as I arrived home I traveled to Washington, D.C. Peace Corps headquarters told me that I would be evaluated and then separated. I asked my Peace Corps nurse if it was possible for me to continue to serve and she said, “No.” If I was positive, I would have to be separated. However, after I had been home for a month, Peace Corps changed its mind. Why? My friend was digging around on the Internet and found a story about another Volunteer who had been sent home earlier that year because of an HIV infection. He felt like his rights had been violated and had asked the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to intervene. The ACLU informed the Peace Corps that their policy discriminated against people with HIV and they needed to be more



The author has some company as she waits for a bus in Mansa, Luapula Province, Zambia, four and a half hours from her village by bicycle.

Paul Tunkle

Zambia. People came and shared their stories back with me. They asked me questions and invited me to their homes. I felt the force of belonging to a community.

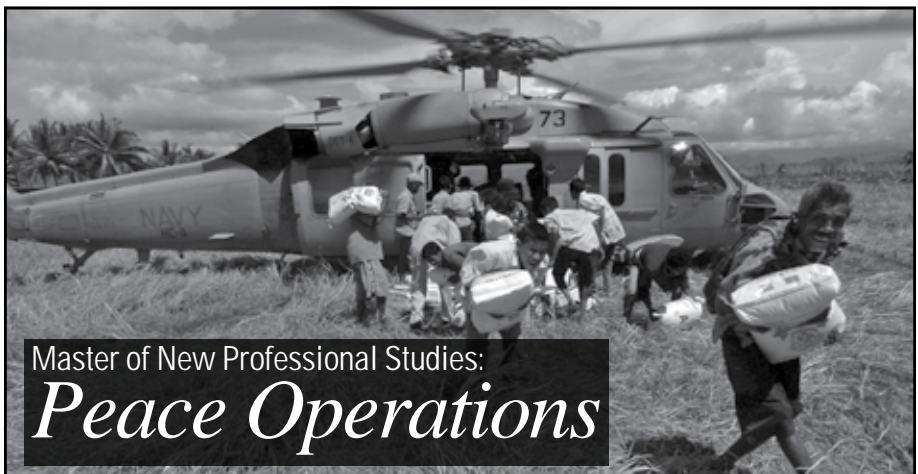
I spent my second year of the Peace Corps speaking my truth over and over again. The fact is none of that would have been possible if it weren't for the courage of other Volunteers who stood up to the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps did something they had never done before and let me, an HIV-positive Volunteer serve out my time in Africa. I received more from sharing my story than I could have ever given to the people of Lesotho.

I think the Peace Corps is like that. We go to faraway lands to give of ourselves, to help, to make something better but it is the people who house us and love us and work beside us that truly give to us. They gave me a sense of purpose. They made me believe that something good could come out of getting a very scary, chronic illness diagnosis. And I believe that it did. I would never have asked to become infected with HIV. But without it, the community of people living with the virus around the world would be just out of reach, and I want to connect. I want to cross over the line that separates and make a connection.

So here I find myself. My service is complete. I am back in America. I served my country. I told my story. Somehow I think I answered my "Why." The work I did as a volunteer in Zambia was forever on the outside looking in. Later, infected in Lesotho, I felt as though I had stepped through an invisible barrier and was welcomed with open arms.

*See the August 2008 issue of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Returned Peace Corps Volunteers newsletter for information about the Jeremiah Johnson case and changing Peace Corps policy related to PCVs with HIV. (http://www.lgbrpcv.org/articles/08_08_johnsoncase.html)

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