A Letter from the Editor

Dear FOG Members,

School’s out for the summer but we are keeping the learning going. FOG ever so kindly donated money to Hope of Guinea for the second annual STEAM camp in Conakry. I was invited to participate in this project and have all the details on pages 2 and 3.

Shreyan, FOG’s communications chair has a moving and insightful summary about Guinea’s response to Ebola relief in the forest.

And last but not least a brief summary of Peace Corps Guinea Reunions!

Enjoy! A la prochaine!

Cheers,
Hannah Koeppl

Reunions! The month of July summons up memories for several education RPCVs. FOG has found several reunions, fundraisers, and meetings to celebrate PCG Guinea.

- PC Connect in Denver will be attended by FOG’s Webmaster Marc Dysart, Denver area Guinea RPPC happy hour, NYC area Guinea RPCV happy hour fundraiser

Tell us about your summer RPCV Guinea Reunion. Perhaps your stage class is celebrating 5, 10, 15, 20 or more years since COS? We want to hear from you! Go to FOG’s Facebook page and post pictures so we all can share in the good times.
I LOVE STEAM: Hope of Guinea’s second Annual Steam Camp

By: Hannah Koeppl, FOG communications assistant and advc co-chair

The second annual STEAM camp was like a recipe for the most delectable Guinea sauce. Our recipe consisted the finest ingredients.

32 students
15 RPCVS
10 PCVs
5 Guinean teachers
4 Hope of Guinea staff
18 experiments/activities
160 Kilos of rice and sauce
4 boxes of Chalk
Countless hours of prep work
Immeasurable enthusiasm, patience, and love

If you put all that into a marmite, let it marinate, and boil for a year it yields 2 weeks of educational bliss.

With the help of Conakry Hope of Guinea staff, selected schools were invited to have their students apply for the camp. This application had a written essay component asking for their long-term goals such as careers and short-term goals such as what they would like to learn that the camp. We also have several questions to test their general science and math knowledge.

Thirty-two students were selected, over half of them female from 7eme annee to 9eme.

Each lesson was taught by a RPCV, PCV, or Guinean teacher in the subjects of math, chemistry, biology, physics, and art.

Caleb Wilson, our vivacious and engaging leader launched the camp with an introductory lesson on the scientific method and density. Kaylee Gund, the multi-talented scientist and artist, conducted a lesson on sound, its propagation and created membranophones.

The following days were filled with all sorts of other activities including propulsion of a balloon car, building bridges, two microbiology lessons, DNA extraction of an onion, the classic egg drop, electromagnets, microscopes, epidemic simulation, calculation of a person’s speed and calculating the slope, and a chicken dissection to study anatomy and some physiology.

Our art activities included poetry, sculpture with our own homemade playdoh, vegetable printing to mimic prints of the glorious Guinean pagnes, and a grand talent show.

We were able to take une petite excursion to the Musee National en ville, seeing maps, sculptures, artifacts from all over Guinea, representing its rich history and cultural roots.

Our sessions were broken up with snack breaks and the help of PCV Lisa to energize, regroup with students. She lead ice breakers and activities to keep morale high including the group favorite “Mariama Dit” Guinean “Simon Says.”

Like a normal school day, the first lesson of the day started at 8 AM sharp July 2nd. Toujours respecter l’heure! Their polite and shining faces entered the classroom ready to participate and learn.
During science and math sessions the students were cooperative, thoughtful, with a touch of friendly competition as they built popsicle stick bridges, or compared petri dishes with bacterial samples. The sense of curiosity, wonder, and pure potential was electric.

During art activities students worked in a calm, collected manner using this new outlet as a form of expression. Working with homemade playdoh and creating unique paintings from vegetable stamps, gave students other sensory exploration.

Overall, the project was a beautiful collaboration between several parties with a shared love for Guinea, its people, and its future.

Our closing ceremony was done in true Guinean fashion, fancy carbonated drinks, loud joyful music, officials dressed to the nines, formal speeches and certificates for all.

It was an incredibly rewarding experience to help with this project and see it in action during the camp. The anticipation for the next year has already begun!
RPCV Reflections on Study of Violent Response to Ebola Relief  
BY: Shreyan Sen FOG communications chair RPCV 2012-2014

The national and international response to Guinea’s 2014 Ebola outbreak was not always welcome. Some villages instituted self-imposed quarantines, disallowing outside groups from entering. At times, response groups were met with violence or riots, including one particularly tragic event in which 8 members of a response team were murdered and their bodies were disposed of in latrines.

Professor James Fairhead recently published a paper assessing the root causes of the 2014 violence, focusing on violence in the Forest region. He identified and explored four main drivers of conflict:

1.) Burial practices which violated religious norms
2.) Political imposition from Muslim and Manding outsiders
3.) Mistrust of Westerners and prior experience with violent Western economic interests
4.) Identification of Western or wealthy Guinean behaviors with sorcery

Many PCVs and RPCVs are familiar with some elements of Fairhead’s first point. I served during the beginning of the Ebola outbreak, and there was widespread understanding that burial practices such as the washing of deceased bodies were contributors to Ebola’s spread. Fairhead explores in depth why such practices were important enough to trigger violence.

Under traditional forestiere beliefs, proper burial practices affect both the deceased’s journey in the afterlife and the continuing prosperity of the living. Fairhead uses the example of deceased pregnant women, who must be buried separately from the fetus or risk danger to all pregnant women in the village. In one instance the family of a deceased pregnant woman (dead of Ebola) wanted to conduct a post-mortem C-section to enable a separate burial. From a medical perspective, this posed a completely unacceptable contamination risk and would do nothing but indulge a local superstition. For the family of the deceased though, the matter was so important that other local pregnant women had already fled the village in fear. Seen from this perspective, the violence seems more predictable, if no less tragic.

Fairchild’s second point is equally compelling. Though I and many other RPCVs served in an era where no PCVs were posted to the Forest region, we all have some idea of the tensions between political parties and ethnic groups. Fairchild contends that Ebola response efforts were often perceived as outsider interventions coupled with outsider political influence. Some sensitizations even took on the familiar pattern of political rallies. Two possible solutions present themselves: better cooperation between rival political parties in cases of emergency, or the strengthening of independent and apolitical healthcare institutions “parallel” to the political state. Recent experience in the U.S. has demonstrated the value of independent institutions, and the damage their politicization or perceived politicization can cause (i.e. waning public confidence in institutions such as the media or national intelligence agencies). A recent article in the LA Review of Books somewhat laments the loss of Guinea’s unified post-independence national identity. Perhaps this crisis should serve as a wake-up call—it seems likely that political polarization and distrust will hamper any future crisis mitigation efforts Guinea may have to employ.
Fairchild’s third point, a mistrust of foreign institutions which borders on the conspiratorial, accords with some of my experiences outside Ebola relief. I remember hearing a local belief that HIV was intentionally spread via condom use, a modern “smallpox blanket” moment. PCVs grow close to our communities, but how much access do we really have to ways of thinking which are suspicious of us? Likewise, Fairchild’s last point took me back to my village experiences. Apparently, foreigners and wealthier Guineans are sometimes associated with witchcraft because we exhibit some of the tendencies common to sorcerers: asocial dispositions, enjoyment of alone time, etc. I certainly struggled to modify my American social norms throughout my service, but I’d never thought about the strange and even nefarious implications my behaviors might have suggested. Reflecting on my own lack of awareness I can readily see how other Westerners, busy combatting a deadly crisis, might have missed many of these nuances—to tragic effect.

Fairhead’s study can be found here: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/african-studies-review/article/div-classtitlenew-window-Reading-social-resistance-to-the-ebola-response-in-the-forest-region-of-the-republic-of-guinea-an-anthropological-perspective/79914D998AA67442119F1C45E274764E
Friends of Guinea is a nonprofit organization made up of former Guinea Peace Corps Volunteers, Guineans inside and outside of Guinea, and others interested in promoting the cause of Guinean development in the world at large. We are a country-of-service affiliate of the National Peace Corps Association.

Do you want to contribute a piece to the next newsletter? Contact FOG Communications Assistant Hannah Koeppl at newsletter@friendsofguinea.org