A Letter from the Editor

Dear FOG Members,

This quarter’s newsletter commemorates the passing of two Peace Corps fixtures: El Haj Thiam, 1995-2004 and batik artist James Boucher. We are extremely saddened to hear of the passing of these two men who were key figures of many of our Peace Corps memories and I’m sure yours too.

Secondly, Friends of Guinea has officially obtained 501c3 status due to the efforts of some of our board members, see below for more information and what that exactly means.

Our last piece this quarter comes from Caleb Wilson countinuing our focus on STEAM efforts in Guinea, discussing why failure is essential.

In kindness,
Laur Ebene
FOG Newsletter Editor
In memoriam:

El Hadj Thafsir Thiam

Peace Corps Guinea’s Deputy Director, El Hadj, retired in 2003 after 17 years of service to PC Guinea. He served also served as a Peace Corps Trainer while he was studying in the United States in the early 60’s, right when PC was getting its start. El Hadj was remembered with a story shared in the newsletter by Woody Colahan at the time of his retirement in 2004.

“No one who passed through Peace Corps Guinea during those years can forget his tireless devotion and loving protection of his volunteers. My own memories include the day all the volunteers in town for IST were supposed to attend a reception given by the Interior Minister at the Palais du Peuple. Thiam, as usual, went on ahead to make sure everything was ready. It happened to be the day the military mutiny of February 1995 broke out. Thiam radioed back to the office for us to stay where we were, and the sound of automatic weapons was clearly audible in the background. Typically, his first thought had been for the volunteers and he only moved to a safer location after he was sure that we were safe.”

– Woody Colahan

El Hadj took his retirement with his family in the United States and received his green card under the recommendations of both Peace Corps Staff and US Ambassador. In his retirement letter, he routinely referred to all the members and affiliates of Peace Corps Guinea as his family, his passion for his volunteers and fellow staff members was evident.

James Boucher

Remembered by Brian Woerner

To James ‘the Artist’ Butcher,

This is what happens, I told myself. Busy lives, busy elsewhere. Too busy to stay in touch with everybody, including you. ‘I’ll reconnect with him when I get back to Guinea,’ I’d think. It won’t be too long. You asked me to take the batiks and sell them in the US, but I didn’t find the time, I sold a few and sent the money. But some remain. I owe you.

Just now am I hearing of your passing. I wish I could talk to you one more time. Maybe even get you the money you needed to save you. Would it have been enough? Merde. It is sinking in.

It was not so long ago, though it seems like ages, I was bartering with you over your batiks! They brought value to the PCVs and their families. And they were authentic, from you, and West Africa, and made down the way in Conakry. The Batiks. I bought a couple for my family. This was after you’d custom made a Peace Corps G24 piece for my mud-brick hut. You’d done it for many of us. That piece is hanging now in my childhood room in California. Your work is across Guinea and the States. It travels and touches the world.

We came to be fast friends, and why that was I am not particularly sure. Perhaps it was selfishness. I enjoyed being close to the artist, the connection, knowing where to get the gifts. But you were human, and beneath your displays there was depth. As I recall, you had been a
chef at the American embassy in Liberia. That was before escaping the civil war, sometime in the 90s. You and your nephew Konneh were the two-family surviving members to get out alive and cross into Guinée forêt. By foot and without shoes you moved as Liberian refugees to Guinea.

Later you had the stroke, and it caused persistent challenges. Always you battled the numbness, the fatigue. You were determined and you adapted. You exercised, walked daily, and sought out the limited medical advice and regimens which were in your means. And you painted. Always you painted those colorful and simple pieces. But there was one you were reluctant to sell, just the one. And I have it safe. You sold it to me, and said it was painted in your past. Amazingly it is one hundred and one unique images. The 10 by 10 grid, each one holding a small scene from African life. Bright and black and beautiful. You laughed as you sold it to me.

I always appreciated that laugh. You shared with many your stories with an openness to the challenges and the joys and the history. Sometimes over Mama’s potato leaf sauce, packed with cassava, fish, African eggplant and habaneros. It was your recipe of course. Très doux.

For me and, I suspect, all who knew you hope you are in the best of places, wherever that may be. Imagining you free from constraints to do what you love. I am sorry that you did not hear from me sooner. I look forward to speaking with Konneh in your stead. And until we meet again. Your work lights up the world as you did.

From the heart,

Tamba ‘Brian’ Camara

Remembered by Maren Lujan

Every volunteer knows, you stroll into the Conakry Peace Corps house and there's James. He's sitting patiently, demurely; he's selling his Batiks.

I don't know how many years ago James started his relationship with Peace Corps, but I do know that three years after my service, after an evacuation and subsequent reinstatement of volunteers, he was still there. Still selling beautiful handmade Batiks to volunteers, still bemoaning the fact that his son didn't want to learn the craft, still trying to up sell: “One for your mom in the US.” he'd say. He always talked about how much we meant to him "I love Peace Corps. Peace Corps is my family."

I had the pleasure of working closely with James; I spent afternoons at his compound, getting my hair braided by his neighbor, learning how to make batiks, documenting the process, learning about the civil war in Liberia and how he ended up in Guinea after having lost his entire family and walking the distance on foot carrying his infant son the entire way, his last surviving family member.

The last time I saw him, it had been three years, but James was savvy with computers and would send me periodic emails. Most volunteers know, us Americans fail in our level of correspondence by comparison. But the last time I saw him, he told me he was still recovering from a debilitating bout of illness, as most know he had less recently been recovering from a stroke. He asked about my mom, he sold me Batiks. He had been struggling and I wanted to help him as much as possible; I asked him to make me a t-shirt and paid him as he made promises to get it to me in Sierra Leone. I told him not to worry, I'd see him next time in Guinea. "In person," I said. I think it's good vibes to discuss the next time, putting your hopes and dreams out into the universe as a sign of good faith.
I imagined he'd always be there, at the Peace Corps house, as he always was in my memory, just waiting with a coy grin, his brief laugh or a wide smile.

I know I speak for Peace Corps Guinea when I say we'll miss you James. Thank you for your friendship and your care. I will not forget your son; I hope in this way we'll continue our friendship across generations, time, and space.

Remembered by Dante Bugli

James played an unexpectedly important role in my Peace Corps service. More than that, James served as one of the few mainstays that connected Guinea Peace Corps volunteers across the years. He told stories of past volunteers quietly but with a gleam in his eye. James was always selling. His smile and his stories were part of his sale. The explosion of pieces that filled any room he set up in meant he could always find a size or style that you just couldn't say no to.

The first time I met James Bucher was during Pre-Service Training in Dubreka. Each volunteer living off of a modest stipend did not stop James from trying to make the sale surrounded by the colors of his pieces, spread out on the floor of a large porch.

The first time I saw James after his stroke was at the Peace Corps house in Conakry. He knew we'd be in the area and insisted on coming over to drop off a piece I had commissioned for my sister's upcoming wedding. As he always did, he showed up with multiple roller-bags full of batiks. James's condition had greatly deteriorated compared to our first encounter. Paralysis on the left-side of his body forced him to use a cane and affected his arm and face. Volunteers meandered in and out of the living room that was quickly covered in James' pieces despite the second bag not being opened. Conversation was, as it always was with James, gentle and kind, until he asked one that not any of us quite expected. “What is a stroke?” A pregnant silence filled the living room while at least six volunteers looked one to another wondering who would answer. We attempted to explain what it meant, scientifically, to say that someone has had a stroke. I don't know if any of our answers helped, but he seemed comforted.

The first time I visited James's house was to film an interview with him. He invited our interruption and continued his progress on a large piece despite our presence. He walked
us through his process, from beginning to end. He bought wax from Sierra Leone. He found coloring
dyes in Marché Niger. He foraged the yellow dye
from the bark of a tree only found in La Fôret. He painted and he taught. We took some
time away from the art to talk about his life. He was a refugee. He was an artist from the
beginning. He learned from his family. Slowly peeling back the different layers of James’
spirations and origins. Interviewing someone is a very personal experience, but James
showed unquestioned trust in us as he shared intimate details of his life and work.

The first time I called James once I returned to Guinea, was to connect him to colleagues
looking for art to take as a positive reminder of their time in Guinea responding to Ebola.
In his normal procession, he entered the hotel slowly as his gait allowed, trailed by an
apprentice with his over-stuffed bags. James confessed to me that he had been struggling
economically ever since his main source of clientele, Peace Corps volunteers, suddenly
left the country. I was happy to connect him to new customers and, of course, to see him
once more. One colleague in particular came with a plan to purchase several gifts before
his impending departure. My colleague, being a stroke rehabilitation specialist, noted the
physical remnants of a stroke and politely broached the topic. James, never embarrassed,
saw an opportunity to get some answers. James gently asked his questions and Andrew
calmly answered them. It was a beautiful moment of coincidence and genuine connection.

The last time I saw James was outside of Hotel Camayenne before heading to the airport
for a flight home. He knew my love for the sunsets he drew and surprised me with two.
One from him and one from his apprentice. We hugged, held hands tightly, and took one
last selfie.

It wasn’t until I sat down to write this that I realized how many places are decorated by a
James Bucher original. My bedroom, my living room, my cubicle, my parent’s foyer, my
little sister’s living room, my older sister’s bedroom. I was lucky to get to know James as
well as I did and I can only hope that I returned enough favors for how much color he
continues to shine in mine life.

Thank you James.

**Friends of Guinea is now a 501c3 organization**

Friends of Guinea is happy to announce that as of January 17, 2018, Friends of Guinea is registered in
the District of Columbia as a 501c3 charitable organization. This allows Friends of Guinea to
receive tax-exempt donations and to apply for certain grants. The process of registering began with the
adoption of organizational [By Laws](#) and Articles of
Incorporation, and now has culminated with 501c3 status. We are excited that Friends of Guinea’s 501c3
status will bring benefits to our members and supporters, who can now deduct their
donations to FOG in their annual tax returns.
FOG Focus Series: STEAM in Guinea

Failure is Essential

We started by listing the camp expectations on flipchart paper with expo markers.

1) Have fun
2) Arrive on time
3) Respect everyone
4) Mistakes are encouraged

With that 4th rule, it might seem a little odd to encourage failure, but that’s something we love to do with our 7th and 8th graders at Hope of Guinea’s annual summer STEAM Camp in Conakry. Unfortunately, errors are too often viewed as “wrong” in education and nowhere is that more so the case than in Guinea.

While it’s true that many Guinean students have immaculate handwriting, it’s also the case that many of them spend an inordinate amount of time simply copying notes, not wanting to make any mistakes in their notebooks. It might be that primary grade teachers put a lot of emphasis on handwriting early on, but it’s a phenomenon I’ve observed with students across grade levels all over the country.

Last year at our summer camp, students received packets to record notes and information for each lesson and experiment conducted. Countless times kids asked me what to do when they realized they had misspelled words or written notes in the “wrong” section with their blue pens. “Mark it out and continue” I would always respond. The students would seem puzzled at first, but then relieved that they didn’t have to rewrite everything. We intentionally don’t have White-Out at our camp.

Neatness is a great quality to have, but not at the cost of greatly slowing down learning. I understand that notebooks might be the only information source that a lot of students in Guinea have so they want to make sure that the notes are written excellently. However, that same desire to not make mistakes can permeate in the more practical, hands-on portion of learning.

During the camp, our middle schoolers sometimes ask for another sheet of paper when they’ve made a mistake or ask for more glue or string or whatever supplies they’re running low on. We kindly ask them to keep on working and figure out a way to use what they have. Especially in places where materials can be difficult to obtain, it’s vital to problem solve with what you have.

Furthermore, not only should mistakes be encouraged because they are inevitable, but also because they are necessary. One term gaining a lot of traction in education circles today is “deliberate practice.” It’s the idea that with focused attention and specific goals, you can improve things you don’t do well. One aspect of deliberate practice is receiving quick, honest feedback. With a teacher guiding each small group of students at our STEAM camp, the students receive instant questions and comments while they’re working on experiments.

Deliberate practice blends well with the engineering process of: Think → Build → Test. When we give students a challenge like an egg drop or designing popsicle bridges, first they brainstorm and share their ideas, then they create their structures, and lastly they test them out.
Sometimes their designs work and sometimes they don’t. We prompt them to think about why the results might not have ended as they expected and how they could alter their designs to achieve better results. When students make mistakes, it’s an opportunity for them to think critically about their “failures” and improve from them. The engineering process, like the scientific method, was created with errors and mistakes in mind.

As STEAM subjects gain more and more traction in Guinea and all over the globe, it’s important that students be challenged to make mistakes. If they’re not making mistakes, then they’re not learning and deepening their knowledge as much as they could. Rather than expecting students to white-out their errors, we need to encourage their “failures” because it’s proof that they’re learning.

For more information about Hope of Guinea’s STEAM programs, please visit hopeofguinea.org or email Caleb Wilson at cwilson@hopeofguinea.org.

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Thanks for reading our quarterly newsletter 😊

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