

MY LIFE AS A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER

January 2, 2009

Dear Brothers of Delta Sigma Phi,
I am sitting in a *taxi-brousse*, or bush taxi, on my way to buy vegetables at the weekly *grand marché* in Sokodé. Although my car should seat five people by American safety standards, our car has managed to fit four people in the front seat and four people in the backseat, plus a crying baby. In addition to the people, a mattress and firewood are tied to the roof and the trunk is filled with yams, chickens and a goat. As we drive along, I marvel at the car's ability to carry this much weight and still make the full 50 km journey. Although I am squished against the window, I put on my headphones, turn on my iPod, and resign myself to the fact that I'll get there sooner or later, and when I do I will finally regain the sensation that is currently gone from both of my legs.

This is just one of the many ridiculous situations that I find myself adapting to ever since coming to Togo, a small

sliver of a country in West Africa, where I have been posted for the past six months as a volunteer for the U.S. Peace Corps. I began my service in June 2008 as a health volunteer, and will remain here for the next two years serving my community, integrating into my new culture and sharing my experiences with everyone back home. Here in Togo I am working as a health extension agent for the Community Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention (CHAP) program, where my work focuses on four public health issues that are evident in day-to-day Togolese life: malaria prevention, HIV/AIDS education, malnutrition, and family planning counseling.

So how exactly did I end up in the middle of West Africa? There are two main reasons: a) a strong desire to help people and b) to gain some hands-on public health experience. When I joined Delta Sigma Phi and pledged myself to our mission "Better Men, Better Lives", I pledged myself to bettering not just myself, and not just my own life, but also the lives of other people. Since I have always been



Nikhil planting *Moringa oleifera*, a plant whose leaves act as a nutritional supplement in the fight against malnutrition in Togo.



Nikhil teaching new mothers the importance of breast feeding at the local hospital.

interested in global health issues, the Peace Corps was the perfect intersection to fulfill my two goals – serving and learning. I hope my experiences in Africa will prepare me for a future career in the field of international health.

After an intensive 11-week training consisting of language classes and courses on cultural integration and health issues, I moved to Sotouboua, a small prefectural capital in the middle of the country with a population of approximately 3,000 people, which is to be my post for the next two years. I was assigned to assist in the reorganization of a local association for people living with HIV/AIDS; my secondary projects include starting a local girls club, assisting with vaccination and malaria campaigns at the local hospital and promoting the use of a local tree, *Moringa oleifera*, as a nutritional supplement. So far my work has been challenging, yet rewarding. Even though work moves at a very slow pace and many projects fail due to a lack of commercial and financial resources, it is satisfying just to know that I am hopefully making a difference in the lives of the people of my community.

Much of my work in Togo focuses on behavior change. Most Togolese people are aware of the public health issues at hand; the problem is turning that awareness into action while fighting myths, stigma and local tradition. Through my work, I rely on utilizing leadership skills I honed during my Delta Sig days; skills such as the importance of teamwork, the art of persuasion, dealing with change and how to listen to the needs of the members of an organization. After all, there is not a whole lot of difference between trying to teach a Togolese person and trying to convince a fraternity brother of the importance of safe sex.

Most volunteers in Togo live without electricity, fetch their water from the local pump (or send a *petit enfant* to do it for them) and use a pit latrine; however, I am fortunate enough to be placed in a large enough town that allows for access to electricity and running water inside my house. Although I am living a somewhat atypical Peace Corps lifestyle, this does not diminish the difficulty of the routine challenges I face as I find myself completely outside my comfort zone. As a French-speaking country where French is actually everyone's second language, I struggle to communicate in both French, which I learned when I came to Togo, and *Kabiyé*, the main local language of my town. At work I deal with death and disease through my interaction with people infected with HIV and malaria. At home I tackle chores without the help of modern technology. These include washing my clothes by hand instead of in a machine and cooking by candlelight when the electricity cuts out. My life is definitely not easy, but then again the Peace Corps motto is "the hardest job you'll ever love" and I could not imagine being anywhere else in the world right now.

Togo has been more than just an incredible learning experience; it has been a life-changing one. I am fortunate



Nikhil hanging out at Club Espoir-Kara, a kids club for children infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS.

enough to have lived on three different continents and to have traveled extensively, so I am not a new witness to poverty; however, for the first time I am seeing the world from a public health perspective. Over the past few months I have been exposed to many global health problems such as dealing with HIV/AIDS in resource-poor communities and the importance of preventative measures such as good nutrition and impregnated bed nets in the fight against malaria. In the time that I have spent so far, I have come to see Togo and its people as more than just an exotic image in *National Geographic* or *Blood Diamond*, but a strong community of hard-working people who are struggling to survive in the face of physical, economic and social adversity, and they do it with kindness and gracious hospitality. The people of my community have welcomed me with open arms and their acceptance of who I am and what I am trying to do for them is evident whenever they greet me by my local name "Somiabalo," the *Kabiyé* name for a male born on a Sunday.

It is now January and I have successfully survived my first four months "alone" at post. I have had my share of ups and downs and I know that I have many more to go. As I enter the sophomore phase of my service, I look forward to seeing where my service in Africa will take me. Regardless, at least I know my journey will be an interesting one. If you would like to keep up with my adventures in Africa, please check out my blog: www.nikhilandthepeacecorps.blogspot.com. For more information about the U.S. Peace Corps, go to www.peacecorps.gov.

YITBOS,
Nikhil Patil, PCV
Togo CHAP 2008
Georgia Tech '04
npatil55@gmail.com