

Back to "Home"

Getting back to St. Vincent and heading into our last year as PCV's

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21/2/1984

January flew by and I'm still picking up the pieces. The most notable experience was our trip over to Bequia. Deb had contacted a young woman over there who was involved in a handicapped development project with her boyfriend. Before we left for our state-side visit, we had made plans to visit them at the end of January. We actually made a weekend of the whole thing going over on Saturday and returning on Wednesday. It was a good visit. Deb had a chance to contribute by working with the folks (mostly kids) who hadn't had a physio to work with them. She also trained some of the mothers and helpers to do some of the exercises themselves. She felt pretty good about it. I just took it easy and followed along (comes naturally). A lot of interesting possibilities emerged from the visit. There is a Catholic priest there (visiting from Boston) who is interested in doing development work in the Grenadines specifically. He 'proposed' a team of Debbie (physiotherapist), myself business and employment consultant), a social worker and himself to work on the team. It would have to be externally funded and nothing since has been said about it. Joanie and Michael, the couple doing handicap development work, had a similar idea utilizing Deb and I in similar capacities and living on a boat traveling the Grenadines. Both are rather exotic and a long shot job possibilities but I don't expect any 'hard' offers to come out of it. But it's nice to think about it as a possibility.

We're also trying to get a coffee urn donated from one of our back home churches because Joanie wants to get a dockside coffee and donut stand going to generate income for her project. Haven't heard a reply to that proposal yet. We're burdening everybody lately.

The next big event was my transfer to Mktg Corp. Yes, I am finally here and busy! Too busy right now in fact. I've been collecting Market data every week and now I am in the final stages of typing up our monthly report. I'm going to be hard-pressed to get everything done this month. Then, next month (around the end of March) I'll be going to Barbados to work with the BASIS team there to try to work out a strategy for the future of the Unit here. I've already applied for a PCV to replace me (in, alas, December!) so it looks that the unit May indeed be a real

entity before I leave. USAID has proposed \$20,000 USD for the unit (I could use it now).

As for the other activities a trip up to fancy, a few dinner parties and a phone call from home but not much mail). The year has started with a Bang!

2/3/1984

The pace is insane. How could it be that one year ago I was languishing in finance. Work has become unbelievable! The unit is progressing nicely. I'm still not doing everything that needs to be done but it is coming along. I hope to add wholesale info this month (if I can catch up) and change the lines of distribution so that the right people get the right information. The chaos stems from having to collect the info myself. I need to be in three places at once and at the same time write reports and distribute them. But it is coming along. The hectic pace may diminish by May.

At the Vincentian homefront I was involved in my first (and only, hopefully) confrontation with a racist and drunk Vincentian. It's a long story but the essentials are that I had found a goat tethered in my yard within chewing range of one of my orange trees. I finally found the guy and asked him if he could tether it away from the trees and he kindly obliged. Unfortunately, some of his drunken friends saw me talk to him and took offense that a white ex-pat would tell of Vincentian what to do on Vincentian soil. So one of them decided to come over and punch me out. He hit me in the chest then went on to tell me how he could bust my head and knock it off and, to tell me he didn't appreciate me telling Vincentians what to do. He went on and on. Oppression, slavery, white imperialism, it was all there. Finally he left. I was scared. I still am. But I filed a police report, just in case he continues to harass me. It's left me a bit jumpy.

To make things worse Liz's rape case was dropped due to lack of evidence (even before it was heard). So I get this sinking feeling that nobody here is looking out for us.

Travel plans? Looks like Barbados at the end of this month. Trinidad in June. And off to Europe August 30th until September 27th.

Whew! I got to keep up with this thing. Otherwise I'm going to exhaust myself squeezing past events onto paper.

6/3/1984

A whole new section and I realize with only 9 months left, I've got a lot of writing to do to fill this journal. funny I still go back mentally and remember those first few entries. So naive, so idealistic. And all the experiences in between. The hurt, the tears the total confusion. Ambiguity says it all. The whole process is always one of becoming. But becoming what is the big question. My views and dislikes of Peace Corps constantly evolve from frustration to figuring it out with lots of fear in between. Toughest job you'll ever love? I doubt it. PC is constantly pushing you beyond the point of where you feel safe. Pushing you into situations you'd rather not deal with. I don't exactly like being pushed all the time and so far. It would be much easier if you could seize control at some point but, no. You always end up in the 'danger zone' and frantically search for a safe spot. I think that's why I'm constantly planning for safety, mostly in terms of returning to the USA. But it hasn't been bad. Bad in the sense that I regret time spent here. There were 'bad' times but I seemed to have grown through them. But mostly, I've been pushed to become more mature and self-reliant. Probably have done the same in the states, just would have taken longer.

I don't write so much of people here either. Mostly me and Deb. Whether that indicates a lack of knowing Vincentians or just emphasizes where the emphasis has always been, I don't know. I wish I were better at writing about the local characters. There are plenty of them. Standouts in an American crowd, but such a part of the local mix that it hardly seems noteworthy. The drunk yardman and ambulance drivers who weave through the hospital grounds. The homeless in town that are constantly camped out on various doorsteps. The beggars who regularly hit you up with a "gimme dollar". The total space outs who wander the streets talking, shouting and singing to imaginary audiences. The blind flute player who has his usual spots to play for change and who, by the way, has invested his 'small change' into several large real estate holdings. These folks and normal Vincentian; children, rostars and businessmen make up that peculiar mix called Vincentian society. How can you possibly put it into words? I wish this could be like "Living Poor" the book by an Ecuadorian PCV that we read prior to joining. His ability to describe that life in detail was hoped to be my model. Instead, it just put me and

Deb trying to make sense out of senselessness and bring order out of chaos. When I write the final chapter of this story, probably after reading it in the quiet and cold solitude of our home back in the USA, it will be interesting to see what sense, if any, I make out of the whole thing. Gads, up to this point, I still have unsettled feelings.

Back to 'real time'. No further hassles with my assailant who did, in fact, turn out to be Bob Scott, owner of our beloved Ambassadors club and the singer of "Give me the strong rum". I'm thankful for that, but can't help feel anxious as I approach our home in Edinboro. That event cash shadows everywhere.

The M.I.U. progresses nicely. Still beyond my expectations at this point but A-OK all the same. TONS still to be done and I just need to remain energetic and determined to see it through. I'll be going to B-DOS on March 26th to spend a week with the BASIS crew and get the basics of their units operation. Embassy plane, too! Should be a nice ride. I do worry about leaving Deb for so long will have to arrange for someone to stay.

I've got travel on the brain. We'll be in Trinidad the weekend of June 24th just before St V's Carnival and arrival of new PCVs (hopefully Deb's replacement too). A good 3 months away but after that, the time will fly by anyway so, for me, it's not too soon to plan. Trip to Europe still on course for August 30th and 2,000 francs are on their way to Martinique to secure our flight on Nouvelle Frontiere. I'll be buying more foreign exchange with dollar falling as it is...

Homefront SLC - Dad has been demoted but may be promoted due to death of one replacement and quit of another. Holly is, amazingly, pregnant and word is everything is A-OK. Deb's brother and sister in law had a girl (Katrina) and we're awaiting news of other newborn from Deb's sister (reads like a population explosion doesn't it?)

I'm okay. Tired lately, bad acne continues to scar my back (it doesn't like tropical heat). Deb's fine too but terribly overworked and almost tearful over spreading herself so thin in a situation that constantly demands more than one person can possibly handle. She's looking forward to July... ENOUGH!

12/3/84

Not much on today - at least not much that is pressing. I do need to get a list of to-do's together and start chiseling away at them. Today I spent most of my time futsing around. I left my office key at home so spent AM running around PC office and Bounty. Finally wandered into my office at 2:30 p.m. after taking care of odds and ends. Trying to get travel arrangements set with LIAT for trip to Trinidad in June. Hassle is that the ordination occurs on the first day of St V Carnival so getting in to St V is impossible. Waitlisted on return just now. We'll see how it goes... additional travel info on Deb. She'll be going to St Lucia on May 6th -13th for Partners/P.C. program in rehabilitation. Should be good for her. so we both see some business travel in near future.

Did I ever mention the classes I am tutoring? Psych and Econ (with Richard). I really enjoy it. It's a correspondent study course sponsored by University of Waterloo Canada. It' forcing me to learn my P's and Q's.

Not much else but I'm striving for regular journal writing so....

20/3/84

Another typical Tuesday. Running errands and chasing down odds and ends. Monday and Tuesdays are usually slow. I brace myself for the business of Wednesday and Thursday. Not a lot to do immediately. I talked with Jerry Hildebrand from IVS, they will be bringing in a marketing specialist to assist ORD with a long-term project. He was just checking to see if it would overlap with my efforts at the MIU, it won't. The specialist would mostly be concerned with external markets and exports. I can use him but it won't duplicate my efforts. I've been concentrating on local market information. Been giving re-organization a thought or two. I may suggest a move to MTA in a few months. The information unit and statistical unit could easily be combined under the heading of marketing intelligence. The info unit is already closely involved in disseminating the information I collect. The two statistical field officers are underutilized and could be used to collect the market information I collect. In all it would be a good move if I can work out the politics of it. That way, I could move into the background and get the locals more involved in it. The PC replacement could possibly help to continue the project and maybe work on specific weak points in data collection.

All this points to when the replacement will arrive. I got more information on that today. The EC38's will be here on November 3rd until November 16th for 2 weeks of on-island training. I will orient him/her then which means we could early COS on November 17th. Deb's work will be finished in August when her replacement arrives so we could presumably leave then around November 17th when my loose ends are tied up. It would be nice in that we could visit Deb's brother and sister-in-law (and children) and get to Illinois for Thanksgiving. A few days later we could be in Utah and spend a few weeks there before going to Boise for Christmas. It would ease our pre-Christmas travel a bit and allow us time to get settled in before the Christmas rush. Nice idea but time, as always, will tell.

Plans are still in place to go to Barbados next Monday. some ambiguity surrounds the use of the embassy plane but I hope to have that worked out by Friday. I feel uncomfortable in leaving Deb alone but I guess I'll have to trust God to look after her safely.

Phone call from home should be coming in this Sunday. it will be nice to catch up with all the latest in the Helgren household.

3/4/84

Phone from home was nice. Everybody sounded great. Relaxed and happy. So I guess most of the stress in regard to Dad's job has been reduced. Still snowing though. Sounds like winter will never end up there. Anyway, it was very nice to talk to them all. All is well. No major hassles.

Got back from B'dos yesterday and boy is it ever nice to be back home. I managed to accomplish quite a bit in one week. The pace was leisurely and I guess we could have squeezed it all into three or four days. As it was, it was a nice 'vacation' though I wished that Deb were there. Actually I'm glad it wasn't insanely paced. I'm feeling tired as it is with all the travel.

11/4/84

Just got back from another trip. this time to Bequia. Seems I've been traveling a lot lately and there is more to come. Ron wants Deb to go down to Canouan and Mayreau later this month or early next. The Grenadines are in great need of some attention and Deb has been a favorite choice to go help. For her, it's a chance to establish the protocol for the next physio to follow which would add some variety to a regular 9 to 5:00 job (or 8:00 to 4:00). It gives us both a chance to get a change of pace in to our usual routines. It does keep us jumping and I'm not so sure we need all this variety, sometimes. Could have used it last year...

The coffee and donut stand for the Bequia Handicapped Committee is struggling and I'm feeling a bit guilty for obtaining the donation of the coffee urn from Zion Lutheran. Not that it's going to waste, rather it may have been better to have things start smaller. I figured Joanie and Michael had done more homework on it. I hope it survives because it is a good idea and a good cause. Will check on it next in May. Deb and I are talking about the possibility of an additional trip. This time to South America after COS. the Bienamens seemed to have enjoyed their stay and since Deb and I speak a bit of Spanish, it wouldn't be too difficult to get around. Money, of course is a barrier so we'll have to see how much Dick and Ann spent while there. Could catch an Eastern flight up from Trinidad to Miami, so the return trip would go directly to the US and fit nicely into our visiting schedule before Christmas. There is always a chance.

I got a letter from Dad today. I find it interesting that he is considering his retirement in the same way I am looking at the "what now?" question of employment once we return stateside. Beginnings and endings. It doesn't sound like he is as enthusiastic about his job as he was prior to the recent hassles. I'm amazed at the treatment he is receiving after nearly 30 years of service to Morton Salt. It sobers me to think of corporate indifference after a year and a half of dealing with this Peace Corps "adventure" where I'm used to enthusiasm or hostility but never indifference. Could I survive the corporate melting pot? What should I do and how am I to find meaningful work? Gads, I keep procrastinating on taking some positive steps in looking for work. The deadline is approaching. I've

got to start making some decisions. But with my current job so involving and demanding it's hard to look ahead. The unit is doing well. Thriving actually. I now have a long list of to-do's to finish. Some of them are not very inviting but need to be done. Still studying the possibility of a move to MTA combining or utilizing the info and stats units. Another big item on the agenda.

13/4/84

A quiet Friday the 13th. Haven't accomplished much, but quite frankly, I didn't feel I needed to. Yeah, there's still plenty to do but my Thursdays drain me so I 'cruise' on Friday. I'll get back to it all on Monday. It will all still be there, waiting for me.

Back to the insanity of planning far into the future. I was checking out prices on flights today. Mostly our return to the United States via Venezuela. Dick and Ann made such an impression on us that we have decided to try to include it after our C.O.S on our way to the states which adds about 3000 EC dollars to our savings need. But it looks like we'll make it. Nice thing is that we pick up Eastern's Unlimited Mileage in Trinidad so it keeps our total travel bill low.

I also checked out Eastern's fares because Deb's folks were thinking about coming down. Quoted \$790 US which seems quite high. We were quoted \$649 on the unlimited deal. But I guess you have to add on the Boise to Salt Lake and BGI-SUD legs to get the total picture. Still, it seems a lot of money. It will be interesting to see what comes of it. Thoughts, of course, return to home once again. I wonder what will become of us? What will we be doing? Where will we be living? The questions start to coming in a torrent, forcing me to face a more ambiguous future than just the scheduling of flights home. Oh well, reality always beckons in this paradisaal isle.

30/4/84

Talk about constant changes, planning and ambiguity. Just when it seems we get a handle on the future, the rules change. Found out two things last week that kind of (or could) mash up all of our well-thought-out plans. First, P.C. is firm in its policy about travel during the last 3 months of service. That is, no vacation leave will be granted during the last 3 months. Which casts doubts that we will ever get to Europe this year. Plus it would cost us another 400 French Francs ~ 140 EC dollars to change our itinerary if an alternate date is available. Otherwise we 'eat' the 400 Francs and cancel the whole thing. But that's not all. Seems as though P.C. is having trouble filling its requests for the summer program. Looks as though Deb won't get a replacement this time around. Which brings up the possibility of extending - a very real possibility. How long? P.C. may concede a few months or may only offer a one-year option. The surprise is that we may do it. In fact we decided to extend if it's offered. Frankly, I can't quite believe it. After counting the days until COS for so long we now think of prolonging our 'agony' for up to 13 months longer. The one year option is preferable for practical reasons. First we could go to Europe as we planned Sept 13th - Oct 11th because our COS date would be Jan 15th 1986. Second, we would get a free 30-day holiday in the states and could spend that month over Christmas to be with our families.

Why extend? Gads I wish I knew how to answer that. About a month after we arrived, Deb and I were talking about why people extend and we figured that since they had lived through 20 months of PC life, another year would look like a 'cake walk'. I told Deb "Well, if I ever start talking about extending, shoot me!". Perhaps I should be shot. The biggest reason for extending is that somewhere over the last 4 months we moved from making good on a commitment, to being committed. We agreed with P.C. to remain 2 years and over the last 18 months have struggled and sweated to live up to that commitment as difficult as that has been. But, along the way we moved our commitment from P.C. to St Vincent or rather to the people we work with. Now that's a personal commitment rather than a contractual one. Frankly, saying goodbye to PC is a lot easier than saying goodbye to our friends here in St.V. Deb especially wants to avoid vacating her physio assignment with no one to fill her shoes. That takes the rationality out of why she was here. My job

is more flexible. Whether I'm here or not will not affect it much since I plan to hand over the operation of this thing soon if we are going to leave in December.

Of course there are drawbacks. I guess I should have sold my truck, rather than leave it to depreciate with my brother, but that's a financial decision and I'd be hard-pressed to hang a price tag on alternatives. Second is in 'starting a family' which, of course, could wait a year. Mostly we just miss our family and friends who seem to be drifting away as time goes on. We miss the states too, but that's getting tougher to qualify. "First world" living is an option always ahead of us. So now, we wait and see what twists and turns will develop. Van is going to Antigua next week for a staff/COS/training meeting and will come back with more information about Deb's replacement and our options. As for our Europeans. I appealed the policy to P.C. Barbados and although I think they will throw it back to me, parroting "The Book" they might just let us go. We'll just have to see.

8/5/84

Well, tings is still in de air. An impromptu meeting with Van didn't solve our problem and may have opened a 'door'. Seems the EC-32's scheduled to go to Antigua on Sunday ran into some problems with the same no travel policy that I had. Now, the fact that they are traveling to a C.O.S conference makes little difference. Fact is that many folks wanted to add on a few days here and there to visit other islands. A strict interpretation would indicate that this is a contravening of policy. A more liberal interpretation would allow PCV's to travel on for a few additional days since they were traveling anyway. A couple of problems arise from that, however. First, assuming the 3-month no travel policy was established for reasons such as finishing up your work, being professional, etc why schedule a C.O.S Conference during the last 3 months if it is so important that PCV's remain on island. Second, even allowing for a 'special case' situation like C.O.S. why allow holiday leave for a few days before or after it? What makes a 'few' different from a week or a month? So, it's all conflicting and ambiguous. Van made a tentative ruling that since we were brought in under one policy we should remain under it. Hence, he said no travel during the last 60 days which makes October 16th our deadline and our Nouvelle Frontiere reservations are okay. We'll just have to see. Hedging, I also booked on Caribbean Airways for August 18th through September 15th but that would cost us \$1,040 EC more...

Deb is gone and I'm feeling empty when I'm at home. I sure do miss her. She is in St Lucia at a Partners / Peace Corps conference for the whole week. I'm not real keen on being a bachelor. Had a nice phone call from my folks on Sunday. Todd has repaired the truck, passed inspection and is going to have it repainted. He was also chosen for a management training program for Mervyn's which puts him over at Valley Fair Mall. I'm sure he is glad to have the truck.

Holly and Jeff will move into a house just a few doors away from our old house on Garfield. It gets me anxious to have my own house again. There is a certain amount of permanence to that. Deb's sister and brother-in-law might also purchase a house in Horseshoe Bend, ID. Everybody is settling down and Deb and I here are in such turmoil. I wonder if we'll ever settle down again. Mom and Dad

are fine. Dad told me that we don't owe Uncle Sam anything so that's nice. Mom sounds great and is still plugging away at real estate. The lake keeps rising and is worrying everybody. Hope they build the ark in time.