

CROSSING BORDERS

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PEACE CORPS SERVICE IN BURKINA FASO, WEST AFRICA

The most recently “crossed border” in my life was my two-year Peace Corps service in Burkina Faso, West Africa. Along with an actual national border crossing, my entire lifestyle was altered including different languages, friends and colleagues, food, environment, and work. It wasn’t simply crossing a state line; I essentially crossed into a new world of its own.

The Peace Corps was incredibly challenging but immeasurably worthwhile. During my first year when my school was functioning properly, I loved every second I spent in that classroom and I was pleased to see students at my door in the afternoon with various math or science questions. Even my second year was a positive experience, although I was often miserable due to the breakdown of my school’s academic discipline and as a result, my inability to reach my students. I learned so much about myself and my fellow human beings that I could never write off those 12 months as a waste of time. Besides, when life has troubles and frustrations, it’s easier to realize life’s pleasures for the miracles they are. As life got harder at my school I cherished my nearby friends and my weekend trips to see more of the country.

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For the “border crossing” of my arrival, nearly all of the necessary changes occurred quickly. Most of African life was exactly as I pictured it, and if you’re willing to accept a new environment it’s easy to adapt. Physically, you need a matter of days or perhaps weeks to be at peace with totally new standards of living. Running water, electricity, fresh and expensive food, new clothes every month, and comfortable temperatures are things we just don’t need and one’s body adapts rather quickly.

Mentally adapting is trickier; it takes some time to be at peace with cultural isolation and the fear that arises from it. But these obstacles are temporary. Many volunteers are reluctant to leave when the time comes to return to the states. While I couldn’t wait to get home to my friends and family, I was also very sad to leave my village of Gorgadji. That’s part of the Peace Corps experience: any border you encounter must be crossed twice – once on the way



there and once on the way back!

My time in Burkina Faso was the last push I needed to continue with my vocational calling. About half way through my service, I began making calls and sending e-mails to Saint Francis Seminary to begin the priestly formation application process. In terms of my spiritual life as of 2006 (the beginning of my service), I needed time – to think, pray, and contemplate. Between friends, family, work, and the limitless distractions available to me in America, I was always in need of more time for God and me. Two years in the middle of the desert will clear that problem up for just about anyone. Add those hours of prayer to worthwhile labor, the witnessing of simpler and poorer lives, and the self-confidence of making it two years away from home and the Peace Corps can prepare someone for almost anything in their future!

– Justin Lopina

*Justin recently began studies at Saint Francis Seminary.*