

What I Want To Tell The President About My Experience In A 'Shithole' Country

I spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in a place that deserves much more credit than our president gives it.

By Emily Becker

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Thirty-nine days after I graduated college, I boarded a plane that 14 hours later would land in Benin, a small country in western Africa where I was to teach English for the next 27 months with the Peace Corps.

You probably haven't heard of Benin. I hadn't heard of it either until I took a Geography of Africa class my senior year of college, eight months before I would get my Peace Corps placement. Everything I knew about the country I learned from that class and the Wikipedia entry about the country. To say that my expectations were strongly informed by misinformed stereotypes would be true. To say that nothing about the next two years would be relatable to my first 22 would be false.

I ended up in a small town, about 4,000 people, close to the national highway. We had relatively reliable electricity. We had cell phone service. We had bars with satellite television that showed all the 2014 Men's World Cup games, by generator if necessary if the town's power was out at game time.

I lived in a small house in an enclosed area that included three other families. Yes, my water came from well and I didn't have indoor plumbing, but you get used to it quickly when you have to deal with both multiple times a day. I had internet access through a USB key that connected to the cell phone network. I had neighbor kids who were always down for a dance party to Shakira, and one in particular, Modeste, who, at 13, wanted nothing more than to spend his Saturdays riding my bike around the neighborhood.

I had friends who would patiently wait for me to work my way through finding the right words in West African French, and I had a work partner, another English teacher, who would talk to me in English when the French became too much. I had students who looked up to me and fought to be the first to say "good morning" when I arrived at school for my classes.

I had a group of girls who brought me to local festivals and taught me their dances and in whom I tried my hardest to instill some amount of feminist confidence in them before I left.

I had a host family which I had a standing open invitation to visit at any time. The head of the family still rings me and calls himself my "Papa Rosaire." I had a neighbor who showed me where to buy the best rice and beans and how to do my laundry. When she made dinner, she'd send me some.

My entire experience in Benin was filtered through the fact that I was there as a Peace Corps volunteer and all of interactions with individuals were informed by the privilege that came with that position. I by no means consider myself an expert on Benin. I don't speak for Papa Rosaire or Modeste, but instead,

can only hope to speak as someone whom they impacted.

I cannot say that Benin was without its challenges and its complexities. Yes, there was corruption. Yes, there were little professional opportunities for women. Yes, there was a monumental wealth gap. Benin gave me moments when I felt like what I was doing was what I was supposed to be doing in the largest meaning of the word, and also moments when I felt like what I was doing was completely meaningless. And the two often occurred within a 15-minute span of each other.

But I can say that country has and will continue to impact the person I am and the impact that I hope to have in the future. It introduced me to people who showed me what it means to be giving and welcoming and part of a community. It gave me a perspective that I like to think continues to ground me. It taught me I was capable of so much more than I had ever thought possible.

Mr. President, you should consider speaking to people who have lived in (and learned from) the countries your words affect.

And if you'd ever like to learn more about Benin, I'd be happy to connect you with Papa Rosaire.