

Greetings from Kenya!

The PC Service Improvement Committee, of which I am a member, has proposed putting together a directory for future volunteers listing challenges faced by current PCVs and how we have met those challenges. Each of us on the committee submitted a few sample items to show PC staff members the sort of helpful information we are hoping to collect. Building on that, I am featuring in my newsletter this month the challenges I face on a daily basis. (These do not include the difficulty many students have in using English as the language of instruction and the challenge for me of learning Kiswahili, both of which I may address in another newsletter.)

1. Tap water flows only at certain hours of the day, during 2-3 hour periods in early morning, around noon, and early evening. Occasionally the water supply is interrupted for up to 3 days. My solution: Keep my bath bucket, water pitcher, electric kettle, two 20-liter jerry cans, and 70-liter water tank full when possible.
2. Power is cut off intermittently with no apparent pattern. Sometimes it stays off for 2-3 days. My solution: Keep my phone and other electric devices charged up, and recharge my solar lamp battery before it gets below half.
3. During the spring rainy season, which this year lasted about four months, it rains heavily almost every afternoon and sometimes throughout the day. It can be difficult to find the right times to go to market or to hang clean laundry on the line. My solution: Walk to market wearing boots and carrying an umbrella when it's too muddy to ride a bike. Hang clothes early in the day (hoping the rains will hold off) and wring them out repeatedly as they hang on the line. Then rehang them on the covered porch or in the house until they are dry.
4. My teaching job continues to offer frustrations. Students at my site are poorly prepared and considered to be "low-performing." Classes are very large and the absentee rate high. Many students are not willing to put in much effort because the exams are so difficult they have little hope of passing anyway. Attempted solution: I have offered incentives for students to take quizzes and homework seriously, such as invitations to math camp and an auction at the end of every term (using marks earned as currency), and I make myself available most days after class to give extra help. Some of the better students are responding, but they are in the minority.

Also math teaching in Kenya seems to emphasize rote learning of procedures to solve certain types of problems without much understanding of why they work. When students forget the procedure or don't apply it properly, they are lost. Attempted solution: I have explained what is behind the procedures, and introduced a series of logical steps so that students can figure out what to do next, but they usually revert to the old way and make the same mistakes. Again, a few of the better students catch on, but most do not.

Finally, an update on our book project: To date we have raised over one-third of the total needed to ship a 40-foot container of books. The Director of Development at Books for Africa contacted me recently to say that many donations have come in memory of Sam Hammond. This is a result, no doubt, of the efforts of the former University Librarian and one currently serving librarian at Duke to publicize the project to friends and colleagues. Consequently the staff at booksforafrica.org have decided to do a feature story about Sam on their website and social media platforms! It will appear as we get close to our fundraising goal. So if you'd like to make a donation in memory of Sam, or inform others through your social media sites of the opportunity, it might be regarded as an August (22nd) birthday gift to Sam. Thank you!

The attached photographs show me teaching math (indoors) and Life Skills (outdoors). You may notice that the blackboards in the classroom are simply sections of the wall painted black. The Life Skills course has no set curriculum, so we talk about anything from Kenyan poetry to "How to protect yourself against HIV/AIDS" to "What to do to improve my exam scores?" Students are happy to escape from their classrooms into the fresh air for a short while.

Several of you have asked me to repeat the instructions on how to make a donation to the book project. There are two ways:

1. Go to the website www.booksforafrica.org and click on the line that says donate. Then scroll down to the blue box and click "donate to a project." Scroll down to Kenya and click "Lirhanda School Project–Pascal Ogutu (Kenya)." Click the green button that says "donate now." The procedure may be slightly different for those using a smartphone.

Pascal Ogutu is the principal of our school and the official contact person for the project. The Peace Corps prefers that its volunteers act as facilitators for the communities rather than as independent fundraisers.

2. If you'd like to donate by check (payable to Books for Africa and sent to: Books for Africa, 717 Prior Avenue North, Suite B, St. Paul, MN 55104), please add a note or send an email to alejandra@booksforafrica.org to inform her of the date, amount, and recipient (Kenya-Lirhanda school project) of your donation.

*With love and appreciation for friends back home,
M/M*



