

The following article was written by Christi Bayha, one of the American GCJ delegates.

If you visit the US State Department website, they will tell you:

1. If you travel in Africa, don't go to Nigeria
2. If you have to go to Nigeria, don't go to Delta State
3. If you have to go to Delta State, definitely don't go to the creeks.

My journey started on 22 July 2005 with an email. The subject line simply said, "[iProJobs] Global Citizen Journey – looking for participants" and the first line read, "Global Citizen Journey is looking for someone to join them in Nigeria where they are building a library."

My inbox beeped, and a new message appeared: "FW: [iProJobs] Global Citizen Journey – looking for participants" and when I opened it up, a good friend had simply typed, "This sounds like something you would be interested in!"

I don't consider myself a thrill-seeker or even much of a risk taker. I am a librarian. I can't define that very well some days, but it's a core part of who I am, my passion and what moves me to act. I also have longed my whole life to see Africa. Within 10 minutes of receiving those emails I had called and scheduled an interview.

Global Citizen Journey is a grassroots peace organization that has its roots in Earthstewards. The founders, Susan Partnow and Mary Ella Keblusek, have years of experience in the peace movement. This was to be their first foray into leading a peace mission. They wanted to pick someplace "edgy", someplace often ignored and avoided by the civilized world. They picked Nigeria.

The village of Oporoza Nigeria is in the very heart of the creeks, in Delta State, Nigeria. A few years ago, the Ijaw and Itsekiri tribes started to fight among themselves and the area is largely believed to be a lawless land. People warned me that I might be killed. Our trip leaders assured us that the recent peace accord between the tribes was secure. My father was so concerned that I thought he was going to disown me at one point. Very few people thought that I would really go. After all, I'm not a risk taker. I'm an overweight, out-of-shape, 30-something librarian with a husband, two cats and a mortgage.

The trip turned out to be one of the most intense and profound experiences of my life. No one was killed. No one was even threatened. Oporoza was our home for one full week. We lived with the Ijaw people and brought Itsekiri people into the village with us. Everyone was greeted with open arms and treated like royalty. The Itsekiri woman in our group actually received several marriage proposals! We managed to complete the library and stock it with 1400 books; we made new friends, and learned just how much hope and resiliency a people are capable of.... But let me start at the beginning!

Once I was accepted as a delegate, I needed to raise \$2,950.00 to meet my commitment to Global Citizen Journey and the money for my airfare and shots on top of that. I spent

the rest of my summer and fall writing letters, holding raffles, and generally beating the bushes for the funds.

I arrived in Lagos late at night on the 17th of Nov. – First impression: hot & humid! We stayed in Lagos for the first two days, spending our time in various meetings – with representatives from Chevron, the King of Badagary and learning about the history and culture of Nigeria. A performance by the National Dance Troupe was a particular treat!

On Sunday we traveled to Benin City, one of the oldest cities in the world, where we met up with the Nigerian delegates for the first time. Overnight our group grew from 19 to 40! I was surprised to learn that it wasn't just American parents who were unsure about their child's choice of destinations. The Nigerians told their own stories of standing up to their parent's opposition, of writing their wills, "just in case." I wondered if I had made a wise choice.

Wednesday morning we boarded the speedboats for Oporoza. For some of our Nigerian friends, this was their first boat ride ever! The journey went quickly, with beautiful scenery flying by - then we were there! Surrounded by festively decorated dugout canoes – drums beating, people singing, dancing, and cheering our arrival! It was overwhelming. I've never felt so welcomed in my whole life. As I climbed off the boat there were many hands to help me up the stairs, and many more, pressing in from all sides – "You are welcome!" they exclaimed, as they all reached to shake our hands.

Once we were all off the boats we were led thru the village by two "Masquerades", representatives of the spirits who appear at important times in village life. In this case, the masquerades were made to look like a car and an airplane to represent our journey. We were led to the town hall where we were officially welcomed by the elders and chiefs of the Gbaramantu (Ijaw) Kingdom. The welcome ceremony was followed by dance performances by many of the young people of the village.

The light was fading by the time we were reunited with our luggage and we were taken to the homes of our host families. I and another delegate stayed at the home of Patrick & Marris, two of the most generous and sweet Nigerians you will ever meet. There were several beautiful houses in the village; Patrick's being the nicest in my opinion, but no plumbing! This presented its own challenges, but I won't go there! Suffice it to say, it was rustic.

Thursday morning I finally got to see the library! I was nervous, the building looked pretty good – four walls, a roof – but not windows or doors or furniture... and the grand opening was only 5 days away! The contractor assured us – it would be ready, so I turned my attention to the books. Most of the American delegates had packed books as their second piece of luggage and they were now being stored in the secondary school.

My Nigerian counterpart, Nicholas Dekpen, and I wanted to complete an inventory of the books to leave with the Board of Trustees but the school had no electricity and we only had 3 laptops with limited battery power, so several people sat with pen and paper and

started to write. When the laptops were available, we created Excel spreadsheets and transferred the data. It was long, tedious work and yet it was amazingly satisfying. On Friday afternoon the delegates were meeting with the villagers to discuss peace, self-empowerment and other issues. Nicholas and I slipped away and walked in a light rain back to the school. We worked in perfect silence for the next hour and a half until the sun set. It's my favorite memory from the trip.

Unfortunately, the light rain of the day turned into a downpour that night. When we arrived at the school the next morning we were dismayed to find that the roof had leaked and several of the children's books had gotten wet. The sun peaked out from scattered clouds as we lay the books open on the lawn in hopes that they would dry.

I was pushing back my chair and yelling, "Rain!" before I even realized what was happening. I reached the doorway and stopped in amazement. Children had appeared as if out of nowhere and they grabbed up the books frantically and hustled them under the relative protection of the school roof. I smiled as I remembered listening to these same children the day before at a school assembly. Susan had asked them, "What are we building?"

"A library!"

"Whose library is it?"

"It's my library!"

"Who's going to take care of it?"

"I am!"

Monday morning finally arrived. I had discovered the night before that my host "mom", Marris, owned the small beauty shop in the village and Monday morning she insisted on washing my hair for free so that it would be clean for the celebrations of the day. What a wonderful feeling! Clean hair!

The celebrations started early, and went all day and all night! After hours of speeches and dances we made our way across the soccer field for the ribbon-cutting. The mood was joyous as everyone filed past the plaque on the door: "Niger Delta Friendship Library". We snaked thru the stacks and study carrels and out the back door. I ran my hand along the books as I wound my way through 1400 books, 7 bookcases, study carrels, chairs. I felt exhausted and proud.

The next several days passed in a blur and suddenly I was home again. As I write this, sitting in my house with the rain falling outside, I know I will never forget my journey to Nigeria. The palm trees dripping with canary nests, the children – always smiling and laughing and anxious to play and talk with us, the long jetty on the riverside; all this – Oporoza – Nigeria – is imprinted on my heart.