

2006 – RECOLLECTIONS OF SRI LANKA AND CRISIS CORPS

The tsunami and Crisis Corps

On December 26, 2004 a 9.1-9.3 magnitude submarine earthquake occurred off the northwestern coast of Sumatra, Indonesia causing the largest, most devastating tsunami ever to hit the Indian Ocean. A tidal wave of as high as 100' in some areas affected a total of 11 countries resulting ultimately in 230,000 deaths, one of the deadliest natural disasters ever. At that time there were no tsunami warning systems in the Indian Ocean. The tsunami hit the



eastern shore of Sri Lanka with its most powerful force within two hours of the earthquake and a few hours later hit the southwestern coast with less force but equivalent casualties.



I was Country Director of Peace Corps Micronesia at the time and knew that we had several volunteers on vacation in Thailand. Thanks to the communications systems of the Australian Embassy we were able to ascertain rather quickly that our PCVs were unharmed. But we watched horrified as the death toll kept rising to 100,000 more than that of the entire population of FSM and Palau, reaching a total of 235,000. Thanks in large part to UNESCO, by the next major Indian Ocean tsunami in 2007, significant progress had been made on an early warning system.

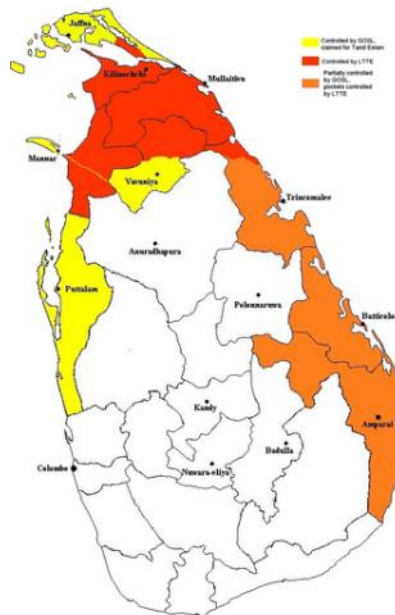
By late January 2005, Peace Corps had recruited Crisis Corps Volunteers (CCVs) to serve in Thailand where there was an active Peace Corps program. Crisis Corps (now known as Peace Corps Response) is a program where experienced professionals serve in short term (normally three to six months) high impact assignments. The requests usually come from countries dealing with the aftermath of war, natural disasters, or epidemics. Peace Corps had been periodically active in Sri Lanka, most recently from 1983 to 1998 with PCVs working in the areas of education, environment and youth development, but had terminated the program for security reasons related to the ongoing civil war.

By June an agreement had been reached with the Sri Lankan government and several organizations to host a total of 30 volunteers over a six-month period. Of the first group, eight of the volunteers would work with the Christian Children's Fund and World Vision, to rebuild

I arrived in Colombo at the beginning of May. This was a particularly challenging assignment because of the ongoing civil war between the LTTE (Tamil insurgents) and the Sinhalese government forces (GoSL). Although the bulk of the military action was in the north of the country, there were incidents throughout the country. In Colombo many buildings (government) were protected with sand bags and one was rarely out of sight of a team of guards armed with automatic rifles. This map shows the area claimed by the LTTE as Tamil



homeland, and this one shows control areas at my time there: red LTTE, yellow GoSL, and orange GoSL with pockets of LTTE.



Our volunteers were based in communities along the southern and southwestern coasts.

were seven CCVs serving and arrive and complete their September. Four HIV/AIDS with American Red Cross/Sri cross-cutting program in construction managers, Sarvodaya would assist in playground design and by USAID and the Clinton/Bush Foundation. The final two volunteers who arrived at the end of June for their three-month tour, a social worker and a human resources professional, worked with Christian Children’s Fund.

At the time of my arrival there eight more scheduled to projects by the end of professionals would work Lanka Red Cross to initiate a HIV/AIDS education and two assigned to local NGO implementing an 85- construction project funded

In all, 46 Crisis Corps Volunteers served over a sixteen-month time frame – the largest (except for domestic Katrina) - and longest Crisis Corps program in Peace Corps history at that time. These mid-career professionals made significant contributions during their short tenures and were much appreciated.

The Crisis Corps staff included, in addition to the Country Representative, an Assistant Country Representative who had been a CCV in the first group to serve, a Sri Lankan Administrative Assistant and a Sri Lankan driver. On contract we had two medical doctors to support the volunteers and also a language teacher. At arrival we provided a three-day orientation primarily focused on safety and security, medical challenges and intensive



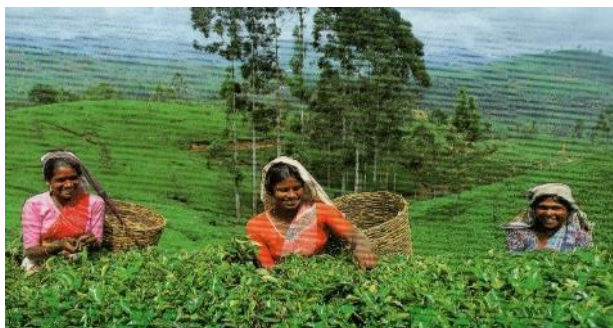
Sinhalese language training. The office was in the ground floor of a house whose upstairs also served as my residence.

All of the volunteers had previously served two-year tours as Peace Corps Volunteers so they were experienced at settling into new communities and cultures. They also received a briefing from the U.S. Embassy and were sworn in by U.S. Ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead.

Sri Lanka history and the civil war

The history of Sri Lanka is intertwined with the history of the Indian subcontinent and the surrounding regions. The earliest human remains found on the island date to about 125,000 years ago. Modern settlement began in the 6thC BC by ancestors of the Sinhalese from Northern India. Buddhism was introduced in the 3rdC BC and the first Tamil king was in the 2ndC BC. 181 monarchs had ruled the island's many kingdoms between the beginning of modern history and unification by Great Britain in 1815 under the name of Ceylon. Other colonial powers had controlled portions of the island from the 1600's onward. Initial independence and the name Sri Lanka arrived in 1948, but the island remained a dominion of Great Britain until full independence in 1972. The Sinhalese language act of 1956, mandating Sinhalese language in education and commerce sowed some of the seeds of the subsequent civil war which erupted in 1983. Although a cease-fire had been negotiated in 2002, there were frequent military clashes and terrorist-type attacks including massacres and assassinations. The war finally ended in 2009.

The British had introduced plantation agriculture in the highlands in the 1830's, importing large numbers of Tamils from Tamil Nadu in India as laborers. These Tamils were a different group than the Sinhalese Tamils of northern Ceylon who had been present for centuries. At first coffee was grown but from the 1850's to '70's a leaf blight destroyed the coffee and as an alternative, tea production began and continues to be a well-known export.



Rice and coconuts were primarily for local consumption, there was a moderate industry in gems prior to the war and rubber plantations were also successfully introduced. Today tea accounts for 20% of exports and textiles and garments account for 63%. It is also known for its spices, especially cinnamon and chilis. I have included postcard scans of these and other sites. The vast majority of the post card photos are by Juergen Schreiber.

The country has a highly varied terrain from tropical forest to highlands and sand beaches. Historic religious sites and colorful festivals are among the major tourist attractions. It is approximately 70% Buddhist, 12% Hindu, 10% Muslim and 7% Christian. In 2006 Buddhism was celebrating the 2550th anniversary of the Buddha's birth and there were many special events during the year.



Every Peace Corps country has an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) with thorough procedures to provide for the safety and security of the volunteers. Every PCVs location must be known at all times and there must be a method to communicate with them in case of emergency. Due to the situation in Sri Lanka, we

were briefed daily by the U.S. Embassy regarding the security situation and notified immediately of any incidents in areas where we had volunteers placed. We also kept the Embassy security staff informed of any travel by our volunteers. CCVs were always on Alert status and we were frequently putting them on Standfast either in their homes or communities when their security was potentially at risk. The organizations to which they were assigned understood that this was a requirement of enjoying the services of the volunteers.

Impressions of Colombo

The U. S. Embassy had a recreation center to which I had access. Each morning about 6:30 as I started my 4 kilometer walk to the swimming pool there was an elderly man in his sarong clipping the red hibiscus and yellow ehala (cassia fistula or golden shower) flowers on my lane. He selected only perfect blossoms because they were going to the Buddhist temple to be placed on altars as offerings. Another man along my walk also had a long stick, but his was used to switch off the street lights along his route.



Then, I heard music and it was coming from a small loudspeaker on the bicycle of a man selling lottery tickets. All along the route women in orange vests were sweeping the leaves, twigs and miscellaneous trash into two-wheeled push carts, thus keeping the storm drains unblocked.

There was also a crew which collected recyclables from houses and put them into a multi-compartmented truck. Sometimes a wagon (shaped like a miniature American pioneer covered wagon) passed by drawn by a bullock.



Even though the route was primarily residential or passing through a large park, there was an entrepreneur with buckets of water who washed cars and several others who sold the popular buns (fish,

chicken, vegetable) or rice/curry packets that people ate for breakfast and lunch. At this early hour the city was relatively quiet with only the buses crowded with workers (and the occasional motorcycle with a brightly helmeted driver) drowning out the birdsongs and breezes. Although the sidewalk pavers were topsy turvy and often missing, they were carpeted with white, pink and striped plumeria, hibiscus flowers of every hue, and the yellow ehala and mimosa flowers.

As in Cotonou, Benin, people were constantly sweeping the fallen vegetation from their frontage out onto the street, but here the brooms had handles, so people weren't stooped over to sweep.

Colombo's built environment was a study in contrasts with gleaming mid and high-rise office, residential and hotel buildings interspersed with handsome colonial buildings with wide verandahs, elegantly carved wood trimmed deep set windows, and orange tiled roofs. Everywhere there were nondescript buildings in various stages of repair interrupted



every few feet by Buddhist or Hindu shrines – an occasional Christian saint as well. At night these were lighted and there were always strings of flowers, flags and/or paper lanterns fluttering. You often saw buildings constructed around a sacred bo or other tree.



As the city awakened the three-wheeled vehicle known as a tuk tuk or auto-rickshaw (think small golf cart) competed



with the buses and cars for road space. These were the primary taxis and they darted around, as did the zemi-jahns in Cotonou, producing a similar level of anxiety, although, blessedly I didn't see nearly as many accidents. There was a school next door to the pool and I noticed that the students arrived about the time I finished my workout each morning. In fact, I would hear them singing their school songs just as I was departing. I found a tuk tuk driver who brought one of the students each day and negotiated with him to take me back to the house (it was both my house and the Crisis Corp office). I was then able to call upon him when I needed transport and avoid having to constantly negotiate with other tuk tuks.

High alert was the watch word for the pedestrian, especially one not raised in British traffic travel directions. But, in reality, vehicles seemed to come from every direction! The horn was extremely important. Generally, a driver didn't look before, say, backing up. So, if someone was there, it was their responsibility to announce their presence with the horn.

We were in the monsoon season so there were tropical downpours almost every day. Fortunately, they were not generally accompanied by thunder, so they didn't interfere with doing my walk/water aerobics. Generally speaking, being at about the same longitude, the weather, vegetation and length of day were about the same as Kolonia, Micronesia and Cotonou. We cheated, however, by having ½ hour of daylight savings time, so it was light at 5:30 am and dark about 6:45 pm. Living at this longitude I did miss the very long summer evenings in the north with daylight until 10 pm.

There are also very important temples in Colombo. The major Buddhist one is Gangaramay Temple located on Beira Lake in the heart of the central city.



What I am used to calling stupas (from Nepal) but they call dagobas, are everywhere and Hindu and Buddhist are often intertwined – witness this Ganesh in a Buddhist temple.

It was difficult not to adopt shopping as a major pastime. From modern multi-story shopping malls with gleaming glassware, Noritake china, furniture and textiles, all made in Sri Lanka, to street stalls with food, and every manner of plastic products from China, the temptation was endless. There were wonderful batiks, hand painted silks, gold-threaded sarees, ready-made Western wear (Calvin Klein, Adidas, J Crew, Banana Republic, and Victoria's Secret all had production there) and traditional Indian sarwal outfits to say nothing of the fabrics to be custom tailored. Other handicrafts include wood carvings (including fabulous brightly painted

masks and puppets), basket and mat weaving, metal work (brass and copper) and gemstones. Very inexpensive books in English “For sale only on the Indian subcontinent” were my downfall. Here are my hanging brass oil lamp plus hand-painted silk dress, top and scarf.



There were periodic exhibitions/sales of the artisan products from around the country.



I bought two woven wall hangings at one of those and two small elephant batiks decorated with sequins and pearls at another.



Another shopping opportunity was china. The house only had plastic dishware which I don't feel ever gets really clean, so I had an excuse to buy some china. As I went from one outlet to another, I noticed that the same pattern was available from multiple “brands”. In the end I acquired six place settings (dinner plate, salad plate, bowl), a coffee set (pot, cups, saucers, sugar and creamer) and a soup set (covered soup tureen and six bowls) all in the same pattern. However, each was a different manufacturer: Plankenhammer Bavaria, Royal Fernwood Porcelain Sri Lanka, Porzellan Fabrik Tirschenreuth Bavaria Bone China, and Bernardo fine bone China Germany is what is written on the pieces but, clearly, all were manufactured in Sri Lanka!

So, we enjoyed our 10 am and 4 pm tea breaks on proper china. And my favorite, ginger snaps, were the best I have ever had! I should also mention that every month the full moon day, Poya, was a legal holiday.



I really liked the work of the Sri Lankan artist and sculptor known as Segar. Here are some greeting card reproductions of his work.

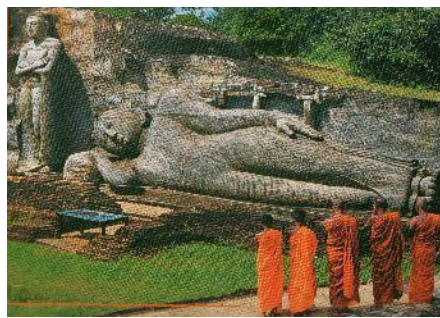


Much to my surprise, there was an Alliance Française in Colombo and they were celebrating their 50th anniversary in Sri Lanka! A French couple offered two courses that worked for my schedule. On Friday evenings the wife held a conversation class and on the weekend the husband held a multi-hour

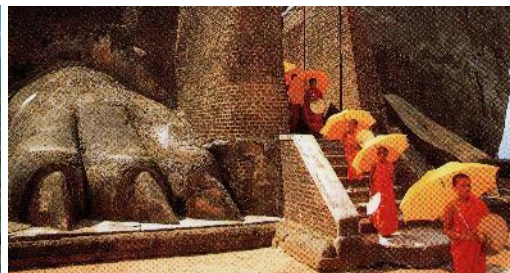
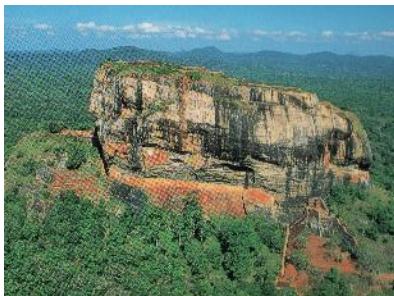
intensive class, preparing students for their high school language exams. I jumped at the chance to prepare for my B2 level French exam and to spend time with Sri Lankans.

Travel and tourism sites

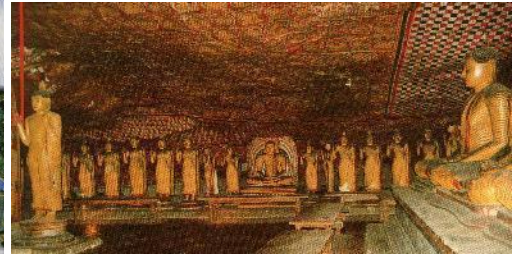
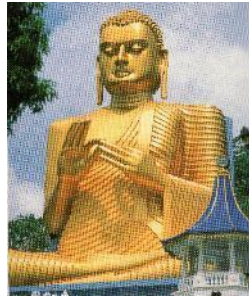
Traveling along the southern coast add cows to the mix of traffic on the road plus wall to wall stalls of merchandise and the coast road could be pretty frantic. There was, thankfully, a train that ran along the coast from Colombo all through the coastal south. It was inexpensive, ran frequently and undoubtedly helped alleviate what could have been a worse traffic jam! There were also trains into the interior – specifically serving the hills of the tea country and the ancient capitals – Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy, known as the cultural triangle. Due to the war I was never able to make it to Polonnaruwa or Anuradhapura.



Another magnificent area that I missed out on was Sighirya. The base is known as the lion's paw

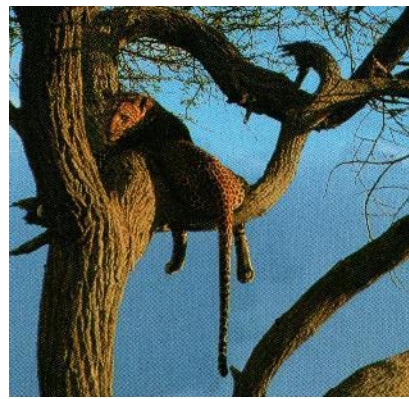
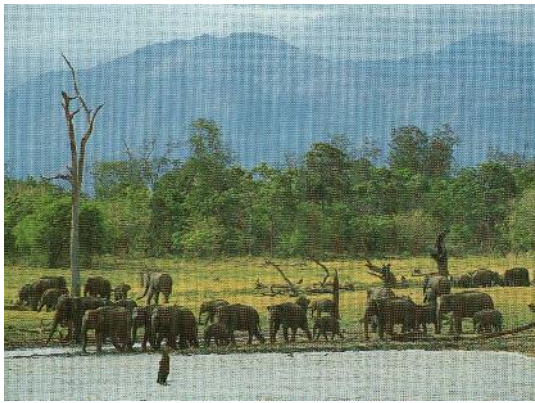


and the frescoes date from the 5th C AD.



Nearby was the Dambulla temple complex, Golden Temple and Rock Temple.

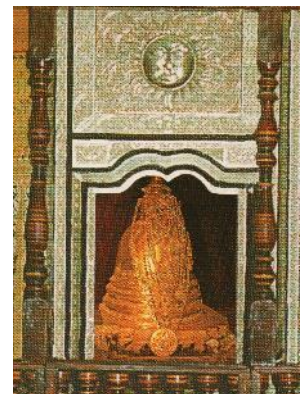
Another major tourist site that I did not visit was the Yala National Park with herds of elephants and one of the largest concentration of leopards in the world.



However, I was fortunate to make a visit to Kandy, which sits in the hill country that comprises approximately the central third of Sri Lanka. It felt very much like Pohnpei, including men wearing lava lavas and chewing betel nut, but with the addition of Buddhist and Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, and tea instead of sakau growing on the hillsides. On the flat land, rice paddies were interspersed with giant taro. The weather also felt like Pohnpei with relatively constant downpours for the three days and fog hanging around the mountain tops. I did get to visit numerous temple sites (most have both Hindu and Buddhist on the same site) and enjoy an Ayurvedic herbal facial treatment and massage. The train felt as if I was still in the Colonial era (same trains) and was very enjoyable with views of the lush surrounding hills and valleys.

Kandy is the site of the annual 10-day Perahera during the full moon of July/August. This is a major festival when the sacred tooth of the Buddha, which is stored there, is brought out. This is its storage site inside the temple of the tooth.

Five of our volunteers had planned to attend but, unfortunately, due to a police assassination nearby we had to cancel their visit for safety reasons. Here are some photos from postcards. Perahera means procession and the elephants are caprisaned in magnificent garments with drummers and dancers accompanying them.





The coastline is magnificent, some areas great for surfing, others for snorkeling and scuba diving. However, even after a year and a half, a great deal of damage remained.



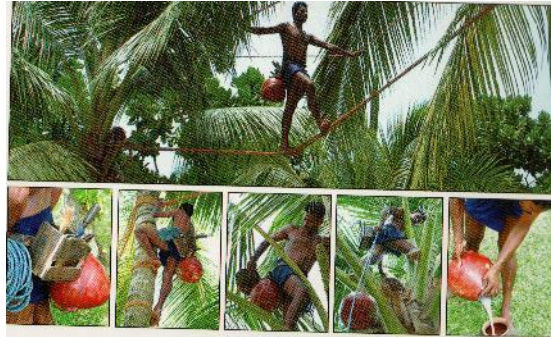
On a visit to a volunteer I saw the famous stilt fishermen, supposedly unique to Sri Lanka. Here are my photo, a postcard with more detail, and a wood carving I purchased.



The outrigger canoe is similar to those of Micronesia.

Also, along the south coast I saw tappers tapping coconut trees to make toddy from the flowers. This requires great balance as they are walking tightropes between the trees, the network is called athura. The sap is collected in large jugs and either drunk freshly fermented as toddy or distilled into the extremely

potent (66 to 100 proof) liquor called Arrack. Here is my photo and a postcard showing more detail. Last year I saw tappers when on a houseboat trip in Kerala, southern India, but without the athura network.



The Hikkaduwa strip along the coast road to Galle has many artisan villages. At one batik workshop I bought this double-bed sized batik spread. I paid \$300. It had taken 6 women 6 months to create and they were in tears as it was their only sale in that amount of time!



Ambalangoda is famous for making masks which are used in many of the traditional tales and dances of the region. This is the cobra mask I bought. The cobra is believed to assist people who are possessed by demons. Here is an exhibit of some of the variety of masks, but in Ambalangoda there is an excellent mask museum.



I loved visiting the volunteers and meeting their communities. These children had been

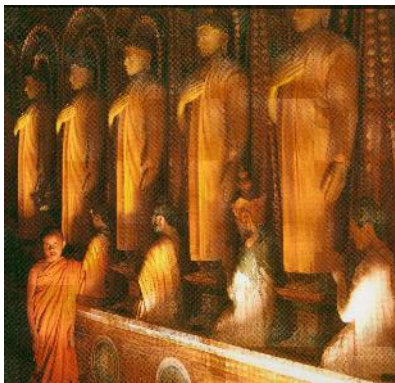


involved in a community garden project. One little girl wanted to celebrate in her party dress.

Fishing was still a major livelihood factor. This a was typical south coast fishing village.



A volunteer was based in Mirissa where there were both a beautiful temple and beach.



There was a wide variety of accommodations from inexpensive guest houses – 2 to 10 rooms in a family compound – to magnificent five-star properties.



At Galle, the 16th C fortified town initially settled by the Portuguese, the Galle Fort Hotel is a lovely example of a colonial four-star hotel.





We were fortunate to be able to attend the dedication ceremony for the playground at Panadura. It was a lovely celebration with drummers and dancers, but most of all children enjoying the playground and happy parents and community members standing by.



There was also a Lions Club Gift of Sight Hospital and a beautiful temple at Panadura.



Standards of dining were very high, regardless of what cuisine you prefer. All ingredients were available and spices are one of the country's chief agricultural products (along with tea). Wait staff had amazing memories – I had taken tea at a hotel in Colombo and returned a week later only to have the waiter remember which tea I had chosen.

The Sri Lankans are very friendly, have wonderful smiles, and are devoted to their families and respective religions. Language was a bit challenging – even people who spoke English didn't necessarily understand me. There is a waggle of the head which is used to indicate everything from "yes" to "no" to "I don't understand you but don't want to say so" to But in the end, everyone had good intentions and we managed to communicate.

I was also fortunate to see a traditional story/dance program one evening.



There were sounds to remember. The bird that woke me at first light each morning, the Muslim call to prayer I could hear from the house/office, the Buddhist chants at all times of day, and the constant cacophony of horns – bus, truck, auto and tuk tuk.

Crisis Corps Transition

Unfortunately, the week of August 7th proved to be a deadly one as it started with a massacre of 17 volunteers of the French NGO Action Against Hunger in Muttur, near Trincomalee, then the aforementioned police officer assassination near Kandy. In response, the Sri Lanka military initiated intensive air attacks in Trincomalee and Jaffna. Then, on the 8th a bomb in Colombo targeting a member of Parliament killed two people and injured 8. On the 12th the Deputy Secretary for the Peace Process was assassinated outside his home. When on August 14th the convoy of the Pakistani Ambassador returning from presenting his credentials to the President was attacked by an anti-personnel mine killing 7 and wounding 14, Peace Corps HQ decided that given the vastly escalating safety risks we should immediately terminate the program. We were given 48 hours to gather the volunteers into a safe location, complete a basic Close of Service activity, and transport everyone to the airport about 30 km north of Colombo for flights to their homes of record. This is always a stressful way to end service for any volunteer.

Fortunately, we had been in the process of preparing for the closing of the program five weeks later. We accelerated as many actions as possible and the Assistant Country Representative was able to leave within one additional day and me after another one. Staff at the Embassy would deal with the remaining details locally and I would follow up from Washington, DC.

During the summer, a position had come open in Crisis Corps at PC headquarters. Because I had become very impressed by the program, I decided to apply and after a competitive process was selected. So, I was slated to relocate to Washington and start the position on October 1st. Instead, after a quick trip home to collect personal effects, I arrived on September 1st for a 30-month contract. The position handled coordination with countries where Peace Corps was active to develop and negotiate MOU's for CCV requests that could then be filled by our three recruitment/placement staff members. I was also responsible for the budget, personnel

administration (of our six-person staff) and for responding to requests for Crisis Corps volunteers from countries where Peace Corps did not currently have a presence, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone.

I found the job fulfilling, an apartment in Adams Morgan (a 20-minute walk to the office) delightful, and Alliance Française and La Maison Française (cultural arm of the French Embassy) activities and courses, stimulating. There was a first-ever French film festival in the fall and all the amazing free musical performances and museums of the Kennedy Center and the Smithsonian Institutions.

My belongings arrived from Benin late in the year so I was able to truly settle in to the apartment by hanging my art work. And my summer clothes arrived just in time to depart in January, 2007 on a temporary assignment in the Philippines, the subject of the next write-up.