

# The Seasons Come & Go

## *Impressions of a Peace Corps Tenure in Ghana*

BY CHRISTOPHER M. BURNS '95

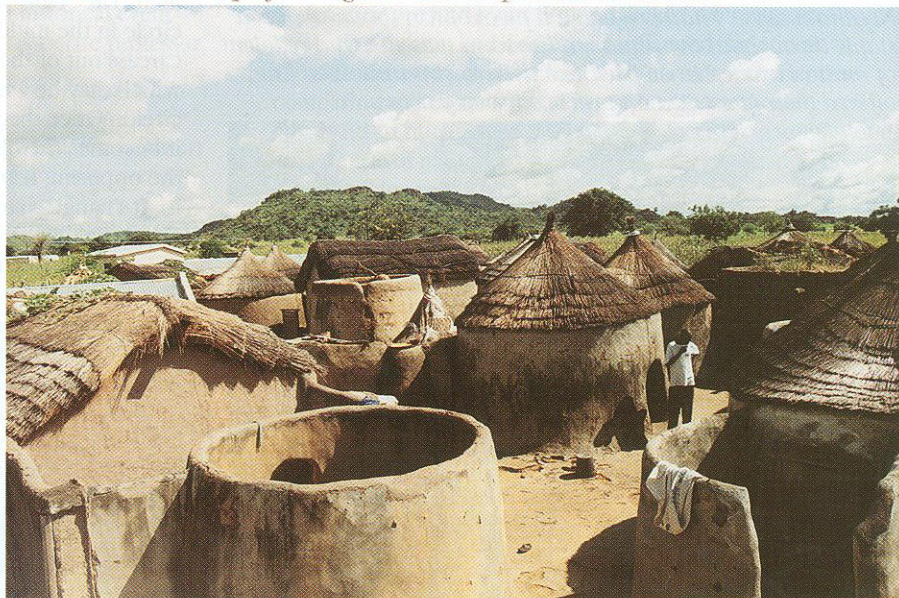
*Chris Burns '95 is an agro-forestry and sustainable agriculture Peace Corps volunteer in the village of Tongo, northern Ghana. He manages a tree nursery with six workers; they raise seedlings to sell to farmers, businesses and local organizations. In addition, he works with farmers to improve techniques of farming in brittle environments and implement land conservation measures. As he notes in the following edited excerpt from a much longer reflection on his time in Ghana (available upon request to [nburdick@stlawu.edu](mailto:nburdick@stlawu.edu)), Chris took part in St. Lawrence's Kenya Program in 1993.*

LONG FOR A BREAK from the monotony of the computer world, where for a few hours I've forgotten where in the physical world I am. I make my way toward my vantage point outside on the balcony, at the edge of an off-center four-way intersection.

African life, peaceful yet busy, wakes me instantly. I bend over the rail to catch the sounds of horns, people and animals, the sights of colorfully clad women in perfectly patterned cloth, with everything imaginable – from headpans overfilled with carefully balanced tomatoes, to brooms, sewing machines and five-

horsepower generators – on their heads. Small boys are pulling donkey carts with only three good tires; men are loading *tro-tros* and buses for distant vicinities. A deal for fertilizer goes down next door. Taxi prices are negotiated on the street corner. Oranges and bananas are being hawked for mere pennies, groundnuts for even less. Bicycles, by far the most common mode of transport, glide past, swerving left and right, narrowly missing daydreaming bystanders. The wind sways gently through the *neem* trees. I strain my nose to pick up smells, but there are none. I strain my eyes to catch a glimpse of my Tongo Hills in

*The panorama from the Tongo Hills of northern Ghana encompasses the region where Chris Burns is performing his Peace Corps volunteer service.*





the distance, but buildings and a thick morning haze block the view...

My mind wanders to December 1993, to a similar vantage point: a different balcony on the streets of Mombasa, on the other side of this great continent. Although I can no longer recall specifics, the day is forever engraved in my memory, more so in my dreams. Coconut-sized mangoes sat in piles on the side of the road, their yellow, orange and red hues beckoning pedestrians. Most would stop to buy some, un-

*"I have not felt as much at home and at peace in a foreign land since my Kenya semester days of seven years ago."*

able to resist the temptation of the sweet juices hidden beneath the peel. Electronics shops, bookstores and auto-mechanic bays lined the congested street. Murmurings of Swahili, Luo and other Kenyan dialects drifted up to the second floor of our cheap hotel, in lazy ascent, much like the smoke from meat roasting below. From my balcony I reveled in the kaleidoscopic events below.

I'm compelled, but not eager, to return to work at the keyboard in the fanned room. Dreams of yesteryear will have to wait for the next respite, a different balcony.

Sixteen months into my 27-month Peace Corps stint in northern Ghana have allowed me to live the law of the African land in its true glory. I have not felt as much at home and at peace in a foreign land since my Kenya semester days of seven years ago.

I WAKE UP EARLY on a January morning, uninterested in rising from beneath my warm blanket. It is still hard to get used to being cold in Ghana, though the Harmattan winds have been a constant reminder of the low temperatures. My throat is parched, saturated again with the heaviness of Harmattan dust, my hands and heels cracked with dryness. At least I can find solace in the cold mornings for another month, and the howling winds that rip through my cement house in the mid-afternoon,

before the onslaught of the hot season.

At home in my village, I look out at the Tongo Hills to the south and imagine myself elsewhere. Sometimes I dream that the learned goats galloping across the road are actually graceful gazelles, and that I'm in the center of the Serengeti instead of the Sudanese savannah. The *baobab* trees stand tall, weathering yet another century of unrelenting heat and dryness, just as they do to the east in Kenya. They slouch to the ground under the weight of the heat. In their heyday, they used to rise up against the weather and flaunt their imperviousness. Yet after generations of

struggling, they have given up hope, and instead seem to resort to prayers for the coming rains which offer renewed spirit.

In the distance, farmers hunch over, working the scarred land to the bone, in the same manner as their East African neighbors. They too, pray for the rains. Prayer and rain – a recurring theme in Africa. The Samburu, I learned during my semester in Kenya, feel so close a connection between God and rain that the two share the same name: *N'gai*. Here in Ghana, the connection is just as strong, although the words are different.

But the rain doesn't come. For over six long months – from October

## Laurentians in the Peace Corps

*According to information supplied by the Peace Corps, St. Lawrence is tied for ninth among all small colleges and universities supplying volunteers in 2000-01. As of June 2001, indicates the Corps, the following St. Lawrence alumni were serving:*

<b>Christopher M. Burns '95</b>	Ghana	<i>Forestry</i>
<b>Frederick H. Hobbs III '95</b>	Paraguay	<i>Agriculture and Forestry Extension</i>
<b>Heather E. Patt '96</b>	Madagascar	<i>Parks and Wildlife</i>
<b>Jennifer L. Martin '96</b>	Vanuatu	<i>High School Science Teaching</i>
<b>Jeffrey M. Guillemette '98</b>	The Philippines	<i>Community Services</i>
<b>Harald Knudsen '98</b>	Estonia	<i>High School English Teaching</i>
<b>Michelle R. Alexander '98</b>	Bulgaria	<i>Community Services</i>
<b>Abigail J. Stamm '99</b>	Malawi	<i>Parks and Wildlife</i>
<b>Rebecca J. Watters '99</b>	Mongolia	<i>Environmental Education</i>
<b>Jamie M. Olson '99</b>	Haiti	<i>Agriculture and Forestry Extension</i>
<b>Tasha Hacker '99</b>	Russia	<i>High School English Teaching</i>
<b>Catherine M. Banks '99</b>	Bulgaria	<i>Primary Education/Teacher Training</i>
<b>Kathleen M. Barry '99</b>	Ecuador	<i>Animal Husbandry</i>
<b>Shannon B. Cornelius '00</b>	Ghana	<i>Community Services</i>

*According to information they gave their class reporter, these alumnae began Peace Corps service in Summer 2001:*

<b>Allison P. Mills '00</b>	Benin	<i>English Teaching</i>
<b>Meredith A. O'Neil '00</b>	Cameroon	<i>Community Health Education</i>

*And, last but not least:*

<b>Melissa A. Denchak '01</b>	Caribbean or Latin America	<i>Business Development (country to be assigned)</i>
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An article in the January 1965 *St. Lawrence Bulletin*, predecessor to this magazine, suggests that Laurentian loyalty to the Peace Corps is not a new phenomenon. The article, which covered Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver's address during a fall 1964 visit to campus, points out that St. Lawrence was "one of the most prolific producers of Peace Corps volunteers among the nation's like-sized colleges and universities" and notes that 22 Laurentians were serving in 13 countries at the time.

Peace Corps regulations prevent the Corps from releasing names of current or former volunteers without their specific consent; we encourage alumni who have served in the Peace Corps to inform us, at slualum@stlawu.edu.





*A volunteer women's group, Suntaaba ("people helping people"), gathers around Jacob Sakot, community chairman, while he plants a mahogany seedling to inaugurate their community planting project; Peace Corps volunteer Chris Burns '95 is helping the villagers with agro-forestry and sustainable agriculture projects.*

to early May – the land dries up like a forgotten sponge on a kitchen counter. People dry up too, for there is little to do in a farming community when one cannot farm. Instead, they look to family and friends for social support. The hot, dry season (once the Harmattan winds vanish in late February) becomes the funeral season. On most nights, drums, music and dancing catch the midnight air. Day in and night out, villagers gather to praise their loved ones who have passed on to a "better world," in their minds. They do not mourn, but rather

celebrate life with a grand party, something our culture could stand to learn.

Three-quarters of the way home [from one such funeral], my peripheral vision catches a shooting star soaring across half of the sky, tapering off as if to say, "I'll take time; I want you to see me." The star seems out of place be-

Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy Erin McCarthy and four students spent three weeks in Japan in May and June, studying Zen Buddhism. To find out more, go to <http://www.stlawu.edu/magazine/>.

cause my mind is focusing on distant lightning. But I realize that the lightning makes the star all the more impressive. With the rains approaching, I can relish the beauty of the heat lightning, which illuminates all the sky. I had been able to catch glimpses of it during my dinner of riceballs and groundnut soup, but the tops of the houses in the compound prevented me from viewing the flashes in their true glory. Now, in full darkness with a celestial ceiling, I bask in the majesty of the night, and begin to long for rain.

FINALLY, WE GET AN ANSWER to our prayers. Florae break through the soil with parched tongues outstretched, like baby birds waiting for a morsel from their mother's beak. Tree roots awake from their hibernation and turn an ear toward the sounds of raindrops and thunder high above. Piglets and kids frolic in the carousel of spinning rain.

*It's an amazing thing, rain. Let's hope God never stops crying.*

What I like about storms in Africa is that one can see them approaching, step by step, fury unleashed. [During one storm], Isaac, my 8-year-old smallboy, and I sat mesmerized by the wind and rain. I stripped down to my boxers to relish the cold. I wanted to feel it soak my bones, for I had not experienced a chill like that in months. Isaac sat underneath his umbrella for a time, until he decided to take my cue to enjoy the rain. He ran back to his house next door and returned minutes later with a grin, sporting boxer-type shorts of his own. We sat through the showers for about an hour until they calmed.

To counter-balance the cold and wetness, I made my first pot of lemongrass tea, pulling lemongrass from my garden so that it could stew in boiling water. With a little sugar, it tasted fine, and I let the hot melt over my body. It reminded me (the heat, that is) of Kenyan *chai*, something we grew to love while there. Kenyans have a saying: fight fire with fire. I always found that strange, but believed it could be true and even found myself saying it to others. If it is hot, they say, the temperature of the tea will provide relief. We think differently back home,