

## **News/Update from 2005/6's Rotary Grant to a University Professor in Gambia**

All is well for me here in The Gambia - although I may pass out from dehydration while writing this email. They say that the rainy season has started here, but it is sunny every day. The humidity is high, and it rains at night. But this is not nearly as bad as being in Florida in the summer. Except Florida has electricity and AC, and here in The Gambia we feel happy if there is electricity to run the fans.

I just gave the midterm exam for both of my classes this week. The results are not good. I brought my high expectations with me (that I apply to my classes at Juniata College) and I decided that I didn't want to lower my standards, but I can see that this wasn't fair. Teaching here is a much different culture, obviously, but one of the problems is that they have taken on the UK culture in which the only thing that really matters to the students are the exams. Attending lectures is considered to be optional, or even an annoyance. If they pass the exams, they get the credit and move on. The problem is that my exams are based largely on things we do in class - so most of the students didn't come to class, and then got mad at me when the exam was too hard. These are not legitimate complaints from the students, but a real problem that I have had a hard time with is the fact that my students here come to the university from high schools where the main aim is to teach them proper English. They have almost no background in history and politics. (let alone political philosophy). I brought a lot of readings with me (30 copies of each) but I can't use them, because these readings are way over their heads. The students have sharp minds and they love to dig into political topics, but they have no background. They are tremendously cynical about politics, about human nature, about the US role in the world, about their own leaders. Whereas US students tend to have a rosy picture of the world, and I must devote much time to making them more critical, these students are thoroughly critical, and I devote much time to convincing them that peace and prosperity are indeed possible for humanity.

I was invited to give two big public lectures. The first was a large public forum that was covered on national TV (excerpts) and reprinted in the national newspaper. Kati told me that she sent this to you. The second lecture was another large public forum, with the US Ambassador and me as speakers. I love this kind of event, and I had much fun throwing out very tough arguments. Africans are obsessed with colonialism and they blame everything on colonialism. When I tell them that colonialism is only one part of the many reasons that Africa is poor (the bigger reasons being the incompetence and corruption of African leaders) they become enraged. I made the decision upon arrival that my role here is not simply to go through the motions. I challenge them to be critical, which they are not taught to do here. Their deep cynicism about politics is a private thing. This is the way they are raised, especially in a difficult political environment. But I try to make them see that this is the whole point of a university education - intelligent, informed, open critiques of all questions.

In my first week here I saw a full-page ad in the paper for a Rotary fund raising event. The Rotary contact number that I was given before departure didn't work (I later found out that the man had passed away a few months ago). But there was no contact number given with the Rotary ad in the paper. So I played detective and eventually found the head of the local Rotary chapter. I bought a ticket for \$30 (which is a lot of money for

people here) and went to the event. It was schedule to start at 8pm, but at 8:30 the only people there were the delegation from the Taiwan embassy and me. around 9 pm people started showing up and the event started around 9:30. The president of the country was scheduled to attend (he is a very big supporter of Rotary), but he sent his VP instead. I sat next to the Governor of the Central Bank (the guy whose signature is on the money here). He was educated at Lincoln and Temple Universities in PA. He tried to convince me to invest in Gambia T-bills (they have an 18% annual yield, let me know if you want me to make some calls for you).

There were about 250 people at the event, so they raised a lot of money. It was a fun evening for me, because I had the idea that Rotary here would be a handful of modest, but well-intentioned Gambians trying to do a few small things in their weekly meetings in someone's kitchen. Instead, I saw that Rotary is big here, and the members are the elite of this country, and they meet weekly in the 5 star luxury hotel. I have attended 3 of their weekly meetings and they are a fun bunch. They meet Friday night at 8pm (which means 9pm), but since they are Muslims, they only drink sprite and water. Fortunately, there are enough Christians around to make sure that there are at least a few pubs.

I have another 6 weeks here. I have settled in well and feel quite comfortable. They just started a non-stop flight from Banjul (the capital of The Gambia) to Baltimore. It is the same distance as to London (8 hours), so if you wish to visit me, let me know and I will meet you - or any other Rotarian who wants to visit Africa this summer - at the airport. You will have a free place to stay.

I will write you again in the coming weeks. I will shortly send another packet of things to Kati, that she can forward to you.

best wishes, Emil