Anthro Club Meeting 3/14/2011

Speaker: Heidi Kershner

Peace Corps

Graduated from MSU 3 Years ago. History, Anthro, and lots of specializations!
Went to Peace Corps right after she graduated, went to Benin. Monthly Stipend. $6,000 when you come back. In West Africa. Official language is French but lots of local languages. South is primarily Christian, North is Muslim. Blend traditional beliefs in. Rural Community Health Volunteer. Kandi. Very Muslim community, 12 mosques in the area. 6 am wake up call! Very rural. No running water, no electricity. Bucket showers, wash own clothes, pump for water to drink after which had to purify it then boil it before it was okay to drink. No beer, didn't drink, but men would drink on the side. Nearby community, you could get you beer there. Speakeasies! One Catholic Church, not a large following that she saw. Lokba was the local language. Large language divide not very far away.

Greetings in Benin is so important! If you don't, you are considered rude. The niceties must be observed. Ceremonies like weddings, funerals, etc. Women would crouch down “eh eh eh eh eh” which means yes. Her day was walking around and greeting people. Integrated into the community.

Gender Issues: Insane. Mama was her best friend, land lady. In early 30's. Circumcised. Told Heidi about it, 20 other girls with her. Two girls died that day. Had a child before her current marriage, he died around age five. Had a child with her current husband. Hurt to have sex. Infection or STD. Her husband would go out and look for women, had many sexual relations. She asked him for money to go to the doctor to get the medicine she needed. He pushed the receipt out of the way when she presented him with it to show him how much her medicine would cost. Many men had these relations with girlfriends. Men need to be married to be accepted, women needed to have children to be respected. Something that was really hard to handle was the amount of sexual harassment the women endured. Women volunteers in Benin got harassed all the time. “You, me, lets go make Obama Two!” She rejected. Almost every man proposed to her, offers everyday. Hit on by an old man, was not a good situation. These things happened as an everyday action. “That's how women are treated.”

Taxi's in Benin are one of the most common ways to get around. The way the drivers make money is by cramming as many people in as humanly possible. Not the best cars either. Wedged in. One person dead-bolted their car door to fit more people in. One friend was in the taxi, it was hot, and they were stopped for some reason. Some guy on the back of the motorcycle, jumped off the bike, ran over to her and asked for her number.

As a white American woman you are a walking target. You're a symbol of escape, of greatness. Trying to attach themselves in any way to get help.

Didn't do a whole lot whilst there. The work outlined is very vague. Goal to promote health. Went to the health center, allowed her to help there. Wednesdays they would vaccinate children. In charge of paperwork and weighing the children. Thursdays were pre-natal consultation. Mostly did paperwork there too. Technology at the health center was cotton-balls and alcohol, pharmacy didn't have much either. Only one head nurse, he was a jerk. Yelled at the patients about anything he could seize upon.

Issues of AIDS, malaria, etc? Malaria was a huge one. Diarrhea was a huge killer of children. Dehydration sets in quick in a tropical environment. Can compound with other problems. Hygiene was
Beliefs in sorcery: Would talk with Muslim friends and ask how they could believe in wizardry and sorcery. “I don't believe in sorcery, I know it exists.” Became interested in the issue and how it related to health. Sickness would be blamed on others. As a health volunteer, trying to convince people to come to the health center was a real fight. They believed that because others had inflicted it on them there would be no reason to seek out western medicine. Cuts with razor and rub dye in, basically a vaccine. Common belief is that the sun gives them malaria.

African time is based on people. Not on when it is by the clock.

Care groups: Two groups of ten women who would come together to talk about simple preventative health issues such as washing your hands. Between meetings it was their jobs to go out and teach other women. Making them peer educators. September '09 to July. Pretty successful. Women would quiz each other on the info given. Hold a girls camp in one of the cities, four highest scoring girls at the local high schools. Spend a week learning about girls empowerment. Organized the first boys camp in Benin to work on how the boys viewed women. Shorter and only five days but went over very well. One boy who was a little chauvinist, “when women became pregnant they became dumber.” Said he learned that women have worries too. Acknowledged that women had it rough as well.

Originally wanted to do international development, no longer interested. Went into Peace Corps thinking about a very goal oriented thing, came out with a different conception of work and other things. “It's not so much a development organization as it is a two year cultural immersion.” Remember the people, not the projects. Greatest thing about Peace Corps is the people that you meet. Wants to do teaching now. Going to do Teach for America.

Why did you change your mind? Studied development while here at State, it's such a different thing to study something then to live it. The whole development process is very hard. Saw how much that process should happen from inside the country not from outside of it. Debilitating cultural practice, if they are successful the people of the village will do everything they can to undermine them. Spend life in an uphill battle or do something that can make herself happy while making a difference. Started to love teaching.

Peace Corps effects infrastructure, may have needed to look at different avenues to go about presenting the people with better resources.

How acceptable was it for women to be with multiple men? Married women would be beaten if it was discovered. The men the women are chasing are unmarried and of high school age.

When you learned the language, how were you trained? Mostly just immersion but there were intensive language classes.

How did they organize, village level? Kings all over the place, controlled their tiny hamlet. Biggest force was the elders, oldest males. Had a representative of the village to the mayor of the closest largest town. Not a lot of crime. Small enough that everyone would know. If someone did commit an offense, may have been shunned.

What was the population?
6,000 but scattered all over.

Yay elections!

President: Valerie Leah or Rebecca Richart
Winner: Rebecca Richart!

Vice-President: Autumn Beyer
Winner: Autumn Beyer!

Secretary: Rebecca Sobanski
Winner: Rebecca Sobanski!

Treasurer: Shannon Leary
Winner: Shannon Leary

Event Organizer: Valerie Leah
Winner: Valerie Leah

Web-Master: None.
Winner: None.