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Kati McClurg, Peace Corps Volunteer and MLIS Student, Ruacana, Namibia: A Day in Her Life

Good Morning! My name is Kati McClurg. I am a United States Peace Corps Volunteer at the Ruacana Teachers' Resource Center (TRC) in Ruacana, Namibia. Before coming to Namibia, I was a Head Start Teacher for six years in Portage, Wisconsin. I have my Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education and am currently writing my thesis to complete my Master's in Curriculum and Instruction through the University of Wisconsin-Madison. My thesis topic is "How To Create a Literacy-Rich Environment in Northern Namibia-The Land of Few Books."

Ruacana is a small town in the far north-western part of Namibia, located on the Angolan border. It is situated on a plateau, and surrounded on all sides by a beautiful valley. Ruacana is home to a wide variety of people, including Ovambo, Otjiherero, OvaHimba, Ovadhamba, Afrikaner, and two Americans. The tar road ends in Ruacana, and it is the last place to get petrol in the far north. There are many rural villages and schools in the bush surrounding Ruacana Town. We are near the Kunene River and home to the Ruacana Falls and NamPower, which provides electricity to the whole of Namibia. There is a small shop with petrol and groceries in Ruacana, but banking and bulk shopping must be done in Oshakati, which is approximately 170 km south. People hitch rides in small combies (vans) to get to the big city. Most people do not have their own transport here in the north (including me!).

Teachers' Resource Centers (TRCs) were developed in Namibia after Independence in 1990 to support the country's educational reform and the training and upgrading of teachers. The Ruacana TRC consists of a small reference library, two conference rooms, one TV and video machine (including a small collection of educational videos), two computers, and four guest huts. The TRC is used to hold workshops, the neighbouring secondary school uses the videos quite often, teachers spend a great deal of time here planning lessons and working on their distance learning courses (many are working toward their teacher's certification), and learners from the neighbouring schools use the reference library on a regular basis.

I live in one of the small guest huts adjacent to the TRC; it is made of stone and has a corrugated iron roof. I have electricity, but no running water. However, I can easily get water from a nearby outdoor tap. I wake in the morning as the sun comes in through the windows and the song of an African hornbill drifts in with the breeze. It's 6:30 a.m., and I prepare myself for the day. I greet the neighbors as we are all out filling our containers with

the water we will need for the day. I fill my water filter, get dressed, and eat some breakfast while reading a chapter in whatever novel I have been able to get my hands on. I'm off to the TRC and starting work at 8:00 a.m. It's Wednesday, my favorite day of the week! It's story hour today.

Each day I visit a different rural primary school. Today, I will go to Otjovanaatje, a school down in the valley and deep in the bush. At the TRC I fill my backpack with storytelling materials (usually some puppets I have made, a few books, and some story posters), some book-making materials (paper, cardboard, string, colored pencils or crayons, and a hole punch), bottles of water, a few pieces of fruit, my camera, and some rehydration packets. I get on my mountain bike and I'm on my way. I first ride through deep orange sand as I pass through the squatter camp (a group of tin shacks set up by people to live in) just behind the mounds of sand left from a military demining mission, on my way to the valley. I head down a steep and rocky dirt road to get to the valley floor. I'm always thankful when I make it to the bottom without falling and fear the day when my brakes fail me. As I follow the dirt road along through the valley, I pass by many dHemba homesteads. People often stop me along the way: "Wu uhala po! Oto ye peni?" (Hello, how are you and where are you going?) There aren't many *oshilumbus* (white people) down in the valley, so I am a curiosity! Often I stop to talk and we exchange greetings and share my water (*omeya*).

Unfortunately, all the dirt roads look exactly the same to me down in the bush, and with the trees being dense and obscuring my view, it is easy to get turned around. Today, I make a wrong turn and end up quite a bit beyond the school and near a group of traditional homesteads. Everyone must be out working in the fields or tending the cattle and goats, because no one is at any of the homesteads. Outside one homestead, I stop to admire the work of some children. They have used clay to form models of cattle, goats, and people to play with on the miniature homestead they have created out of small sticks. It is beautiful! The next homestead I come across is protected by an angry dog that chases me deeper into the bush, turning me around even more. I am completely lost! Finally, I follow the sound of a *panga* chopping wood and come across a *tatekuju* (old man). He only speaks dHemba and I only speak English and a few words of Oshindonga, so we communicate with a made-up sign language. I just keep saying "Otjobvanaatje, oskola?" and shrugging my shoulders in questioning gestures. Finally he points me in the right direction, and with rocks in my hands to ward off any more angry dogs, I am on my way to the school. Yes! He sent me to the right place, and I arrive about an hour late to the school. Tate Jonas, Meme Hilma, and Meme Esther laugh as I tell them that I was lost and ask if I am tired. They translate into dHemba, and the children laugh too. I am so happy to be here.

dHemba is not a written language, so at this school, the children are being taught in both Oshindonga and English. In other words, they and their teachers are in the process of learning two new languages! Today, I have

brought along the story "There Was an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly." I made a woman out of a large piece of cardboard, cut a hole for a stomach, attached a clear plastic bag, and we can see inside everything that she swallows. I say the words in English and act out the story, as Tate Jonas translates into Oshindonga and dHemba. He's an amazing teacher! The children are in hysterics when I make the GULP as the old woman swallows the fly and other animals.

Each week when I visit, we make a new book for the school library. Most schools in the north have no library, or if they do, it is usually just a small box of books that is kept in the office. One of my goals this year has been to build up the libraries and create a reading program in the schools. Today, each learner will create his or her own page for a book. I write the sentence "There was an old man/woman who swallowed a ___" on the board. The children draw beautiful, funny pictures of big round people with their bellies full of all sorts of crazy things. They write the sentence at the bottom of their page and fill in the rest. When they are finished, we punch holes in each child's page, make a cardboard cover, bind the book with string, and Tate Jonas then reads the book to the class. The book will be used over and over and kept in the library for the children to read on their own. The collection continues to grow, and the children are so proud of their work as authors, illustrators, and publishers!

OK, time is up, and I have a long ride back to the TRC. It's very hot now at 12:00 noon. I stop several times to drink water and rehydration salts. Finally, I am back to the big hill and get off my bike to push it to the top. It is 1:00 p.m. (lunchtime) by the time I get back to the TRC. I go to my hut, take a quick sponge bath to cool down, and eat a bite of lunch. This afternoon is Story Hour and Creative Art Time, so I have much to do. I started this story hour a year ago when I first came to Ruacana. At that time, we had no children's books at all, so I wrote stories, made homemade books, puppets, and story posters. These have been put into "story kits" for the local teachers to check out. Many teachers come to observe, to get teaching ideas for their own classrooms. Now, thanks to donors and friends from all over the world, we have a growing collection of children's books. Each Wednesday, 60 local children gather under a big shade tree just outside the TRC, and we share stories, laughter, and messy art projects. I am fortunate to have the wonderful help of 12 learners from the neighbouring secondary school who volunteer their free time to act as my assistants. Today, after our stories, we are making greeting cards as our creative art project. These cards will then be sold to raise funds to build a much-needed community library here in Ruacana.

Story Hour is finished, and back inside the TRC, Meme Linda waits for me at the computer-she is here for her weekly lesson. Today she has brought along an assignment to be typed for the distance learning course she is taking, the BETD: Basic Education Teacher's Diploma. She is working to earn her teaching certificate. When she is finished typing, we discuss any

grammatical errors, spelling, English words, and so forth, and I show her how to edit her work on the computer. It is so great to see her progress! She is thrilled with the finished project and looks forward to her instructor's response. As we work at the computer, several teachers and learners come in and request assistance finding information in the reference library. Afternoons are busy at the TRC, as school is out and people are studying or preparing lessons.

At 5:00 p.m. we close the TRC and the work day is finished. This evening, Tate Iitano will use the conference room to run an English language and literacy course for the local men and women.

This *Day in the Life* is a compilation of experiences I have had as the Peace Corps volunteer at the Ruacana TRC Reference Library over the past year. TRCs play an important role in the educational system of northern Namibia. Few schools have actual libraries, community libraries are extremely rare, and the lack of resources is disturbing. Thanks to international book donors and many private donors as well, our reference library is growing. We have also formed the Ruacana Area Community Library Committee and are working hard to establish a public library there in Ruacana. We have secured grant money and other financial donations to buy supplies to build the library. We have arranged for two scholarships to send two staff to get their Library Science Certificate from the University of Namibia, and many books continue to come in through the post. It looks as if the Ruacana Area Community Library will be completed by May 2000. We hope that this community library will be able to support the local schools as well as the community at large. We look forward to the day when the children can check out a book and take it home to read. The desire to read and write in Ruacana is very strong; it is just so difficult to become literate when you haven't enough books to support those efforts.