From: Wendy Amin [Peace Corps Volunteer]

Date: 29 Jan. 2008 3:09:13 AM **Subject: Hello from Namibia**

Letter 4.

Morokeni Mukwetu. I have been at my permanent site for nearly three weeks. It's fascinating. Following are excerpts from my journal over the past month. I hope you're all well and enjoying winter.

Best, Wendy

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Sex. I have never talked so much about sex in my entire life and never so explicitly. Armed with posters, photos, books, fun phalluses and an eyepopping vocabulary, us Peace Corps Health Education volunteers – popularly known as 'Healthies'' – would make the navy blush.

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Disparity. The disparity thing is real here – the have's have everything one could want - can't think of any material thing missing. But most Namibians have not. Being a PCV is strange we're living in both worlds. Namibia's large towns have paved roads, wide sidewalks and grocery stores shelving ample varieties of pasta, face soap, yogurt, peanut butter and dog food. In Windhoek I saw sporting good stores, music stores, furniture galleries, expensive clothing boutiques, coffee shops and fancy restaurants. While not the majority, Namibia's rich have money to spend and then some. In fact a 2005 UNHD report placed Namibia in the number one spot for income disparity in the world. Where 0 represents complete equality and 100 total inequality, Namibia scored a 70.7. Global inequality is at 67. 35% of Namibians live on less than \$1 a day. 40% are unemployed. And the poor are falling behind, rather than moving forward. Namibia's a miniature model of the planet.

On the way to Kavango to our permanent sites we hit a pheasant. The driver stopped the car, found the bird half dead in the grass on the side of the road, finished it off with a flap of the wings, and threw it in the truck to BBO tomorrow.

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It's been raining nearly all day and every day since we got here. I'm starting to understand what rainy season means. Funny – as I've envisioned myself wandering around the village doing projects it isn't slogging through the mud with an umbrella that I pictured.

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Wings. There are hundreds upon hundreds of inch long delicate translucent wings outside our front door, under the windows, and scattered outside the house. Also dozens inside. Thousands upon thousands on the mission grounds. Last night Tondoro was swarmed by termites who in a frenetic mating ritual shed their wings and scattered to underground nests (up to one million in one nest) where

they will live out the remainder of their days – at least those that weren't eaten by grateful bats, birds and other creatures (including people) who enjoy the delicacy. But no one told us they were coming. Last night Stephanie and I ran home through a rainstorm, and within minutes of our escape from the torrential rain we were being bombarded by oodles of frantic insects in our hallway, attracted to the light and streaming under our front door, whizzing around rapidly, bumping into our eyes and ears and getting tangled in our hair. We tried to sequester ourselves in our bedrooms but they found their way in. The successful solution was turning off all the lights, planting a flashlight on the porch, opening the door, and waiting ten minutes. The dozen that remained inside we attracted to the spare bedroom

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with a bright light and pushed towels under all the doors to keep those in, and the others out. This morning the only evidence of the excitement are the wings blowing on the ground, and the occasional dead termite, wings attached, who for some reason couldn't complete his mission.

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It's 1 am. Too pumped with adrenaline to sleep. End of the first week at permanent site and filled with excitement, anxiety, confusion, questions, and eagerness. Looks like the job is going to be good. I'll be working with the regional Primary Care Supervisor at Nankudu Hospital to design programs to enhance public health education and affect behavior change. The work is promising and just what I was looking for. The only down side to my assignment is it seems I will not be working or spending much time in the bush (aka villages). The hospital doesn't have outreach programs and no vehicles to take people into the bush. This speaks to one of the greatest development challenges in Kavango – a shortage of vehicles. The hospital is illustrative: it has two SUVs – they serve as 1) transport for staff (most staff don't have their own cars), 2) transport for patients who need to be moved from one of the five health centers to the hospital or back, a possible distance of 150 km on unpaved road, and 3) as ambulance. Getting me into the bush obviously shouldn't be a priority, but having enough vehicles to transport patients and reach them in the bush should be. The source of the problem seems to be the Ministry of Health, which won't put money in the budget for vehicles. The ministers deny there's a problem. Of course, because none of them live in Kavango. Not my job to take this on but I just might...

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A child has just died. I don't know why. I am too choked up to ask. His mother sits on the ground sobbing while an old lady stands next to her singing a mournful song. A small crowd stands around, talking quietly. Strangers slow as they pass, taking in the scene, then continue.

In theory Namibia is a desert. But in the month since I was last in the Kavango it has become a tropical paradise. Green grass growing gaily where before there was only red sand. Tree limbs hanging happily heavy with big leaves, fruit and blossoms. Flowers blooming so brightly they camouflage the villagers in their colorful clothing. Cows, goats and chickens plumping merrily, delirious with delight over the ample grazing. And there is rain, Rain, and RAIN. Within ten minutes the sky can change from nearly cloudless to intensely darkened with storm – heaving great gobs of water upon the land and its inhabitants. Sometimes a storm, complete with spectacular thunder and lightning, will last only ten minutes, disappearing as suddenly as it came and then returning an hour later. One day I counted ten separate showers. And somehow amidst all this rain there is still the heat. It climbs above 90 on most days and remains there until sunset. The Kavango sauna. I'm gunna have great skin.

Bugs. It's late at night and I'm sitting in my new living room. The windows have all been closed for 8 hours and as far as I could tell 8 hours ago there were not any bugs in the house. In my living room now I can see 12 pairs of termite wings, 3 naked termites, 5 mosquitoes, 7 fruit flies, 3 grasshoppers, 4 moths, dozens of booger bugs (no clue what they are just what they look like), 2 flies, 2 beetles and a few ants. Pushed a millipede out a few hours ago. Never really was a shoe person before Namibia.

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My house. I keep referring to "my house" in my entries but that's a euphemism for "the place I will lay my head tonight." Since arriving in Namibia 11 weeks ago I have slept in ten different beds, and not because I'm the Peace Corps floozy. On top of all the traveling we did as part of training there was a predictable comedy of errors around my housing that caused me to move more than most. The latest example was arrival at permanent site. I was supposed to move into a two bedroom house at the Tondoro Health Center with

Stephanie, another volunteer from my group. When we arrived at 11pm last Thursday we were told by the gateman that we could not stay in our house just yet.

We argued, lost, and deposited ourselves and our 15 (no exaggeration) pieces of baggage in dingy guest rooms and scrambled (unsuccessfully) to find refrigeration for the month's supply of groceries we brought with us. Shrouded in mystery, the fact was illuminated 48 hours later that our house was not available because it was being lived in by a doctor who was supposed to move to a house at the hospital but that house isn't ready yet. Dominoes. After a week at the guest "lodge" where we were expected to prepare our own meals sans refrigerator or cooker (yeah bread!!!) we moved yesterday into Sister Mwemba's house. She has gone on leave for 17 days to Zambia. We'll move again when she returns. Don't yet know where. Or maybe I'll move again before then. I'm not really supposed to be living in Tondoro at all but in Nankudu, my work site. But there's a "housing crisis" there... and that's another story.

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A damn mosquito has penetrated my net and is eluding my quick silver fingers. Highly annoying. One mosquito can conquer an entire night.

FUN FACTS ABOUT MOSQUITOES

Only the female bites-she needs the blood to fertilize her eggs and lays 250 at a time - mosquitoes feed on plant sugar from nectar -the swelling and itching at the bite site is a reaction to the anticoagulant she injects to ensure the blood will remain liquid in her abdomen -she has chemical sensors that can detect the carbon dioxide emitted from human skin 100 feet away - there are 3000 species of mosquitoes worldwide. There are 63 in New Jersey .

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My laundry's on the line and it's raining. How do people who live where it rains for months at a time ever have dry clothes? I am struck every day by how much effort goes into simply living. And by comparison, my life here is easy. It's the end of week two at site.

It was an interesting week. Most of my time was spent talking to hospital staff to learn about the existing health education programs, understand the gaps and needs and assess the level of interest in

addressing them. (Ok, to be perfectly honest most of my week was spent chatting and sitting in an office chair becoming an expert at computer pinball. Being overly productive is viewed with high suspicion, especially for a new arrival – so I consider my activities "integration.")

I also went to Mpungu Vlei with my counterpart to investigate a suspected case of polio, interviewing villagers to see if anyone else has symptoms. The most interesting day of the week, however, took me into a nearby village with Scholastica – a 21 year old thunderbolt and the TCE "Total Control of the Epidemic" Outreach worker for Nankudu. Her fulltime job is to go hutto-hut to talk to people about HIV/AIDs and she's amazing. She simultaneously puts people at ease, sobers them up, gets them to laugh, gets them to talk and gives them a stern lecture. She commanded the respect of the skeptical boys, giggling girls, leering old men and drunk old women. She's from Nankudu, has known these people her entire life, and is pissed off that AIDs has taken such a staggering toll on her village. TCE is funded by the Dutch government and is by far the best anti-AIDs project I've come across in Namibia. It is being implemented in over 20 places across the country and the cornerstone of each is someone

like Scholastica – a person from the community who has both the passion and charisma to facilitate behavior change among her neighbors. The challenge is enormous but this program gives me a glimmer of hope.

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Village life continues to astonish me. The first house we visited was a three walled mud hut, housing a family of four. The mother was washing clothes in a bucket when we arrived, a baby lying **

A word about visiting homesteads. When you arrive at a homestead you stand at the entrance and announce yourself, calling loudly, and wait until someone calls back inviting you in. You walk to the parlor – usually a grass thatch gazebo – and wait for the host to greet you. You do not greet first. She will bring a chair and present it to the most prestigious person in your group and invite that person to sit down. You do not sit until asked. She will then go collect chairs for everyone else in the group, and then for herself and any other members of the household who will attend the visit. The best chair is brought first, the next best next, and so on. The "best" chairs, and most of the other chairs, are almost always the cheap plastic patio variety. Chairs seldom are intact, often limping on three good legs, missing an armrest, absent slats at the back. People are very resourceful and improvise ingenious solutions to these deficits. If there are more people than patio chairs, seats are made of paint cans, upturned buckets, boxes etc. The sitting room is thus assembled. Formal greetings are then shared among everyone in the group – each person with each person. Then chat, or often just sitting for a while. The chairs are never kept out once the visit is concluded. They are always stowed away, awaiting the next arrivals.

At the next house the father had just returned that

morning from a month in the hospital. He had been bitten by a snake in his sleep. His arm was still swollen and bandaged, his hand missing skin-corroded by the poison. Despite this he was in high spirits and joked with Scholastica, purposefully giving wrong answers to all her questions. Other household members and neighbors joined the chat. This house was much larger than the last – they had a fenced homestead with 5 huts, the sand raked clean.

The next homestead was even larger, with ten huts, several constructed out of a thick mud brick with beer bottles imbedded. However it was littered with rubbish, empty and broken bottles and cans, pieces of unidentifiable plastic, a battered shoe. All the homesteads we visited varied widely in size, material, and level of upkeep.

In addition to homesteads we visited shabeens – aka bars. Yes, by 10:30 in the morning we found a crowd at the shabeen, sitting on benches outside, talking merrily, drinking the local brew – fermented brown sugar - smells as bad as you would imagine. A few patrons were multi-tasking - doing work while also enjoying their drink. There was a man repairing shoes, mostly rubber flip flops. There was a woman pulling mutete leaves from their stalks, and vendors wandered by and lingered, selling chips, dried soup packets, and candy. Shabeens are the commercial centers of their constituencies. Old men are there telling stories. Young men are there, nodding and listening. Women of all ages flirt with men of all ages. The patrons that got to me were the women with children; a baby nursing a drunk mother. A toddler crying at his mother's feet, she too drunk to notice.

And with this crowd Scholastica would take the stage. The group would immediately fall into silence, listen, then an old man would challenge her. She would shout back, debating fiercely, everyone would laugh, and he would smile and nod. We would stay another half hour, then move onto the next shabeen or homestead.

Text Messages. Perhaps the best way to let you in on life as a Nam27 PC volunteer is to share a sampling of texts from SMS Fridays. While normally they cost 40 cents, each Friday SMS messages within Namibia are free – so there's an SMS frenzy country-wide. People check up on friends, family and random strangers. Silly messages and cheesy love poems (sent to everyone you know) are common. Here's a selection of messages I've received over the past 3 months from PCVs and Namibians:

-Oh mercy this is quite the week. Sad lonely confused and today I'm a lot better. Looking forward to Saturday. [message sent only on Day 2 of said week]

-Have a flippen freaky fabulous funky flamboyant funfilled Friday full of fresh flowers friendly faces and funny friends. From a faithful friend

-Hi again wendy – my sun ride fell through but luckily I can ride w peace corps on Monday – my site mate will be in rundu sat night and will bring u back 2 shambyu w her on sun-ok? As far as shopping don't worry about basics like spices and oil and sugar and I have some chicken and tuna – could use a pasta and 1 carton of milk if u get a chance. -Hello everybody. Point of clarity: all of

you should travel back to the Training Center this Friday, 30 November. Reason 4 change: you all must get your Rabies shots on Saturday. Please take note that there will be NO arranged vehicle to transport people from Windhoek to Okahandja on Friday. Everybody has to learn to find his/her way around, and traveling back to Okahandja on your own this Friday is part of the exercise. Let me know if you need help locating the Windhoek hikepoint to Okahandja. Wish you all safe

travels. C u on Friday. Peace Corps
-If time stood still with each breath I
would forever inhale only you [sent to
her entire address book]
-Hoo...is bad 4 u 2 be outside. I wl found
out were is evry 1. don't feel bad. [I was
locked out of the house]

-Gusirenipo kapi nani moneka. -Are the rumors of people in groot getting in trbl for real? [yes, they were]

-I never thought id say so but I can't wait to get back to camp o!

-Hey high rollers. Nick and I are putting together a No Limit Texas Hold'Em poker tournament on New years Day starting at 2 PM. Buy in will be N\$30 and the top five positions will payout depending on the number of players. Either one of us will have a sign up sheet. Please sign up and pay by lunch on the 31st so we can get coins at the bank. All levels are welcome to join in the fun!

-Helen just told me the bank won't clear your money until today. It will only be available tomorrow. Sorry for the inconvenience. Pls pass the word out. Thanks. Peace Corps [money was already two weeks late] -Haha good luck with that! The wind isn't bad here for once. We finally got our water working and now picking up some stuff, why is it so hard to find a trash

People have pet dogs. I think we might have a pet horse just chillin' at our door! I always wanted pet horse!

Ah now for a relaxing evening of cleaning the house.

can?

