

Mark Battin

- **Country of Service:** Venezuela
- **Assignment:** Cooperative Extensionist, Community Development, Youth Education
- **Service Tour:** 1968-1970
- **Contact Info:** mark@markbattin.com

Service Description:

I requested and received an extremely remote, different, and primitive assignment. Extreme location on far eastern coast peninsula of Paria, State of Sucre. Villages mostly only accessible by small boat on open ocean. Almost no health care, very violent, little communication, no law enforcement, 95% mestizo, no English speakers, many young people had left for cities. Mud house, little electricity, and irregular drinking water. Like living 100 years ago in time.

Life and Career Impact:

1. High value of living with completely different people, culture, language, and low-income levels. Being lone white in a black and brown population. High quality of life from music, dance, and warm family values. Respect for elders. I learned more from them than they from me.
2. High value of living outside of US for two years. We are an imperfect country, but better than most.
3. I saw how other countries and peoples look at us, although my village people did not know me from a Russian, Frenchman, or any other. I was just tall, white, and very different.
4. Importance of maintaining our DEMOCRACY! Venezuela had just become a Democracy. I witnessed their first peaceful exchange of power between rival political parties. They had a growing middle class, abundant natural resources, wanted to diversify from oil to develop other resources. Unfortunately, the richest half percentage of people did not share the wealth. A supposed populist was elected, and he turned into a dictator. Now Venezuela is a failed state, and has lost 20% of its most talented citizens.

Additional Observations:

- Describe what motivated you to join the Peace Corps: I strongly opposed the Vietnam war, but wanted to serve my country. PC was a very positive opportunity.
- Describe any differences you were aware of between being posted alone in a village and being with other Americans? Being posted remotely with my wife made me be more self-motivated and creative than I otherwise might have been. I was not subject to as much anti-Americanism as other volunteers experienced in urban environments.
- What was the importance and difficulty of speaking local dialects? It was total immersion. I had to communicate and teach in Spanish, as no one spoke English.
- What experiences stand out most? Seeing my coop members gain the ability to run their own small savings and loan groups. Medicine for a sick child, seed money for a farmer, boat money for a fisherman.

- What was the most challenging (perhaps least enjoyable?) aspect of your experience? Difficulty gaining the peoples' trust. They had been cheated by so many others before me. I was sick for most of the first year from tropical disease.
- What were the one or two of the most amusing or memorable experiences you had? Living 60 yards from the Caribbean for 2 years. I dove for food, exploration, and to help my neighbors. I'm still a diver and a sailor today.
- What was the coolest PC job in your assigned country? I think my coop group. It really brought very disparate people together.
- What are the most significant cultural, socio-economic, and/or political insights about your host country and the Peace Corps itself? Importance of preserving Democracy. See above explanation.
- How do think your host area/country benefitted from your Peace Corps service? The people of my villages started working together to solve some common problems. I started to put some of the villages in touch with the new Democratic government to try to improve infrastructure, housing, sanitation, and health care.
- What did you miss out on at home during your Peace Corps service? 1968 Democratic convention, Woodstock, Cuyahoga River fire, siblings' growth, grandparents ageing.
- Describe if you went "home" again or ended up "elsewhere": I had trouble readjusting from the jungle. First went to grad school at U of Washington, Seattle. Left to help form an alternative living group in very rural Northern California. It was based on community, conservation, education, reforestation, and sound use of natural resources. Also, retaining farmland, and passing it from one generation to the next. This group is still operating the same ranch.
- Describe any situation in which you were "thanked" for your Peace Corps service? Very rarely thanked.
- Why should anyone here and now be interested in your experience, what relevance does it have on a personal or national level now? Very relevant now. We must retain our DEMOCRACY, and respect for truth and the rule of law!
- Based upon your experience, what are your thoughts about national service and about immigration? National service is very important for the vitality of our country and for those who serve.