

I just wanted to forward you the latest e-mail update that I sent to my friends and family back home. A little background is in order...

After I graduated from APU in May of 2007 I packed up and left the US to begin life as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Jamaica. I left in early July '07 and have been rocking strong as a volunteer for over ten months now. And in a few days it will be the one year anniversary of my graduation. I cannot believe how fast it has gone by.

Here is the update:

As my good ole friend once-roommate said in his last e-mail from abroad (China), there is no time for chit chat because it has been a long while since we have spoken (although for him it had only been a month and a half since he wrote, I think I'm going on several months... oops). Here are a few highlights of what has taken place in the last few months of my life:

Hiked up to the top of the Blue Mountain Peak in the rain wearing Chaco Hiphong flip flops and had a blast, eating wild yellow raspberries (crack berries as another friend said) and freezing my butt off at the top with a PB&J for lunch (those are always the best when hiking)

Successfully backflipped off of the platform at Rick's Cafe in Negril (approx. 40-50 Ft), although I wiggled my arms because I was scared beyond any hope of true calmness.

My garden is growing and growing. I have yet to harvest a great abundance, but I have had a couple bunches of cilantro, a few handfuls of jalepeno and serrano peppers, a couple tomatoes and a couple squash. Much more to come.

Raced in the Treasure Beach Triathlon and finished 25th. I'm not sure what "place" I got yet. Placement is determined by mens, women's and team relays. I imagine and hope I placed top 10 in the mens div. There were over 130 competitors and it was a lot of fun. The course involved a 600m swim, a 25k (almost 15 miles) bike and a 7k (a bit over 4 miles) run. I completed the course in 1:51:09, and I was kind of shooting for an hour forty-five, so I didn't do too bad. That and I've never been a race before, so I really didn't expect to finish in under two hours, so it was a pleasant surprise. My goal for next year is to make it to the podium. I plan to cut 20 minutes from my time.

We'll see.

Went to the Smile Jamaica/Africa Unite concert and saw the Marley brothers play.

Made like a tourist and hit up Dunn's River Falls with 13 friends (of a friend).

Taught some neighborhood kids to play Phase 10.

Now, some of you might be thinking... does this boy ever work? The answer to that question is yes, yes I do. Work is not as exciting as, say, a backflip in Negril or a triathlon in Treasure Beach, but I do love what I am doing. I may have mentioned what I am doing before, but I figure I ought to mention it again in light of a recent increase in intensity. I work with the Santoy Farmers' Cooperative in South West Hanover, Jamaica. I am halfway between Lucea (Hanover) and Negril (Westmoreland) a couple miles in from the coast. The Coop's farm is nestled just next to a mount/hill next to a river (where we get our water!) And is about 40 acres in size. On it is a packaging facility, office and refrigeration unit to take care of the administration and marketing of the vegetables that the farmers grow.

We are currently harvesting squash, zucchini, tomatoes, and cucumber; currently growing cantaloupe, pumpkin, scotch bonnet peppers, and more that I am unaware of. In the next month we will be starting and growing everything we can (including every veggie I mentioned above, plus...): honeydew, watermelon, red yellow and green sweet (bell) pepper, scallions, callaloo, pak choy, red and green cabbage, eggplant, broccoli and one or two more I'm sure.

I have been working with the farmers to put together a production schedule to ensure that the land is being utilized to its best capacity and that they always have the produce they need to sell. Crop scheduling tends to be one of the most difficult tasks for farmers in Jamaica to master. I hope to be helping these farmers out with this. We have also begun to work on the project for which we were awarded the grant we wrote a proposal for back in November (my first grant-writing experience! I've written three since, not sure what has happened with them yet...). This includes the addition of three greenhouses to the farm (pictures will someday come!), three big and wonderfully productive (it is hoped) greenhouses. I have seen these farmers take the opportunities presented to them and work hard to make something happen.

A year ago they had one design for a high tunnel greenhouse (HTH). At the moment there have been multiple developments and we now have at least 3 marketable designs of HTH. Their innovation and creativity speaks of a natural ability to make it even in the difficult economic circumstances here in the Caribbean. It is my aim and hope to schedule crops into the greenhouse so that the farmers make the most of their money. The need for HTHs is less to capture heat and extend the growing season (because it is already hot here and the growing season is called "a year" down here, lol) but rather for protected agriculture. Protection from the rain and high winds (during rainy seasons and high winds less than hurricanes), protection from insects (because with no winter they never go away — this means less insecticides), and to decrease the need for herbicides and allow for a much more controlled use of fertilizers because of drip irrigation. I like working with greenhouses. The future of Jamaica (as I am coming to see it) is in Agriculture (especially fruit and vegetable production, at least as far as my assignment is telling me — I can see that if Jamaicans grew their own rice and produced their own milk again, this would be of great benefit too). The future of vegetable production in Jamaica is protected agriculture, and at this point it is in HTH technology. As my farmers move closer and closer to perfecting their design, the investing in this technology for farmers across the island will change the face of Jamaica. I only hope for the best.

What is perhaps my favorite part of this assignment (working with a Farmers' Coop) is seeing these farmers work hard to make something of their lives, make something work with their business, and their hopes and movements to bring others along. Part of the details of the grant we won (that is funding the building of three HTHs on our farm) is the linking of local small farmers to the market we have access to (because we are a Coop with a packaging facility and soon a refrigerated truck) thus expanding our reach as a Coop but also providing a means for a good livelihood for small farmers around us.

That is what my life looks like lately. The next few months brings the beginnings of training for the Reggae Marathon in December, more works with the farmers (teaching them how to do what I can do on a computer), more tricks jumping off cliffs, a couple friends coming out to visit, a brief trip back to the states for me, and the planning out of a work experience

syllabus for a project i will be heading up in the fall! I am excited. Life is so good out here. But know that life is very difficult out here too. It is lonely, it is uncomfortable, but it is also very good. I'm growing up so much, learning so much, and I am so grateful for this experience. I hope that all the goodness that is filling my life will only spill out and get others wet too.

Hope you enjoyed today's edition of an update on my life.

The weather is sunny and hot with a projected rise in heat over the next 6 months as well as an increase in humidity, rain, mosquitoes and the chance of hurricanes. But on the good side this summer promises mangoes, pears (jamaican avocado), and the coming of group 79 (another batch of PCVs in Jamaica, i.e., more american friends!).

Much love.

Peace and Hope friends.

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