

THE AUTHORS SHOW – Authors of Memoirs

Author: Mark D. Walker

“Different Latitudes: My Life in the Peace Corps and Beyond”

Fresh out of college in 1971, I hoped to do some traveling—although not to Vietnam with Uncle Sam and to save the world. My global trek began as a Peace Corps volunteer in an isolated community in the highlands of Guatemala where, one bright morning, I was going to complain about only receiving one hard boiled for breakfast. Fortunately, my limited Spanish prohibited me from saying anything after which I realized that, of this family of eight, I was the only one who received an egg at all.

After my first year, I was stricken with a serious stomach ailment which could have been life threatening if several of the local women hadn't used their local remedies to break the fever. The Peace Corps moved me to another, less isolated site where a strawberry blonde girl caught my eye. It turns out that this would be my soul mate and life-long partner Ligia. After we were married, in a moment of transparency I devised a list of reasons she might reconsider my proposal to marry which I divided into “The She'd Reconsider List” and “The She'd Run Screaming from the Altar List” which are in my book and include, “He'll take you to a country where green monkey disease, dengue, malaria, and other deadly ailments are commonplace; He'll be threatened by a local revolutionary guerilla groups and give you less than three days to pack up and leave the country.” I neglected to share my list on several occasions which is probably why we're still together after 40+ years.

After fifteen peripatetic years with Plan International, circumstances in Sierra Leone forced us to the U.S. where I used my transferable skills to raise funds for CARE International and set up their regional office in Denver. I went from representing the needs of the poor to being sensitive to the needs of the wealthy, whose generous gifts would make our work possible. As a member of NSFRE (which would become AFP) I began learning all aspects of fundraising.

After working thirty years for innumerable international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) I became the CEO of Hagar which worked with survivors of human trafficking. After less

than two years I unexpectedly was forced to abandon this role in a most bizarre set of circumstances making this my last full-time position although my untimely departure offered an opportunity to reflect on forty-five years since I left Colorado for an adventure which took me around the world. I'd gone from a single volunteer barely able to ask where a bathroom was in Spanish, to speaking it every day of the week with my Guatemalan wife. As I point out in the last chapter of my book, I'd have very few "woulda, coulda, shouldas" and appreciated the fact that, as Paul Theroux put it, "Travel (and I'd add fundraising) is a state of mind. It has nothing to do with distance or the exotic. It is almost entirely an inner experience." And this would be my opportunity to gather up all my journals, reports and photo albums to share both my inner and career journey in the form of a memoir.

I decided to write about my experiences to help other Returned Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs) appreciate the impact of their own experiences and consider sharing them with others. I also wanted to inspire students and young professionals considering a career in international development. Each chapter of my memoir provides new insights on what I learned and felt during my journey. Twenty-four photos depict many of the people and places I visited over the years. A Guatemalan as well as a travel map showed many of the places I worked in over the years. I also provide a timeline of the major places I worked in or traveled to.

My book would become an effective "author's platform" to promote my values of world peace and cross cultural understanding. Most recently I lectured at Arizona State University (ASU) for 18 students of the Peace Corps Prep class where all the students considered joining the Peace Corps or following a career in international affairs. I've also shared my values and world view at multiple book signings and will do a book reading for the Returned Peace Corps volunteer group from Bolivia on their 50th reunion. Most recently I was recruited to the board of "Partnering for Peace" which promotes collaboration between Rotary and Returned Peace Corps volunteers to promote partnerships for peace and development.

But I was also counting on a number of special writing projects to fall out of the "blue" in order to add serendipity to my new writing career. A few months after my book had been published I discovered a copy of a book with an exotic, traditional Maya drawing on the cover. I found an

inscription on the inside cover that indicated that my wife's Guatemalan/German friends had gifted it when they visited my parents in Colorado over the Christmas of 1978. I was surprised that the author and the artist's names were not listed anywhere. The book merely cited the publisher as, "Galeria Panajachel, Lake Atitlan, Guatemala"; dated 1977 with a German printer. The book was entitled, "In The Kingdom of Mescal: An Indian Fairy-Tale for Adults".

Although the book began with the typical "Once upon a time", it was anything but traditional based on pieces of memories the illustrator received from her Maya Indian mother as well as stories stimulated by folk art and music the German author had collected over the years, plus the influence of psychedelic drugs I learned both were experimenting with. These fascinating set of circumstances would lead to my next literary project, "The Making of An Adult Indian Fairy Tale." I'd connect with the son of the Maya illustrator as well as identifying a successful Returned Peace Corps volunteer author, Mark Jacobs who deemed my essay "worthy of being put into print" and helped me identify some potential magazine publishers. Finding this fascinating storyline along the way and meeting seasoned authors willing to share and help me on my new life path, not to mention my book being named a finalist in the Arizona Literary Award competition, confirmed my decision to become an author. The rest is history. I continue to live and work in Phoenix with my wife and editor and chief, Ligia.