

Say Yes To Transformation

2013 Shriver Award winner powerfully blends passion for Africa, summer camp

by Erica Burman and Kelly Reid

“When in doubt, say ‘Yes.’” Phillip Lilienthal (Ethiopia 1967-69) brought that message to Peace Corps Connect - Boston in June, where he accepted the National Peace Corps Association’s 2013 Sargent Shriver Award for Distinguished Humanitarian Service. The award is given annually “to a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer who continues to make a sustained and distinguished contribution, whether that be to humanitarian causes at home, abroad, or through innovative social entrepreneurial efforts to bring about significant, long term-change.” Phil was honored for his efforts as founder and president of Global Camps Africa (GCA), a nonprofit that “changes the lives of South Africa’s vulnerable children and youth by providing HIV/AIDS prevention education and training through high-

impact residential and day camp experiences and continuing education.” Forty-five years ago, Phil was a young lawyer serving with his wife Lynn in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia. Emperor Haile Selassie’s granddaughter was interested in creating a permanent summer camp to foster understanding among children of different tribal ethnicities, and she mentioned it to the Peace Corps staff. A staff member then mentioned it to Phil. Would he be interested in taking on the project? Mind you Phil had never actually *administered* a camp, but his family owned a camp in Maine. He loved the camp experience. He said “yes.” Together with Lynn, a social work Volunteer, they successfully staged four two-week sessions over two summers. Physically disabled children, children of
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Phil Lilienthal, founder and president of Global Camps Africa.

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U.S. and British embassy staff, children from all over Addis Ababa came. Phil treasures a photo of an Ethiopian child on crutches and an embassy child, their arms wrapped around each other at the end of a fun-filled day. It turned out that the benefits of summer camp—experiential learning, tolerance, acceptance, and sportsmanship—were just as powerful outside of the American context, and this made a deep impression on Phil.

And then he and Lynn returned home.

Like for many RPCVs, “life happened.” Phil joined a law firm, did a few stints with the Peace Corps as staff, opened his own law practice, and ultimately took over management of his family’s summer camp when his father died. Yet always in the back of his mind was the idea that someday, when he “grew up,” he would return to Africa to run camps like all those years ago in Ethiopia. Says Phil, “Finally, 35 years later, at age 62, I realized that I had grown up and needed to act.”

Again, he said “yes.”

Phil retired and visited several African countries in search of a local partner organization that shared his vision. He found one in South Africa and in 2004 opened Camp Sizanani, which is the Zulu word for “helping one another.”

The 140 campers who attend each eight-day session receive very little in terms of tangible goods: a hat, a t-shirt and a teddy bear. And the curriculum is not that different from an American camp’s: arts and crafts, theater, swimming, sports, nutrition, adventure, and life skills. On the surface it is all about the process of learning fun new skills, but dig a little deeper and it becomes clear that higher order skills and messages are embedded into every activity. Learning to swim, for example, is not just about overcoming fear of the water. By confronting the myth that black South Africans can’t swim, campers are nudged to think about other assumptions they “know” to be true, such as how HIV/AIDS is transmitted, or the role of women.

“Arriving on the first day ... the campers look like children without a care in the world,” explains Phil. “As the life skills classes move through the various phases of the curriculum, the stories come out of abuse, beatings, rape, incest, and deprivation. Many have to be educated as to what abuse is. They don’t know it as anything but the norm, as the condition we describe as “abusive” is one that they have been living with all their lives, including physical, psychological and sexual abuse. Educating children that this is not the norm can change not only the children at camp, but those siblings and friends they interact with after camp.”

Nearly 10 years in, over 5,200 children have attended the camp, which is run by trained locals with help from volunteers. To extend the influence of the camp experience, GCA has created neighborhood youth clubs that offer a four-hour biweekly day program of

recreational activities, plus life skills and a snack. No one is turned away. Where before children faced violence, gangs, prostitution, and little else outside their doors, now they have alternatives.

“The strength we are giving the campers is in the form of transformation,” says Phil. “We are not changing the circumstances of their lives; we are, rather, giving them the tools to see their lives as possibilities for excellence despite their current circumstances.”

Learn more about Global Camps Africa at www.globalcampsafrika.org. Learn more about the Shriver Award, and past awardees, at www.peacecorpsconnect.org/awards.

Erica Burman (The Gambia 1987-89) is director of communications for the National Peace Corps Association. Kelly Reid attends Colgate University and was a communications intern at the NPCA during summer 2013.

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