Lucy Berman 2017 by Joan Smith

I've talked about Lucy often over the years.

Lucy was the co-leader of the group of young volunteers, including me, working in Guinea Africa in the summer of 1963. The program was part of Operation Crossroads Africa, founded by a charismatic minister named James Robinson to encourage cooperation between American and African nations. Many people called it a precursor of the Peace Corps.

I was a junior in college. I'd been in work camps run by the Quakers, but this was a chance to spend the whole summer in a new country. And besides, a neighbor knew Jim Robinson and encouraged me to apply. I had to raise the money to go and then commit to a year of giving talks about my experience after I got back.

An anecdote about my fundraising: my mom had a rich cousin visiting New York from Oklahoma and we went to see him. I told him of my plans and asked if he would like to help sponsor me. He agreed, reached into his inside jacket pocket for some money and out flew dozens of $100 bills all over the floor! He picked up one and handed it to me…. at the time it seemed like a lot, but not compared to the possibilities!

Our Crossroads group was supposed to follow on to the success story of two summers earlier when Rev. William Sloane Coffin from Yale had led a group to the same town of Mamou, Guinea, to start the construction of a community center. His experience had been touted in film as an example of how effective the program was. We were to finish the project.

In the meantime, however, Guinea had chosen to become independent of their colonial overseers, the French, and had asked them to leave. They did, in the manner of a resentful child who gathers up its toys and goes home. They took all their equipment, furniture, phones, even paperclips, and left very little in terms of instructions on how to run a country. At least that's how it looked to us.

We were twenty or so college-aged students and young people, men and women (or rather boys and girls in retrospect) from America and Canada. Our two leaders, Len and Lucy were probably not much older than we were. We met in New Jersey, where we were briefed on our prospects, and then we flew together to Conakry, Guinea's capital. I have to confess that I had one-too-many gin and tonics on the plane and slept through our bus tour of the city before we headed off to Mamou.

We stayed together in a small stucco community building, boys on one side, girls on the other, with a dining room across the back. My bunk bed was right next to Lucy's. I don't remember most of the names, very few in fact, even though at the time we thought we'd never lose touch. Spirits were good, we all got along, and went cheerfully to a site at the other end of their small dusty main street every morning to continue the project begun two years earlier.

The only problem was that no one seemed to know what to do next, where to get the right materials, how to oversee a team at work. My memory is that we filled buckets

with dirt, moved them to the other side of the site, and then very often back again. I'd love to find some old letter to see if that's how it was presented to our anxious families back home. Could we really have done so little when we went in with so much optimism? I do know that the center wasn't finished when we left after two months.

There were, however, many chances to interact, socialize, put on presentations for each other, visit in the huts of local families, and even take a trip on the back of a truck into Mali, the country next door. I remember once seeing a group of adolescent boys, all dressed in red robes, being led together into a large thatched hut. It turned out they were at the age when they had to undergo ritualized circumcision, a traumatic thought to us. We all learned the national anthem of Guinea, "Chantons Notre Pays" (Sing of our Country) which I can still sing and often hum its energetic tune, and we performed it for the local audience wearing the colorful outfits we had bought to take home.

I usually wore mine to give those talks we were required to give. In those talks I chose the topic of learning not to get along. So many people talk about breaking down barriers, finding common ground, learning new ways of working together. We were in a situation where we were hindered from achieving our goals, frustrated by roadblocks, often angry at the inability to get things done. But the message in the end was that we were really equal in our willingness to express those frustrations, to treat each other as the same rather than different and get angry even with our hosts. That, to me, was really breaking down barriers.

So back to Lucy. She was almost as young as we were, recently married so in a different place in life. And she had access to something we hadn't really heard of before: birth control pills. My memory is that she was part of the first group of women to use them before wider distribution. The reason it stands out so strongly to me is that this represented the divide between before and after, the year, in my mind, that we entered the Sixties. It was also the year of Martin Luther King's march on Washington, which we were missing by living his message.

I've told this story many times over the years, so Lucy is part of my history. I haven't been able to remember her last name and wondered just recently how I could ever find it out. Since I also sing the Guinean national anthem often I carry these parts of the summer of 1963 with me though the details are fuzzier each year.

Then came ALP's Memoirs class and the story of the sheik in Senegal and the news that the reader, Lucy, was on Operation Crossroads Africa. "When were you in Senegal?" I asked. She said 1960. "When on Crossroads?" She said 1963. "So was I! Where were you?" "In Guinea, I was Lucy Berman."

Reality can truly be more unbelievable than fiction!