

**Remarks by Peace Corps Acting Director Jody Olsen
at the Memorial Service for Peace Corps Volunteer Catherine “Kate” Puzey
to the Government and People of Benin**

Cotonou, Benin
March 25, 2009

On behalf of the Peace Corps and the family of Kate Puzey, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the people and government of Benin for setting aside this day to commemorate Kate’s life and service in Benin. This memorial service for Kate is poignant testimony to the very special bonds that exists between the Peace Corps and the people of Benin.

It was only last fall that we gathered together in joy to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Peace Corps program in Benin. On that occasion, we had the great pleasure of thanking you, the people of Benin, for opening your hearts and your homes to the Volunteers who have had the unique and wonderful experience of spending two years in your beautiful country.

Today, we gather again, but this occasion is necessitated by a far more somber reason—we have lost one of our family members. When I say we, I mean all of us, Kate’s family in Georgia, her Peace Corps family, and you, the people of Benin, who embraced Kate from the day she arrived in Benin, nurtured her throughout her service in Badjoude, and now mourn her death.

I attended Kate’s funeral in Georgia on Saturday. It was an emotionally moving occasion filled with soul-felt tributes to a woman who was loved, admired, and respected for who she was and for all she had accomplished in her too brief a life. It was also an occasion to learn of Kate’s unqualified love for Benin and its people. I would like to share with you one of Kate’s depth of feeling for Benin:

I’ve become familiar with so many new sounds. I now know the sound of a chicken when it’s being killed, a goat when it’s giving birth, the baby next door when it’s hungry. I know the sound of the tonal repetitions in the local language when two close friends meet in passing; the rumble of the flour grinder two houses down and the hum of a nearby generator; the sound of mice and big lizards running around my ceiling at night and the ruckus that ensues when one chases the other (I always root for the lizard); the sound of the marché across the way from me carrying on well into the night; the deep-throated grumble of cattle as they graze in front of my house; the low clicking orders of their herder; the whining of children versus the baying of goats, though I swear one goat sounds like he’s always saying in a deep grumpy voice “Baddddd!” (I’ve named him Eeyore); all the different bird and insect calls. I’m even learning to discern the voice of each student who, in passing at night, will see me cooking dinner by candlelight and holler out from the dark “Good Evening, Madame Catherine!”

Although we are all diminished by Kate's death, her love for Benin and her life and death have brought us, Americans and Beninese, closer together. As with any family, we have come together over the decades to share both our joys and our sorrows, and, in doing so, I cannot help but believe that we have forged stronger bonds. From this day forward, we are bound in a shared sadness, a shared loss, and a shared love for Madame Catherine.

Peace Corps Volunteers like Kate Puzey have been privileged to work in close partnership and friendship with the people of Benin for the past 41 years and throughout this period Volunteers' lives have been enriched by the Beninese people. We are confident that these ties of friendship and understanding will continue to thrive in the years to come.

From time to time, I hope you will join me in hollering out from the dark "Good Evening, Madame Catherine!"