Cori Duke

Lab 2

Story 7 Rewrite

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There Michael Dicks stood with an armor of leather covering and sunglasses as black as night.

Although his skin white, he stood out like a black knight under the African sun. Back in America, one might second-guess this man’s motives if they entered his office. Dicks sits behind his desk, slouching in the laziest manner. His hair is tousled from the motorcycling joyride he took this afternoon to clear his head. The coat rack to his left is unstable and houses a rugged leather jacket with wind-ripped holes. Nature Valley granola bar wrappers line the footing of his desk while a crooked picture of an African family dangles aimlessly as if ready to fall into the abyss of scattered trash.

“Pardon the mess,” Dicks says. “I’m expecting the maid to come any day now.”

His office stands out among the rest with a poster plastered over the door’s frame reading, “In business you don’t get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate.” Dicks shuffles his feet to clear away trash as he grabs for his coffee mug. With each sip, the words, “Peace Corps, The Toughest Job You’ll Ever Love,” gleam in the sunlight shining through the tattered blinds.

“You know, I’ll never forget the day I decided to join the Peace Corps,” Dicks said. “I sat out in a pretty bland office waiting to speak to a recruiter about the whole process. I wasn’t sold on the idea, but I figured I had nothing else better to do with my time. As I sat there, the receptionist looks at me and raises her shirt exposing her breasts. She had this huge scar that ran right through her chest. I looked at her like, ‘What the hell is going on.’”

It is memories such as these that Dicks looks back on when times in Africa seemed unbearable. He remembers at that moment he knew the Peace Corps was dangerous and danger was his calling.

“I almost didn’t graduate high school,” Dicks said. “I was a pretty troubled kid and didn’t really feel like anyone had any type of authority over me. I was a great a baseball player and knew it. When my coach got upset with me, for whatever reason, he would grab ahold of my arm. After I had enough of that, I just ended up beating him. Yep, beat him straight to the ground.”

Dicks said he managed to pass high school but constantly battled those who were oppressing him, therefore leading him to the dodgy world of the Peace Corps.

He recalls the day he began shoving aboard a plane to Kenya with 54 people, not realizing he knew absolutely nothing about what Africa was.

“I’d seen some National Geographic stuff, but I didn’t know what I was getting into,” Dicks said. “Eventually I soon found out that Peace Corps throws people out in the world and says here is your job. Learn about this culture and let them learn about you.”

Dicks said the biggest impediment he found was the preconceived notion Africans had about Americans, so his fluency in Spanish allowed him to convince the Africans he was from Mexico.

Throughout his experiences in Africa, Dicks found a soft spot in his heart for helping those less fortunate. Later in life, Dicks became the department head of the Agricultural Economics Board and a professor at Oklahoma State University where he brought his passion of revitalizing African societies to life.

Thirty years have passed and Dicks has finally made a giant leap in the African society.

In 2005, he took a group of 11 students to Kenya on a trip to colonize native tribes that dealt with hardship. Their water is a muggy brown and their beds are made of dirt clumps. With much despair and strife, the Kenyan communities are left with no vision of a future.

Dicks said he specifically identifies locations where he can set up a permanent site rather than finding a new community every time to work with. This way, a project will never go unfinished and progress will continuously be made, impacting almost all lives within the community.

Pat Bell, an agricultural economics student at OSU and overseas missionary said Dicks is the most generous man he has met, despite his rough appearance.

“He has a unique ability to piece together resources from dozens of sources in order to make things happen,” Bell said. “Dr. Dicks is somewhat of a polymath. He knows something about everything. This makes long trips shoved into cramped cars a lot more interesting.”

Bell also said Dicks can make anything happen. While working overseas, Dicks managed to arrange a last-minute meeting with the U.S. Ambassador to Sierra Leone. His wit and intellect challenges those around him and his character is unpredictable.

“People ask me what I do across seas,” Dicks said. “I tell them that I problem solve. I’ll leave with a suitcase of clothes and not look back. Why should I? People over there need me. Selfishness isn’t in my blood anymore.”

Dicks became most fond of Sierra Leone. He has built a permanent settlement aboard an old Mercy Ship out of Sweden, which was left floating among the shore. The building is dilapidated and bleeding rust but serves as a sanctuary to Dicks and his staff. The government owns the wreckage; so to continue the use of housing materials, Dicks and his workforce renovate areas of the ship as a payment of rent.

Dicks works day on end under the hot sun building houses, schools, churches and water wells for the people of Sierra Leone. His sweat has become embedded into the rim of his cap, reminding him daily of the achievement he made the day before.

Annie Nsafoah, an OSU international graduate student from Kenya said Dicks is constantly straining himself to make sure he accomplishes any task the day will hold.

“It’s actually quite humorous to hear the native children yelling at Mike to stop working and take a break,” Nsafoah said. “In Africa, working above the age of 50 is unheard of. When they see Mike sweating and banging metal around, they fear he may die of a stroke.”

Nevertheless, it is adamant people realize Africa is not all work and no play. With harsh conditions, laughter and playfulness serves as the best remedy to keeping sane. Ariel Leff, an agricultural economics student and overseas missionary from OSU said Dicks brings so much joy to everyone, even without being aware of doing so.

“Mike always told us that his blood was too sweet for mosquitoes, so they avoided him,” Leff said. “So of course, he never slept with a mosquito net while we were in Africa. Well, one night, everyone decided that they were sick of being bitten by bugs, so we all draped our nets over our beds, which is a huge hassle. Mike said we were all crazy and putting ourselves to useless work. The next morning, all of us woke to Mike with a face full of bug bites, almost as if a swarm had attacked him. We laughed so hard.”

Dicks’ nature is far beyond his younger years in the Peace Corps. Now, his intentions are solely to better those who live a life of pure anguish. He said seeing a child in physical pain is more than heartbreaking; it shatters a man’s soul to the core.

Despite the building of a new society in Sierra Leone, Dicks looks to rebuild the hearts of civilians who have lost hope in a world full of neglect.

Contrary to popular belief, a man’s heart is greater than his needs, Dicks said. On his first journey into Sierra Leone, the streets were lined with malnourished children, begging like dogs on porch stoops. Their rib cages defined their body frame while their stomachs were distended because of hunger.

“A woman once said to me, ‘You know, we watched you today and you seem calloused to the anguish gleaming in those children’s eyes,’” Dicks said. “You know, that really pissed me off. The next morning I told everyone when I started the Peace Corps I was like a mountain of hope. I really thought I could change the world. Every time I go out, an ax bangs against that mountain and chips it away. I finally realized it won’t get any better and the world will continue to go downhill.”

With this in mind, Dicks does everything in his power to make the people of Sierra Leone feel the world is better than it seems. His motive is to gain peace within himself by knowing all his hard work has made a difference, defeating the odds of a chaotic world.

Cortney Cowley, a graduate research assistant and coworker in the agricultural department, said Dicks has one of the kindest hearts.

“He doesn’t take no for an answer,” Cowley said. “He will never give up on someone. His inquiry is to always be a giver, even if that means sacrificing the things he loves.”

Dicks pushes himself to the brink trying to wrangle all 118 children of his developed society into a mindset that will establish their beliefs of the human race in a positive light. To do so, he reaches out a loving hand to all, trying to dry their tears and diminish the nightmares they have of murder and treachery.

“I do my best to speak to every child,” Dicks said. “They all call me Papa Mike. They are so sweet and thankful and I’m relatively close to about half of them. I try to spend my time talking to kids about what they go through. Nobody has ever done that.”

To these children, Papa Mike is a saint. His presence is omnipotent. His voice is a calling of peace.

There he stands, in the dust-laden wind of Sierra Leone. His leather covering symbolizes protection and his blacked-out sunglasses symbolize a shield to a world of despair. He is a savior in the eyes of the citizens who know nothing greater than what he has given them.

Sources

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