



## Youth can change then world

### Year of Service Stories

Youth at Convention asked this old lady for stories about year of service. Since I did YOS for about 10 years, in Cameroon, Papaua New Guinea and Tanzania, and learned as a youth from voices of experience such as Dr. Ethel Martens, it was nice to pass on the information. Following are a few of the stories.

First, one about the protection the Faith gives. The first night of my arrival in Buea, Cameroon, I was directed by local gendarmes to a cheap hotel. Finding it dubious, I took out the piece of paper given to me by a Persian Friend at my first Feast since declaring. It read, "Dr. and Mrs. Samandari, Bongo Square" and I set off into the unknown. A snake crossed my path which set me in the right direction and somehow I managed to find Mehdi and Ursula Samandari at home. "Well you can't stay there!", exclaimed Mrs. Samandari, frail hands fluttering, on hearing where I had been directed, "That's a brothel".

Fortunately the next door neighbours were all Bahaís and a large group set off to retrieve my suitcase from the house of ill-repute. The gendarmes were all waiting for me. A Bahaí lifted my suitcase to his head, "Is she going with them?", they were heard to say. I had no problems with gendarmes after that.

Prior to going to Cameroon, I met Dr. Ethel Martens, who had worked there in Community Based Health Care. She gave me Ruhyyih Khanum's essential book for Year's Of Service, "Quickeners of Mankind", full of wise advice. Through the years, I made effort to be with Dr. Martens when she was giving community development classes. Here are some of her stories:

**Start with local people's ideas, support them to create their own solutions:** Dr. Martens wanted to vaccinate children in a village prone to health problems. However, even though she was quite elderly, she started by asking the villagers what they wanted to do. They wanted to vaccinate dogs against rabies. She asked them how they planned to organise that. The villagers were surprised because they thought she was the expert. However, they were pleased she respected them so they consulted amongst themselves and came up with a plan.

They would tie up the dogs they wanted, shoot the rest, she would do the rabies vaccination. After that, Dr. Martens asked the villagers, "what next?" This time, the villagers said, "your turn". She said she wanted to vaccinate all the children and on the agreed day, not a single child was missing.

**Include everyone in consultation, keep asking questions:** In a village in India, Dr. Martens was told that a Health Clinic was needed. She asked the villagers, "Why?". The reply was, "There is a lot of illness, the children are sick and many die". Dr. persisted with, "Why?" They answered, "Because the water is dirty". She asked, "Why is the water dirty?" They replied that the environment was dirty so Dr. Martens looked around the group and said, "I see a little old lady over there who has said nothing yet and I am a little old lady, I would like to hear what she has to say."

The little old Indian lady said, "Why don't you put a cover on the water tank". The men in the group were flabbergasted. Now Dr. Martens asked them, "How are YOU going to put the lid on the water tank?" The men were more surprised as they thought she was the expert and should be telling them what to do. They decided to consult together and asked her to return in two weeks which she did. They explained that they had the skills and materials to do everything with the exception of a bag of cement. Dr. Martens asked a Rotary Club for the bag of cement and the villagers helped themselves to better health.

I remembered that story in helping villagers in Tanzania to put in their water supply because when we returned for a visit two years later, they had built a reservoir for the water supply and a pre-school building. UNICEF was filming them as an example of a village where people work together for sustainability.

Find out what the people have got and create organisation around that, not the other way around: Dr. Martens insisted on listing the skills and abilities village people have got and mapping the infrastructure and resources. Non-Baháí projects often begin with prioritising problems. By the time Dr. Martens had ood and aahed over what people can do and what they have got, they felt good enough about themselves to tackle the problems. This advice was so helpful to me as a research student in Cameroon, trying to help save a piece of rainforest that existed in the last Ice Age with thousands of endemic species.

Recently, after 15 years of losing contact with the farmers I worked with, a Baháí mother visiting her daughter on year of service in Cameroon was able to re-connect us. What a surprise, the 25 farmers I had started with are now a nation-wide Agroforestry Farmers Association with related Friends of Nature Clubs. Tears flowed as I read their letters expressing how their family life had greatly improved as they now harvested tree products from their managed forest and the animals and birds were thankful too. I copied their letters to Canadian International Development Agency whose Vice President wrote of his interest in supporting them.

It was so nice as an old lady past her sell by date to be asked by the Baháí Youth at Convention to share these stories. I wonder what connections may happen now? Hmm, I just read an article about a 17 year old girl going to Tanzania to support the introduction of computers for record keeping on farms? Now, who could that be?

Janet Cundall

**Go to Year of Service Desk**

Sylvia Miley (Secretary): <mailto:yosd@cix.co.uk>

Esmyr Koomen (e-mail coordinator): <mailto:yosdesk@koomen.demon.co.uk>

Jonneke Koomen (youth advisor): <mailto:jonneke@koomen.demon.co.uk>