Out of Africa: A Changed Woman

Alumni Profile: Lorrie MacGilvray McKernan

It’s a long way from Middlesex Community College to the tiny West African nation of Equatorial Guinea, and Lorrie MacGilvray McKernan has been transformed by the journey.

A 1992 Middlesex graduate, McKernan credits MCC with preparing her for a successful career in labor relations and human resources that has transported her to many places in the United States and abroad. A trained labor negotiator, McKernan has worked in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Kentucky and now Texas. But it was the year she recently spent working for Marathon Oil Corp. in Equatorial Guinea – one of Africa’s smallest countries and largest oil exporters – that she remembers most vividly.

“I’m a different person after living in E.G.,” said McKernan, referring to the country by its initials. “I used to be spoiled and aggressive. I’d complain about having to wait in line at Dunkin’ Donuts,” she said, laughing. “Equatorial Guinea is a very humbling place. I’ve been to villages where babies had swollen bellies due to malnutrition and parasites. Malaria is rampant throughout the country. Life is very difficult for most of the people there.”

Living and working in a nation ruled by a totalitarian government has also taught McKernan to appreciate life in a democracy. “I treasure things now that I took for granted before, things such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion and freedom of the press. Those concepts don’t exist in E.G.,” she said.

McKernan went to Equatorial Guinea in July of 2007 and worked there for one year. However, her journey to Africa actually began at Middlesex. Born and raised in Medford, McKernan enrolled at MCC immediately after high school graduation. “I found my purpose at Middlesex!” she said. “I learned what I really needed to do, which was to continue my education.”

McKernan transferred to UMass Amherst, one of Africa’s smallest countries and largest oil exporters – that she remembers most vividly.

McKernan volunteered for a year-long, African assignment. “One of the things I hadn’t done in HR was international work. A former Spanish colony, the tiny country consists of a mainland region, as well as five inhabited islands. McKernan spent most of her time near the capital city, Malabo, on the largest island, Bioko. She worked and lived on a heavily protected compound with other Marathon employees and private contractors who work on huge offshore oil rigs and in a liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) plant.

McKernan would work “in country” four weeks straight – 12 hours a day, seven days a week – then would have four weeks off. “On my month off, the company would fly me anywhere in the world I wanted to go. The travel opportunities were great,” she said.

The real adventure began when McKernan was able to leave the compound and travel around the island – something many of her colleagues were reluctant to do. “E.G. is not a democracy. You have to be careful about what you say and do at all times,” she said. Nonetheless, McKernan visited villages and interacted with the local people, often the only Western woman many had ever seen.

However, the “abject poverty” she saw everywhere was hard to take. Despite huge oil profits – the World Bank estimates oil revenues were $3.3 billion in 2006 – Equatorial Guinea ranks near the bottom of the United Nations’ human development index. “People in E.G. don’t worry about saving money for the future or having a pension plan, because they don’t know what’s going to happen next,” she said. “Everything is so volatile.”

Despite these hardships, McKernan found Equatoguineans to be very kind and benevolent. “It’s a patriarchal society, and saving face is paramount,” she said. “I had two days of cultural-awareness training, plus a couple of months of making mistakes – having very understanding people helping me along the way!”

Now back in the U.S., McKernan recently moved to Texas to work for Plains Exploration & Production Co., a small, independent oil-exploration company, based in Houston. She also plans to marry the “Texas cowboy” she met in Equatorial Guinea and start a family. “Being in E.G. helped me realize that you can have a nice house and lots of other stuff, but your family is what’s really important.”

- Kathy Register

One of Africa’s smallest countries, Equatorial Guinea has vast offshore oil reserves and is the third largest oil exporter in sub-Saharan Africa.