Master John Croes in Lagalaga, Vanua Levu, Fiji

Fiji is a country far from just about anywhere. But Lagalaga is far from just about anywhere even within Fiji. Indeed, most people even in Fiji would not have heard of this village. It is far away from anywhere; some 40 dusty miles from the nearest town of Labasa, on Vanua Levu, in Fiji. In 1970, that is where the road on the Eastern side of Labasa ended! The road actually ended at Lagalaga School.

Here in 1970; as a 8 year old in the my 4th grade, I was introduced to the United Nations by Master John Croes; my class teacher. As a young American, Master John chose Lagalaga School of all the places in Fiji or indeed the World that he could have selected to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

In that 4th Grade, I have clearest memories of him showing a photo to our class of the spectacular building that is the United Nations. A tall and elegant tower on one side, and an oval shaped dome on another is how I remembered that photo. I have vague recollections of him telling us that this building was very important to Fiji and that it was very important to the World.

Class 5 at Lagalaga School, Fiji (1970) – photo John Croes

Master John Croes left a lasting impression in our village. He helped to build the school's library. He later built a community library in the neighboring village of Wainokoro. I don't know who sent the books, but week in and out there would be boxes of books coming to the school from the US. We took great delight in helping him unpack these; stack them and be the first to read the most colorful ones.

I must have learned much from him. In all honesty I don't exactly remember what though. I do recollect him introducing us to terms such as science, anthropology, and to a sense of history that stretched beyond the history of our village; or of our individual families.

Fiji became an independent country in this same year. Until the morning of independence, it felt to me that Independence was about changing of flags and singing a longer and different national anthem. He took time to talk to us about America's independence that afternoon. Suddenly, independence become something much larger. It became something about us and a future of possibilities.

I lined up with him on a fine day looking up into Lagalaga/Nubu skies trying to catch a glimpse of Apollo 13 re-entering the Earth somewhere over the Pacific. We had many conversations about the need for the skies to be shared between gods and humans that year.

Then I lost track of him. He returned to the US. Life moved on. Occasionally when I ran into an American (which was rare), I would ask if they knew about Rapid City in the US, and whether or not they had heard of John Croes.

By some insane statistical chance, I secured a place to study at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. In the capital Suva, I inquired about John Croes from the Peace Corps regional office in Suva but did not get far.

Some 35 years later, by when internet and information age had opened new possibilities, I managed to track the late Master David Rhudy – a Peace-corps teacher who preceded Master John at Lagalaga by a year. We connected on phone. Sadly we could not meet as he passed away not long thereafter. Master Rhudy tracked down the phone contact for Master John within a day or so. By that evening we had connected; filled each other about the intervening 35 years within minutes; shed a tear or two.

In May, 2018, I had the honor of being appointed by Fiji's President as Fiji's Ambassador to the United Nations. My wife Kushma; daughter Nehali and I arrived in New York. I was apprehensive but fully aware of the weight of responsibility on our shoulders. I was deeply anxious about the expectation from our people and from our country in trying to make its presence felt and its interests protected in this most global of arena.

I activated my new US phone a day after I arrived. With my new US phone, I made that first call, and it was to Master John Croes of course. I reminded Master John of the photo that he had shared with our class; reminded him about our class discussion about the importance of United Nations to Fiji and the World in 1970. I thanked him for what I now know to have been my first class in international relations.

Today, I am humbled to share my very best wishes with all PCV's and with Master John Croes on this anniversary of the Peace Corps Volunteer Program. I also remember fondly Master David Rhudy and hope this is reaches his family as well.

I refuse to accept that this great program - the PCV's, this fantastic gift of the USA to the World, does not have a great potential to transform lives of so many individuals across so many villages that lie beyond where roads end. It has done so for me. It has done so for me beyond my own wildest dreams.

Vinaka vakalevu Masterji.