

## **Diane LaPointe**

This is an interview with Diane LaPointe about her activities in the West Africa Smallpox Eradication Project. The interview is being conducted at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, on July 14, 2006, as a part of the 40th reunion of the West African Smallpox Eradication Project, to mark the launch of the project. The interviewer is Linda Harrar.

**Harrar:** Would you take a few moments and just describe your early life-where you were born and your education?

**LaPointe:** I was born in Portland, Maine, and I attended Cathedral High School, which is a Catholic girls' high school in Portland, Maine. I also went to college in Maine, at St. Joseph's College in Lake Sebago. After I graduated, I did 1 year of volunteer work in Camden, Arkansas, as a teacher for the extension lay volunteers and then returned to Portland. My husband, Mark, was in the Peace Corps for 2 years before that, and he also returned to Maine. We each did a year of teaching in Maine, and after that year, we were married and then came to CDC [Centers for Disease Control] right after our honeymoon.

**Harrar:** How did Mark get involved in the Smallpox Eradication Program?

**LaPointe:** He was teaching at Mechanic Falls High School in Mechanic Falls, Maine, and received a call from someone who was hiring for this program at CDC. I believe they were looking for people who had African experience and were able to speak French, and so his name was suggested by the director of the Peace Corps. Mark was hired over the phone. My, how things have changed, to be able to get hired over the phone.

**Harrar:** Absolutely. So, tell me a little bit about what it was like. You're living in Africa, you're an expatriate, and it's a different country, a different culture. Talk a little bit about that.

**LaPointe:** Well, I'd like to, if you don't mind, start with our coming here.

**Harrar:** Okay.

**LaPointe:** We married in June of 1966 and took our honeymoon. Mark had bought a little Volkswagen bug secondhand; it got 12 cents a mile. On the way down to Atlanta, our car broke down in North Carolina. So we put all of our belongings in a storage place in

North Carolina-our belongings were in that Volkswagen bug-and took a bus down here. We left the car there to be repaired and came and stayed at a hotel in Atlanta.

Mark would come over here to CDC to do his training, and I'd get on the local bus with the newspaper and sit behind the bus driver, looking for an apartment and telling him that we were going to be at CDC. He would tell me where to get off and point in certain directions. So we got a place on Briarcliff and started the smallpox training program here, which to me was one of the wonderful experiences that we've had, meeting all these people.

We had intense French training, the [unclear] program, where you just saw the pictures and heard the people speak. You never saw a written word. That's how we were trained. A group came from France, and we did all the training here and met all the people who were going to be going to West Africa. We formed a real feeling of camaraderie with all of these people.

**Harrar:** How long was the training?

**LaPointe:** I believe it lasted throughout that summer and into the early fall. We spent all day with the French-speaking trainers, and sometimes in the evening, so we were really not supposed to be speaking English at all. It was very intense. It was wonderful.

**Harrar:** So, how soon after the training did you move to Africa?

**LaPointe:** We went back to Maine and got together some household items and we flew out probably in October or November of that same year to Libreville, Gabon, in West Africa.

And I do remember an experience there right at the beginning. Mark would go off to the embassy and work with his colleagues there, with the AID [U.S. Agency for International Development] people. We didn't have a place to live yet, so we were at the local hotel. And this was my first attempt at using my French. So we would get up in the morning. Mark would go off to work, and I would go to the restaurant and ask for an orange juice in French, jus d'orange [sp.]. And I'd never get orange juice; I'd get grapefruit juice. So after a couple of days of that, Mark came back from work, and I was in tears. I said, "I can't speak, I can't even say orange juice in French. What am I going to do?" And so he went to breakfast with me the next morning and he asked for orange juice, and they brought him grapefruit juice. But he had the foresight to ask, "Why didn't you give me orange juice?" and it was because they didn't have any. So that kind of alleviated my concern about speaking French.

**Harrar:** That's funny, that's funny.

**LaPointe:** We had an apartment right on the ocean. I mean, for 2 young people, newly married, we had this wonderful apartment, completely furnished by the government, overlooking the water. It was very, very nice.

I was pregnant at the time. I had become pregnant right away. So we began thinking about where I was going to have our first child. Speaking with the doctor there in Libreville, who was a Peace Corps volunteer doctor, we had thought about going to Lambaréné, which is Albert Schweitzer's hospital, but we were discouraged from doing that. They said they didn't feel there were adequate facilities in case of an emergency. So it was decided that I would go up to the Cameroons. We knew Arlan and Edith Rosenbloom, who were there. So I went up there in my 8th month.

I flew up and spent my time with them and then went out to a hospital in Ebola, which was run by an American missionary group. I was flown there. It was a very small plane, a 2-seater in addition to the pilot. Beside me was an elderly Frenchman. Because this was out in the bush, they buzzed the hospital to tell them somebody was coming. And I guess I had a look on my face that looked as if I was going to pass out. The little Frenchman next to me said that he had candy with him and he tried to feed it to me so I wouldn't pass out. When the plane landed in a field, a nurse from the hospital came, with a cot, and I was picked up and taken to the hospital. I spent I'd say a week or 10 days there.

There was another American woman there, too, who was from the Cameroons. We became friends, and we hung out with the nurses and the doctors and played Mah Jongg.

Mark drove up from Gabon. It took him a while to get there, I guess, and he thought the baby would have been born by the time he got there. But when he arrived, she had not yet been born. So we took a walk around the campus of the hospital that day, and that evening our daughter Mary was born.

**Harrar:** I hope your daughter appreciates the trouble you went through to get to a hospital to deliver.

**LaPointe:** I think so.

**Harrar:** What was it like raising your children there?

**LaPointe:** Actually, it was very easy. We had help, which was something

very new to me. We had a woman who would come every day and do our laundry and clean our house. I really took care of Mary pretty much myself, but that woman was there to help me. It was beautiful in Gabon. There were beaches there. So we spent a lot of time going to the beach and taking walks.

Gabon was very French. It was a former French colony, and there was still a large French presence there. So I didn't get the feel that I got later, when we went to Mali, of that African experience of the marketplace, because it was all French shops. We developed a wonderful relationship with a French family that lived upstairs from us. The woman took me under her wing. She'd take me shopping. And her 2 daughters loved my baby. So we did a lot together as family.

The thing I remember most is that all of those relationships you made took the place of family-although they certainly couldn't replace them. But they helped with that feeling of loss of family. They became your family.

**Harrar:** How long were you there?

**LaPointe:** We were in Gabon probably about 2 years, and then we were assigned to Mali, to Bamako.

**Harrar:** And there was a big difference between the 2 places?

**LaPointe:** Absolutely, yes. Gabon was, as I said, very French, and located on the water. Mali was inland, on the Niger. But the culture was so rich that I didn't miss the ocean-I had thought I would. But I got so engrossed in the culture of the people. That was a real experience. That was really going to Africa for me. The people were wonderful.

Our second daughter was born. I went back to the States to have her. We had the Rh-negative/-positive situation, so I went back to Maine and then came back with Michelle.

In Mali, we lived in a little compound. There were maybe 5 houses, all young American couples, people with the embassy who lived in our area there.

And, again, we had help. We had a woman who would come in. She liked to take the children and go off. I didn't really like that because I wanted to spend my time with them. But she felt that was her job. But I enjoyed going to the market; I learned a bit of the language, the Bamber [phonetic] language. I liked to go and bargain with the women at the market.

We had to be careful about boiling our water, and filtering it, as well as washing and soaking all our vegetables. And if you hung your clothes out to dry, flies would leave their

eggs on your clothes. They could get into your skin, so everything had to be ironed.

But I just had a wonderful experience because I was very young.

**Harrar:** What was your toughest problem that you faced while you were there?

**LaPointe:** Sometimes Mark would be gone for long periods of time. He couldn't stay in the capital all the time; he had to go out and do his business out in the villages. Those separations were probably the most difficult times.

Another incident I remember is that when we were in Mali, I traveled with Mark once up into the desert. We left our children with some good friends. I can't remember the exact town we went to, but this was in the period right after there had been a coup in Mali, and the president was imprisoned in this town. There were guards around the prison. I wasn't aware that you couldn't take pictures. So I was out taking pictures, completely unaware of not being able to do that. Later, at our hotel, we got a tap on the door, and the local gendarme came and confiscated the camera and put us under arrest. We had to stay there at the hotel. Mark spoke to the head of the health department who he was visiting there, and I believe that man must have interceded for us and finally got the camera back. I think they took the film. But that was pretty frightening. So that's something that has stuck in my memory.

**Harrar:** Nerve-racking.

**LaPointe:** Very much so.

**Harrar:** And I'm sure you were worried about your children.

**LaPointe:** Right, exactly.

**Harrar:** Earlier, you talked about, shopping and going to the market in Gabon. What did you do in your spare time when you were in Mali?

**LaPointe:** Much of your day was spent shopping and bargaining. I love to sew, so I enjoyed going to the market and buying African material. I used to make a lot of dresses and skirts and things with the African fabric. I became friends with Peggy Yates, the wife of John Yates, a political officer. They had 3 children, so we did a lot together. They had a little pool, and we didn't, and so a lot of our day was spent over there visiting with them. Or we would get in the cars and go off somewhere, find someplace

to take the children. And then on weekends, groups of us, with our husbands, would get together and go out and try to do as much as we could around the area.

One particular incident I remember is when we all went off with the kids on a Sunday to a place near the river. It had recently rained, and the cars got stuck in some African lady's field, and she was not very happy about it. John Yates was able to hail some African guy with a Mobyette. So he went into town and got somebody to come out with a truck and chains. We all sat out in the field on blankets and waited until they rescued us.

But I think most of our day was spent shopping. I like to cook, so learning how to cook some of the local foods and just raising children and enjoying the friendship of the other people that we met filled my days.

**Harrar:** How do you think participating in the project changed your life?

**LaPointe:** Completely. Even to this day, we have a lot of interaction with Africans. We went back to Africa again (not with the smallpox program), and the children went to French schools. That changed their lives. It opened their eyes to a whole different side of the world, the poverty, how much we have as Americans, an appreciation for what we have. Our daughter Michelle learned to speak French. She was younger and she just picked it up; she was so fluent in it. So when she went off to college, she majored in the romance languages, and that led to things for her.

I've done work since we've been back. I taught. I'm a retired teacher. But when I retired, I volunteered with teaching English as a second language for African women, and, as I said, we have a lot of African friends to this day. At our church, Corpus Christi, there's a large African community, and we've been very involved in things relating to Africa. The experience really changed our life completely. I don't know if we'd still be in Maine, if I'd still be teaching there. I don't know. I can't even think like that.

**Harrar:** What difference would it have made if families, say the spouse and children, could not have joined the CDC employees or the medical officers, the folks that were there doing the work? What kind of difference do you think it would have made if the families would have had to have stayed back home in the United States?

**LaPointe:** I can't imagine. I think it would have been very difficult. First of all, you wouldn't be able to relate to anything your husband was going through. To be there together, you were in it together. It would have been a great loss for me, and I think it

would have been very difficult on our family. I know we have had separations like that, and it's very difficult on families, the tensions when you get together, and the wife becomes the boss of the house, that kind of thing. I don't think I would have understood what he had been going through when he'd come back and talk about it. I just don't think it would have worked. I'm really happy to have been part of that. It was a whole new life for us.

**Harrar:** Is there anything that you would have changed if you had to do this all over again?

**LaPointe:** I can't think of anything, really. We really enjoyed it. We've made lifelong friends, some of them with CDC.

A lot of these people [at the reunion] we have not seen since back then. But we have 1 friend in particular, Jay Friedman [Jay S. Friedman], who lives here, who we've been friends with him since we started here. That's 40 years. The Roys are another couple that we know. And some of the friends we made while we were living in Africa, the people at the embassies who had children, we're still friends with a lot of them. Our children became friends with their children, and they still stay in touch with each other. So we've developed this network of friends that will just keep going on.

**Harrar:** Wonderful. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

**LaPointe:** Just that I'm very happy that we did this. I know it's just made a big difference in my life, and, of course, Mark's. We came back here to CDC, and that was his career. I'm looking forward to seeing a lot of the people who I haven't seen in so long today. I'm so glad to have had the opportunity.