



Larry Woodson <[REDACTED]>

Re: Merry Christmas

1 message

Sat, Dec 29, 2012 at 1:18 PM

To: [REDACTED]

Fascinating! Many thanks for sharing.

Happy New Year.

Cap

In a message dated 12/29/2012 11:30:19 A.M. US Mountain Standard Time [REDACTED] writes:

Thought you might find Paul's experiences in Laos of interest.

Hey Larry,

Great to know that you were involved in the Vientiane Toastmasters Club back in the day.

Recently, I have been District Governor of Toastmasters District 27 - DC/Maryland/Virginia - some 4,500 members in 240 clubs. District 27 was the 10th largest TM District in the world so during my District Governor year we split the District into two Districts 27 and 29.

I wanted to combine two loves so I went to Laos to try and create a Toastmasters program there. That would make Laos the 117th nation in the world to have a TM program. Last year at our international convention's parade of flags -116 nations - I carried the flag of Vietnam for being involved at the margins in opening that program. I determined that I would start programs in Laos, followed by Cambodia.

There were three challenges to getting started in Laos:

- a) the government. The Lao People's Democratic Republic is not friendly to people's movements and grassroots NGOs unless they are organized by the Party. Getting registered is an onerous process - especially if you are not a moneybags carrying donor;
- b) Toastmasters is not expensive by western standards - about \$50/year - but that is a month's salary for an average Lao. How could the program be made affordable for other than the 1%? -and;
- c) I had not been able to locate one person in a vast network of people living in Laos who had knowledge of Toastmasters. I could get a club started but how could we nurture it along - long distance through Thai clubs? Sister club relationships? Not optimal, for sure but I did meet with a number of Thai Toastmasters club. There was interest.

To make a long story short - I found that the Lao-American College could embed the program in its already-approved by the Lao PDR curriculum. That means not having to directly negotiate with the Lao PDR. In my wanderings around Vientiane I found a Brit expat who had founded a Toastmasters club at the Wharton School U or Pennsylvania many years ago. He was willing to be a mentor for a anew club. Two obstacles overcome.

Now, I just need a scholarship fund to help out average Lao students become members. We will have a program up and running in a month or so.

I did not approach Dong Dok because of challenge '1' above - sensitive issue with the government. I wanted to start in the international community and with some successes and clubs that the Lao government could see, then try to move into local organizations like schools and businesses.

I did approach the brand spanking new American Chamber (headed by Frank Manley's son Chris). There are some possibilities for growth there, and with international NGOs.

I was in Vientiane during National Day - that was a gas. I really got tired of seeing the same artillery battery shoot down the same U.S. jet over and over on TV - film footage from the old days. Watching the PL carry weapons down the trail also got a bit boring as were scenes from the lives of the patriotic soldiers and their families in the caves of Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua.

I was there during the expulsion of the NGO worker. Everyone who knew her in the expat community agreed that she was a difficult person who was confrontational to Party officials openly in public, and to everyone else that she came in contact with as well. She deserved to be PNG-ed was the common sentiment.

So while NGOs (there are about 80 international NGOs working in Laos now) walk a narrow line, I think that Jim's article overstated the case. There are some really interesting things going on there now, including Mac Thompson traveling all over the north by car funding small school projects. He even gets into Long Tieng on his trips. LS 20A is now an overgrown airstrip and a small Lao age with no Hmong visible anywhere.

I was on the U.S. delegation for the Paris Peace Talks on Cambodia in Paris in 1991. At that time I was serving as the Deputy Assistant Administrator for East Asia and the South Pacific.

The Lao asked State if they could have a side meeting to talk about Laos. State reluctantly allowed me to attend that meeting but asked that I not indicate that I spoke Lao. The main purpose of the meeting for the Lao was to ask that the U.S. send a representative to Laos to talk to the government about restarting the USAID program. State pointed to me, explained my USAID position, and also said, 'he might even be able to speak a little Lao.'

I was invited to Laos and went. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed flying me by Russian helicopter to all of the outlying areas - Sam Neua, Phongsaly, the Bolovens - etc. - so I could see the state of development and justify a program. They had Russian helicopters ready to take me out but State got cold feet.

At that time, we were providing limited funding for crop substitution and HIV prevention, and unexploded ordinance removal through the regional programs based out of Bangkok. But State now saw how interested the Lao were and saw that my visit might result in a major resumption of AID. Apparently, the U.S. was not ready to do that.

My trip to the hinterlands with the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs was cancelled.

Later, Bill Clinton nominated me to be U.S. Ambassador to Laos. I resisted for a long time but the pressure was relentless. Finally, I started the in-processing and training. I was asked at one point what my ideas were for Laos. I said all of the right things - at least what I would be expected to say. Then I added that I would like to see a major uptake in development assistance, the reinitiation of a bilateral USAID office in Vientiane, a focusing our assistance on private sector strengthening and on working with the country's ethnic minorities - helping them to better integrate into the Lao economy.

I was told in no uncertain terms that as Ambassador I should put all of those things 'out of sight and out of mind.' After due consideration, I withdrew my name. A colleague and friend, Wendy Chamberlin, went out to Laos as Ambassador instead of me.

Happy New Year Larry - to you and yours.

Your ideas on how I might approach the Lao Scholarship activity for Toastmasters would be greatly appreciated?

Most of what is said above is not for sharing -except with a few close friends. Definitely not for the newsletter.