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# A World Away: US Teacher Who Misses Hoisting of Kenyan Flag

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## A WORLD AWAY

Professor Emeritus Bob Perry  
Sociology

*In the 30 years he taught at JCCC, and well before then, now Professor Emeritus Bob Perry traveled far from Kansas, bringing back to the classroom and college hard-earned knowledge and insight from around the world. From South Africa to Turkey and from Argentina to the Russian Far East and beyond, Bob has spent many summers abroad on an array of academic programs. In addition, he taught one year in China at JCCC's sister university in Xi'an, spent a semester at City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College in England as a Fulbright Exchange Teacher and served two-and-a-half years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya. These many experiences have helped Bob to internationalize his own courses and to support the growth of such initiatives at JCCC over the years.*



*Featured below, with minor editorial changes, is an article on Mr. Perry that appeared in the Daily Nation, the largest circulating Kenyan newspaper. Its author is the newspaper's education editor, Samuel Siringi, a Kenyan journalist who was an Alfred Friendly fellow at The Kansas City Star in 2008.*

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### US teacher who misses hoisting of Kenyan flag

Volunteer's sojourn almost cost him his life but can't wait for the day he'll return

By SAMUEL SIRINGI, In Kansas City, USA

Robert Perry first visited Kenya when he was 19 – and fell in love with the country. So, when an opportunity to become a Peace Corps volunteer beckoned 18 years later, he took it up quickly and ended up teaching at Sameta High School in Kisii. His sojourn in Kenya nearly cost him his life during the 1982 coup attempt. Yet his love for Kenya remains undiminished 24 years later. He left Kenya to return to his teaching job at Johnson County Community College, but is now planning to bring his family back “to see the place that became a memorable home for me.”

#### Very patriotic

“I still feel very patriotic to Kenya ... I really miss the raising of the national flag, which we used to do at school every Monday and Friday morning,” he told the Saturday Nation this week. Speaking over dinner at the Kansas City home of Frank and Peggy Zilm, a couple that is visiting Kenya in November to offer architectural advice to Bomet's Tenwek Hospital, Perry said that during the post-election violence in Kenya [in early 2008], he spent many sleepless nights on the Internet monitoring the situation for fear that the country would degenerate into a failed state.

“When I saw that the violence had spread to Kisumu and Eldoret, two areas I knew well, I got worried that people I

knew and dealt with would become victims of the mayhem,” he said, throwing in Swahili words in his speech.

He remembers how his first experience in Kenya, together with his colleagues, proved to be a shock of Kiswahili language teaching. As a teacher, he found himself being taught using a “direct method” by instructors at the Lugari Farmers Training Centre in 1981.

“Our tutors started speaking and teaching us in Kiswahili before we knew anything about the language. They wanted us to listen and imagine the images contained in their speech. They only gave us a book on Kiswahili at the end of the training. It was the most difficult way of learning yet it turned out to be the best in imparting basic, functional knowledge of the language,” said Mr. Perry who still speaks good Kiswahili.

#### 37 – Mr. Perry's age when he came to Kenya as a volunteer teacher

He says of the 1982 coup attempt, when he escaped death narrowly after being hounded from a bus on Nairobi's University Way, as each passenger was forced to display a national identity card: “I felt so helpless that I thought my volunteer job had led to my death.” He remembers that the then national broadcaster VOK had announced that the situation was calm only for the bus he was traveling in to be

caught up in the deadly violence.

“There were suggestions that our bus cancel its trip from Kisii Town to Nairobi. But I think we were assured that the route was safe, which gave an impression that the coup attempt had not disrupted normal activities,” he said.

Now 63, Mr. Perry plans to return to Kenya to witness the aftermath of the January post-poll chaos. He says the violence reminded him of the coup attempt. Mr. Perry, then 37 years old, was among a group of 40 young American volunteers who had come to Kenya to teach under the Peace Corps programme. The programme was established in 1961 with the purpose of promoting world peace and friendship. Under the arrangement, interested countries and areas receive U.S. citizens willing to serve, often under conditions of hardship, by training manpower. More than 187,000 people have served as Peace Corps volunteers in 139 countries.

On Christmas Day of 1981, then U.S. President Ronald Reagan wrote to Perry: “The spirit of voluntary giving is a wonderful tradition that flows like a deep and mighty river through the history of our nation. When Americans see people in other lands suffering in poverty, they don’t wait for the Government to tell them what to do. They give and get involved; they save lives.”

Mr. Perry still keeps notes and pictures taken in Kenya.

As Sameta Secondary School, Mr. Perry taught English from *Form One to Form Four*. He also taught the general paper for the A-level class. At the school, he introduced a yearbook, *The Sametan*, a publication that published contributions from teachers and students.

### Inspire students

He persuaded the headteacher, Mr. David Motanya, to fund its publication, while he looked for a printer in Kisumu. He still keeps two editions of the publication. The publication was meant to inspire students into journalism and further education.

Mr. Perry also introduced a new form of student assessment. Under the system, he administered continuous tests for students, which were rare before. But he says the standards of education in Kenya were high. “I was stunned by the rigour of exams in Kenya. Students study in a second or third language (English) and are tested on it only for them to pass well,” he says. He remembers students sharing a few textbooks and being taught many lessons each day. “Our school had no electricity while classrooms were not spacious,” said Mr. Perry, adding: “My students in Kenya were the best that I taught in my career.”

In his photo album are copies of the Daily Nation. One of them is the August 25 edition when President Moi had been nominated as the sole candidate for the presidency under

KANU. The headline reads: Yes it is Moi: Wananchi give their verdict.”

Another edition from January 22 is headline: “Midika on new theft charge.” It reported how then Nyando MP Onyango Midika, sentenced to four years two days earlier, was returned to court on another charge of stealing Sh210,000.

Mr. Perry remembers the beauty of the Maasai Mara and Lamu Island, which he visited during his period in Kenya.

Before leaving for Kenya, he had taught at Johnson County Community College in Kansas between 1978 and 1980. He still teaches at the institution. He first visited Kenya in 1965 when he was 19 years old and spent the summer in the country and partly in Uganda.

“I was struck by the sense of hospitality and gentility of Kenyans. They were wonderful people who welcomed me to their homes and social places all the time,” he said.

### Another trip

“My time in Kenya was special. I need to make another trip to take my wife (Carrie Gallagher) there so she can also have a taste of the experience I had while there.” Since he left the country, Mr. Perry has kept in touch through reading local newspapers on the Internet and through former colleagues at Sameta. One of them was Mr. Alfred Kisubi, a teacher, who later moved to the U.S.

“I often ask him to help me understand what is going on in Kenya.”

### Afterword

Alfred Kisubi – referred to at the very end of the article – was one of the very earliest foreign exchange teachers at JCCC, spending the 1985-86 school year at the college. He and Bob had taught together in Kenya, and with support from JCCC and Carolyn Kadel in the Office of International Education, Mr. Kisubi came for the year. Early initiatives such as those that brought Alfred Kisubi to JCCC have since blossomed into a broad array of programs that have provided opportunities for many JCCC faculty to travel abroad, to bring in scholars from many corners of the globe, and to add significantly and genuinely to diversity in our curriculum.

In closing, it may be interesting to observe that following his year at JCCC Alfred Kisubi stayed on in the U.S. to complete a doctorate at UMKC and he is presently Distinguished Professor of Human Services and Multicultural and Global Education at the University of Wisconsin. Among the many new courses he has developed is one titled *Globalization in Human Services*, and Dr. Kisubi has taken a number of groups of faculty and students to Kenya and Uganda over the past decade.