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Dear Neighbor:

Spring is upon us with a sense of renewal and growth in the air. For the first time in three years, we can travel freely again. Staff can visit programs without the fear of contagion, and there is excitement about building and reaching new communities.

At World Neighbors (WN), we are always expanding and, at the same time, helping long-time partners to become self-sufficient through our five-stage development model which lasts from eight to ten years. During those years, the communities go through the stages of initiation, growth, expansion, consolidation and maturity. When they have successfully reached the last stage, they become independent of our assistance. Over the past two years we have helped close to 200,000 people improve their lives and become self-sustaining. These graduated communities can now finance their own projects and in many cases, they become trainers for new communities. The movement of people to full independence and self-sufficiency is one of the best indicators that our methodology is effective and having a positive impact in remote rural communities. At the same time, last year we started working in 77 new communities and added a 14th country, Malawi.

All this takes hard work and a strong cohesive management team. We are blessed to have staff around the world who have been with us for many years (in some cases more than 20 years!) and who are devoted to helping our partners follow through on the five stages, graduate and then go on to innovate and thrive on their own. In this issue of Neighbors, we are profiling three of our five Regional Directors who are leading their teams in West Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and South Asia. Two of the profiles were written by Richard Green, a volunteer from Oklahoma City who was a tribal historian for the Chickasaw Nation from 1994 to 2016.

All of this work would not be possible without your generosity! We are deeply grateful and hope you will continue to support this essential work and change that is happening all over the world. Wishing everyone a wonderful spring!

Gratefully yours,

Kate Schecter, Ph.D.
President and CEO
The May Ayers Milburn Chair

Letter from Kate

On the cover: A member of a savings and credit group and her baby in Guatemala

Srijana Karki, Regional Director for South Asia, and Tommy Barrow, board member, in Nepal in February 2023
Lionel Vigil, Regional Director for Latin American and the Caribbean

Interview conducted and written by Richard Green

There was a time years ago when WN representatives working in Latin America and Haiti had to persuade impoverished rural communities to partner on programs to improve the people’s standard of living.

Peru native Lionel Vigil, who was hired in 2012 by WN to administer its programs in Bolivia, Guatemala, Haiti and Peru, says staff today spend little or no time on that objective. Vigil says that the non-profit’s reputation in those four countries is such today that small, rural communities seek partnerships.

If this suggests that Vigil’s job is easier today, he wouldn’t agree. With experience and longevity, other daunting challenges crop up or come into focus. All four countries face political and socio-economic instability. Furthermore, the effects of global warming have intensified the problems of food insecurity, poverty and poor health.

Lionel Vigil’s leadership role has been pivotal. He has provided direction and motivation to a staff he helped hire, train and inspire. His sister, Pilar Castoe, says he hasn’t changed much since he was the leader and role model of his five younger brothers and sisters in the city of Tarapoto in northern Peru. “Our father was a construction worker with little education who could fix or make anything,” she said. Lionel took after his father but was determined to become the family’s first college graduate. He did, with a degree in Health Sciences and a yen for more. “He was so curious,” Castoe says, adding, “Lionel was always reading and sharing what he learned with us.”

So, family and friends were not surprised, after he married and had two children, when he traveled 6,500 miles to the northeast to Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and in 2002 earned a graduate degree in international developmental studies.

Over the next decade, in positions with international development organizations, he learned first-hand that a permanent source of funding was absolutely essential to improving the lives of isolated rural villagers. No matter how well-intentioned and thought-out the development program was, when funding ran out after a year or two or three, the communities were left to fend for themselves. Lionel called such times “heart breaking for the communities and the program’s rep, who sometimes was me. You never forget the look on their faces when you tell them the funding has ended.”

In 2012, funding ran out on Vigil’s own job, fighting poverty in Peru with the Norwegian Stromme Foundation. Vigil applied to WN, an organization new to him, because he learned that the organization had been working successfully in Latin America for years. Showing he was highly motivated to apply the WN philosophy of staff helping community residents to help themselves, Lionel Vigil was hired in 2012 as Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Initially, Vigil spent almost half of his time traveling to the four countries. As the communities were rural, isolated and impoverished, and received little or no assistance from their governments, their needs were similar; they lacked permanent sources of potable water, health care and ample food to eat and sell.

Dealing with these challenges requires a steady source of funding, but as Vigil well understood by then, external sources come and go. As Vigil told the community participants, WN had demonstrated repeatedly that a community’s long-term ability to improve their lives only comes from within. Vigil meant for example, that community residents had to establish their own savings and credit groups. WN, he said, would help them create the groups, share other communities’ experiences and teach bookkeeping. This might have seemed counterintuitive to impoverished people with few assets, but Vigil and his small staff told them that quick fixes never last for long when conditions don’t fundamentally change or get worse, as with global warming.

Lionel’s staff in each country have been helping manage climate changes by teaching techniques to construct and regulate water reservoirs and filtration systems that provide sanitary water for drinking and water for crops even during seasons of drought. Adequate food and water are the basis of development and they are part of our holistic program in the region, Vigil says.

All four countries experience privation, crime and gang violence, political corruption, and periodic natural disasters such as earthquakes and flooding. In recent years, Haiti, in particular, has become even more unstable and dangerous, with a presidential assassination in 2021 and a serious cholera epidemic in 2022.

While other NGOs and foundations come to Haiti and go, Vigil says WN has stayed and says he relies on Senior Program Associate and native Haitian, Angeline Tirogene, for her research on the ground, her reporting, data gathering and recommendations.

Vigil works closely with all the program associates in the region and says, “By the way, I love my work.”
Srijana Karki, Regional Director for South Asia

Srijana Karki joined WN in 2012. Born and raised in Kathmandu, Nepal, she benefited from what was only available in the capital city: a good education, adequate health services, electricity, readily available clean water, sanitation, decent roads and infrastructure. Her father served in the Nepal Army which provided opportunities to experience life outside of Kathmandu Valley. Her grandparents lived in a rural village that she visited frequently.

As a child, she saw the great difficulties even then with regard to life’s most basic necessities. Srijana wanted to play a role in change in poverty-stricken areas, and to address the unequal treatment of boys and girls within families and throughout society. Srijana, a mother of two children, earned an MBA, specializing in human resource development.

For 14 years she worked in various capacities for different organizations. Her work included educational and vocational training for underprivileged children, organizational strengthening, strategic planning, vocational rehabilitation of ex-combatants and capacity building of local non-profits. For 11 years, Srijana has led WN’s work in India and Nepal with a specific focus on women’s groups, agriculture and gender equality.

The following is an excerpt from the book, *A Woman’s Guide to Power, Presence and Protection* by Monica Bauer, Marty Seldman, Paula Santilli and Jovita Thomas-William published by Optimum Press in 2022:

“Srijana Karki is the Regional Director for South Asia for World Neighbors (WN), guiding WN projects in India and Nepal and coordinating with government officials, donors, and other NGOs. Every year the programs improve the lives of tens of thousands of people in small communities and rural areas. The approach to empowering rural women and small farmers is holistic and impacts sustainable agriculture, economic self-reliance, reproductive health, water and sanitation.”

Srijana was raised in Kathmandu. She doesn’t remember seeing any women in power or leadership positions. She was rebellious and insisted on participating in the same activities as the boys in her family and community. This was accomplished by a fierce determination not to be defined or confined by her culture.

A major decision, which put her on the road to independence, was to go to university. She made this decision without consulting her family. Her educational journey included an MBA from Tribhuvan University. After her MBA, she worked at a variety of roles but lacked passion and purpose. At that point she was exposed to efforts groups were making to empower rural communities. She was impressed by the women she met who were committed to bettering the lives of their families and communities. It has been said that the two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why you were born: Srijana discovered why she was born: she committed to raising women’s voices. This has allowed her to witness the transition of women who initially were afraid to speak up in their own families, yet they developed the courage and skill to represent their village in discussions with government officials.

Although Srijana didn’t grow up with female role models, she has become one. Recently she was visiting a village at a moment where one of the women participating in the project work had recently given birth to a daughter. When Srijana arrived, the new mother asked her if she would touch the baby—because she wanted her to grow up to be a leader like Srijana.
Do Christophe Ouattara, Regional Director for West Africa

Interview conducted and written by Richard Green

Do Christophe Ouattara grew up in a small village of farm families in the West African nation of Burkina Faso. The former French colony’s name, meaning “land of incorruptible people,” was adopted by the nation in 1984, about the time that Do Christophe, eldest of five children, was going against great odds by entering a university in the capital city, Ouagadougou. His father had farmed seven months of the year to provide for the family and worked in a cotton mill five months to earn money to send the children to school.

Do Christophe did the rest by making excellent grades and being determined to succeed as a university-educated professional. The national government invested in such men by granting scholarships to pay the costs and then putting the college graduates to work for the national government. These experiences and associated international travel broadened his outlook and desire to explore and continue expanding his capabilities.

In 2016, Do Christophe applied for a job at WN. He saw an advertisement in a newspaper. In part, he was attracted because his reports to WN had to be in English, which would give him the opportunity to improve his English. He was hired to work on programs for West Africa, including his home country and Mali. Part of his job was partnering with residents of rural villages similar to the one where he grew up. As he had been one of them, Do Christophe literally spoke their language and understood their hopes and fears. He was able to win their trust because the partnership he was offering was doable...

Do Christophe explains that the partnership began with the establishment of a savings and credit group to finance the means to improve their lives. Members would put a small amount of money into the group every month, and with time, the fund would grow so that members could take out a small, low-interest loan to buy what they needed, such as seeds to grow produce.

Gender equality was essential to the community’s partnership with WN. To further empower men and women, assistance in reading and writing in their language was made available at literacy centers through a collaboration with the ministries of education of Burkina Faso and Mali.

Over the next five plus years, Do Christophe and his staff of four helped establish in Mali and Burkina Faso 71 savings and credit groups with 1,600 members. Some 365 members have taken out loans, and when asked, Do Christophe says none have defaulted or committed fraud. Here are two examples of women who have benefited:

- Dabini Albertine took out three loans over six months, totaling $259, to start a business producing and selling dolo, which is an ancestral beer obtained from the fermentation of the flowering plant, red sorghum. After repaying her loan, Dabini’s net profit was $528, part of which is used to grow her business.
- Tampoudi Awa contributed monthly for several months before taking out a $240 loan at 5 percent interest for six months. She bought a loom, thread, soda and dye and produced traditional loincloths for sale. As of this writing, her sales totaled $912, and after repaying her loan and interest, she netted $660.

Such work has become indispensable to the communities in both countries where terrorist attacks are increasing and whose governments in recent years have been displaced twice by violent military coups. “We don’t confront jihadists; we avoid them and dangerous situations with the help of a network of friends who keep track of what is happening at all times.”

Such careful intelligence “permits us to continue our mission with our partners, and to safely approach new communities with which to collaborate. In time, God willing, communities form a cooperative, which multiplies the assets and is capable of assisting even more people to take hold of their lives.”

Do Christophe pauses, smiles shyly, then says, “Anyway, that’s the way I see it.”

“Do Christophe literally spoke their language and understood their hopes and fears. He was able to win their trust because the partnership he was offering was doable …”.

Neighbors Magazine
Commemorations

(July 27, 2022 — March 29, 2023)

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Maybe you’ve already joined the growing number of supporters — our Sustaining Partners — who have included WN in their estate plans. When you do, you create a lasting legacy and ensure the important work of WN will continue to help those facing hunger, poverty, and disease now and for generations to come.

There are so many ways to make a lasting impact today and beyond your lifetime.

- Including WN in your will or trust
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If you’d like more information on how to make one of the most meaningful gifts to improve the social, economic, and physical health of rural communities around the world, please contact Robert Lachance today at (405) 286-0805 or rlachance@wn.org.

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WN has the opportunity to receive a 1:3 Endowment Matching Gift of $20,000 from the Kirkpatrick Family Fund at the Oklahoma City Community Foundation.

WN’s endowment income distributions provide substantial funds each year that cover many program and administrative costs. These funds help ensure that over 83% of your annual gift for programs goes directly overseas to fund trainings and to help communities help themselves.

Our Mission

World Neighbors inspires people and strengthens communities to find lasting solutions to hunger, poverty and disease, and to promote a healthy environment.

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