

## Valley residents who went to Ebola-stricken countries express compassion, love

By Barbara Anderson

The day Peace Corps volunteer Matt Vargas had to leave Liberia was the worst day of his life.

“It shattered my whole universe,” he says.

A Fresno State graduate who grew up in Atwater, Vargas had been in Liberia for 15 months when the [Peace Corps](#) evacuated all volunteers from the [Ebola](#)-stricken country in August.

He had planned to complete his two-year assignment in West Africa — and extend his service there for as long as the Corps would allow.

When it came time to leave, Vargas, 27, almost refused to go with Peace Corps friends who had come to the rural village of Karloken. “I almost ran into the jungle to hide myself so they couldn’t get me,” he says.

“That’s how much I love West Africa.”

Vargas says Ebola could devastate the country that he has come to adopt as his home. His affection and concern for [West Africa](#) is shared by others from the central San Joaquin Valley who have been to countries in the region. This week, the World Health Organization said about 14,000 people have been infected — primarily in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone. Nearly 5,000 of the people infected have died.

Dallas Nord, a Fresno Pacific University intercultural studies student, spent three weeks in Sierra Leone two summers ago before the Ebola outbreak but has stayed in touch with a friend there.

Economic relief efforts also are beginning to be hampered by Ebola, he says.

Nord traveled in Sierra Leone with the [Foods Resource Bank](#), [Catholic Relief Services](#) and [World Hope International](#) — non-governmental organizations working in the country. Nord helped with agricultural programs. Sierra Leone’s main crops are rice, palm oil, mangoes and pineapples.

A friend in Sierra Leone has told him a Catholic Relief Services investment program is being affected. The Savings and Internal Lending Community program allows village members to contribute money to a group by buying shares and then loans are given out throughout the year. For the program to work, villagers have to work together, and Nord said people are afraid. “They’re not wanting to interact across villages.”

Vargas said he understands the need to contain Ebola, but some of the reactions are based on fear rather than knowledge.

The media has portrayed the Ebola outbreak “like a horror movie,” he said.

In Karloken, where he taught biology and chemistry, Vargas said he knew of no victims. Liberia is “not like a battleground of just carcasses and people in gas masks and hazmat suits just walking around.”

Ebola is a “scary disease but it’s not an easy disease to catch,” he said.

The disease is not spread through the air or by water, or in general, by food. It’s transmitted person to person through direct contact with blood or body fluids, such as urine, feces, saliva or sweat of a person who is sick, according to the

federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Symptoms, such as fever and headache, may appear two to 21 days after exposure to Ebola, but the average is eight to 10 days.

On Wednesday, California said it was requiring a [21-day quarantine](#) for people returning from countries affected by Ebola and who have had contact with infected patients. County health officers, however, will determine the level of the quarantine on a case-by-case basis. People at low risk could be free to move about while being monitored. A person who traveled to Ebola regions but had no known exposure to Ebola would self-monitor for three weeks for symptoms. In Fresno County, public health workers likely would be involved in the monitoring, said Dr. Kenneth Bird, interim health officer.

Vargas, who is staying with friends in Kentucky, said he self-monitored after returning to the United States from Liberia in August. He has been surprised by reactions he's experienced since he has had no symptoms and the time has passed for the risk of infection.

Last week, a dentist's office almost refused to treat him, he says, and when he applied for a new passport at the post office, the clerk "stepped back three feet at least and asked if I had Ebola."

Quarantines in the Ebola crisis continue to be controversial, including the involuntary isolation of Kaci Hickox, a nurse in Maine who is fighting a quarantine that was imposed after her return from Sierra Leone.

Chris Collins, the Fresno-based executive director of the nonprofit [West African Vocational Schools](#), says quarantines could deter doctors and nurses from going to West African countries to help with the Ebola crisis. His school is based in Guinea-Bissau. He plans to visit it next month.

Guinea-Bissau has not had a reported Ebola case, but the country, like its neighbor Guinea, would be ill-prepared for an outbreak and would need help from the outside, Collins said.

"The reason why organizations like WAVS exist is because we recognize that countries in West Africa, including Guinea-Bissau, will never be able to handle crisis like the Ebola outbreak unless they are developed from the bottom up so that they can have the capacity and infrastructure to handle these types of challenges that we face in the 21st century world. This is why it's so critical to invest in education and job training for people in countries like Guinea-Bissau so that they will be prepared for the next challenge," Collins said.

Nord says non-governmental organizations, such as Catholic Relief Services and World Hope International, can respond quickly to provide aid. "If you want to help, make donations to organizations that have already been there from the start."

Hospitals nationwide, including Community Medical Centers in Fresno, are shipping medical supplies to West African countries. Thursday, Community was scheduled to ship a container of supplies to Liberia, where most of the supplies will be used at JFK Medical Center in Monrovia, "the largest hospital on the front lines of Ebola, and one that is greatly in need of the supplies we'll be shipping," said Mary Lisa Russell, a Community spokeswoman.

Vargas is encouraged by the American government's response to the Ebola crisis in Liberia, including President Barack Obama's decision to provide funding and to send military troops. He's optimistic the outbreak can be contained by the end of the year.

He's anxious to return to Karloken, where he made friends among the villagers. "I'm tormented by the idea of sitting here in luxury, in excess, while they're over there suffering."

Vargas and Nord say they would probably be in West Africa now if they had medical skills or expertise that could be put to use.

"It's actually really difficult to know there's nothing I can personally do myself," Nord said.

Nord likely will return someday to Sierra Leone, where he said “the soil is red and the trees are green.”

“I’d love to go back and see what needs to be done. It’s going to take a lot of work — the problems won’t end as soon as the disease is mostly gone.”

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