



Out of Africa: A Changed Woman

Alumni Profile: Lorrie MacGilvray McKernan

It's a long way from Middlesex Community College to the tiny West African nation of Equatorial Guinea, and Lorrie MacGilvray McKernan has been transformed by the journey.

A 1992 Middlesex graduate, McKernan credits MCC with preparing her for a successful career in labor relations and human resources that has transported her to many places in the United States and abroad. A trained labor negotiator, McKernan has worked in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Kentucky and now Texas. But it was the year she recently spent working for Marathon Oil Corp. in Equatorial Guinea – one of Africa's smallest countries and largest oil exporters – that she remembers most vividly.

"I'm a different person after living in E.G.," said McKernan, referring to the country by its initials. "I used to be spoiled and aggressive. I'd complain about having to wait in line at Dunkin' Donuts," she said, laughing. "Equatorial Guinea is a very humbling place. I've been to villages where babies had swollen bellies due to malnutrition and parasites. Malaria is rampant throughout the country. Life is very difficult for most of the people there."

Living and working in a nation ruled by a totalitarian government has also taught McKernan to appreciate life in a democracy. "I treasure things now that I took for granted before, things such as freedom of expression, freedom of religion and freedom of the press. Those concepts don't exist in E.G.," she said.

McKernan went to Equatorial Guinea in July of 2007 and worked there for one year. However, her journey to Africa actually began at Middlesex. Born and raised in Medford, McKernan enrolled at MCC immediately after high school graduation. "I found my purpose at Middlesex!," she said. "I learned what I really needed to do, which was to continue my education."

McKernan transferred to UMass Amherst, from which she graduated in 1996 with two bachelor's degrees (in political science and sociology). She then headed straight to graduate school. After earning a master's degree in industrial and labor relations from Indiana University of Pennsylvania – and working in a steel mill as a union member to learn what it was like to be "on the other side" – McKernan began her HR career.

Her first human relations position was with Latrobe Brewing Co. in Pennsylvania. McKernan then moved to Detroit to handle labor relations and HR at an oil and gasoline refinery owned by Marathon Oil Corp., the fifth largest refiner of petrochemicals in the United States.

Several years later, McKernan transferred to another Marathon refinery in Cattlettsburg, Ky. "That was a major plant, with 2,500 employees, plus outside contractors," she said. "We produced 250,000 barrels a day."

Always looking for a new challenge, McKernan volunteered for a year-long, African assignment. "One of the things I hadn't done in HR was international work. After five years in Kentucky, I transferred to Marathon's plant in E.G. and joined their international human resources group."

Equatorial Guinea is located on the western coast of Africa, near Cameroon and Gabon, and is sub-Sahara Africa's third largest oil exporter. A former Spanish colony, the tiny country consists of a mainland region, as well as five inhabited islands. McKernan spent most of her time near the capital city, Malabo, on the largest island, Bioko. She lived and worked in a heavily protected compound with other Marathon employees and private contractors who work on huge off-shore oil rigs and in a liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) plant.

McKernan would work "in country" four weeks straight – 12 hours a day, seven days a week – then would have four weeks off. "On my month off, the company would fly me anywhere in the world I wanted to go. The travel opportunities were great," she said.

The real adventure began when McKernan was able to leave the compound and travel around the island – something many of her colleagues were reluctant to do. "E.G. is *not* a democracy. You have to be careful about what you say and do at all times," she said. Nonetheless, McKernan visited villages and interacted with the local people, often the only Western woman many had ever seen.

However, the "abject poverty" she saw everywhere was hard to take. Despite huge oil profits – the World Bank estimates oil revenues were \$3.3 billion in 2006 – Equatorial Guinea ranks near the bottom of the United Nations' human development index. "People in E.G. don't worry about saving money for the future or having a pension plan, because they don't know what's going to happen next," she said. "Everything is so volatile."

Despite these hardships, McKernan found Equatoguineans to be very kind and benevolent. "It's a patriarchal society, and saving face is paramount," she said. "I had two days of cultural-awareness training, plus a couple of months of making mistakes – having very understanding E.G. people helping me along the way!"

Now back in the U.S., McKernan recently moved to Texas to work for Plains Exploration & Production Co., a small, independent oil-exploration company, based in Houston. She also plans to marry the "Texas cowboy" she met in Equatorial Guinea and start a family. "Being in E.G. helped me realize that you can have a nice house and lots of other *stuff*, but your family is what's really important."

- Kathy Register



Lorrie MacGilvray McKernan, a 1992 MCC graduate (shown here on an off-shore oil platform), recently completed a one-year assignment in oil-rich Equatorial Guinea.



One of Africa's smallest countries, Equatorial Guinea has vast off-shore oil reserves and is the third largest oil exporter in sub-Sahara Africa.



McKernan visiting with friends after church in a local village.