

# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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## **Elvis has left the building!**

That's right, I'm outtahere.

I'm already in Africa, where I will spend the next year.

Africa! How about that! – Cameroon, to be precise. Me. Africa. Imagine.

I'm just about the most provincial person I know. A trip to Burlington for me is a big deal. I have traveled much in Addison County. I am one comforted by routine and familiarity.

I teach a course at Middlebury on the literature and culture of Northern New England, which is essentially an examination of the Yankee archetype. I use myself as Exhibit A.

So I'm a Yankee. Worse, I am a Swedish Yankee. I grew up in Maine and have lived in Vermont for 35 years or so. My dad's parents emigrated from Sweden. That side of the family is full of Nordic reserve. Sometimes you can't tell if my people have a pulse.

Little do people know that beneath the placid surface we Yankees are a seething mass of anxiety.

This year in Africa is so far out of my comfort zone . . . it's out of my comfort *hemisphere*, out of my comfort *galaxy*.

How did it come to this? What am I doing in Africa?

My wife, Brett Millier, is up for a scheduled sabbatical from her Middlebury College teaching this year. She has been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship in Cameroon. She thought it would be a good time to go away as a family, live somewhere else, before our kids, Peter 18 and Annie 16, were big and on their own.

I agreed: good idea.

The last time Brett and I had the chance to get away together for the year was in 1995-96 when she had a sabbatical and I was between things at Middlebury College.



We went to Maine – and had an idyllic year on the southern Maine coast. We cared for our infant baby Peter (who just graduated from high school!) and succeeded in our academic tasks too.

Every morning, after Peter was fed, between 5:00 and 6:00, he and I went exploring for the best breakfast places from Kittery to Scarborough. On the way home, Peter fell asleep in his car seat and I found a scenic spot overlooking the ocean and read the *Boston Globe* before heading back to Ogunquit and starting the day.

So I was cool with the idea of another sabbatical away. Maybe back to Maine. If something works, then do it again, if it ain't broke . . . that's the Yankee way.

Brett's not a Yankee, doesn't take the same pleasure in repetition and comfort. She's a Westerner, born in Kansas, raised in Arizona, Oregon, and California. Let's not go back to Maine, she said.

So then I suggested British Columbia, Western Canada, 3000 miles away. A colleague had taken his family there for a year and had a good time.

Not Canada, Brett said.

Okay, someplace really different, I offered. Ireland? I had been to Ireland a couple times in my job at the College, visiting Irish universities. It was beautiful and culturally stimulating.

No, let's go somewhere and learn a different language, she said.

Sweden! I have never been there. My people!

Not Sweden. Too cold.

Okay. Spain. I figured we're going to Spain. Warm. Culturally stimulating. Language immersion. Spain's okay, I thought, though a stretch for the Swedish Yankee. I thought I could do that.

So Brett went about investigating Fulbright opportunities and putting together the extensive, complicated applications.

Near the end of last summer, we were eating dinner on the back porch on a warm August night, when Brett told us she was applying for a Fulbright *in Africa*. All things considered that made the most sense.

I was taken aback. Way back. As ESPN's Chris Berman would say, "back, back, back, back." I left the table and went for a little walk around the house.

When I came back, I choked out, "what happened to Spain?"

Annie then checked in. Having just turned 15, she announced, "If I'm going to leave my friends and sports teams, I want to go someplace really different."



From then on, Africa for a year was a possibility. Early this spring, Brett was informed she had been awarded the Fellowship in Cameroon.

Game on.

With appointments like these in the academic world, the person in my position is called the “trailing spouse.” Rarely has that term been more literally true than in my case. My jobs in Africa are dad and husband.

The women, Brett and Annie, are intrepid; the men (Peter and I) are decidedly trepid.

We will be living in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon, with a population of about 1.7 million, in a “mixed” neighborhood. While Vermont and Maine, my stomping grounds, are 1% black, Cameroon is 1% white. Everyone speaks French. It’s right on the Equator – 80s most of the year with two rainy seasons.

Making it my home for a year is my life’s greatest challenge to date. (Bigger than Basic Training in the Army at Fort Polk, Louisiana? Yes! That was just ten weeks.)

Brett will be teaching American Literature to graduate students at the University of Yaounde. Annie will go to the ASOY (American School of Yaounde), probably Peter too, though he’s already graduated from high school and doesn’t have French so cannot attend the university. ASOY does have a basketball team, so that’s an inducement for Peter to repeat Grade 12.

When I told John Walsh, former Chaplain at Middlebury College, about our Africa adventure at Reunions in June, he beamed, clasped my arm warmly, and exulted, “this will be a life-changing experience!”

“John,” I said, “that’s what I’m afraid of.”

I have never been one for taking chances, jumping off the high board. I tip-toe into the shallow water: I don’t run and take the plunge. I don’t rip the band-aid off: I remove it slowly.

Not this time.

Here goes!

Allons-y!