



Mek arwe go pong tory

News from the Lacey family in Antigua

...settling in... It seems remarkable that I'm writing this almost two months to the date after our arrival in Antigua... in some respects it feels like we only arrived this morning; in others, like we've been here for years!



We arrived to slightly cloudy skies and a beautiful 28 degrees Celsius (not all that remarkable, it transpired - the weather forecast every single day in Antigua is "28 degrees, sunny with showers"!), and was transported by our landlady to our new home. It's fair to say that we hit the jackpot in the area of accommodation - we'd seen the house in January during our initial visit to the island, but had forgotten how beautiful a place it was. Sofie immediately re-acquainted herself with the spacious lawn in the front garden, while we spent some time gathering mangoes, guava and bananas from the back.



Despite the idyllic nature of the house itself, we are, however, frequently reminded that we're living in a developing country thanks to the Antiguan utility companies. Government water supply is erratic (to say the least!) throughout the year, which we have to buffer against using rainwater tanks. The first few days of our arrival, though, saw all sorts of problems with pipes and pumps, so running water has posed quite a problem. Power cuts also seem to occur fairly frequently across the island, but it's something we're getting used to.

We're fortunate to have found a wonderful pre-school fairly close to our house (just opposite the MCCA Conference Centre, in fact), where Sofie has settled in very well. Her knowledge of nursery rhymes, songs and writing have come along in leaps and bounds, her Spanish has already overtaken that of

her parents, and she has perfected her spitting and shouting abilities, thanks to all of her fellow students being boys! C.

During our second week here, we were treated to a welcome event at the MCCA Conference Center – a fairly formal affair, which attracted such dignitaries as the Minister of Agriculture! One of the people to whom we were introduced was a minister in training in the Antigua circuit, Rev. Roger Deane. Thanks in part to a shared and similar sense of humour, we ended up sitting on the same table as him, and invited him to come and visit GARDC the following week, also suggesting that he might lead the devotions one morning with the students.

His words of encouragement with the students turned out to be very well received, and several took up his offer to talk with him privately afterwards. Consequently, we invited Roger to take on the role of chaplain within the Center; he attends every Thursday, and spends the majority of the morning here - providing counselling as well as discussions with the youth about Christianity. C.

...first day at work... Our first day at work, at the Gilbert Agricultural and Rural Development Center, was perhaps the most confused and manic day of my life. We'd had almost three weeks of sorting things out at home before starting work; and on that Monday morning moved from the relative calm and quiet of our newly organised home, to complete mayhem.

Two new cohorts of students were starting at the Center (one studying Office Administration, the other Graphic Design), and at the same time two outgoing cohorts were presenting their company business plans to everyone - the culmination of their Business Studies module over the past 12 weeks. There were students **everywhere**... sitting or standing in every possible spare space in the building.

Once things settled down, though, and the new inductions began, it was interesting to see the differences in the two sets of students - the new ones, shy and reserved; and those who had completed their twelve weeks of training, full of confidence and abilities to express their business ideas and take questions.

The current set of courses (five in total) are funded by USAID under the banner of Caribbean Youth Empowerment, and it was easy to see on this occasion just how effective this empowerment had been. These students are now in the process of being placed for 6-8 week placements in companies around the island, which will hopefully in many cases lead to offers of employment.

The Center itself is in a somewhat less pristine condition than our new home, and also besieged by constant water cut-offs, power cuts, collapsing roofs, phone lines dying; the list goes on. But the work goes on regardless, helped by the enthusiasm and resolve of its staff. The new group of students (to whom I was fortunate enough to teach some IT classes during their tutor's illness), are also a great bunch of kids who I know we'll enjoy working with. **C.**



...hiv projects... The other day our director had a visit from another nonprofit colleague, who heads an HIV network NGO in Antigua. After being present at the meeting, I wanted to look up the country's HIV stats and to my surprise found there are not any anywhere except for 65 new reported cases of HIV infection last year. Our guess is that Antigua is not that different from the rest of the Caribbean that has the second highest rate of HIV infection in the world after sub-Saharan Africa. Digging deeper into any kind of statistics in my effort to understand the problem of HIV in Antigua caused me to discover that deaths from HIV-related causes are among the eight leading causes of deaths in the age group 20-59.

The HIV network brought up the idea of setting up HIV infected people in farming businesses. The idea reflects the sad situation when HIV people get fired from their jobs after disclosing their status and are left with no means of supporting themselves. This is particularly hard on them since regular income can buy them healthy food which is even more important for them than

for the rest of us since it can offset and postpone any health complications arising from their HIV status. The farming idea is therefore a great answer to their nutritional needs as well as helping them to secure extra income from selling surpluses.

One of my jobs is now trying to find somebody who thinks along the same lines or convince somebody that the project idea is worth spending money on. **V.**

One of the projects currently being undertaken by GARDC (funded by the EU) is to train farmers in Good Agricultural Practices, thus making their output acceptable to the top end hotels and to the possibility of export.

To that end, the Center commissioned some software to be written to help farmers keep proper records about crop and plot management, and I assisted during the training event.

Farmers are, perhaps, not the keenest recipients of IT training, but the session went down well, and three hours later, twenty enthused and/or bemused farmers headed out of the building, flash drive in hand with their new software! **C.**

...micro-enterprise grants... Last week, we completed a month of putting together a project proposal within the “Eastern Caribbean Youth Micro-enterprise Programme” funded by United States Agency for International Development. The project describes well what the GARD Center has been doing in recent years. It aims to help seven new or nearly new farmers to jump-start their businesses onto long-term profitable paths. By helping these farmers, their immediate families will benefit by having a source of fresh vegetables and eggs and by getting part time jobs with the businesses. But in the end also the local community (including our family!) will benefit by being able to buy local produce at reasonable prices. Most goods in the supermarkets are imported and the price tag attached is easily three times of the British prices while the local salaries are nowhere near the British figures.

In order to be able to enter the supermarket chains the farmers need to meet certain quality standards and regulations (GAP, mentioned elsewhere in the newsletter). And that’s where GARD Center steps in by teaching farmers about the regulations, by giving them the software and teaching them to use it which makes them comply with necessary standards; and also by providing a 40 foot chill unit that will prevent the produce from spoiling before it reaches its customers. Without the chill unit not much stays fresh for extended times on this island. GARD Center also introduces the farmers to potential buyers (catering companies, large hotel resorts, whole seller) in order to secure customers for the produce. Business courses are also lined up for the young farmers that help them understand crops planning, business planning, marketing and tax issues.

In order to succeed in farming in Antigua the farmers need to have some type of irrigation in place so they are not entirely dependent on rain water. The rainy seasons and periods of drought have become less predictable and less pronounced in recent years due to climate change but lots of crops like tomatoes still need consistent water supply. GARD Center is helping the farmers to access funding to cover part of the irrigation costs.

When farming is done properly (having access to technical equipment, training and markets) it can be a source of significant revenues in Antigua. It is also encouraged by the local government who provide farming land lease-free to interested entrepreneurs. Farming still has a bad PR though and is seen, primarily by youth, as a second class employment - a high risk operation full of drudgery. Office jobs even in the times of crisis are still a lot more attractive. Our project is trying to at least make people realise how

much revenue farming can bring, and present it as a viable alternative.

In case you are thinking you haven’t noticed the agricultural streak in me or Chris rest assured that Chris’s role involved more business planning and fighting with the figures in the budget. While I had to make the proposal sound as a perfect fit for the donor’s intentions. We are now hopefully waiting to hear good news about the money coming our way. **V.**

...prayer points... Please pray for:

- The physical state and resources of the GARD Center, as staff try to work with facilities that frequently fail
- The receptiveness of the students to the devotions and messages given by Rev. Roger Deane and the other staff at the Center.
- Sofie’s ability to fit in and make new friends.

June 2011

Mission Partners Chris and Véra Lacey are working at the Gilbert Agricultural and Rural Development Center in Antigua, providing IT and management support and training.

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