



Cultivating growth in Africa

The tale of a traveler at Oklahoma State University

The rhythm of the land and the beating drums make the heart skip a beat. The land of Africa - a cultural experience no one could forget - was home for Kenton Dashiell, associate professor of plant and soil sciences, for more than 18 years.

A native of Indiana, Dashiell earned a bachelor's degree in agronomy at Purdue University. After graduation, he joined the Peace Corps and moved to the small island of Antigua in the West Indies.

In Antigua, he worked on an irrigated vegetable farm run by the government where they grew a variety of vegetables including tomatoes, okra and sweet potatoes. In addition, he worked with Antiguan extension agents and visited farmers to see what he could do to help.

"That is where I discovered that we had no good answer for almost every difficulty the farmers were facing," Dashiell said. "I thought, 'We need some research here so that we can try to start developing some answers for them.'"

He developed an urgency to conduct research to help Third World countries find the answers they sought.

This urgency was the driving force behind his decision to go back to school and earn a master's degree in agronomy at Oklahoma State University. But he didn't stop there. After graduating from OSU in 1979, he attended the University of Florida where he received his doctorate in 1983.

After graduation, Dashiell wanted to go overseas and work. He applied for a position with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture in Nigeria, Africa.

"I was just fortunate that there was an opening for a post-doctoral fellow at that institute to work on soybean breeding," Dashiell said. "I applied for the job and got it."

While working for the IITA, Dashiell had several assignments. One of his assignments was working on the development of soybeans. He soon realized, even though the crop grew well, there was no market for it after harvest and the people had no idea what to do with it.

"Just like Americans, if tomorrow the average person were given some soybeans and told, 'Why don't you cook that tonight?' everybody would say, 'Well, what do I do with it?'" Dashiell said.

Despite this similarity, Dashiell was quick to point out a major difference between the Americans and the Africans.

"People (in Africa) are dying and are malnourished; children have insufficient protein in their diet," Dashiell said. "We saw soybeans, a high-protein grain, as something the average person could grow without too much difficulty."

"If we could overcome this lack of knowledge about how it could be eaten and enjoyed as a food, we would be able to greatly improve the nutrition and health of the people."

When Dashiell began working with soybeans, the crop was not being sold in the marketplaces.

However, when IITA started its campaign for popularizing soybeans as a food source, within four or five years, the grain was being sold in more than 500 retail outlets in the cities of Africa.

In the rural areas, where the soybeans were being produced, every family would save some of its harvest as seed for the next year and some for eating at home, Dashiell said.

"The sense of accomplishment was fantastic," Dashiell said.

Dashiell learned, experienced and came to love African cultures. In fact, he married an African woman, and they now have three children. He said he would like to go back one day, whether it is for work or retirement. He considers Africa his home.

Dashiell came back to the United States for one reason: his family. He said he wanted his children to have an American education, and his reason for coming back to Oklahoma is "because it has the greatest university in the world."

At OSU, he currently does research on peanut/oilseed breeding. The objectives for his research include developing high-yielding peanut cultivars and improving oil-quality characteristics. His research involves experimentation in both the field and the laboratory.

Arthur Klatt, professor of plant and soil sciences, works next door to Dashiell. He describes Dashiell as a good scientist with a good academic background.

"He's seen a lot of different aspects of agriculture," Klatt said.

Dashiell has the ability to work with an array of people, Klatt said, because he has worked with so many different nationalities. Dashiell has a cultural sensitivity, and he has the experience of seeing agricultural production in the developing worlds.

"This is very important, because a lot of that can be applied in Oklahoma to improve Oklahoma agriculture," Klatt said.

Klatt joins Dashiell in his passion about international experience for faculty and students. He said international travel changes how you interact with people.

"You bring a wealth of experiences with you, a wealth of information and a lot of contacts," Klatt said.

Christian Nansen, associate researcher for entomology and plant pathology, said international travel can be a great tool to broaden not only a person's mind but also a person's friendships.

"It allows you to get in contact with people from many, many places," Nansen said.

Nansen also said Americans should think more about going abroad because of the cultural and social experiences that go along with living in another country. He said it can enrich your life and broaden your contacts.

Dashiell said Africa changed his life forever.

"When you read a report that 100,000 people have adopted your technology, that's nice," Dashiell said. "But when you go out to the village and meet five or 10 of these people directly and they explain to you why Sally and Jill are now alive – because every breakfast they ate the soybeans they grew on their farm – then it gives you a nice, warm feeling."

The international travelers all agree living outside the United States makes you consider things you may never have thought about before. They said you look at them differently than the average American.

Klatt and Nansen both said travel abroad makes a person want to learn more and to be more involved in the important issues in the world. People get out there and see what is happening, they said.

You realize you can help those starving children in Africa. All it takes is your heart, that beating rhythm that lets you live day after day.

By Nikki Davis, Oklahoma City, Okla.



Above: Kenton Dashiell examines a field of peanuts near Stillwater. (Photo by Nikki Davis) Left: Kenton Dashiell looks on as workers in Africa harvest a field. (Photo courtesy of Kenton Dashiell)