

Title: Dr. Scott Lacy and African Sky Profile  
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“Africa is calling...”

A poster above the desk announces it in stark white letters.

You can hear it in Dr. Scott Lacy’s office. It draws your eye around the small room. Slate-grey African masks look down from the back; painted canvas maps are spread out over the walls. Nudged between a file cabinet and a low bookshelf is a Venn diagram about sustainability. Opposite, beneath the wall-length window, a framed Saharian sunset glistened in daylight: it reads “African Sky.”

If Scott Lacy drew a Venn diagram of his life, that horizon would be in the center. “It is the glue that puts it all together,” he explains. He is both a teacher and researcher because of what he does for African Sky, an entirely volunteer-based, non-profit organization helping Malian villages. “It’s the thing that makes everything else possible.”

Sometimes, Lacy finds it hard to balance his many exploits. This semester, he has had to miss two of his classes to “shake the money tree” and still has another trip to come.

It might be so difficult because as a professor, Lacy is “productive, passionate, thoughtful, [and] committed,” said Dr. David Crawford, head of the Anthropology department at Fairfield University.

“He truly demonstrates the portrait of what a college professor should be,” said Ellen Hayes, a student in one of Lacy’s classes called “Intro to Four-Field Anthropology.”

Lacy says that, “this year there’s been a perfect storm.” And it is bittersweet; on the one hand his teaching has been suffering, but it is because African Sky is going strong.

Lacy has spent so much time in Mali that he measures in years, “I’ll be starting my twentieth year this January,” he said. Through that time, he’s seen the children he met while in the Peace Corps grow and start their own families and he’s mourned with the village at elders’ passing. “It’s really helped me understand the lifestyle.”

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In high school, Lacy knew exactly what he wanted to do, and it had nothing to do with university: He wanted to go to Africa and was going to use the Peace Corps as a vehicle to get there. But he had no practical skills to offer. So, after graduating high school in 1989, Lacy earned an English degree from Otterbein University so the Corps would accept him. “All you needed for Peace Corps was a four-year degree,” Lacy explained, the reasoning being that it showed commitment. “If you could get through your degree, then you could get through Peace Corps.”

Before Lacy knew it, it was 1994. He was being driven across Africa to the small village of D Jenné as an “agricultural extension agent.” During Lacy’s interview with the Corps, he mentioned the gardens his family kept when he was a child. He recalled the hot summer days where he would set up vegetable stands for some spare change. But the problem was, Lacy wasn’t a farmer by any means. “Here I am, this kid who’s more interested in Jack Kerouac than farming,” he said. He remembers feeling that he didn’t have a right to help, having only studied agriculture for three months prior. “They [the

village] had been doing it their entire lives,” Lacy marveled. So he was honest and offered all he could: an extra pair of hands.

Lacy became one of the village’s sons and apprenticed in the fields. Through his service, he fell into a cycle of debt that he is still trying to pay. Lacy even earned his Ph.D. because of D Jenné – indeed, it’s been the ever-present root of all his achievements. This cycle spun him into African Sky.

As Lacy was sitting in D Jenné, working on his dissertation in 2002, he was struck by how static the village’s development was compared to his own personal progress. He decided that trying to repay the obligation alone was impossible and reached out to his community in the United States.

Their goal was to raise \$1,000 to install a pump at the existing school. Within three months of selling \$15 t-shirts – with everyone from his sister to grandmother stuffing envelopes and mailing them out to supporters – Lacy and his friends and family raised \$9,000 more than they expected. So instead of building a pump, “we just built a whole new school,” said Lacy. There, 100 children could go to school until the bricks crumbled away – basically in perpetuity.

From the first brick being laid to the last, the construction took 6 months. On the flight back to California, with files full of research to write his dissertation, Lacy couldn’t help but feel: “that was so damn easy.” Too easy for Lacy not to do more.

“It would be immoral not to do it again,” he said, “and again.” Instead of aiming for one more school, the goal was set for 10 new educational buildings. Bricks are being made in Mali now and by early 2012, construction will begin on schools 2 through 10.

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Lacy remembers Africa calling him even as a little boy in the books he read. No one is certain of how Lacy became so enamored of Africa, but the closest his parents could get to an actual reason were a few children’s books. He recalls one specifically, “Why Mosquitos Buzz in People’s Ears” and its “amazing African textile illustrations.” Who could blame little Lacy for getting hooked? “It just hit me in a way that a lot of other stories didn’t,” he says.

Morals play a big role in Lacy’s life as well, something instilled in him growing up. Rather than singling out any one particular influence though, he’ll give a very Malian answer: “it’s my family with a capital F,” he said referring to not just his family but also his community.

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And not just to Lacy. Most every major school break, he goes back to his home across the world. Normally, he brings along company during the winter trip. He has traveled with all different kinds of people, from high school seniors to senior citizens. As the anthropological consultant for Engineers Without Borders, he has also been corresponding with technical experts, particularly architects and designers from Pratt Institute, whom he plans to bring with him to break ground on the new schools this winter.

Lacy is an evangelical anthropologist, Crawford says. “He has a specific, elaborated, and self-conscious understanding of what the discipline is about and he sets about converting anyone who will listen.”

Perhaps this explains the growing support for African Sky.

This past January, the first Mothers and Daughters Summit – or “The Skirt Power Meeting” – was held in the extended area of Mali. 700 people attended the event, at which women were brought together to teach each other ideas and skills.

“It’s really been an amazing past few months for us,” said Lacy. Within the last few days, African Sky has been picked up for an event in Atlanta on January 27 called Hip Hop Symposium, where major-label artists, literary figures and students from across the nation will be brought together to discuss artists social obligations and global citizenship. All the proceeds will go to African Sky.

Africa’s call is getting louder.