

**Interview with Liz and Miguel De Almeida Amaral
January 20th, 2017**

Iza: Could you give me an overview of how you became involved in humanitarianism?

Miguel: I was born in Africa, then went to Europe, then I went back. Then "Worldvision" showed up, they were going to start a new program, the distribution of food, because the country had been going through drought, 30 years of civil war, and there were many people in need. They were looking for staff. So I was hired in Angola and then I did a lot of the work you see in these pictures. Registration of the beneficiaries, distribution of food, the movement of food. Most of the time the commodities were corn, beans, and vegetable oil. So I did that for about two years or so, then I ended up in the Republic of Armenia which is in Europe, Eastern Europe, with World Vision, and that is where I met Liz. Then I went back to Angola and she went to the States, and a year later or so we were back in Angola together working for World Vision. '93 '94

Liz: I started working for World Vision because of Miguel. After we were married in the states in '93, a former boss of Miguel looked me up and so when he looked me up he offered me a job. So we left to Angola in '93. Angola is SW Africa. The idea of doing this kind of work always appealed to me, I majored in international business admin., so I always imagined working abroad. I never would have imagined that I would work in Africa, but it was the best decision I had ever made. It was a life changing experience.

Iza: From World Vision you later joined the Peace Corps and had involvement with the UN?

Liz: No, no, World Vision is an NGO and they work in conjunction with.. A lot of the .. when you do humanitarian work there is a lot of overlap and the UN kind of oversees and coordinates humanitarian work so that there is not much overlap and NGOs are deployed to the places in which they specialize. In Angola there was a need for demining so the UN would coordinate and say well okay well if there is a population perhaps in a town that is besieged and landmines are all around, you really can't start humanitarian work there until you have some kind of access, whether it is airport or road, so the first thing you have to do is demine. So sometimes it is a painstaking waiting process sometimes for humanitarian aid organizations to go in because you know the Norwegians were the ones who specialized in demining so they would go in and clear a space and make sure it was safe for humanitarian aid workers to go in and then different organizations specialized, different NGOs specialized in different areas. Some might specialize in therapeutic feeding, some might specialize in medicine, some in emergency relief work which is a very specialized type of strategy for helping. Then there is specialized in education and so the UN is the umbrella that coordinates these. So to answer your question, I didn't work with the Peace Corps, I worked with the UN. I was recruited on the ground by the UN because of my language skills, I quickly picked up on Portuguese and it was a valuable tool to be able to speak both English and Portuguese and that's why I was recruited.

Iza: So could you give me a little background on what Angola was like at the time? Before and during humanitarian aid. When was the civil war?

Miguel: The civil war started in '75, we were there in '94 and it was still going so we had programs in government and rebel control areas. Before I met Liz I worked for about 10 months in the rebel control area. Everything had been destroyed by fighting and bombing and stuff like that so roads were completely destroyed so it was a nightmare to any kind of commodity anywhere. So the civil war was a big devastating event that took a country that was very, it was a good country, very rich, and still is but it just destroyed the whole country so that the wealth is controlled by very few people. The majority of the population looked something like this (picture). Malnourished kids, people that have probably that is the only clothes they have, they. People that need help.

Liz: So malnourishment becomes, the skin becomes scaly, and you see how the belly is kind of protruding out, and another very interesting thing I learned is that the hair becomes orange. Malnutrition is a very common symptom. For me, I went into a country in civil war having lived in Chula Vista all my life, and it was kind of... a culture shock? I don't know if I should call it a culture shock but just plain... shock. So some of the things that happened that I wasn't used to is that we needed to be escorted by bodyguards. And we could drive and all, but it was something I took for granted here. And that when I was in Angola it was definitely a privilege but a privilege that could go south really quickly. And part of it was depending on where you were in the city, where we were out in the capital, it could be crime, you could be targeted for crime, and then just the whole way you circulate here, like here you get in your car and you drive from one place to another it's kind of something I took for granted. Over there you could randomly be stopped by military and that was something that definitely was scary and took some getting used to. You could randomly be stopped and searched and questioned without reason. I think in the provinces outside of the city where there was actual armed conflict well you run the risk of traveling in roads that could be in armed conflict. And you don't know who is who, if these are military people who are government, or are they rebels? Because a lot of times they weren't in uniform, so you never knew. The the other thing that was different is that there was really no security. You couldn't call on the police and say "hey these people are threatening me with guns" the police just didn't exist. The other thing with traveling in the provinces was that you had the risk of coming into roads that were mined. So if there were mines you could go over them and blow up. So, that was definitely something different. I don't know if it was because I was young, that I didn't understand the full extent of what I was doing. When you're young I guess your brain works differently. After I had children I would think twice. I did have frightening situations, and scary situations, and reflecting back on them that was dumb and scary, but at the time I wasn't scared. I think it was... adventurous haha.

Iza: As someone who grew up with this civil war going on around you, would you say that your experience was different?

Miguel: Yes I was used to the conditions, I spoke the language, I knew the culture. I could gauge the level of danger. Being there and growing up there was helpful.

Liz: I remember he was saying “okay there is a couple of things you need to know” One of them was never talk about politics with your house help. Because labor was cheap we could hire someone to help us at home. We were very fortunate to have a girl to help us and would cook and clean for me when I was at work, but she was more than that. She kind of taught me the culture and was very receptive to me and realized I was a foreigner and didn’t know how things worked. So what I could do, what I couldn’t do, what I should say, what I shouldn’t say. I felt very comfortable around her because we had that kind of relationship. But that was one thing with Miguel, even with Amelia, someone I trusted, was just: Do not talk about politics. It was a country at war and that’s one of the things we underappreciated here is that we talk openly about things and we can disagree and have different political views. But you’re not going to turn me into the authorities because I believe something different. The second thing was when we arrived at the place we were going to live, Miguel said to me “Okay this is where we are going to put the bed in a certain position so that if there is gunfire we are away from the window And if there is ever a gunfire or something, crawl to the bathtub. The reason is that because there are several walls they would have to go through to get into the bathroom and also the tub itself has a lining that will protect you. So I thought I had it down and it was really funny because one night we were sleeping and you could hear a gunshot and immediately my reaction was to sit up on the bed. So Miguel pushed me back and was like, “NOOOO.” You crawl out of bed and into the floor. Because obviously if you sit up what can happen?”

Iza: You get shot

Liz: Exactly. And so in that moment, even though you might have gone through it in your head so many times, the instinct is to get up. But his instinct was nooo, roll out of bed and into the ground. So that was one of the ways you could tell I was a foreigner. And a skill that helped me survive.

Iza: So besides war, what was the culture like?

Liz: For me, what stood out was the wide range of senses and emotions and experiences. There wasn’t anything in between. For us, a lot is in between. In Angola, you wake up and say “Do I have electricity, do I have water, am I going to be able to do all the things to get ready?” And so it made just trying to leave so complicated. You want to shower, flush the toilet, brush your teeth, open the refrigerator and get food out, and have it be nice and not spoiled. Sometimes you don’t have power the whole night and you didn’t know there was an outage. So the food is spoiled by the time you get to the refrigerator, you don’t have the running water -

Miguel: And remember this is a tropical country so the temperature is extremely high. All of a sudden the food is spoiled, you are sweaty and want to shower, what are you gonna do? A lot of the culture, people start doing it because of the situation. For example, you guys would never

think that when you go to a funeral, before you lower the coffin, people start banging on the coffin to break it. Then throw dirt on top. You wouldn't think that right? Well the reason behind it is that because there is so much need for everything, at night people would come, dig the coffin out, and steal the wood. So you have the pain of someone that died, and then that action of someone breaking the coffin. It's really traumatizing for the foreigner. I was used to it, she wasn't. So a lot of things that you don't even realize, like immediately the coffin, the dirt, and, if they can afford it, cement, things like that. Culture wise-

Liz: For me that was culture shock, okay these are the things I take for granted. The other thing is that there were shortages. So you go to a supermarket here and you know, you go down the aisle, and this is something I had a hard time adjusting to back in the states, is that you need toilet paper and I would be overwhelmed with the amount of choices of, well any product for that matter. In Angola, there were shortages of everything, so we would hear "Oh there's toilet paper at such and such store!" and so everyone would run and get it. That would be the only thing at the store. That one brand,

Miguel: And there wasn't much, so she would go and then I would go so we could stock up for 20 days, or a few months.

Liz: So those are some of the things. But in contrast, I think the biggest shock was the disregard for human life. In the U.S. we value human life, the individuals, we go out of our way to ensure rights. Over there it was just a disregard for life in general. I think it's part of being in an environment so full of violence, they become used to violence. So that was very...

Miguel: And death is very common.

Liz: Death is common.

Miguel: You have 30 years of civil war and then you have people who don't have jobs, they have needs, they have families, they get shot, they shoot, so death was very very common and then all of a sudden you become-

Liz: Very numb to it

Miguel: Used to it

Liz: It becomes normal. The other thing in contrast I think that the complete opposite was that you became... the people who were surrounding you became your really good friends. I talked about Amelia who was my house helper, well she was more than just a house helper. She was someone that genuinely cared for me and wanted me to be safe and told me "Do this liz" or "Don't do this". She was someone I could trust. You really needed your neighbors to survive. To be able to protect you and watch out for you. And I think that there was a friendship that went deep. So this is one of my favorite pictures, at this place they would cook your fish but you

had to bring your own plate and side dishes. I was invited here and the tables as you can see are rustic, like literally branches.

Miguel: The neighbors were important because you needed them.

Ana: Really quick Dad, could you explain what is going on in this picture? The operation?

Miguel: Natural beauty in people and in geography. Lush vegetation, and then the human tragedy, death and disregard for individuals was the dichotomy there that was just.

Miguel: So this is the process of distributing food. We would build a little well with corn in the middle and people would come and measure so many per family member. All kind of distribution going on there. They are very happy.

Liz: I just want to point out the difference in this community and this one. Look at their faces.

Miguel: There is a timeline there.

Iza: So these people (happier and healthier) had been exposed to more humanitarian aid?

Miguel: Yes. The team would go in, find the need, organize the registration, then distribute the food.

Liz: So this is one that was just starting. You can see how rustic it is, these are living quarters, the staff, you can see how different the distribution is. It is very rustic, whereas over here people are able to think and organize and do it in a more orderly way. Whereas right here when you are in more of a state of survival, the distribution is more unorganized and challenging. There is different things happening in this distribution, but you can see how there is-

Miguel: The idea is that in a big city you don't know what you're going to get, this commodity or this product, everybody rush. Same thing with this, they don't know if tomorrow they are going to have food so whatever it is now they get em.

Liz: Really quick, I want to show you here in Galatando. This is a city where I was telling you about agronomists. These people are the ones who will engineer and germinate and produce a crop quickly. That's why I really have a hard time when people say they don't want genetically modified foods because I believe GMO foods have saved lives and transformed communities. When you have comm that are besieged and need food quickly, they could come in and design something resistant to diseases and able to produce quickly. So you have them so they could teach people how to plant and produce a crop.

Ana: Steps?

Liz: So this here is a very interesting picture, you might think we are just being tourists and going to the market but we're not. What we are seeing is you're going from a group of people who are receiving food to a group of people who are now growing and selling food. So you can see how communities are really transformed. There would still be distribution going on, but in a much different way.

Iza: So basically you guys would go into a community with a lot of hunger, a lot of need, a lot of malnutrition, and then the health specialists would go in and assess how to feed them in order to get them to that basic level of being able to sustain themselves. Then they would get to the point of being able to teach them how to grow their own food, and then from there to having markets and an economy.

Liz: And when they start selling in the market, you want to stop giving to food, because if you give the food, you bring the prices of their products down.

Miguel: World Vision had a five step approach. We would go in, find the really needy, needy ones, the ones who are pretty much dying of starvation, we move food in and start feeding these people. At the same time we have the babies, so the health dept. goes in and sets up the therapeutic feeding centers.

Liz: So one of the things that is tied to everything is water as well.

Miguel: You have to remember, these people have not eaten, so if all of a sudden you give them a big meal, their stomach would not be able to handle it. And when we are talking about babies, they are malnourished so you need to be very slow. That is where the medical comes in. Now you need to look for water, because diseases happen all the time and very quick. They kill a lot of people. So there was another program that W.V. had where they would identify the water and put in a well so that they could have clean water. So now they have food, the babies are taken care of, the old people are taken care of, water is coming in now. Let's talk about demining. There were mines everywhere. So we identified the mines, mine awareness was another one. We did not demine, but mine awareness was a big one. Educate people about demining. There was a counterpart that did the actual demining. So now they are fed, water, the mines are gone. Then they start producing. As we said, you have to be aware of the strategic value of the food. So when you take and when you give back.

Iza: Do you guys have a story or day that you think captured your time?

Miguel: Danger? Distribution?

Iza: Hero project explanation. So a time where someone could be seen as a hero. Yourselves, someone in the communities, etc.

Liz: **One of the things I think of is that many times, well my experience was I'm gonna go into this community and I am going to make a difference. I think one of the things that happened to me is that the person who changed the most is myself.** I was gonna go "help" but I ended up being helped in the process. I received so much more giving back. If I were to say it in a nutshell, it's that when you do humanitarian type of relief work, it is **often times, you go thinking that you are going to help, but the person who ends up getting helped the most is yourself.** I don't think I am a hero, I think that the people who are there, like Amelia is a person that you could say the lowest of the lowest. When I left she named her next born, her next born was a girl, and she named her Liz. Then she set up a hair salon and two clothing stores and to me that's a hero. Someone who was a house-helper became a businesswoman. That teaches me a lesson. Amelia is my hero. She came from a place where women were very oppressed and her husband was very mean to her, and yet she didn't let that bring her down.

Iza: I think that could be the perfect narrative. The reader begins with hearing about the humanitarians and how they go in and do this amazing work, but they leave feeling like the real heroes are the ones who were already there. The community members who managed to flourish under these conditions.

More pictures

Miguel: **See how they endure this, but they still manage to smile. These here are moms, dads, children, they are registering people and giving food. They are the ones who built this community.**

Liz: Look, she's working with her baby.

Iza: So is that something you saw a lot? As you would work, the people would start to take over?

Liz: You have to involve the community

Miguel: We weren't able to do it without them.

Liz: **Without the community, you can't do it.** You have to know the need, and the ones that know are the community. **It gives them a sense of pride when people know, we are helping each other, not someone from the outside, we are part of this.**