



GO OUT

To all the World

In 1935, Bro. Larry Kieffer, SVD was born in a quiet little town in eastern Iowa. Growing up on a farm, that young boy from Bellevue could never have imagined the things that life would have in store for him.

Now at age 88, Bro. Larry lives at Divine Word College in Epworth. He's not far from where he was raised, but a big piece of his heart will always be in Papua New Guinea, where he served for 46 years as a Divine Word Missionary.

Early Life

Bro. Larry's parents both died when he was in his early twenties. In 1958, at the age of 23, he was drafted into the U.S. Army. He trained in Colorado and Georgia before being sent to Germany for a year and a half. It was his first time on an airplane. "It helped me get away from home and see the wider world," he recalls.

During his service abroad, Bro. Larry spent some time in the Army chapel. That's where he found Catholic magazines that caught his interest. "In one magazine, I saw 'Become a missionary with the Society of the Divine Word - priest or brother.' I checked 'brother' and within two weeks I got information from a vocational director."

After his discharge in 1960, Bro. Larry waited patiently for September 12, the date that he could join the next

class of young men at the SVD major seminary in Techny, Illinois. During his formation, priests and brothers from the missions regularly gave talks to the novices about their experiences. At first, Bro. Larry wasn't interested in that lifestyle. Then, during the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church announced plans to send more religious men to the missions.

"I decided that I didn't want to be left alone in Techny, so I applied for the mission in Papua New Guinea," he said. "My approval came quickly."

By then, Divine Word Missionaries had already been working in the island nation for more than 70 years. They were instrumental in the development of the country, helping to build roads, open schools, start health centers and establish parishes since the end of the 1800s.

Bro. Larry professed Final Vows in 1969 and the following year he received his first assignment.

Mission Life

In 1970, Bro. Larry flew to Papua New Guinea, just north of Australia. It took him a few months to learn the language. He spent the next 46 years managing plantations and producing coconut and cocoa for worldwide markets, the profits of which supported the missions and the local church. Over the years, his life was

enriched by kind people, healthy living and a lifestyle that was vastly different from the one he knew.

“It was a great experience, living in a different culture with very friendly people, seeing how they live, I always enjoyed their company,” he said. “Many of the workers came from villages in rural areas and the plantation was a way for them to earn money. I saw it as my vocation to help them. I supervised the entire operation, taking care of the workers, their pay and selling their produce at the local buying points. In general, I looked after all the activities of the plantation.”

In 1975, he witnessed the country gaining independence from Australia. There were parties to celebrate and a peacefulness that Bro. Larry appreciated. “Papua New Guinea is one of the few countries that never had a civil war when they gained their independence,” he said.

Eventually, he became the general manager of five plantations, all producing coconut and cocoa. The two crop species exist well together. The tall coconut palms create the shade in which cocoa plants thrive.

Rising early, his day began with Mass and breakfast and then it was off to the plantation to meet the workers at 6:30 a.m. They started at 7 a.m. and went until noon. After an hour lunch break, they worked another two to three hours in the afternoon. For some jobs, workers preferred a “work mark,” a line that showed what they needed to get done for the day and then they could go home.

The climate had a big impact on the workers. Located near the equator, Papua New Guinea is hot, humid and rainy year-round.

“It’s a tropical country and to work steady all the time is very difficult for them,” Bro. Larry said of his workers. “You have to learn to slow down a little bit, you can’t hurry up too much.”

The work was five days a week, with weekends off. That’s when he’d do odd jobs around the plantations and the workers could spend time in their own gardens. With fresh fruit like papaya, bananas and pineapple, it led to a simple but healthy diet.

Looking back

Six years ago, Bro. Larry decided to retire and move back to the United States. Living at Divine Word College in Epworth keeps him close to his hometown, where his nieces and nephews live. He helps out with the mail at the college and inspires students with his stories about the missions. He still misses the warm island climate, especially during the Iowa winters.



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During his time in Papua New Guinea, Bro. Larry says he learned what’s most important in life. Even though the people there were not rich, they were generous in spirit and would share anything they had. Friendship is a very important aspect of the culture.

“When you serve the needs of the people and live in a third-world country, you learn to prize life more than possessions,” he said. “I don’t collect many things.”

Having spent more than half of his life in Papua New Guinea, Bro. Larry can’t help but to grin when he talks about it. “It was wonderful,” he sighs. “The time went so fast. I guess when you like everything, time goes faster.”