



Ceremonial Swearing-in of Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams
Remarks by Director Williams
Shriver Auditorium, Washington, DC
September 17, 2009

Thank you so much, thank you. Thank you so much. It is so wonderful to see all of you here-- so many friends and colleagues from so many years that we have spent together. As I look around this room I see story after story of time we've spend together in a long career. I guess I hadn't realized how long it'd been since Stacey started marking down the years. I want to thank you. And of course I want to thank President Obama for giving me this extraordinary opportunity in this historic moment in our country's history to take on the challenge of leading this wonderful agency—the Peace Corps.

Senator Wofford, thank you for your generous remarks and for swearing me in. I was of course sworn in a few weeks ago by our able General Counsel, Carl Sosebee so that I could assume my new duties – thank you Carl.

Today's ceremony allows me to be joined by my family, friends and staff members. Senator, I couldn't be more honored to be sworn in by you, a visionary leader who has contributed so much to our nation's commitment to voluntary service. Thank you for the support you have given me during these last few months; your sage advice and counsel is extraordinary. At one time in one of your books you called the Peace Corps a quantum leap for America, and this is the house you helped built. We're here today as assistants to the Stars and Stripes.

I would like to thank my family for supporting me and joining me on this journey that has taken us to so many different communities around the world. The love of my life and rock of our family, Rosa, who I was very fortunate to have met in the Dominican Republic and who has been my partner in serving our country as a Foreign Service couple around the world. Thank you my dear.

I am also very pleased today that our son Michael – Dr. Michael Williams – is here today with his wife, our daughter in law Angela Rae, and of course our son Steven is here. And my cousins, Dolores Hutchens and Heather Conyers, came a long way to be with me today.

Going back to that high school in the south-side of Chicago, Tilden Tech, I have here today my childhood friend Harry Simmons, we've been friends since the eighth grade. He's a little older than I am. Thank you Harry.

My only regret today is that my dear mother could not be here to see this day. Because she was the only person in my life who saw the value and importance of serving in the

Peace Corps when I told her what I was going to do. Everyone else said, “You have a good job teaching in Chicago, why would you leave?” My mother knew.

I also wish to thank my friends, mentors and colleagues – many are here today – and many who are part of this vast Peace Corps family and who have been a source of inspiration to me.

Especially I want to point out Henry Reynolds – where is Henry Reynolds? Stand up Henry. Henry is here today with his wife Liz. Henry was my first boss when I was a volunteer Dominican Republic, along with Tom Giddens who is also here who was a director. Henry believed in me and inspired me and told me for the first time in my life, “You can be a leader.” I said, “Me?” He said, “You. You can be a leader.”

And then of course I want to thank Assistant Secretary Johnnie Carson – Ambassador Carson, a distinguished American. Thank you for joining us today. You are a shining example of what an RPCV can achieve. *BusinessWeek*, as a matter of fact, recently named Peace Corps as one of the best places to “Launch a Career” – and you are proof of that. You are an example and role model to so many volunteers who aim to pursue a career in Foreign Service. Ambassador, thank you for joining us today and thank you for your lifetime of service to our country.

Before I acknowledge several of the guests who have joined us today, I would like to thank three groups of people that I think about everyday in this new job.

First of all: The Peace Corps Volunteers in the field: Nearly 7,500 of you in 74 countries around the world. I hope that every single one of you is afforded the same opportunities I enjoyed: that you eventually conclude your time in Peace Corps service with the same quality life-changing experience that firmly placed me on the path that has led me here today. Last week, I returned from my first trip in field as Director. I went to the Dominican Republic — that’s not a surprise is it? How did I end up there first? – and Nicaragua. I saw your fellow Volunteers, engaged in a wide range of projects that are improving the human condition in hundreds of communities around the world.

Two: As this room well knows, the individuals who share the experience of Peace Corps service are united by a similar belief in people-to-people exchanges. There are nearly 200,000 Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. Returned Volunteers are leaders in classrooms, clinics, embassies, non-profits, newsrooms and other organizations that contribute to change. You are our best recruiters, our best spokespeople and the legacy of service that President Kennedy envisioned. I look forward to working with you.

And number three: I want to thank the Peace Corps staff both here in the states and around the world. This is my fourth week as Director and I have had the privilege of meeting a small fraction of you. I look forward in the weeks and months ahead to meeting more of you and working side by side as we move forward in this important mission with this incredibly important agency.

I would like to take a minute and thank acting Director Jody Olsen for her tremendous leadership through this transition period. And also former Director Ron Tschetter for his dedicated service to Peace Corps. Both Olsen and Tschetter, like me, are other examples of returned Peace Corps Volunteers who were inspired by their Peace Corps experience to pursue a career in public service.

Mark Schneider is also here today – today he is with the International Crisis Group. Mark, like me, became the Director of the Peace Corps after being an RPCV.

Mark, you were the second RPCV to be the agency's director, I am the fourth. I hope there is a Volunteer out in the field today that in the next twenty, thirty years or maybe sooner will become the Director of the Peace Corps in the future. That is a legacy that we want to continue to see follow in our footsteps.

There are many people from the diplomatic community here. I look forward to sharing the excellence of Peace Corps with you and your endeavors. My friends and former colleagues are here, Ambassador Luis Diego Escalante of Costa Rica. We walked down a few of paths together, did a lot of exciting things together in Costa Rica. Thank you for being here today Mr. Ambassador. Also Ambassador Alec Watson, another great American who's here today, the former Chair of the Pan American Development Foundation and John Sambrailo, the Executive Director of the foundation, thank you for being here.

I am honored to see so many of my colleagues today, both old and new. I would like to thank my colleagues from USAID, my home for so many years. I have many fond memories of the experiences we shared for 22 years. I would want to thank my colleagues from International Youth Foundation – thank you Bill Reese, the President and CEO for being here today. Also I want to thank my friends from my most recent home, the Research Triangle Institute. We have our senior executives here, General Bert Maggart, Executive Vice President of the international group and his wife Wanda Maggart, thank you for coming. We have Lorena Clark, Executive Vice President for Human Resources and of course my former right arm person and assistant, Claudia Calderon – thank you for your support. Also here today is Jan Guifarro, the Chair of the National Peace Corps Association's board. Jan I look forward to working with you in the future. Also, I want to acknowledge George Ingram, and Liz Schrayner the Chair and Executive Director of the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition who fight on behalf of raising resources for the development work that we all do. Also, I am pleased to see Betsy Bassan, the President of the Society of International Development, and Doris Meissner, former Commissioner of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and the Vice Chair of the CARE board. Thank you Doris for joining us today.

I have mentioned these all of these organizations have given me the extraordinary opportunity to serve in many ways and they are wonderful organizations.

As all of you can imagine this is an emotional moment for me. In my first few weeks I have been here the Peace Corps staff has commented on the fact that I laugh a lot . . . This is the dream job for me. I never expected in this stage of the game in my career I'd have the chance to serve and I thank President Obama for giving me that opportunity.

Of course here at the Peace Corps we face huge challenges and have a great responsibility, but I feel very fortunate to be here at this time. It is a rare moment when one is in a position to contribute to an organization that has meant so much to so many over such a long period of time and especially in my case, to me.

We are living in a time of great change, both in our country and the world, and we have a new Administration that values community service, as Senator Wofford has mentioned – and he has played a role in this Administration to do this. President Obama's renewed call to service has inspired a record level of new applications for Peace Corps. The best and the brightest want to serve again, as we approach the Peace Corps' 50th anniversary, this is a remarkable time to embark on a period of quality and sustainable growth.

I grew up in a modest home on the Southside of Chicago, and I never dreamed that one day I would have a career in international development. Peace Corps opened that door. I applied to the Peace Corps in 1967. Shortly thereafter I took my first trip on an airplane and had a chance to speak Spanish. Not very well, ask my wife Rosa. I have to confess!

I was a 20 year old Peace Corps Volunteer assigned to serve as a teacher\trainer at a teaching center in a small town in the Dominican Republic. It was my first job where I needed to be a leader. I was responsible for 50 rural primary school teachers. Our project's goals were to teach 2 years of high school courses so that teachers could obtain their high school diplomas, and to improve their teaching methods through direct supervision.

For 2 years, the teachers, some 2000 teachers nationwide, attended all day Saturday classes during the school year, and gave up their summer vacations to take intensive courses—for two years.

They made this sacrifice because they believed that the Peace Corps would help them gain a high school diploma to become better teachers and gain higher pay and positions in urban areas.

In light of this tremendous sacrifice by my 50 teachers, I became determined and inspired to do everything in my heart and soul to help them. I had to do that. I became a leader, a coach, a mentor and a friend. I made frequent visits to them in some of the most remote areas of the country. I got to them by foot, on horseback and even on a motorcycle – something we don't let Peace Corps volunteers do today. No motorcycles in today's Peace Corps.

These teachers became my family. And I learned a lesson that I have held dear every day since that time: I learned that when we work together for a common goal we – we together – can achieve magnificent things.

Today, the Peace Corps continues to provide the bridge to accomplish great things around the world – person to person – community by community. Under my leadership, and with the dedication and support of my colleagues, this magnificent work will continue.

I intend to focus my efforts on targeted growth, broad innovation across all of our operations, and a commitment to Peace Corps's 3rd goal: to bring PCVs experience home and help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

This noble cause that President Kennedy launched under Sargent Shriver's superb leadership – and this agency that now hears President Obama's call to service – is challenged once again to rise to the occasion.

I am convinced that the Peace Corps of the 21st century will continue to harness the enthusiasm, skills and talents of Americans willing to serve humanity's neediest communities around the world.

I am honored to be the new Director of this iconic American agency. I took this oath today in recognition of this sacred trust – Peace Corps is a sacred trust – and I am committed to recruit, train, and support the dedicated and enthusiastic Americans willing to serve in every region of the world.

In closing, let me say that I look forward to working with you to make sure that future generations of Peace Corps Volunteers are afforded the same quality experience that I had – that so many of you have had – and that communities in this great nation continue to benefit from their extraordinary service and this rich texture that you bring back to our country. Thank you for joining me and my family today, it's been an honor to speak with you today, and I look forward to working with you in the future.

###