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Tribune photo by Bonnie Trafelet

Graduate student Joel Haskard brings his Peace Corps skills to Downstate Havana, where he helps promote tourism.

# Peace Corps veterans bring it home

## Overseas experience good fit for small-town Illinois

By Virginia Groark  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

HAVANA, Ill. — Hundreds of miles from Chicago, where skyscrapers give way to grain silos and interstate highways are replaced by two-lane country roads, lies Havana, a place where a retirement home doubles as a bed and breakfast and economic development has come in fits and starts, like a ride in a worn-out pickup.

It is scarcely a setting where anyone is digging ditches to improve the water supply or inoculating impoverished children against dread Third World diseases.

Yet Joel Haskard is there anyway, a Peace Corps fellow in a little-

known domestic extension of the program that provides help to struggling communities in the heart of America.

Haskard's task in Havana is far different from teaching English to students in Bulgaria after the fall of Communism. That was his overseas assignment with the more familiar Peace Corps program that operates in 77 countries worldwide. But as a Peace Corps fellow graduate student at Western Illinois University he is nonetheless providing valuable aid, only in a town on the Illinois River.

And he's getting valuable experience, something that should come in handy when he graduates later this year.

"It's just what I wanted, just what I needed," the native Kansan said. "As opposed to strict university learning, you are doing some field-based learning and that is wonderful. It has been three years of education wrapped up in 11 months."

Since it started in 1994, Western Illinois' Peace Corps and Community

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FROM PAGE ONE

# Peace Corps skills fill bill

Fresh from teaching English in Bulgaria, Joel Haskard lends a hand in the heartland and earns a master's degree.



Tribune photo by Bonnie Trafelet

Peace Corps veteran Joel Haskard and the Nature Conservancy's Joanne Skoglund work together to promote the charms of Havana.

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Fellows Program has placed Peace Corps veterans in some of Illinois' most rural areas, where they work on community projects, like economic development, as they pursue a master's degree.

With names such as Cairo, Carthage and Sparta, the towns may sound like exotic locations associated with the Peace Corps. But these fellows are drafting ordinances and developing Web sites.

There are, however, similarities. "In a small way it mirrors what I have done in the Peace Corps in that you are in a small community where everybody knows you and you get to know everybody," said Heather Atkinson, 29, who served in Nepal and now works on economic development in Annawan, about 35 miles east of the Quad Cities.

The idea for the program arose from the university's Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs, which works with rural communities on projects such as developing a strategic vision. But sustaining momentum to achieve the "laundry list of goals" was difficult, said John Gruidl, fellows program director.

For Peace Corps veterans, the program is a chance to earn a master's degree in one of five fields and hone their skills through a community-based internship. Rural communities, which often have small staffs and budgets, benefit from having a staff person they might otherwise not be able to afford.

Nationally, there are 27 active Peace Corps fellows programs, according to Michele Cisco Titi, director of the Fellows/USA Program for the Peace Corps. Though the Peace Corps does not administer individual programs, it coordinates them nationally, identifies funding sources and markets them to returned Peace Corps volunteers.

Western Illinois' program was one of the first to offer community and economic-development work with its 11-month internship.

"It's a big selling point," said Mary Honer, who is working on urban forestry projects 60 miles outside Chicago. "I don't think there is any way I could have walked into a job like this."

Former fellows have gone on to become economic- or community-development officers in places like Phoenix and Saipan.

Others, such as Donna Raynalds, have continued in towns where they did their internship. Raynalds stayed in Cairo, where she supervises Ursula Pike, 31, an economics fellow who served in Bolivia. Havana's proximity to an abun-

dance of natural resources made it an ideal location for Haskard, who is majoring in recreation, park and tourism administration. He is especially interested in eco-tourism. As Dan Pitcher, a partner in the book and gift store the Neverending Story put it, in Havana "there are more bird watchers than there are golfers."

Sitting on the east bank of the Illinois River, the former ferry-crossing town is home to a handful of restaurants and just three stoplights. The biggest traffic jams occur a couple of times a year when trucks line up to deposit their load in grain elevators along the river.

After an automotive parts manufacturer closed here in 1980, the unemployment rate climbed and the population dropped, declining from 4,400 in 1980 to about 3,600 in 1990, said Havana Mayor Ed Ray, before starting to rise again.

But its officials and business leaders see great potential in the town, with its historic brick main street and specialty shops, not to mention a restored theater where a local production of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" is playing.

What's more, Al Capone vacationed here. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas gave speeches during their 1858 Senate campaign. Senate. And in winter, the town is on the migration route of scores of bald eagles and pelicans.

With a budget of about \$3 million, the town was hesitant to hire a full-time person to promote tourism and economic development. So when leaders learned that Western Illinois would lend them a Peace Corps fellow for 11 months for \$15,000, they jumped on the opportunity.

At 6 feet 6 inches, Haskard, 31, is easy to spot in town, where people greet each other by first names and stop their cars in the middle of the road to chat. And he was determined to immerse himself in the

community, starting with the first day, when he volunteered to sand floors at a new Nature Conservancy office on Main Street.

"We got a kick out of it," said Joanne Skoglund, an administrative assistant for the Nature Conservancy, whose husband is building a marina on the river.

Since then, Haskard has helped Havana develop a town brochure, put up signs for local attractions and draft a grant application for the town's 19th Century storefronts. He also is helping Havana Hav-A-Vision Corp., a community group, apply for non-profit status so it can seek grant and foundation funds.

While Haskard's efforts focused on one town, Honer has worked on urban forestry projects with communities in four counties: Will, Grundy, Kendall and Kankakee.

The project is a good match for Honer, 28, who spent two years in Nepal helping villagers develop management plans to protect forests. But unlike in Nepal, where major issues involved people grazing their animals in national forests or using the wood for fuel, Honer is dealing with communities in which newly built subdivisions nip at the edge of cornfields as development sprawls westward from Chicago.

Based in the headquarters of Silver Springs State Park in Yorkville, Honer helps towns grow and protect their tree populations from developers and disease.

"It's nice to have a go-to person," said John Clayton, parks supervisor for Sugar Grove.

Internships for this year's fellows end next month, so the question for communities is how they will continue the work.

Haskard, for one, is confident in Havana's future.

"I'm just a spoke in the wheel," he said. "Havana was on the upswing before I got here and they are going to be on the upswing after I leave."

## Bringing the Peace Corps to Illinois

Since the mid-1990s, returning Peace Corps volunteers have used the economic- and community-development skills they have acquired overseas in these Illinois communities, counties and economic-development areas. Participants in a program sponsored by Western Illinois University, the students also receive a master's degree in one of several academic fields, including business, economics and geography.

