

The Second-Toughest Job

The Peace Corps helps returned volunteers become teachers at home

TWO YEARS AGO, ANDREW Schirber was teaching science and mathematics as a Peace Corps volunteer in a small village in Liberia in West Africa. Now, half a world away in Brooklyn, N.Y., he is back in the classroom. But unlike his colleagues at Boys and Girls High School in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Schirber—who had an engineering background but no formal education training before entering teaching—can draw on lessons from his stay in Africa.

"Just being in a place where you're so different—a whole different culture—you're used to that," Schirber says. "There are an amazing number of cultures here [in Bedford-Stuyvesant], and the number of Caribbean students is enormous. Listening to them talk about the way they were brought up, it's a lot like Africa, with the whole extended family."

Schirber, 29, is one of dozens of returning Peace Corps volunteers who have taken advantage of a special master's degree program at Columbia University's Teachers College aimed at smoothing their paths into U.S. classrooms. The two-year program, he says, was "tailor-made" for his interests, although the combined workload of full-time teaching and graduate study has proved to be quite a challenge.

"Here at Columbia, we say [teaching] is the second-toughest job you'll ever love," Schirber says, adapting

the Peace Corps' slogan, "the toughest job you'll ever love."

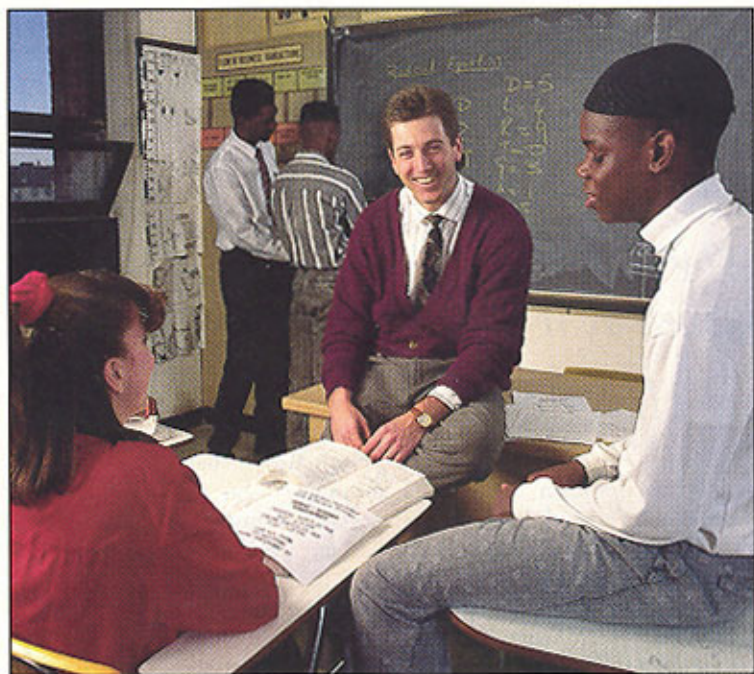
Other returning volunteers will soon have the opportunity to duplicate Schirber's success. The Peace Corps, which helped start the Teachers College program six years ago, has decided to expand the project to include a wide range of colleges, univer-

Corps, "and a way of harvesting the investment that taxpayers have made in the volunteers. It's too good an experience to leave at the end of two years."

Since last summer, 12 additional colleges and universities have signed agreements to offer master's degree programs for returning volunteers.

The 12 are Tulane University, the University of Southern California, Florida International University, Georgia College, George Washington University, Ohio University, Texas A & M, the University of Southern Mississippi, Georgia State University, Auburn University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Maryland at Towson. By the end of May, the agency expects to have agreements signed with the University of Hawaii, San Diego State University, San Francisco State University, Northern Arizona University, and the University of New Mexico.

Each university will arrange to have nearby school districts hire the returned volunteers to teach subjects in which there is a shortage of qualified teachers. The Peace Corps teachers begin working in the local schools immediately, completing their own studies at night and during the summer. All former Corps volunteers are eligible to apply for the program. Formal teaching experience abroad is not required by the Peace Corps, although some universities may decide to make teaching experience a prerequisite. Dale Gilles, who is coordinating the university pro-



Out of Africa: Andrew Schirber in his Brooklyn, N.Y., classroom

sities, and school districts across the country. The expanded program, now called Peace Corps Fellows/USA, is a milestone for the agency. It marks the first time in its 29-year history that the Peace Corps has developed a specific program to fulfill one of its congressional mandates: to have volunteers bring home their experiences from abroad and share them with their fellow citizens.

"This program is an opportunity to share their international perspective in the classroom," says Barbara Zartman, deputy director of the Peace

historical record straight, Williams says.

"Most of our students never knew there were kings and queens in Africa," says Williams, a preK teacher. "And they thought all Africans spoke the same language. They didn't know the geography—the deep forest, the plains, the deserts. They just thought it was all jungle."

Until about two years ago, that's what most Whittier teachers thought, too.

"A couple of years ago," Williams recalls, "we had a young parent who came to us and asked, 'Why aren't you teaching African history?' At Whittier, where most of the students are African-American, it was not an irrelevant concern. Says Williams, "We had to start asking ourselves, do we even know our own history?"

After careful consideration, she concluded that the answer was "No." So Williams persuaded her fellow teachers to let those celluloid visions of Africa die on the vine. Then, she and about 20 other teachers split up into teams, investigating the continent's rich history—its kings and queens, tribal and family culture, art, music, and languages—and came up with their own script for the history of Africa and its now far-flung people. No Tarzan, no Jane.

Although most of the action takes place onstage, children are also helped along by between-scenes narration. The education begins even before the curtain rises, as kindergarten teacher Shelley Graham warms up the audience like a cheerleader.

"It gets cold in the Sahara Desert, is that right?" Graham asks.

"Noooooooo."

"They carry baskets on their heads in Africa, is that right?"

"Yeaaaaahhhh."

And as the play begins, to the accompaniment of recorded drum beats, the learning continues. "The

narration is where the history is taught," Williams says. "And there's a huge matte drawing onstage showing the different parts of Africa. We just bring the students step by step, from King Ramses of Egypt to the present day."

Of course, a history textbook can tell the same story, but, Williams believes, not as well.

"Theater really *shows* you life," she says. "For instance, one of the most popular skits in the play is called 'Flossie Learns to Read.' It shows how one slave tried to learn to read and

was beaten for doing so. That made the kids very sad. I've seen more than one of them cry. But it also made them determined. After the play, many of them come up to me and say, 'I'm not going to be like Flossie. I'm going to study hard to learn to read.'"

Although the play has an emotional impact on its audience, perhaps no one is more touched by it than its players.

"Each time I perform the play, I get more from it," explains John Haywood, Whittier's science coordinator. "I get pride from learning my history, the history I didn't learn when I was in school."

Since its debut before an audience of Whittier students last year, the play has been presented at a teachers' convention in Washington and, recently, in a private performance at the Ghanaian Embassy. Now, Williams is soliciting grants to take the play on the road, to all the District's schools and possibly beyond.

In many ways, Williams says, *From Africa to America* has become a mission. If all the children learn is the history of Africa, she says, that's fine. But she believes there is a deeper message that is of singular importance to black children growing up in America's cities.

"We tell our children, your ancestors were great," says Williams. "You can be great, too." □

—Jeff Meade

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It's Elementary: The National Science Resources Center, a joint project of the Smithsonian Institution and the National Academy of Sciences, has published the first three units of its "Science and Technology for Children" curriculum. The curriculum is designed, its developers say, to help elementary school students "learn science by doing science." The three units—on plant growth and development, electric circuits, and scientific observation—are the beginning of what is expected to be a complete hands-on science curriculum for grades 1 through 6. The new units were field-tested in 1989 and 1990 in 27 school systems across the nation and in Department of Defense schools. At least 24 units are expected to be ready by 1995. The units are available from the Carolina Biological Supply Co. of Burlington, N.C., and sell for \$150 to \$260 apiece. Each contains enough materials for a teacher and 30 students.

Art Links: The New York City schools' art and music programs, which have been badly hurt by budget cuts, are about to get some help. The DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund has awarded a \$1.78 million grant to help strengthen the link between the city's schools and its arts and cultural organizations, such as museums, historical societies, zoos, and botanical gardens. A minimum of 15 schools will receive grants of up to \$10,000 each during the first year of the three-year program. Another 40 schools will receive grants of \$5,000 in subsequent years. In addition, some 15 of the city's 32 community school districts and six high school superintendencies will get grants of \$10,000 each to promote arts and cultural programming.