

**My Peace Corps Volunteer Experience
Peace Corps Azerbaijan
2006-2008**



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Introduction

I joined the Peace Corps to not only I learn about different cultures and to challenge myself but to give back what I was given – the opportunity for higher education and a better livelihood. Twelve years ago, in September of 1996, my sister and I arrived in the United States of America to join my family after living in a refugee camp in Thailand for 13 years. From the moment we arrived, we were given the opportunity to get a good education. We finished high school in 2000 and went to college, where we both received our bachelor degrees from Wichita State University. My sister has her degree in Electrical Engineering and is currently working for Boeing Company. I received my degree in Political Science in 2004. My motivation to work for those in need is rooted in my childhood. During my time in the refugee camp, I experienced poverty and hardship, yet my family was assisted in many ways by NGO's workers. Therefore, I decided to join the Peace Corps upon completing my university degree, which I believe would put me in a position to help those who are enduring the same difficulties that I overcame.

I received my Peace Corps placement in early May 2006, almost two years from the time I completed my application. The Peace Corps invitation letter stated that I would be going to a country in Eastern Europe. I was very excited at that moment because I did not know very much about the region besides its history with the Soviet Bloc. After almost two years of waiting, I immediately accepted the invitation to join. A couple weeks later, I received my Peace Corps assignment package, which stated I would be stationed in Azerbaijan. I was a little bit confused at first because I was sure that Azerbaijan is not part of Eastern Europe. Then I looked it up on the map. Azerbaijan is located on the west cost of the Caspian Sea, in between Eastern Europe and Central Asia. My initial disappointment turned to excitement as I thought about the very challenging to work in the country I had rarely heard of and know nothing about.

From my hometown, Wichita, Kansas, I left for Philadelphia on June 22, 2006 for the staging orientation. At the staging, we were prepped for what it would be like to be a Peace Corps volunteer and what to expect when we arrive at the country of our service. We also had to learn and be familiar with Peace Corps rules and policies. After a few days in Philadelphia, a group of 47 of us left for Azerbaijan on June 26, 2006. We arrived in Azerbaijan on the evening of June 28, 2006. Everything proceeded rapidly once we arrived. We were transported immediately to Sumgayit, the city just north of Baku where we were stationed in the first 3 months.

The Peace Corps Azerbaijan volunteer's service is divided into three major sections: pre-service training and adjusting to site, work and implementing projects, and close of service and readjusting back to the life in the US.

Pre-service training and adjusting to site

Training

The pre-service training began the following day after we arrived in Azerbaijan. For the first few days, we were staying at the hotel where the training taking place. We began our first orientation training on the morning of June 29, 2006. It was a very intense training because we tried to get as much information as possible in these first few days. We had to go through a medical check up; get familiar with Peace Corps Azerbaijan policies, safety and security; get to know Peace Corps staff; and began the language course.

By the end of that week, we were transported to our training sites, which were in the settlements surrounding Sumgayit. Our language and cultural training were taking place in these settlements throughout the pre-service training period. However, at this point, we were trainees and not volunteers until we completed our training and official swearing in.

To make the training easier for us and staff, we were divided into small groups of five. Then, two to three groups were put in one settlement. For five days a week, we had language and cross culture training. Since none of us knew any Azeri, we were starting from the very basic. Azeri language came from the same family as Turkish but has a mixture of Farsi and Arabic while using Latin alphabets. Even though Russian is a second language and very much a working language in the capital Baku, we were not learning any Russian because outside of Baku almost everybody uses Azeri. Once a week, on Wednesday, all the trainees went to Sumgayit for the all-day training, where we were trained for technical skills that were needed for our assignments.

I was put in a settlement called Saray, a short ride from Sumgayit. There were three groups in this settlement. When I first arrived at the settlement, I received a very warm welcome from my host family. There were four people in my host family: my host father is a municipality member, my host mother is housewife, my host sister was a university student at that time and my host brother was a secondary student. I was very touched during my first dinner with the host family when the host father welcomed me as their older daughter into their family and expressed how happy they were to have me staying with them. They are very kind and generous people. I visited them often after the training ended and continue to keep in touch with them even now that I am back in the US.

My living conditions with my host family were pleasant. I was well-fed from the first day I arrived at their place. The host family provided me with three meals a day. From where I stayed, food is usually prepared from family-grown vegetables and fruits. I was there during the summer so there were plenty of vegetables and fruits available everyday. Almost every family in the settlement has vegetable and fruit gardens. The host family also provided me with my own bedroom and a type of indoor plumbing with which I was able to take warm shower almost everyday.

By living with the host family, I observed that life in the settlement was quite laid back and easy. Since it was a summer, most people tended to stay indoors during the day to avoid heat, which

could get up to 90 to 100 degrees during the middle part of the day. After sunset, people would come out and hang around in the family gardens or in front for their houses. Azerbaijan is a relatively patriarchal and conservative society, and in some parts of the country, most of the time women tend to remain indoors or are accompanied by members of the family when they are out and about. It bothered me at first that someone had to accompany me when I left the house. Then later on, I got used to it, and having company along made me feel less awkward since I was able to avoid being stared at by locals. Nonetheless, I enjoyed spending time with my host family, and experiencing and learning about of the Azeri culture. They even took me to meet their relatives who live in the different settlement.

A few weeks before the end of the training, we were given the opportunity to experience firsthand what the volunteers' lives were really like at their sites. We were sent out to visit volunteers who had been serving for a year. The other trainee and I were sent to the Agjabadi region, which was a five-hour bus ride from our training site. Agjabadi is located in south-central of Azerbaijan, a rural region with a very flat and dry landscape. We were visiting a volunteer who worked at the vocational school helping the Internal Displaced Person (IDP). There are high numbers of IDP in south-central Azerbaijan because it borders the conflict area between Azerbaijan and neighboring Armenia.

In 1993, war broke out between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, the territory in the southwest part of Azerbaijan. The hostilities ended in 1994, and Azerbaijan lost about 16 percent of its territory including Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. The conflict left about one million ethnic Azeri homeless and scattered through out the country.

My area of interest has always been work with refugees or the IDP NGOs. By going to Agjabadi, I had a chance to experience the works of different NGOs that were operating in the area at the time. The volunteer was working at the US-based NGO called the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) that set up vocational school that provided technical skills such as computer courses, English, sewing and small business management courses for IDP youth.

After 12 weeks of training, we were sworn in by the US ambassador to Azerbaijan as official Peace Corps volunteers and were given our assignments. On the assignment, I was given the title Community Economic Development volunteer, but I was assigned to Save the Children, a US-based NGO that works to promote social integration and community capacity to care for vulnerable children in Azerbaijan. I was to work mainly with children and youth. My main responsibilities included providing advice and assistance on different activities carried out by the local staff; providing advice and assistance staff on how to conduct research online for available resources and assisting staff on community outreach and home visits.

However, a volunteer's responsibilities were not only limited to the host organization but also to work on projects that could benefit the community as a whole. My additional responsibilities included providing technical assistance to children therapy projects, creating and implementing community events, writing grants to secure funding for various initiatives, creating awareness about gender issues through informational sessions, managing small projects, developing relationships between different organizations through networking activities, and working closely with refugee and vulnerable children by providing computer lessons and development assistance.

Adjusting to Site

My assigned community site was Goranboy, a region about 250 km west of the capital. The region of Goranboy has about 100,000 people, but there are about 6,000 people in my community. I arrived at the site on September 14, 2006 and went to work at my host organization, Save the Children, the next day. For the first few weeks, there was not much for me to do but to observe and learn about activities that were carried out by local staff. My work schedule was pretty much from 9:00am to 5:00pm.

I was not given a lot of responsibility during the first few months in the community. It was the adjustment period when I had to find out what kind of resources were available in the community and what type of projects I could implement that would benefit the community. I was introduced to some of the community's well-respected leaders and elders – these were the people I would go to when we needed assistance to implement community projects. I was also learning to be familiar with the local culture and custom. Even though at this point I had been living in Azerbaijan for a few months and had learned a thing or two about their culture, I found out that culture differences exist between different regions of Azerbaijan. For instance, the area near the capital where our training community was held, people were a little bit liberal compared to the rural region of Azerbaijan. There are certain things that people in the areas near the big cities, like the capital, are able to do but the same things are forbidden in different parts of the country. For instance, girls are allowed to play sports freely in the surrounding areas of the capital but those in the Goranboy region do not have the same kind of freedom.

Moreover, there was a lot more cultural adjustment that I had to do as a foreigner living in rural region of Azerbaijan. At the same time, I had to learn how to be more tolerated and try not to offend local culture in any way. For instance, I usually dressed modestly when I went outside, did not talk to male strangers which can set off a wrong interpretation and can ruin my reputation, did not walk alone at night but if I need to be some where after the sunset, I have to have someone from my host family or friend accompany me. It was not easy at first but with the help and support from my site mate, I was able to adjust to the local culture during my first few months there.

Given that I was a foreigner in their community, people there were too curious about the American culture. The locals seemed most curious about the fact that I was in my late 20s and single. For Azeri culture, I was a girl because I was (am) single and it almost unheard of for a single girl to be so far from her family. Because of the cultural differences, people in my community were having a hard time understanding why my parents allowed me to be so far from home and that I should be married at my age. Due to the curiosities by the host country nationals (HCNs) about American culture, I was able to explain and share with them information about American culture and why we do what we do. However, I was not the first American in town and people did not give me much of a hard time. There was another female Peace Corps volunteer who was there a year before I came and some people seemed to be more understandable after I shared with them our lifestyle here in the US. Given that I was a guest to the community, I generally received some warm welcomes wherever I went.

For the first 6 months at site, volunteers were required to stay with the host family. After that, volunteers have the choice of continuing to live with the host family or move out to live independently. I chose to live with the host family throughout my two years of service because it was unheard of for a single female to live by herself in a small town. It was also for my own safety and much more convenience for me to stay with the host family. There were six people in my host family: a host mother, host brother who is married and has two teenage children and a host sister who is mentally disabled. The house was comfortable and pleasant. I was provided three meals a day but was able to cook for myself from time to time. My office was about a 10 minute walk from my house. Goranboy is not a big town and it takes about 20 minutes to walk from one end to another.

Work and Implementing Projects

My very first experience at the host organization was working with an Azerbaijani counterpart in designing activities and training local staff to help children with disabilities. The activities included art enrichment and sports and were implemented throughout the year, which benefit over 150 children. In the summer of 2007, I designed a preschool workbook and trained staff to implement the preschool activities for children who were about to begin their first year of school. Children's parents were also encouraged to get involved during the course. I also assisted the host organization in capacity building and taught staff basic business English and basic computer skills and assisted in the editing and creation of resumes for staff members.

In addition to my main responsibilities at my host organization, I was also working on community developments. I had organized several community events. For instance, during the 2007 Global Youth Service Day, I organized the play day at the park which promoted volunteerism among youth and social and community integration for the vulnerable children in the community.

For the Women's Day in March of 2008, with a group of community members and students, I organized the Women's Day celebration, which promoted gender equality and women in development in her host community. The event was attended by over 300 people. During the 2007 and 2008 school year, I taught English conversation to teachers and students at the secondary school.

To promote a better understanding of American culture among the Azerbaijani youth, I organized an America Day at the local NGO. During the event participants not only interacted with Americans and learned about American culture, they also gained life skills such as baking and improved self-esteem through interacting with foreigners. The event benefited more than 50 youths and adults. Some of these activities were funded by small grants that I had received through fundraising efforts and different NGOs.

As a member of Peace Corps Women in Development and Gender and Development (WID/GAD) committee, I created the Girl's Empowerment Project to allow the female students in the community the opportunity to learn basic computer skills and play sports freely. Over 20 girls

benefited from the project. In addition, I designed lessons and taught basic computer courses to female teachers and students who were interested in learning basic computer skills.

Nonetheless, I had collaborated with other fellow Peace Corps volunteers in implementing a number of projects in different regions. My very first project outside my host organization was helping my site mate set up an English library. My site mate, who was an English teacher volunteer, had learned that even though English is one of the foreign languages required for the secondary school, there was not a single place in town where students could get a hold of English books besides school textbooks. In recent years, English has gained a lot of popularity and has even surpassed the use of Russian, which used to be second language spoken during the Soviet era. Therefore, my site mate saw the need to set up the English library where students could have access to English books. However, there was not any resource available whatsoever and we had to start from scratch. We had set up fundraising by applying for grants and donations. We had received donations from various sources. After several months of hard work, we were able to set up the very first English Language Library in town stocked with over a thousand English books, audio cassettes, DVDs and computers.

To promote tourism in Azerbaijan, we taught local students how to create a Wikitavel web page for their community. Students were trained to carry out a basic research method, collecting data and creating basic web page design. Since 2005, Peace Corps volunteers in the trans-Caucases countries – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – have been holding the annual trans-Caucases English essay writing contests and I served as one of the judges for the 2008 contest.

Furthermore, volunteers also received a lot of support from Peace Corps staff in helping to implement different projects throughout our service. In assisting the volunteers, different conferences and trainings were organized by staff, and volunteers could sign up for the one that we thought could be useful to our community. For instance, the women and gender conference where volunteers learned how implement projects that concerned gender issues or the conference on grant writing, managing the small projects and etc.

Throughout two years of Peace Corps service, I helped three organizations and two schools obtain a number of non-financial and financial items, which benefited more than 300 children. I also created a networking initiative among the local NGOs that allows them to collaborate with one another.

Close of Service

During the three months leading up to the end of our service, it was the time for the volunteers to reflect on what we had done for past two years of service and think of the memories that we would take back with us upon our return to the US. It was also the time for us to get ready for retuning to the US and think about life after Peace Corps. Besides searching for a job, some volunteers were applying for graduate school or planning overseas trips. About half of the volunteers in my gourp did not come back right away after the end of our service but instead they were traveling overseas. However, up unilt the last day of my service, I was unable to figure out

what I would do when I came back to the US but having been working with children and refugees for two years, my interest in working in this field has increased significantly.

It was also the time for volunteers to complete whatever projects we were implementing or to transfer projects to the new volunteers to continue the work. There was also a lot of paperwork required by the Peace Corps that needed to be completed prior to the end of service. For instance, we have to complete all the grant and project reports and administrative paperwork.

One of the hardest things to do was to say goodbye to the people in the community. For two years, we were a part of their communities and families and had grown to gain their trust. It was not so easy to just let that go. However, we keep in touch with some of the host country nationals that we befriended. During this time, Peace Corps staff were kind enough to help us prepare for our end of service and to reenter our lives in the US. At first, I was concerned on how to readjust back to the life in the US after being away for 27 months. I was very much worried about the reverse culture shock. Volunteers were told that we have to be prepared for Peace Corps third goal, to share about our experience and the country we served with American upon our return to the US.

Conclusion

After 27 months of being in Azerbaijan, my Peace Corps duty officially ended at midnight on the 12th of September 2008, and 7 hours later I was on a flight back to the US. At that moment, I felt so liberated and accomplished. When I first received my invitation to serve as a volunteer in Azerbaijan, I did not know what to expect and whether I would be able to complete the two-year service. Even though I knew beforehand that being a Peace Corps volunteer was not an easy job, finishing the service and surviving the hardships gave me a sense of accomplishment.

There were times when there was no running water and no electricity for heating, and the frozen water pipe during the winter months made me doubt the situation and why was I there when I can have the comfortable life in the US. There were many times when I was faced with obstacles and discouragement when my works or projects did not go the way I planned or did not receive the fund I needed, and I felt like giving up. But with the support from fellow volunteers and Peace Corps staff, I was able to get myself together and pull it through. In Peace Corps Azerbaijan, we have something called “the peer support network” where a group of volunteers were selected to lend their help and give advice on common issues that facing us day to day. By talking to fellow volunteers who were facing the same issues was very helpful in putting the bad feelings aside.

After returning to the US, one of my friends asked me if the Peace Corps motto “the toughest job you ever love” apply to me at all. It does. The experience of being able to work directly with the people that I was helping or to learn about their culture and speak their language was more than anything I would have imagined, and the reward was quite overwhelming. If someone would ask me if I would do it all over again given what I know now, I would say definitely. I think I have become a stronger and better person and am able to see the world in different ways. My Peace Corps experience taught me that there are other things in life and to not be afraid to go out into the world and make a difference.

General information

Peace Corps Azerbaijan

- ▶ Program dates: 2003-2008
- ▶ Total volunteers to date: 195
- ▶ Number of current volunteers: 45
- ▶ Number of current trainees: 61
- ▶ Projects:
 - Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)
 - Community Economic Development (CED)
 - Youth Development (YD)

Azerbaijan

- ▶ Gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991
- ▶ Population: 8 million
- ▶ Almost 90 percent of the current population is ethnic Azeri
- ▶ Languages spoken: Azerbaijani and Russian
- ▶ Capital: Baku
- ▶ Economy: relies on the country's oil and natural gas resources