

THE PEACE CORPS

Turns

THE PEACE CORPS CELEBRATES A MAJOR
MILESTONE AND LOOKS TO THE FUTURE
BY DAYTON FANDRAY



TWO PIVOTAL JOURNEYS have shaped Jim Grieshop's life: The first, a road trip to Mexico at age 15, inspired an interest in travel and service. The other, his departure for Ecuador in 1964 as a volunteer for the fledgling Peace Corps, fulfilled those dreams.

Until the winter of 1957, Grieshop had not experienced much beyond the horizon of Rockford, the small agricultural community in west-central Ohio where he'd grown up.

"I was raised with this idea of giving," he recalls, but it was the trip abroad with his aunt and uncle that gave this urge a context.

"It was like a lightning bolt," Grieshop recalls. "I realized there's this other world out there. So I decided that I wanted to live in Latin America for at least five years."

But first, he had to figure out a way to get there. Fortunately, as Grieshop moved into his college years, a bold, young presidential candidate was about to articulate a new vision of international engagement—one that would open a path to the wider world not only for Grieshop, but for thousands of dreamers just like him.

DURING AN IMPROMPTU speech on October 14, 1960, presidential candidate John F. Kennedy issued a challenge to a crowd of 10,000 students at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Would they be willing, he asked, to serve the cause of peace by volunteering to go overseas to live and work alongside the people of the developing world? The response was overwhelmingly positive. So, on March 1, 1961—50 years ago next month—President Kennedy signed Executive Order 10924, establishing the Peace Corps.

"Kennedy had been in office less than two months," notes Brother Gerry Molyneaux, professor of communication at La Salle University in Philadelphia and a longtime observer of the

Peace Corps. "That took real daring."

By July 1961, 5,000 people had applied to take the exams to enter the Peace Corps, and in August the first groups of volunteers departed for assignments in Ghana and Tanganyika (now part of Tanzania). Despite that volunteer enthusiasm, Congress was at first skeptical of the President's outreach to the developing world.

Kennedy envisioned that sending Americans abroad to work at a grassroots level might counter "ugly American" stereotypes in the emerging nations of postcolonial Asia and Africa. And, Kennedy shrewdly couched his call for service and sacrifice in terms that would have broad appeal in the midst of the Cold War, notes Molyneaux, whose commentary on Executive Order 10924 is included in the four-volume anthology *Milestone Documents in American History* (Salem Press, 2008).

"Kennedy made sure that the Executive Order suggested enlightened self-interest," says Molyneaux. "Yes, we would go over there and do good for these Third World countries, but he had to lay between the lines the idea that it was also an anti-communist step."

The gambit worked—on September 22, 1961, Congress approved the Peace Corps as a permanent federal agency. From the beginning, the program has had three basic goals: helping the people of interested countries meet their needs for trained men and women; helping to promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and helping to promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

The Peace Corps model puts volunteers through a three-month training period, followed by two years of service in a host country. The decision to invite Peace Corps assistance is strictly left to the host countries, and these countries also decide which projects the Peace Corps volunteers will undertake.



Tara Taylor serves as a health-education volunteer in Paraguay.



Current volunteer Tim Morin works in the IT sector and tutors children in Guyana.



Early Peace Corps volunteers learned gardening techniques in the Waipi'o Valley, Hawai'i.



Peace Corps volunteer Kenneth Baer teaches English to students in Ghana, 1961.

Opposite: President John F. Kennedy signs the Peace Corps Act at the White House on September 22, 1961, making the Peace Corps a permanent federal agency. Kennedy is joined by Sargent Shriver (far left)—his brother-in-law and the first director of the Peace Corps—as well as numerous senators and congressional representatives. Senator Hubert Humphrey (left of Kennedy) was an early proponent of the Peace Corps concept.

Peace Corps Today

- **HOST COUNTRIES:** 77
- **VOLUNTEERS AND TRAINEES:** 8,655
- **GENDER:** 60% FEMALE, 40% MALE
- **MARITAL STATUS:** 93% SINGLE, 7% MARRIED
- **MINORITIES:** 19% OF VOLUNTEERS
- **AVERAGE AGE:** 28
- **VOLUNTEERS OVER 50:** 7% OF VOLUNTEERS
- **EDUCATION:** 90% HAVE AT LEAST AN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE

Where They Serve

PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL VOLUNTEERS SERVING, BY GEOGRAPHIC REGION, IN 2010:

- **AFRICA:** 37%
- **LATIN AMERICA:** 24%
- **EASTERN EUROPE/CENTRAL ASIA:** 21%
- **ASIA:** 7%
- **THE CARIBBEAN:** 5%
- **NORTH AFRICA/MIDDLE EAST:** 4%
- **PACIFIC ISLANDS:** 3%

Source: www.peacecorps.gov. Figures are based on data as of September 30, 2010. Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

Education has always been the dominant theme in Peace Corps work: Initially more than half of volunteers met this need, and even today, 37 percent of the 8,655 volunteers serving in 77 host countries work as teachers. Twenty-two percent serve in public health, with a growing emphasis on HIV/AIDS awareness, and the remainder of volunteers work in business development, environmental activities and agriculture.

TO ONE DEGREE OR ANOTHER, each of the Peace Corps volunteers over the years has taken the organization's three key goals to heart. For Jim Grieshop, acceptance into the Peace Corps also helped achieve his personal goal of living and working in Latin America. In May 1964, he arrived in the village of Cayambe, Ecuador, to spend two years as a science teacher.

That, at least, was the assignment. As it turned out—and as often seems to be the case in the Peace Corps—things didn't go exactly as planned.

"The science teacher in the village didn't really want me to teach science," Grieshop recalls. "So I taught English in primary schools and the high school

because they were required subjects at that point. I also taught math and did a lot of community work in what we'd now call after-school programs. We put on a rodeo, we did some summer programs—I was kind of making it up as I went along."

Looking back on his experience in Ecuador, Grieshop concedes that he didn't "craft any miracles" during his stay in Cayambe. But he did make many good friends, and he became part of the community. Upon returning to the United States, he embarked on a career path that ultimately led to the University of California, Davis, where he worked for 33 years as a community-education development specialist at the UC Cooperative Extension.

"I think my whole career has been about looking for hands-on projects, learning and hopefully contributing," he says. "For me the Peace Corps came along at the perfect time. It allowed me freedom and flexibility. It set the stage."

Peace Corps Director Aaron Williams believes that this "setting the stage" is an impor-



The first group of Peace Corps volunteers went to Ghana in 1961.

COURTESY: PEACE CORPS

PHOTOS COURTESY, TOP ROW: FROM LEFT: JIM GRIESHOP; PEACE CORPS PHOTO ARCHIVE; BOTTOM ROW: FROM LEFT: CHRISTINE DONGHUIE; THE NATIONAL PEACE CORPS ASSOCIATION; KATHERINE HAGSTRUM



tant aspect of the agency's mission. Williams himself served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic from 1967 through 1970, spending his first two years in a training program for rural schoolteachers in the small town of Monte Plata. He extended his service for a third year to work as a professor of teaching methods at the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra in Santiago. Upon returning from the Dominican Republic, Williams worked for the Peace Corps' Chicago office, earned an MBA, and became a senior manager in the U.S. Agency for International Development.

While it is true that many returned Peace Corps volunteers (RPCVs), such as Williams, pursue careers that keep them engaged in international commerce and diplomacy, many simply come home and apply their skills to solving the problems in their own communities—the common thread being an unusually open mind and a firm commitment to service.

“Think about the impact these volunteers have when they return,” says Williams. “We have some 200,000 returned Peace Corps volunteers who are leaders in every walk of American life.”

Indeed, the list of RPCVs reads like a roll call

of notable Americans who have brought their experience to fields ranging from the arts to government to business to education: for example, the writer Paul Theroux, Netflix founder and CEO Reed Hastings, Sen. Christopher Dodd and University of Miami President Donna Shalala. But walk down the hallways of any American high school, go to any clinic or hospital, or drop by the offices of any human-services agency and you are also likely to meet men and women who are returned Peace Corps volunteers.

THE BELIEF IN SERVICE and a desire to do something positive with one's life are common motivations for joining the program. But, like Grieshop, volunteers also apply for a variety of other personal reasons.

“Like many of the early volunteers, I had been devastated by Kennedy's assassination,” recalls Katherine Hagstrum, of Bisbee, Arizona, who taught English as a volunteer in the African nation of Gabon from 1965 through 1967. “I liked his attitude toward the rest of the world. I had thought about joining the Foreign Service, but the Peace Corps seemed like a better first step.”

A French major in college, Hagstrum admits

Top row, from left: Jim Grieshop poses for a class photo with his students at a Cayambe, Ecuador, high school in 1965. Current education volunteer Keiko Valente uses a bicycle-powered water pump to collect water for her host family in Cambodia.

Bottom row, from left: Kat Hudson taught English in Phuket, Thailand, from 1987 through 1988. Kevin Quigley volunteered in Thailand from 1976 to 1979. Volunteer Katherine Hagstrum took this photo of her students at the school in Franceville, Gabon, where she taught English from 1965 through 1967.

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to having been worried about getting a teaching job without having more experience with the language. So in her Peace Corps application, she asked to be placed in French-speaking Africa.

"I had felt a bit guilty that my reasons for joining seemed selfish rather than altruistic," she says. "But during Peace Corps training I learned that the program actually preferred to have volunteers who had things they expected to get out of the experience, rather than people who had grand ideas about saving the world."

When Hagstrum left Gabon, she came back to the United States with the intensive French language experience she had set out to acquire. And, she had developed an interest in Africa and African-French literature; the latter, in fact, formed the basis of her master's degree thesis. She also came back with some perspective about the impact she'd had in Gabon.

"I often asked myself what good it was to be teaching English to students in the most remote part of Gabon, where they hadn't ever seen paved streets, a telephone or any of the modern world. English was, after all, their third language. But I finally realized that I was teaching

them something far more important than English. I was teaching them that there were other ways of approaching learning than the one they had seen from the French. I think that it gave the Gabonese—and French, too—a chance to see ordinary Americans close-up, and, perhaps, it erased some of the stereotypes they had been taught about Americans, and whites in general."

This notion of giving people their first taste of American culture might seem outdated, even quaint, in a world where aircraft and the Internet have reduced the distances between continents to something of an afterthought. But Keiko Valente—a 2008 graduate of the University of Washington who is currently teaching English as a Peace Corps volunteer in Cambodia—believes there can be no substitute for the ongoing personal contact that a volunteer brings to his or her assignment.

"In my community, I will leave a lasting impact of friendship and an understanding of the American people, beyond what they see in magazines and on the television," Valente says. "I am the first American most of them have ever interacted with. I think this impact is

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especially important in a country that has had strained relations with the United States since the Vietnam War.”

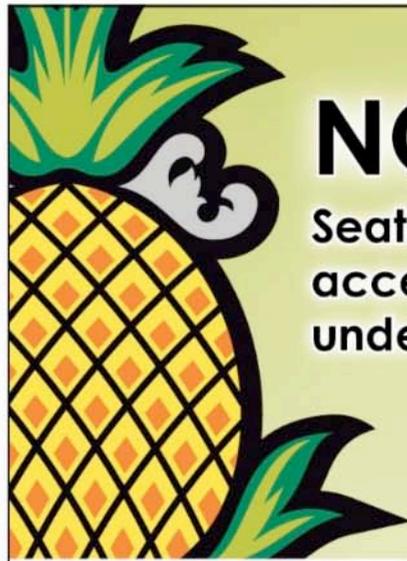
As important as it is to project a positive image for the United States and to help the residents of the host nation, the experience is also transformative for the volunteers themselves.

“I have learned how far I can stretch myself in challenging situations,” says Valente. “Through my experiences I have become more of a self-starter and learned to create and organize in a community with very little infrastructure or resources. I have learned to stand up for myself and for what I believe in, always in accordance with local customs, of course. Additionally, the personal development that comes with understanding the virtues of patience and understanding is something that I will practice for the rest of my life.”

Kat Hudson—who taught English in a village on the island of Phuket, Thailand, from 1987 through 1988—speaks of her Peace Corps experience in similar terms. “I stretched my mind and heart in ways that I don’t think I could have if I had stayed in the United States,” says Hudson. “I challenged myself to communicate in another language and to function in a culture different from my own. I humbled myself by appreciating the finer things in life that money can’t buy, like sharing a meal of rice and cobra, or playing a new game. I didn’t save the world, but I may have inspired some of the 150 students whom I taught to feel comfortable interacting with a *farang*, or foreign teacher, so that they could get a good job.”

FIFTY YEARS after its founding, the Peace Corps mission and the experiences of its volunteers have changed relatively little compared to the pace of change in the larger world. For example, Jim Grieshop and Aaron Williams echo the tone and themes expressed by Keiko Valente and Kat Hudson.

One notable difference, however, is communication. The locations where today’s Peace Corps volunteers serve may still be remote, but *CONTINUED ON PAGE 149*



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MEET AT THE PINEAPPLE

FROM PAGE 39 with cell phones in hand and seemingly universal access to the Web, they are seldom too isolated.

Williams laughs when he recalls the difficulty of communicating with the United States when he served as a volunteer in 1967.

"In my day," he recalls, "I would write my mother a letter, and it would take three weeks or a month to arrive in Chicago. I would say, 'I'm going to call you on June 15; please be available.' Then on June 15, I'd go down to the post office in my small town in the Dominican Republic, and I'd call the capital in Santo Domingo. Then they would connect me to Chicago. Then I would get my mother. All three steps had to work. And it was very expensive."

Williams believes that as the Peace Corps moves into its second 50 years, one of its greatest opportunities will be to harness the technologies of the 21st century. This involves seeking new, innovative ways to utilize the creativity of its volunteers in the field, and helping volunteers and administrators communicate effectively with each other.

Fortunately, Williams notes, Peace Corps volunteers are bright and resourceful. He cites with pride the example of a group of volunteers in Namibia who helped that nation's ministry of health create a resource center that allowed young people to ask questions about their health concerns in a safe, secure way. The 2009 project was so successful, it was replicated throughout Namibia.

"We're very proud of the fact that our volunteers came up with a text-messaging system that would allow them to do that," says Williams. "I want to be sure that we invest in the kind of IT platform that will allow us to take best practices such as we saw in Namibia, and make sure that information is available to volunteers in the 77 countries where we serve."

Of course, more than technology has changed in the last 50 years. When President Kennedy and his brother-in-law Sargent Shriver were piecing together their vision for the Peace Corps, there were two superpowers in the world. And it was widely accepted that a nation as rich as the



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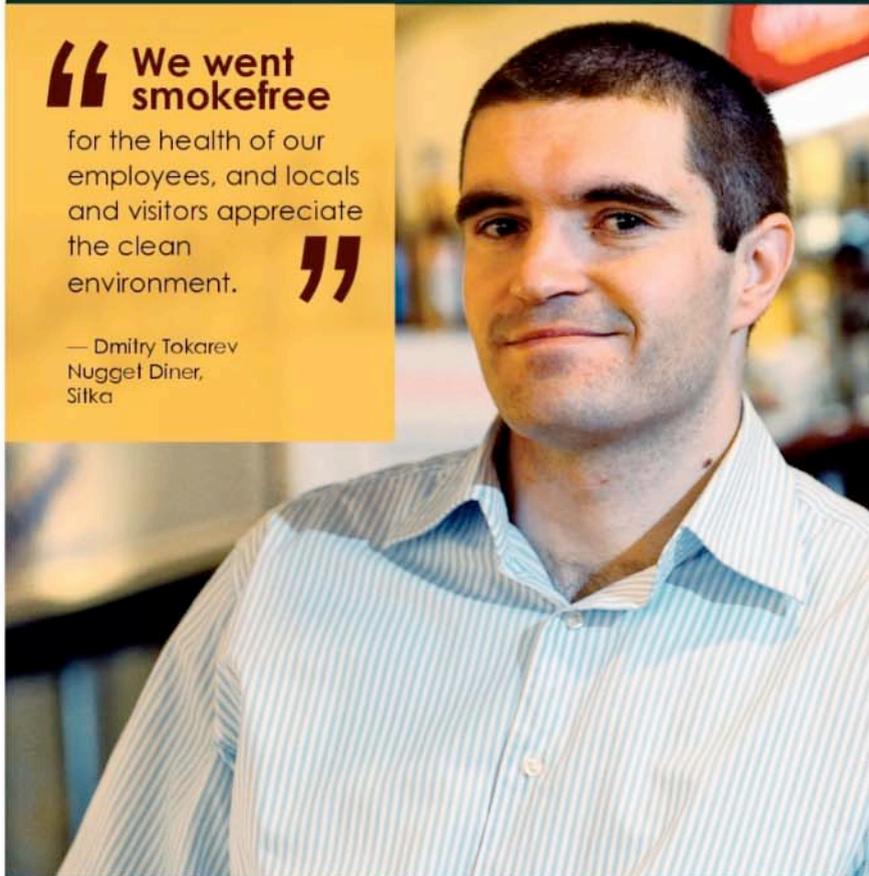
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*Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Tobacco Prevention and Control in Alaska FY08 Report



United States had an obligation to improve the lot of the world's developing countries.

The shifting balance of power in the world today raises the question of what the United States' ongoing strategic interest is in maintaining the 50-year-old program.

Kevin Quigley is president of the National Peace Corps Association, an independent group whose mission is to advocate for the Peace Corps and support the community of RPCVs. In light of increasing globalization and economic interdependence, Quigley suggests the Peace Corps could evolve into a multinational effort in which other countries, such as China and India, also send volunteers.

"Our mentality has been all about us sending. We need to make the program multilateral, internationalize it," he argues.

With this in mind, Quigley—who served as a volunteer in Thailand from 1976 through 1979—believes the celebration of the Peace Corps' 50th anniversary will be a good time to reassess and revitalize the organization.

"While honoring the accomplishments of the past and the service of its volunteers," he notes, "this anniversary should be about advancing the work of the Peace

Celebrating 50 Years

THE PEACE CORPS WILL COMMEMORATE THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF ITS FOUNDING WITH EVENTS AROUND THE COUNTRY (SEE WWW.PEACECORPS.GOV), INCLUDING SEVERAL AT UCLA, MARCH 2-5.

UCLA AND THE PEACE CORPS SHARE A SPECIAL BOND BECAUSE THE SCHOOL WAS A PROMINENT TRAINING CENTER FOR THE FIRST WAVES OF VOLUNTEERS, MORE THAN 2,000 OF WHOM TRAINED ON CAMPUS BETWEEN 1961 AND 1969. BY THE 1970S, TRAINING SHIFTED FROM UNIVERSITIES AFFILIATED WITH THE PROGRAM TO THE HOST COUNTRIES. THE UCLA EVENTS THIS MARCH INCLUDE RECEPTIONS, A SCREENING OF THE DOCUMENTARY FILM *A SMALL ACT*, AND A PANEL DISCUSSION—"PEACE CORPS: THE NEXT 50 YEARS"—FEATURING JOURNALISTS AND RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS CHRIS MATTHEWS, MAUREN ORTH AND FRANK MANKIEWICZ.



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THIS ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND NEEDS AND IMPROVISE SOLUTIONS HAS ALWAYS BEEN PART OF THE PEACE CORPS' ETHOS, AND IT IS ULTIMATELY THE SPIRIT THAT WILL GUIDE THE ORGANIZATION AS IT NAVIGATES THE UNCHARTED WATERS OF THE NEXT FIVE DECADES.

Corps, which is to try to make the world more peaceful and prosperous. The second principle, for me, is that people anywhere and everywhere who value the Peace Corps should have an opportunity to participate."

Hoping to maintain flexibility while providing a vision that will guide it into the next half-century, the Peace Corps completed an agencywide assessment last June. The three goals articulated in 1961 remain the guiding principles for the program.

In addition, the assessment team defined a plan to guide the agency in the decade ahead, which includes strategically utilizing volunteer resources in order to strengthen relationships with the developing world; focusing on a more limited number of highly effective technical interventions that will enable the Peace Corps to demonstrate its impact in the communities it serves; embracing generalist volunteers and making sure they are well-trained; and piloting new programs to expand the Peace Corps' presence and technical depth.

Peace Corps officials currently identify HIV/AIDS awareness, business development and information technology as areas that are of particular interest to volunteers and their host nations. Looking to the future, the official goal is to simply "address global needs as they arise." This might seem a bit vague, but perhaps that's appropriate in a world that is changing so rapidly. Even in 1981, 20 years into the Peace Corps' existence, who could have predicted that HIV/AIDS and information technology would one day top the list of its priorities?

To a large extent, of course, immediate priorities will be determined as they have always been—by the volunteers them-

selves when their feet hit the ground and they get a firsthand look at conditions in their assigned cities and villages. For Therese Claxton, a 26-year-old volunteer who served in KwaZulu-Natal, a province in South Africa, from 2008 through 2010, this meant looking beyond her official assignment of working at a community health organization to assist people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.

For instance, she designed and implemented a youth-development program. "We taught life skills for orphans and vulnerable children, using arts and crafts, community activities and sports. Seeing the positive difference it made in the children's lives was really amazing," Claxton says.

This ability to understand needs and improvise solutions has always been part of the Peace Corps' ethos, and it is ultimately the spirit that will guide the organization as it navigates the uncharted waters of the next five decades.

Fifty years after John F. Kennedy called on Americans to help build a better world, the Peace Corps is alive and well, and more valuable than ever. Last year, the Peace Corps received 13,430 applications. Tellingly, Peace Corps officials note that requests from host countries for volunteers far exceed the organization's capacity to place them, given the constraints imposed by its \$400 million annual budget.

Over the years, more than 200,000 Peace Corps volunteers have carried their hopes, dreams and know-how to 139 countries. President Kennedy's challenge is being met; the legacy lives on. ▲

Dayton Fandray is a freelance journalist living in Tucson, Arizona.

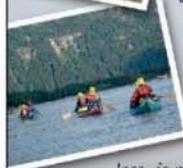
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