

**Deputy Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet  
Commencement Address  
St. Mary's College of Maryland  
St. Mary's City, Maryland  
May 14, 2011**

President Urgo, faculty, staff, trustees, guests, families, and most of all, the Class of 2011, congratulations on the wonderful achievement we're here to celebrate today.

Over the past four years, you've learned, grown, and forged incredible friendships.

You've worked side by side with faculty mentors—in the classroom, in the lab, on the field.

You've studied abroad and served your community, on campus and beyond.

You've had leading roles in dozens of clubs, from music to media to politics and more.

And you've done it all in one of the most breathtaking settings in the country.

All of which begs the question: Are you sure you *really* want to leave?

St. Mary's is a very special place—something we at Peace Corps know very well. This school is one of our nation's top producers of Peace Corps Volunteers.

In fact, right now, there are 18 St. Mary's alumni serving around the world teaching English, physics, and math to high schoolers in Africa, working with local villagers in Central America to preserve the environment, or leading camps in rural areas in Asia to empower young girls to be leaders.

But one thing is clear: They are all bringing a message of solidarity and support to people around the globe.

And perhaps we need that spirit of solidarity more than ever. Today, our world faces challenges that no one nation can meet alone.

But if the challenges are new, more than ever, we have the tools that we need to address them.

And if the problems are great, that means your generation has the greatest opportunity to solve them.

**PEACE CORPS AS AN AVENUE FOR ACTION**

As you can imagine, I'm partial to the Peace Corps as an avenue for action.

It changed my life—though, in many ways, it was a part of my life all along.

As you may know, the Peace Corps was created 50 years ago this year, inspired by President Kennedy's call to for a new generation of Americans to serve.

When I was eight—back in 1964—my Aunt Ginny, Ginny Kirkwood, volunteered to serve. She was one of the first Peace Corps pioneers—just 22 and fresh out of college. She was sent to Turkey, where she worked in an orphanage in a remote mountain village. After her Peace Corps service, she went on to live in Asia, and later served as Peace Corps Country Director in Thailand.

Then, when I was in high school, my grandparents—who were retired and in their late 60s by then—applied to the Peace Corps as well. They were sent to a town in northern Malaysia, where they taught in the university.

It was very inspiring to me at the time to see them take such a bold step and commit so fully to helping others, halfway around the world.

By the time my grandparents returned to the United States, it was clear in my mind that I would follow the family tradition. Some people feel pressure to go to law school or medical school. For me, it was Peace Corps or bust.

Fortunately, my husband was game to join me—though he had never even been on a plane.

We eventually went on to serve together in Samoa, teaching in an all-girls secondary school.

And our experience shaped everything we both went on to do with our lives.

Before we went to Samoa, my husband had planned a career as a high school math teacher but when we came back, he got a PhD, and has since made a career as a leading development economist.

In my case, I was profoundly affected by my friendship with our host mother. She was 32—six years older than me—and she had eight children already – all delivered on the floor of her hut by her sister-in-law.

Her life was an endless cycle of backbreaking work to support her family. Her days started at dawn, and didn't end until it was too dark to see.

One day she came to me, crying bitter tears. At first I thought someone had died. But I soon found out that the reason for her tears was that she was pregnant – again.

She was devastated. They had so little money, and caring for eight other children left her weak and exhausted every evening. She didn't know how they would manage. It was a kind of despair that I had never before witnessed.

I went through every day of that pregnancy with her and seeing the challenges she faced, I became convinced that my life's calling was to work in public health—with a special focus on reproductive health for women. And I worked in that field for the next 20 years, until returning to the Peace Corps as deputy director in 2010.

President Urgo, when you first came to St. Mary's, an interviewer asked if there was a quotation from an author that inspired you.

You chose a line from Willa Cather's The Song of the Lark: "Your work becomes your personal life. You are not much good until it does."

Because of the Peace Corps, I do what I love and I also love what I do. My work is indeed my personal life. And I think countless returned Volunteers would say the same.

But I know there are many paths to choose, many ways to make a difference.

So, what I'd like to do is share three lessons that relate to the Peace Corps experience that I believe have broader application for our lives, and for the world.

## **LESSON #1 – WE GROW BY CHALLENGING OURSELVES**

The first lesson: We grow by challenging ourselves. By stepping out of our comfort zone.

A colleague once told me about when she and her fellow Volunteers first touched down on the tarmac in Mali. They were in a desolate part of West Africa. The landscape was dusty and bare. Everyone was quiet. And then someone said, "Wait, I thought we were going to *Maui!*"

A sense of humor really helps get you through, when things seem unfamiliar or tough.

Patience helps too.

For many Volunteers, the first night, when you lay down, you look up at the stars, and the sky looks more beautiful, more immense, and more intense, than it's ever looked before.

And you're thinking, "Wow. Can I do this? How am I going to last for a whole two years?"

It can seem a little overwhelming.

But, day by day, and step by step, you start to figure things out. And the more you understand about the community around you, the more you understand about yourself.

By the time you leave, you've realized two years wasn't nearly long enough.

More than that, inevitably, you realize that you got far more than you gave.

## LESSON #2: RELATIONSHIPS ARE EVERYTHING

Lesson number two: Relationships are the most important thing in life.

Whether we're talking about family or diplomacy or business—real change happens through the very personal interactions between real *people*.

There's a joke I once heard: "If you're in an argument with somebody, walk a mile in their shoes. Because then, even if you still can't agree, you'll be a mile away and you've got their shoes!"

But the truth is, being able to walk in someone else's shoes to see the world from their perspective and to empathize with their hopes and concerns—those are the indispensable skills for shaping progress.

The Peace Corps gives you a chance to develop and practice and hone those skills. It helps you see the common good that exists in all of humankind.

And that *matters*. Because building the world we seek comes down to our ability to *connect*. To listen to others, to find points of convergence, and to cultivate common ground.

## LESSON #3: SERVICE IS A MINDSET

My last lesson: Service isn't just about a *moment*. Service is a *mindset*.

That's why we don't call ourselves "former Volunteers" but Returned Volunteers instead.

You don't have to go halfway around the world to make a difference in someone's life, any more than you have to be standing on campus to feel a bond with St. Mary's.

Whatever field you choose, whatever line of work, you can find ways to help others. And when you start your careers with a service mindset, it never goes away.

It's a mindset you might carry into government, asking how you can best lift the lives of those you represent.

It's a mindset you might carry into business, asking how you can deliver simultaneously for your shareholders and for society as a whole.

It's a mindset you might bring to a nonprofit you join, or to one that you create, that aims at helping those who really need support the most.

If you let the call to service inhabit your imagination, it will guide you for the rest of your lives. And the rest of us will all be better off because you did.

## THE POWER OF AN IDEA

Sargent Shriver, the Peace Corps' first Director, once observed that critics often charged the Peace Corps of being naïve.

They'd say, "Isn't it an illusion to think that the Peace Corps might actually help change the world?"

But Shriver would respond with a question of his own. He'd say, what do you think *is* going to change the world?<sup>i</sup>

Half a century later, the answer to that question hasn't changed.

Like Sargent Shriver, we at Peace Corps still believe that what can change the world now is the same thing that has always worked in the past: "an idea and the service of dedicated, committed individuals to that idea."<sup>ii</sup>

That's why we are so grateful for and inspired by schools like St. Mary's.

This is a place where social responsibility and civic-mindedness are as natural as the environment where compassion for one another, and caring for the world we share, are part of what it means to be alive.

I know people like to say: "Perhaps it's something in the water."

But the truth is, it's something in you.

And I can't wait to see you make your mark on the big, wide world.

Congratulations and Godspeed!

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<sup>i</sup> Shriver, Foreign Policy Association speech, New York, NY, December 11, 1963.

<sup>ii</sup> This is also from Shriver's FPA speech, December 11, 1963.