

# Celebrating 50 years of Peace Corps volunteerism



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*The author is president of the Santa Barbara Peace Corps Association.*

**T**he Peace Corps is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, and the agency, created at the height of the Cold War by President John F. Kennedy, continues to thrive.

More than 200,000 volunteers have served their country by working with millions around the world. Of these, more than 1,510 have come from UCSB, ranking it among the top 15 universities in the nation for all-time number of Peace Corps volunteers.

In part because of Santa Barbara's significance to the Peace Corps mission, Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams and National Peace Corps Association President Kevin Quigley will discuss "The Future of International Service" today at UCSB Campbell Hall at 3 p.m.

The world has changed dramatically since 1961. The Peace Corps, evolving in response, has maintained its relevance while remaining true to the agency's

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founding principles: helping the people of interested countries, helping to promote a better understanding of Americans, and helping to promote a better understanding of other peoples.

Though the end of the Cold War left the Soviet Union on the ash heap of history and the Iron Curtain dividing East from West came crashing down nearly two decades ago, it is more critical than ever before in our post-9/11 world for Americans to cultivate relationships with people beyond our own borders.

Peace Corps volunteers play a crucial, though largely unheralded, role in America's foreign policy. There are currently

8,655 volunteers, a 40-year high, serving in 77 countries. They work side by side with tribal leaders, government officials and teachers from Botswana to Bulgaria to share their expertise while dispelling stereotypes about the United States built by reality shows, MTV and blockbuster movies.

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These volunteers, incalculably enriched

by their two years abroad, return home to invest in their own communities.

My own time in the Peace Corps, teaching English and American history in the Russian province of Chuvashia from 2000 to 2002, stimulated my zeal for education, underserved populations and nonprofit work while broadening and shaping my perspective of the world, my community and myself.

I grew up in Kettleman City, a tiny farming town in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley, and, so far as my parents felt, my leaving for Chuvashia may as well have been leaving for Narnia. It truly was a long way from Kettleman City to Cheboksary (the capitol of Chuvashia), but I learned that Americans and Russians, despite decades of Cold War propaganda to the contrary, wanted essentially the same things: a good education, meaningful work, and to see our chil-

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dren grow up in a world free of fear.

Teaching at Cheboksary School 55 demanded discipline, resourcefulness and the development of strategic partnerships. The struggle to maximize limited resources and leverage every dollar (or ruble) to effectively provide a public good and serve a diverse community was, essentially, the same challenge I currently encounter as the associate director of a local nonprofit that provides preschool to homeless and at-risk children here in Santa Barbara.

The opportunities afforded to me by the Peace Corps are, however, denied to thousands of potential volunteers. Only one in three applicants becomes a Peace Corps volunteer; each year there are thousands more Americans than there are available positions.

Unfortunately, the Peace Corps will undoubtedly be targeted by those seeking to cut federal spending in this period of budgetary stress.

Our elected representatives should be reminded not only of the critical work the agency performs

## F.Y.I.

Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams and Kevin Quigley, president of the National Peace Corps Association, will appear in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps today at 3 p.m. at UCSB Campbell Hall. The event is free to the public.

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around the world but also that it operates, relatively speaking, on a shoestring. The current total budget for the Peace Corps is 1 percent of the foreign aid budget which, in turn, is 1 percent of the overall federal budget. The entire agency, comprising thousands of administrators and volunteers, costs this nation little more than a single F-22 fighter jet.

There is, of course, no argument that this nation requires a modern, well-equipped military. However, the innumerable person-to-person relationships fostered around the world by the Peace Corps make it more likely that words, and not weapons, will solve our differences in the future.