

## Skin Deep

by Ravi Shah

After months of anxiously waiting, I was overwhelmed with excitement and relief when I saw a large Peace Corps envelope in my mailbox. I opened it up and the first thing that I saw, to my surprise, was a letter about the challenges of being a minority serving in Ukraine. While I appreciated the letter and its attempt at assuaging concerns of serving in Eastern Europe, my feelings of excitement were replaced by apprehension and uncertainty.

I knew being a minority abroad would be challenging, but it had never occurred to me, perhaps naively, that my life could be in physical danger—the letter had noted instances where minorities were attacked—or that I could be prevented from making an impact and assimilating into my future community because of the color of my skin. I put down the letter and immediately started contacting colleagues, friends, and acquaintances of color that had served in the Peace Corps. The Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) shared that any prejudice that I may experience in Ukraine would be perpetrated by a few, and that the actions of those few would not reflect the majority of Ukrainians. Most Ukrainians have not had much exposure to different minorities and cultures outside of American movies and TV shows. The RPCVs reassured me that my experience, while challenging, would be an unforgettable and transformational opportunity in which I would represent the diversity of America. Soon after receiving the envelope, my fears subsided and I was mentally ready for the challenge of serving as a minority in Ukraine; the only thing left to worry about was how this California born-and-raised Indian would survive Ukrainian winters. Where



Photo: Ravi Shah

Ravi with his host family near the end of pre-service training in Ukraine. (2007)



Ravi with his co-teacher Yulia (middle) and her mentor (left), having a traditional Crimean meal to celebrate Yulia's birthday. (2008)

could I find a coat and snow shoes in the middle of summer in California?

As soon as I arrived in the tiny village where I would spend three months training to be a Volunteer, I was immediately made to feel welcomed and protected by my host family. They were so interested in my family's history and my life in America. The welcoming nature of my host family would go on to characterize most of my Peace Corps experience. Little did I know that my experience in Ukraine as a minority would be defined by only two instances of prejudice, one because of the color of my skin and the other because of the *condition* of my skin.

About a month into training, our training group was finally allowed to venture into the capital city of Kiev. Mindful of pickpocketing on the Kiev subway, I left my Peace Corps passport with my host family, and brought along with me my Ukrainian ID card and a copy of my passport and visa. I was unaware that I would be heading into Kiev on the same day that Kiev police received an intelligence report about a possible Pakistani spy operation. At my first subway station, a police officer approached my group and asked for my documents. Unconvinced by my passport copy, he took me to the police office in the metro station. As I sat in the

corner waiting for Peace Corps security to intervene on my behalf, I saw other minorities of color enter and exit the station. It was obvious that the police were targeting any person with dark skin. Unable to get in contact with Peace Corps security, my language instructor intervened and essentially flirtd our way out of my temporary "detainment." While this experience turned into a story for the ages, I knew I had to be more careful while in public, especially in major cities.

My second and most profound experience of prejudice was, as far as I know, not racially motivated, but rather driven by ignorance and fear of my eczema, a genetic skin condition. Two months into training, the opportunity every Volunteer is waiting for arrives: a site visit to the community he or she will call home for the next two years. This meant that I would be traveling by myself and relying on my language skills for the first time, adding to the stress I was already feeling about meeting my new host family and school. From my perspective, everything was going really well. My host family seemed very interested in my life and family; my host grandmother even sang Hindi songs to me from her favorite Indian movies she saw as a child. After what I thought was a successful trip, I said goodbye to my would-be host family and school and made the 23-hour trip back up to the capital city of Kiev. When I returned, my regional manager immediately contacted me and told me that I would not be returning to my site.

I would later find out that my host family was concerned about my eczema, which had flared up on my face. The family had told the principal of the school, who then contacted Peace Corps to turn me down. Being discriminated against because of my eczema was not something I expected or was prepared for. As I waited for a new site placement, I struggled to accept what had happened. Thankfully, two weeks later, I would be matched with an amazing site and teacher, who herself has a visible

skin condition. After meeting her at our swearing-in ceremony, I knew I had found my home for two years.

Aside from attracting stares from strangers wondering who I was and where I came from, the rest of my Peace Corps experience went smoothly. Neither the color nor the condition of my skin prevented me from assimilating into my community, making lifelong connections, and learning to love—and now miss—the food. I look forward to going back to my community in Ukraine, my second home. Looking back on my

experience in Ukraine, I would not have it any other way.

*Ravi Shah served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ukraine from 2007 to 2009 teaching English as a second language. After returning to California, Ravi received his Masters in Public Administration with an emphasis in nonprofit management from the University of Southern California. He currently works for Community Partners, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit, where he provides technical assistance to emerging nonprofits.*

## Every day, our graduates change the world.

As a qualified RPCV, your world experience will earn you a scholarship and guaranteed internship at the Monterey Institute. Gain a master's degree addressing sustainable development, conflict resolution, environmental policy, international trade, international education management, international business, nonproliferation and terrorism, translation and interpretation, or language teaching. Join our community of graduates who are changing the world, every day.



Amy-Clare Howell,  
MFA '12  
Peace Corps Volunteer,  
2007-2008

## Be the Solution™



**Monterey Institute  
of International Studies**

*A Graduate School of Middlebury College*

[go.mis.edu/pcfellows](http://go.mis.edu/pcfellows)