Diversity: Challenges and Opportunities

All Peace Corps Volunteers go through the trials and tribulations of adjusting to a new culture and integrating into a community, but their experiences vary significantly based on various aspects of their identity. Everything from race to socioeconomic status shapes the lenses through which an individual sees the world, and how he or she is seen.

Depending on where they serve, Volunteers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds may have different experiences adjusting to a new culture. “I was very taken aback by the fact that people were always staring at me and that cars would always come to a screeching halt every time I was around,” says Allison, a Bulgaria Volunteer.

As an African-American, Allison was subject to a lot of attention and curiosity. She says the key to her successful integration was learning the language.

This unwanted attention also poses some safety and security concerns. In Allison’s case, police officers stopped a bus she was riding, demanding she explain why she was there and that she produce legal documentation.

With the assistance of the safety and security officer, such incidents stopped. Allison says when people in her village heard what happened, several of them went to the police station to tell them “tza e nekolitita mumiche,” which means, “she is our girl.”

Safety and security concerns also apply when a hidden aspect of identity is revealed. Religion, disabilities, and sexual orientation are not always apparent, yet they often impact a Volunteer’s adjustment to a new culture.

In some countries, for example, Jewish Volunteers are advised to be careful about sharing their religious or cultural identity.

In a number of countries, in a context in which homosexuality is not only socially unacceptable but illegal, some Volunteers are advised not to share their sexual orientation. Such warnings are relevant and necessary, but taken alone, they can cause anxiety and fuel fear.

The warnings can be balanced through such formal mediums as a Peer Support Network (PSN), Diversity Committee, or diversity training; or through everyday interaction. In a number of posts, diversity issues have been integrated into PSNs. Volunteers are trained in coaching and active listening skills to help support fellow Volunteers.

In Bulgaria, staff and Volunteers co-facilitate a “Diversity Story Circle” during PST. During this activity, four to six Volunteers from diverse backgrounds share their experiences with trainees. Instead of a panel format, all trainees and Volunteers sit in a circle and group sharing is followed by a reflection activity on how to be allies.

In Bolivia, trainees not only explore perceptions in the local cultural context, but also the impact it has on relationships within their training group. Volunteers are trained to co-facilitate diversity training during pre-service training and beyond, the “Diversity Training Modules for Pre-service Training” manual is available in the Volunteer Resources and Support section of the Peace Corps website: www.peacecorps.gov/library.

They understood what the immigrant experience was like because so many of their sons or daughters or nieces or nephews are often immigrants in other countries, so they understand what the struggle is about. I was much more easily accepted here, I think, because of that.

Kadesha Thomas, PCV, Nicaragua

“The reaction I’ve gotten here has been really interesting, and I like being able to talk from a different perspective about the United States.”

At first, when I got to my town, people would ask me where I’m from and I’d say, “The United States,” and then they would say, “OK, but no, where are you really from?”

And so I would say I was born in Bangladesh and they’d say, “Oh, so you’re Asian.” And then they understood that I was an immigrant and that made me a little closer to them.

RPCV Tanushree Dutta, (Nicaragua, 2006-08)
The following is an interview with Shirley Everest, Manager of Peace Corps’ American Diversity Program:

Anyone meeting Shirley Everest will quickly learn of her love of penguins. On her office door at the Peace Corps Headquarters in Washington, D.C., hangs a cartoon depicting one of the birds taking a photograph of himself (or her) peers.

“Why on earth would you spring for colored film?” an inquisitive penguin asks the photographer.

Everest would likely tell the inquiring bird that it’s important to look beyond the surface. After all, in her role as manager of the American Diversity Program, nothing is merely a matter of black or white.

“It’s important for staff and Volunteers to realize Americans come in many different colors, ethnicities, religions, and ages, and all of these differences may be understood differently by Americans and host country nationals,” she says, adding, “To understand the way we interact with people who are different than we are, I think we really need to recognize our own personal frame of reference about how we perceive ourselves and other people.”

Such a frame of reference may find Volunteers reacting to a similar situation in different ways. “Each of us can only communicate what we have experienced, and that comes from such things as our education and influences from family and friends. An individual’s experience is unique in every country,” says Everest.

A widened workplace can also contribute to the challenges both staff and Volunteers face. While an employee in the U.S. may be limited to an office bicycle, the work environment of the Peace Corps staff and Volunteers overseas is expanded due to the organization’s mission.

“The workplace may be a vehicle, with a driver taking a Volunteer back to his or her site; it may be in a village where a staff member is visiting the Volunteer. Anytime a Peace Corps employee is in that capacity of representing the Peace Corps, they are in the workplace environment,” says Everest.

This is among one of the realizations Everest must relay to staff members. Having traveled to 10 countries since stepping into her role six years ago, she also presents training sessions for Program and Training Officers, Peace Corps Medical Officers, and others to explain the relationship between appropriate workplace behaviors and the impact of American diversity and host country national cultures.

“Community style is a big part of what we talk about. Within the U.S. we have a very wide range of management and community styles. How we socially interact in order to work together is very important to understand,” she says, adding, “Not having good information about American diversity and foreign cultures can damage a relationship, which can become a disruptive influence in the workforce and can also reach the point where it’s detrimental to the staff as a whole. When that happens, it hinders the level of support afforded each Volunteer.”

Referring to the differences in cultures, where a woman’s role at work may be more limited due to accepted norms, Everest says sexual harassment remains at the forefront. However, a proactive approach has lessened such incidences within the Peace Corps family.

“We discuss how certain attitudes exist. In countries where we have had a longer presence, the chance of resolving issues is very real and possible. . . I have to start from a point where people don’t raise their eyebrows, wondering, ‘What is she talking about?’ In many of the posts we go to, diversity is just not something they’ve heard a lot about.”

However, that has changed since management adopted a more aggressive approach. “Even though our office is (Continued on page 4.)
50+ Volunteers in the Peace Corps

Introduction by Peace Corps Director
Ron Tschetter

Since becoming Peace Corps Director in September of 2006, one of my priorities has been the 50+ Initiative, which aims to increase the percentage of 50+ Volunteers in the Peace Corps from approximately 5 percent to 15 percent over the next few years. While the initiative is called 50+, it is not just about broadening our organization’s demographic profile—it is also about broadening the diversity of life experiences and professional expertise the Peace Corps can offer to our partner agencies, and the communities served by our Volunteers.

The Peace Corps is generally thought of as an organization of young people, but 5 to 10 percent of Volunteers have always been 50+. Surveys and work with Volunteers in the field have shown there are remarkably few differences in motivation and service experiences between older and younger groups. Both are motivated by ideals, a desire for adventure, and a strong commitment to volunteering.

50+ Volunteers tend to have added responsibilities, with three and even four generations (siblings, children, grandchildren and aging parents) back home. They also tend to have more “stuff” (houses, finances, pets) to deal with before leaving home.

They share other concerns with younger Volunteers, such as appropriate training, site placement that utilizes expertise and life skills, and the desire to work with counterparts, staff and fellow Volunteers in the exciting process of becoming useful partners in their communities.

The following stories demonstrate this group’s enthusiastic engagement.

Dale Mosier, Malawi CD
My wife and I served as Volunteers in South Africa after retiring from the business world. This provided a total change of life’s direction – part of which was anticipated and part of which was not. I am currently the country director for Malawi and have observed, for the young Volunteers, that no two experiences are the same. This is even truer for 50+ Volunteers as we bring our broader experience base to our Volunteer role.

Additionally, age is more respected than we typically find in the U.S., giving us an even further advantages in use of our skills and experiences. One delightful surprise that came with the job was the number of lifelong friendships we made with young Volunteers.

IAP:
Martha Landis,
St. Kitts (Eastern Caribbean)

Here I am, 2,000 miles from “home” (and I use that word lightly!), having spent almost two years in the village of Mansion on the island of St. Kitts. My life has been irrevocably changed. I will never see anything the same. I left four grandchildren behind and gained a village of them. At 7 a.m., they arrived at the gate to put the finishing touches on their kites to fly today.

It is Good Friday. Most every day here is good. Even the worst of them. No car to drive, unbearable heat, the snail’s pace of accomplishment, letting go of outcomes and expectations, and missing “home.”

I’ve learned more about myself in these two years than in the 65 previous ones: That I can persevere. That there are always options. That there are other ways to think about things.

It’s been a journey into the great unknown, literally and figuratively. I’ve learned “the stuff I’m made of” and, so far, I like what I see. They told us that when we started, and I can tell you “for true” (as they say here), that it is so.

AFRICA:
Madeline Uraneck, Lesotho

There are many photos I don’t take here in Lesotho, southern Africa’s tiny mountain kingdom. I have photos of thatched-roof rondavel huts and cemeteries with fresh HIV/AIDS graves. But I have few photos of myself, since I’m seldom with anyone who has used a camera.

I planned my Peace Corps service as a late-in-life career change—from international education to international development. I’m less sure about the wisdom of that now: grass-roots development is so hard.

I did not plan, however, for the gifts I have received: My healthiest year in ages—25 pounds lost to mountain walking; my most challenging career assignment ever—training isolated teachers who have few desks, chairs, or textbooks; my strongest lessons in patience and compassion—the death of a teenage orphan neighbor to HIV/AIDS and the death of my brother in the U.S. to cancer.

Both times, neighbors gathered to share my tears and teach me the importance of joy amidst sorrow.

I didn’t plan on feeling, for the first time, that I’m a member of this planet’s human community—sharing its scarce resources, looking up at clear mountain stars, imagining a better way.

EMA:
Dorie Mueller, Romania

At the ripe young age of 63, I decided to pack away my golf clubs and do something meaningful. Here I am in Romania, serving in the Peace Corps. Yipes! From North Carolina’s mountains to the rolling hills of Romania! Living in another culture is a new experience for me; one that I find challenging (my lack of language skills) and at times stressful (my lack of language skills), but always interesting (wonder what I just said to that woman in the bakery?).

I am living with a gazda (host) so I can learn more about the culture. “Living with Lili” is an adventure in itself. She is very superstitious and has found my happy-go-lucky attitude both puzzling and entertaining. After a year together, we have found a common ground to navigate our living situation.

She knows I love having my windows open and I know she thinks I am going to die from the “draft.” I’ve shown her how to make a mean grilled cheese sandwich, and she has shown me how to make choiuru (sour soup).

Although I miss my two children more than I ever imagined, the most difficult aspect of living in a culture where my language skills are so weak is the inability to converse with the older population. I enjoy hearing people’s stories. Doing this through a translator loses its appeal.

My love of children has brought me to an organization whose focus is on the Roma community. Children laugh, play, and cry in the same language. They are patient with me and accept my hugs without question. When one of their mothers said, “I hope you stay past your 2009 end of service,” I felt my presence here had made an impact. My life has meaning beyond the golf course.

The PC Times Reader Survey—Here’s What We Heard from You

The majority of PCVs are receiving the PC Times “reliably.” Some Volunteers may not get the PC Times delivered to their site, but the majority (71 percent) do.

The most popular feature right now is “Volunteer Life,” followed in order by “Notes from the Field,” feature stories, blogs, recipes, and agency news.

Community development is the most popular subject of interest, followed by HIV/AIDS, education, youth development, health, environment, business/ICT, and agriculture.

Eighty-four percent of readers want the PC Times to run longer (6-8 pages), a preference in line with suggestions that content be “meatier” that the feature articles run longer, and delve more into technical issues relevant to Volunteers and staff in the field. In addition, Volunteers are asking for less veneer and more realism.

The PC Times staff appreciates hearing your point of view and is working hard to respond to your requests. We also appreciate your stories and articles—submitting material to us is the best way to get representation for your projects and countries.

So...take your best shot—put something together about your Volunteer experience (between 250-750 words is the desired length for articles) and send it to: peacecorps-stories@peacecorps.gov.

We look forward to hearing from you soon!
mandated and regulated by federal laws, this agency’s approach is to provide proactive training. In conjunction with the host country nationals, our whole purpose is to provide a positive working environment for everyone involved.”

When the American Diversity Program meets with staff members overseas, the many aspects of hiring responsibilities are at the forefront of discussions. “By their employment status, they do have obligations to come forward and report incidents that could result in discrimination and harassment. All employees and Peace Corps Volunteers have direct access to our office,” says Everest.

Noting the many differences in a foreign culture, Everest cites the importance of adopting similar styles of communication. “Communication is a big part of what we talk about. There are everyday interactions, where the greetings are often more drawn out in foreign countries than in American society and it’s important to respect that culture.

There’s an importance in how you connect to a person and spend time greeting them, with eye contact and various gestures being a part of the formula,” she says.

There’s also the American relationship between space and privacy of an individual, something that isn’t always apparent in the countries served by the Peace Corps. “How two societies interact in order to work together is very important to understand.”

Also meeting in the field with Volunteers, Everest notes that an initiative such as the Volunteer Support Network goes a long way toward assuring a safety net for those in a foreign environment. “We encourage VSN, especially in countries that have a strong history of diverse opinions about a particular minority or aspect of another human being.

It’s important for Volunteers to support one another until they are fully embraced by their communities.”

Everest has met with Volunteers of varying religions and cultural norms. Citing an African American man and young Jewish woman she had spoken with overseas, Everest asked if false perceptions or the inability to reveal all of their dimensions as individuals had hindered their service, and says they agreed it had not.

“We are all individuals and deal with things in different ways, but the Volunteers I’ve spoken with have been able to be productive, despite the necessity of hiding some things about their personal lives or having to break down racial barriers in instances where all Americans are perceived as being blue-eyed and blond,” she says.

Emphasizing the need to let all employees know they have the right to come forward with reports of inappropriate behavior in the workplace, Everest encourages staff interaction. “We try to keep in touch with regional directors and country directors to see if it has had an impact. The biggest indication is when staff comes to us for resources and advice,” she says, adding, “Hopefully we can provide the type of support where the post is a safe haven.”

Encouraged by the reception she has experienced thus far, Everest states, “We are careful to let staff know that we embrace all cultures, but there are aspects

“The Food Crisis: Top 10 List of Things Volunteers Can Do

Excerpt from a letter by Jeffrey Cornish, country director, Tonga

1) Start a vegetable garden.
2) Promote the use of improved storage facilities.
3) Work to improve irrigation systems that sustain food crops.
4) Improve the pest control of local crops and gardens, preferably without expensive and difficult to manage homemade chemicals.
5) Create a seed bank either at a household or on the community level.
6) Establish a market price surveillance system with your fellow Volunteers and promote collective marketing.
7) Promote the consumption of locally produced foods.
8) Help individual families reduce household costs, which will provide more income for needed food.
9) Conduct an agroforestry project if you have the resources.
10) Decrease consumption of scarce food and promote healthy eating.
WHAT VOLUNTEERS ARE BLOGGING...

Nicaragua

A Change of Pace
We’ve been attending our assigned schools for about two months. The needs of this task were to survey the families in my school’s community. Although Peace Corps Volunteers tend to be very unique people, they are surely products of their culture. Along with our flexibility and hunger for cultural difference, we intend to work hard to produce tangible results. Three houses in a total of over four hours.

Initial frustrations led to deeper understandings and appreciations ... and resignation.

Our own concept of how to approach “work” does not always coincide with those here. People do not walk into someone’s house and start firing questions all in the name of perception. This country has transfixed me to see with green lenses. There was a story that a man was from a village where everyone had yellow eyeglasses. This man traveled to distant lands. He traveled to a land where everyone had blue lenses. When he returned to his village they asked him, “How were the people? What was their culture like?” He responded, “It was green.”

I hope everyone understands that we will always see with our yellow lenses, yet we can still see the green ones. The main goal of Peace Corps is to promote peace and friendship in the world. Peace Corps wants to define peace.
EASTERN CARIBBEAN
For All Children

At St. Benedicts Day Nursery and Infant Hospital, Volunteer Katie Sheridan works with special needs children, engaging in tutoring and behavioral therapy. The Day Nursery and Infant Hospital, were established in Georgetown, St. Vincent, as a response to the malnutrition and other associated complications of local children. The Infant Hospital has extended its services to abandoned, orphaned, and battered children, as well as children with physical and mental disabilities.

BELIZE
Art & Identity

Married Volunteers Cheryl Frances, an artist and art educator, and John Tuck, a counselor, have developed the Art & Identity Program (A&I) for youth of the Toledo District. Representing Mopan and Kek-chi Maya, Garifuna, Creole, East Indian, Mestize, and Chinese ethnicities, a great mix of populations come together in this district. The A&I program asserts, “In our multicultural world, images are increasingly necessary to communicate across language and cultural barriers,” and aims to encourage tolerance and emphasize celebration of diversity. Students of A&I incorporate diversity into many aspects of their program, including the creation of a tapestry as part of a group art project.

Volunteer John Tuck teaches in a classroom in Belize.

GEORGIA
Crossing Boundaries

One of the largest minority groups in Georgia, the Azeri population, is concentrated in the region of Kvemo Kartli. Volunteer Ruth Decalo works with four NGOs in this area, including the region’s first community radio station. Radio Marneuli runs news and music shows in Russian, Georgian, and Azeri, so all communities may benefit. IREX Europe, a nonprofit organization working to develop the station, says, “The community radio approach allows the raising of awareness of diversity issues, the rights of ethnic minorities, and the responsibilities of journalists and journalism.”

SWAZILAND
Walk for HIV/AIDS

Walk the Nation is a grassroots campaign initiated by Volunteers to promote awareness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in rural Swaziland. Participants from villages across Swaziland walked from the Mozambique border to the South African border for two weeks in March 2008. Over 100,000 residents participated in the campaign to create awareness and spur behavioral change.

We’re Eco-friendly

The Peace Corps Times is printed on 100 percent recycled paper using forest products that are Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified, an environmentally-friendly standard for this and future editions of the publication.

BUEA DIRTY RICE

INGREDIENTS:
2 cups rice, washed
3 cups water
1 medium tomato, chopped
1 medium onion, diced
2-3 large cloves of garlic, crushed and minced

DIRECTIONS:
Wash the rice well (especially if using local rice), add water, salt, tomato, onion, garlic, pepper, and oil. Bring to a boil uncovered over high heat. Stir once. Reduce heat and simmer, covered with a tight lid for 15 minutes or until rice is done. Remove from heat. Fluff with fork. Cover and allow to steam an additional 5 minutes. Add plenty of cumin and black pepper. Serve.

Says Bill: “When I lack the creativity, wherewithal or money to make something more original, this is the one I turn to time and again. It’s simple, has a lot of flavor, and I’m willing to bet it tastes good on any continent.”

RECIPE AUTHOR: PCV BILL ZIMMERMAN, CAMEROON

1 or more hot peppers, cleaned & minced
2 tbsp vegetable oil
1 tbsp ground cumin
Salt and black pepper to taste

IN UPCOMING ISSUES:
Please send us your thoughts, ideas, and stories related to Peace Corps Partnership Projects and other forms of sponsorship of projects, and working with youth. We want to hear from you! pctimes@peacecorps.gov

FPO for FSC Logo

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