



## Mexico: PCV Environmental Project Wins International Planning Award

Volunteer couple Jajeen Burney and Ana Hernandez-Balzac (Mexico, 2010–2012) met at the University of Buffalo, studying urban planning. When they joined the Peace Corps after graduating, they didn't expect international recognition. But they got it.

In January, the American Planning Association recognized the "Valsequillo Initiative" with an international planning award for involving local communities, farmers, and landowners—and municipal, state, and federal governments—in the effort to plan the use of Valsequillo Reservoir near Puebla, Mexico's fourth-largest city.

Before the couple came to the country, Peace Corps Volunteers had been working with local counterparts in the area to manage urban growth around Valsequillo, 120 km east of Mexico City.

Following years of contamination from untreated sewage and industrial waste, the 58,000-acre Valsequillo had been considered an environmentally "dead" area and was slated for development for upper-middle-class housing. PCVs had been working with local agencies to promote social justice in the urban development process.



PCV Jajeen Burney (second from right) leads a recreational bird club trip with other Volunteers and local community members to Valsequillo Reservoir in 2012.

Through the efforts of Burney, other PCVs, and community leaders, Valsequillo Reservoir, which also provides irrigation for farms southeast of Puebla, was designated as a state park and an internationally significant wetland, primarily due to the number of migratory and endemic bird species found there.

"When I went there for the first time, it was something very different

from what people were saying," Burney said. "It was winter—peak migration season—and I saw thousands of birds.

"People thought there was no life in the reservoir. What I was seeing was that this was actually an important area."

To verify his theory, Burney proposed a yearlong bird study to determine Valsequillo's importance to the endemic

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3 ■■■■■■■■■■►

## Environmental Project Highlight

With Earth Day, April 22, fast approaching and spring planting season almost here, this issue of *Peace Corps Times* focuses on the Environmental and Agriculture sectors. Here's a look at six recent Volunteer projects across the globe.

• **Ecuador:** Volunteer Caroline Baylor (2011–2013) led a school recycling project in which students brought in materials to sell to the local recycling center. Students received certificates for their work; the class that collected the most went on a field trip.

• **Ethiopia:** Volunteer Benjamin Morse (2011–2013) coordinated a large-scale fruit-tree distribution to increase food security and income generation. Morse and his counterpart distributed 16,380 coffee, guava, papaya, avocado, citrus, apple, and orange trees to 1,092 households.

• **Guinea:** Volunteer Deborah Tsai (2011–2013) worked with community members to create an organic pesticide made primarily from taro leaves. The pesticide has lower costs and is environmentally friendly, resulting in increased yields.

• **Morocco:** Volunteer Nicole Abrams (2010–2012) led 16 students on a field trip to the Emirates Center for Wildlife Propagation for the Environment Leadership Trip and Field Day Program. Afterward, students built compost pits, collected trash, planted 15 trees, and built a fence at the school, then presented a lesson and held a drawing contest for other students.

• **Peru:** Volunteer Bradley Dawson (2010–2012) led a 15-month intervention to improve health and waste management in his community. To combat chronic malnutrition, anemia, parasitic infections, diarrhea, and respiratory diseases, Dawson held educational sessions at the community health center and visited homes to update inefficient systems and monitor behavioral changes.

• **Togo:** Volunteer Justin Carter (2011–2013) helped organize Camp Eco-Action for 40 girls to learn about the environment and the importance of protecting it through games, songs, and other hands-on activities.

## The Peace Corps Spreads Permaculture



PCV Emily Jaeger demonstrated permaculture gardening techniques to this señora in Paraguay, and started a friendly tomato-growing competition in the process.

Peace Corps sectors routinely impact each other and often overlap in multiple ways. Agriculture and environment are intrinsically linked, with sustainable agriculture projects—effective soil and water conservation, organic fertilizer use,

self-sufficient agricultural systems—impacting the environment in myriad ways.

Two Volunteer projects in Paraguay typify the successful climate-smart Agriculture projects underway.

Agriculture Volunteer Emily Jaeger

(Paraguay, 2011–2013), has been using permaculture techniques—which integrate human activity with natural surroundings to create efficient self-sustaining ecosystems—and some healthy competition to promote better gardening practices in rural Misiones, Paraguay.

Here, 95 percent of families cultivate vegetable gardens. Most don't use chemical pesticides or fertilizers, but they also don't use organic pest or disease control or mulch to conserve water.

Jaeger's greatest success in educating her community about permaculture gardening techniques has come from using her own garden as a demo-plot.

Early in the season, Jaeger helped one of the señoras double-dig a tomato bed. When they finished, the señora gave her four leftover tomato plants.

When the señora came to visit, she saw how Jaeger's mulched plants were bigger and further along and began to copy the practice.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2 ■■■■■■■■■■►

# Actually, There *is* an App for This: PCVs and Tech Experts Create Mobile Apps for Development

Mobile technology, more than any other modern tool, may just have the biggest impact on a Peace Corps Volunteer's service today. In fact, according to the 2012 Annual Volunteer Survey, PCVs are more likely to have cellphone service than electricity or running water.

Moreover, three out of four people worldwide have access to a mobile phone, according to a 2012 World Bank study.

This rapidly closing digital divide presents new opportunities for Volunteers to engage their communities in ways unimaginable even just a few years ago.

Last September the agency launched the Innovation Challenge to engage the Peace Corps community in a global brainstorming session to create mobile-technology solutions for problems faced by Volunteers in the field. On December 1-2, the Peace Corps collaborated with Random Hacks of Kindness—an organization that hosts semiannual coding events worldwide for developers to build open-source technology solutions—for a 48-hour global hackathon, where 1,200 coders and subject matter experts in 32 cities tackled real-world problems—and produced hundreds of app prototypes.

As one Volunteer in rural Zambia, Tony Tseng (2010-2013), said, "It is in [Volunteers'] best interest to use technology to equip ourselves and others" to accomplish all three Peace Corps goals.

Inspired by his country director and the potential of the Innovation Challenge, Tseng and fellow Zambia Volunteers Melissa Stelter, Robert Kent, and Rasa Kent (2011-2013) identified

and defined a major challenge faced in their communities: language barriers between development workers and Zambians. Armed with a clear understanding of the communication obstacle posed by multiple in-country languages, the four teamed up with BongoHive, a local technology and innovation hub in Lusaka, to design a solution. There, they joined Zambian tech experts for a pioneering weekend of collaboration.

Led by BongoHive developer Daryl Lukas, the team crafted Bantu Babel, an Android app that provides a Tonga/English digital pocket dictionary and key Bemba survival phrases.

Stelter, who is nearing the end of her service, is confident that Bantu Babel will make a difference for future Volunteers and other aid workers. She and her fellow Volunteers were so invigorated by their collaboration with the local innovation hub that they plan to continue to develop both the scope of the app and the relationship between Peace Corps/Zambia Volunteers and BongoHive in future hackathons.

Tseng concurred, "With the success of the hackathon event and the relationship now established with Peace Corps, I look forward to having Volunteers bring forth unique problems and together with BongoHive provide a unique solution."

Lukas also raved about working with the Peace Corps Volunteers, saying it was a great opportunity to gain "insight about their work and this helped a lot even as we were defining problems and finding solutions [at the hackathon]."

Bantu Babel was not the only solution prototype to come out of Peace



Peace Corps/Zambia Volunteers and BongoHive coders at the Random Hacks of Kindness event December 1-2, 2012, in Lusaka, Zambia.

Corps Innovation Challenge and the RHoK global hackathon. From Germany to Georgia, coders created innovative mobile solutions to coordinate low-cost transportation in Ghana, sync sanitation data in Malawi, enhance citizen-government reporting in Ukraine, track financial accountability via text message for small NGOs and Volunteer projects, improve Volunteer safety tracking, find and rate NGOs working in-country via a searchable database with comment fields—the last three of which can be used globally—and more.

The excitement around the event has been far-reaching. Heather Lee of the University of Alabama at Birmingham Sparkman Center for Global Health, who connected PCVs in Zam-

bia with BongoHive, said, "I just wanted to personally convey how excited I am about the Innovation Challenge and the potential apps that will come out of [it].... President Obama's emphasis on open access information initiatives and mobile technology in solving global health challenges is really exciting. I am a big believer in sharing information, especially since learning is a two-way street and there is a lot to be learned from folks in other countries."

Volunteers, coders, and Peace Corps supporters around the world are now planning for the next RHoK Global hackathon, on June 1-2. Visit [innovationchallenge.peacecorps.gov](http://innovationchallenge.peacecorps.gov) to submit an idea to solve a local community issue or to host or attend a hackathon event.

## Homemade Tortillas



### Ingredients:

3 CUPS FLOUR

1 TEASPOON SALT

1/2 TEASPOON BAKING POWDER (OPTIONAL\*)

1/3 CUP CANOLA OIL OR MELTED BUTTER

1 CUP HOT WATER

\*BAKING POWDER MAKES THE TORTILLAS SLIGHTLY PUFFIER AND LIGHTER; IF YOU OMIT THE BAKING POWDER, THEY'LL STILL BE DELICIOUS.

### Directions

1. Mix flour, salt, and baking powder together.
2. Add oil/butter and mix together with fingers until all of the oil is incorporated and the mixture has the texture of cornmeal.
3. Pour the hot water into the mixture.
4. Mix everything together with your hands until a ball forms, then transfer the ball to a floured surface and work dough until it's smooth and round.
5. Let the dough rest covered with a dishtowel, or similar, for at least 30 minutes.
6. Divide dough into 12 balls.
7. Flour your surface and roll out the balls as thin as possible, approximately 8 inches across, (you can use a rolling pin, wine bottle, or similarly shaped container).
8. Cook in a frying pan or griddle on medium heat (with no oil) until the tortilla bubbles slightly and turns golden brown in some areas. Flip the tortilla, then remove from griddle when both sides are browned.

Photo and recipe submitted by Nalena Santiago (PCV/Paraguay, 2012-2014). Source: Tasty Kitchen, *Healthy Homemade Tortillas* [www.tastykitchen.com/blog/2012/03/homemade-tortillas](http://www.tastykitchen.com/blog/2012/03/homemade-tortillas)

### PERMACULTURE FROM PAGE 1 ■■■■■■■■►

After mulching her garden, the señora told her neighbors about it and the practice spread.

Volunteer Nathaniel Delano (Paraguay, 2010-2013) organized a workshop in San Pedro on using biodigestors to dispose of manure and produce sustainable organic fertilizer.

Delano and a local farmer worked with the Energy Climate Partnership of the Americas—an organization dedicated to clean energy—to host a one-day workshop for community members, students, and the Ministry of Agriculture.

The workshop included lectures on biodigester technology—essentially a closed container that speeds up the process of breaking down manure into usable methane gas—maintenance, and sustainable farming.

Afterward, the group constructed, tested, and installed the biodigester.

Later, they built two more biodigestors and the ministry began promoting biodigestors as a best practice.

# Peace Corps Returns to Nepal After Eight-Year Absence

The first group of Peace Corps Volunteers to re-enter Nepal after an eight-year absence departed for Kathmandu early on September 6, 2012, the day after a ceremony honoring the 20 trainees and the Nepal program was held in Washington, D.C. Three months later, the new Volunteers were sworn into service at the U.S. Embassy in Kathmandu in a ceremony conducted by Ambassador to Nepal Peter Bodde and attended by Nepali Minister of Finance Bashar Man Pun and Peace Corps Chief of Staff Stacy Rhodes.

“People from host villages, along with those whose lives were touched by Volunteers during the 42 years we were previously there, were very excited to welcome the newest group of Peace Corps Volunteers to Nepal,” said Nepal Country Director Andrea Wojnar-Diagne. “Much of the program work will be to promote food security at the grassroots level, and the communities that will share their knowledge and culture with our skilled Volunteers eagerly await their arrival.”

The new program was opened with significant support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Increasing security concerns forced the Peace Corps to suspend its Nepal program in 2004, but in January 2012 the agency announced it would re-establish the program by sending Volunteers to promote food security through



Twenty new Volunteers are sworn in November 30, 2012, at the U.S. Embassy in Kathmandu, Nepal. The group, the first Volunteers to return to the country since 2004, will work in agriculture and nutrition.

agriculture, sanitation, and health activities. Since 1962, nearly 4,000 Americans have served as Peace Corps Volunteers in Nepal, working on projects in education, environment and natural resource conservation, health, and community and youth development.

The return to Nepal was especially momentous for Chief of Staff Rhodes, as it marked his first time in the country since serving as the USAID Nepal deputy director from 1987–90. “I saw many

changes in Nepal since I was there 22 years ago,” said Rhodes. “Some of the changes were good, and some bad, but almost all had to do with the rapid expansion of Kathmandu. There’s a noticeably stronger infrastructure in the city that has led to economic growth, but the expansion has also brought crowded streets, traffic, and pollution.”

However, Rhodes also noted one aspect of the country that remains the same. “The people of Nepal haven’t



Peace Corps Chief of Staff Stacy Rhodes (center) in Nepal in the late '80s

changed. There is still the same kindness, welcoming attitude, and generosity of spirit that existed more than two decades ago.”

It’s this sense of welcoming community that has led the new Nepal Volunteers to easily adapt to their new host country. As Nepal Volunteer Tia Sandoval said, “The Nepali people are amazing and very welcoming. I was immediately accepted into my new host community as a family member.”

Volunteer Amanda Benseal said she anticipated connecting with the people at her permanent site.

“I look forward to getting to know my new community, to being a regular at the neighborhood tea shop and learning the community member’s needs from their own mouths.”

## Career Corner

### New RPCV Job Board Launches



Whether you swore in last week or 24 months ago, your close of service will be here sooner than you think: It’s never too early to start preparing for your life after the Peace Corps. And now, thanks to the latest offering from the Office of Third Goal and Returned Volunteer Services—RPCV Career Link—your transition into post-Peace Corps life will be that much easier.

RPCV Career Link is a brand-new, modern job posting platform that carries on the Peace Corps’ 40-year tradition of helping RPCVs connect with post-service jobs, internships, and scholarship opportunities. Combining the numerous listings of Hotline (the former semi-

monthly career bulletin) with online job search tools, RPCVs and PCVs no longer need to check multiple sites or subscribe to multiple services to stay abreast of career and educational opportunities.

Further, RPCV Career Link offers comprehensive, real-time access, and allows you to filter announcements to meet your identified criteria (e.g., noncommercial education or international jobs).

Check out RPCV Career Link today at [www.peacecorps.gov/rpcvcareerlink](http://www.peacecorps.gov/rpcvcareerlink). Even if it isn’t time to start your job search, this is a great way to get an idea of the types of skills employers are looking for in RPCV candidates.

Happy job seeking!

#### PLANNING AWARD FROM PAGE 1 ■■■■■■■■▶

and migratory bird species. Burney said the final count had some 240 species, including protected species, and bolstered the argument to end contamination and clean up the reservoir.

In late 2011, Burney convinced the state to nominate Valsequillo as a Ramsar wetland of international importance. The designation was awarded in February 2012, bolstering the case for clean up.

At this point, Burney said, the local communities and the state government had committed to a plan with a mix of urban growth and agriculture, but the municipal government wouldn’t approve it. To bypass the local government, the state government declared the area a state park in April 2012.

Working with local communities and the state government, Burney helped design a zoning plan to manage land use that both maintained farming and prohibited large urban subdivisions.

Burney said the biggest success of the project was twofold: first, changing the perception of the reservoir into something of value and second, recognizing the quality of the planning process.

“The community went from wanting to do urban development, done in a poor way, to a more sustainable way, then to a conservation plan. That’s what it is now.”

“There will always be pressure to develop the area,” he said. “But now they can always see this process that led to conservation was done right. When there’s an argument for development, they can use this award and say, ‘We have recognition for this process. What we did was the right thing to do.’”

Indeed, much of Burney’s work focused on building collaboration between the community and the government.

“The last thing I did was help with the zoning plan. I tried to promote that, do some outreach,” he said. “There was a lot of distrust of the government. I spent the last two months going to community meetings, going to schools, meeting with farmers and talking about why it was important for them to continue what they were doing.”

Hernandez-Balzac concurred, “The award validated the planning process, the people involved and the technical aspects. Someone could come along and say, ‘Maybe it wasn’t done right.’ [But] here’s a whole bunch of people that validate it. Maybe there are things that can be changed, but you can’t just dismiss it.”

Mexico Country Director Daniel Evans said, “Volunteers worldwide share their skills and passions in many unique ways that leave a lasting impact on the communities where they live and work. [Burney’s] work exemplifies how Volunteers can make a difference.”



## Peace Corps One of 'Best Places to Work' in U.S. Government

*Agency is also No. 1 among small agencies for diversity and inclusion*

For the second year in a row, the Peace Corps was named the fourth best small federal agency to work for on the Best Places to Work in the Federal Government list. The Peace Corps also took the No. 1 spot among small federal agencies for support for diversity and inclusion.

Twenty-nine small federal agencies were ranked this year. The Peace Corps has participated in the rankings for three years, and this is the third year in a row that the Peace Corps has ranked in the top five for small agencies. The rankings are calculated by the Partnership for Public Service through an employee satisfaction survey of 700,000 federal employees from more than 360 federal agencies.

The rankings represent an in-depth look at the views of federal employees. Agencies are ranked in 10 workplace categories, including leadership, work/life balance, training and development, diversity, and teamwork. The rankings are compiled by the Partnership for Public Service from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and additional data. The Partnership for Public Service first produced the rankings in 2003.

## Peace Corps to End Programs in Bulgaria and Romania



A Volunteer in Bulgaria leads a group of local kids on a scavenger hunt through their village.

After more than 20 years of Volunteer service in Bulgaria and Romania, the Peace Corps will phase out the programs by the end of 2013. By working closely with host country partners, government institutions, and host communities to transfer knowledge and resources, the Peace Corps will leave a strong legacy in both countries.

Since 1991, the Peace Corps has worked in Bulgaria and Romania to help meet their needs for trained men and women in the areas of education, health,

agriculture, environment, youth in development, and community economic development. During that time both countries have experienced high rates of development and achieved membership in the European Union. More than 1,300 Volunteers have served in more than 300 communities across Bulgaria; more than 1,200 Volunteers have served in Romania.

The Peace Corps considers these programs to have been extraordinarily successful in terms of achieving its development and cultural exchange goals. Currently, there are 48 Volunteers serving in Bulgaria and 43 serving in Romania.

## Astronaut and RPCV Joe Acaba Compares Peace Corps Service to Living in Space



Astronaut and RPCV Joe Acaba speaks December 7, 2012, at Peace Corps headquarters for "Pasos Adelante: Hispanic Innovation in Action," a discussion on diversity in innovation.

Astronaut and returned Peace Corps Volunteer Joe Acaba visited Peace Corps headquarters on December 7 as the keynote speaker for "Pasos Adelante: Hispanic Innovation in Action," an event sponsored by the Peace Corps Office of Diversity and National Outreach. Acaba's speech was followed by a panel discussion highlighting the importance of diversity and innovation in an increasingly connected world.

"Peace Corps will always be a part of who I am. Serving in Peace Corps is just like living in space: You are working with people, away from your family, in a new environment, and you are occasionally faced with uncomfortable situations. I was just as affected by my service in Peace Corps as my time in space," said Acaba. "Being in Peace Corps, you learn to adapt, to communicate effectively, and to be creative—all 21st century skills that really got me to where I am today."

Acaba served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Dominican Republic from 1994–96 as an environmental education awareness promoter. Acaba has spent 138 days in space during two missions, most recently returning in September. He is recognized as the first NASA astronaut of Puerto Rican descent.

In addition to Acaba, the panel included Maria Elena Vivas-House, a senior executive director of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities National Internship Program; Patricia Leon-Guerrero, the managing director of national Latino initiatives for Teach

for America; and Alejandra (Manuela) McDonough (Panama, 2003–2005), who oversees the National Council of La Raza's health programs.

McDonough, who served as an environmental health Volunteer in Panama, credits her Peace Corps service for leading her to work in the public health sector.

"It was my experience on the ground, in the communities, that really sparked my interest in working in public health."

Currently, there are more than 600 Peace Corps Volunteers of Hispanic origin serving worldwide.

## Peace Corps Announces Top Volunteer States and Metropolitan Areas

In 2012, the metro area comprising Fort Collins and Loveland, Colo., was the leading producer of Peace Corps Volunteers per capita with 14.7 per 100,000 residents, ousting the 2011 and 2010 per capita leader, Missoula, Mont. The New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island metro area produced the greatest number of Volunteers with 345 in 2012, followed by the Washington-Arlington-Alexandria area with 338 Volunteers, and the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana area with 331 Volunteers.

For the second consecutive year, the District of Columbia, Vermont, and Oregon top the list of Volunteer-producing states per capita, with 8.1, 7.2, and 6.4 Volunteers per capita, respectively. Comparatively, the greatest number of Volunteers call California, New York, and Texas home with 1,084, 448, and 381 Volunteers, respectively.

## Peace Corps Announces Top Volunteer-Producing Colleges

For the first time, schools in a single state hold the No. 1 spot in the small, medium, and large undergraduate school categories for the 2013 Top Colleges rankings for producing Peace Corps Volunteers. Washington state now holds this noteworthy distinction, with University of Washington leading large schools with 107 alumni currently serving as Peace Corps Volunteers, while Western Washington University and Gonzaga University lead in the medium and small categories with 73 and 24 currently serving graduates, respectively.

Also for the first time, two universities are tied for first place in the large schools category, with University of Florida matching University of Washington's 107 undergraduate alumni currently serving as Peace Corps Volunteers. University of Florida made the largest leap of the undergraduate schools ranked No. 1 this year, up from No. 4 in 2012.

University of Wisconsin-Madison rounds out the top three large schools with 103 undergraduate alumni currently serving. In the medium schools category, American University and

George Washington University place second and third with 55 and 53 undergraduate alumni in service, respectively. St. Olaf College holds the No. 2 spot in the small schools category with 22 currently serving alumni, and University of Mary Washington comes in at No. 3 with 21 graduates in service. This is the first time that University of Florida, Western Washington University, and Gonzaga University have topped their respective categories since the Peace Corps began ranking schools based on the small, medium, and large enrollment numbers in 2003. University of Washington previously held the No. 1 large schools spot from 2007–10.

## Peace Corps Commemorates National Day of Service



Peace Corps staff pack food for distribution at the Capital Area Food Bank on the National Day of Service.

The Peace Corps joined Americans across the country in the nation's largest day of service, the annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. National Day of Service. This year, Martin Luther King Jr. Day coincided with the 57th Presidential Inauguration, and the Peace Corps community gave back by volunteering at local community service events and participating in the National Day of Service Fair on January 19 in Washington, D.C.

"Dr. King believed that lasting achievements in life came through sacrifice and service, and at Peace Corps we know that his message transcends borders," said Acting Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet. "Peace Corps Volunteers in the field work to make a difference in their communities through service every day, and they continue this legacy when they return home."

Hessler-Radelet volunteered at Food and Friends in Washington, D.C. which fosters a community of caring for men, women, and children living with HIV/AIDS, cancer, and other life-challenging illnesses by preparing and delivering specialized meals and groceries and providing nutrition counseling. In addition to Food and Friends, Peace Corps staff in the Washington area volunteered at the Capital Area Food Bank.

Representatives from Peace Corps participated in the National Day of Service Fair on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., which showcased approximately 100 nonprofit and community service groups, as well as speakers and musical performances.

# Thoko Waits: Heart and Desire of an Olympic Hopeful



By PATRICK CORBETT | PCV Malawi

Thoko crouches at the beaten metal bar, feet set firmly on the broken concrete floor. Callused hands close tightly over steel. His grip is slick, but chalk, like so many other things, is a wish gone unfulfilled. A deep breath; his 150-pound frame tightens visibly—a cat preparing to spring. Against gravity, Thoko explodes upward. He takes 319 pounds to his chest, pauses, and with a grunting final effort, locks the burden straight-armed overhead. He holds it high in a triumphant moment, then lets the bar crash back to earth. Chest heaving, the victor stands above his beaten steel opponent. Before Thoko's hopeful brown eyes, the uneven floor transforms into the layers of reinforced wood and rubber of a proper Olympic weightlifting platform. Thoko looks up and out from his imagined

Kakhongwe shines like a beacon. He is one of the top weightlifters in Africa in his 69 kilo division, and the top lifter in his home country of Malawi. As a Peace Corps Volunteer since February 2011, I have had the privilege to coach Thoko and his peers. In 25 years of working with strength athletes, Thoko is as talented and coachable a competitor as I have found. In an age of overpaid and egocentric athletes, Thoko is a welcome contrast as he greets each training day with calmness, humility, and integrity. Through a language barrier and a hearing impediment, for which medical care is unaffordable, he and I communicate perfectly. He learns quickly, as if the complex movements that Olympic lifts demand—honed over lifetimes—are woven like steel filaments into his DNA. When the rest of us flounder in 100 degree days in the barracks, his energy animates our strength-sapped bodies. When a fellow lifter despairs or finds the jarring surface of concrete, Thoko's strong hands and bright smile pull him back. Against all odds, laughter echoes against the rusty roof of the barracks, and Olympic dreams root in the infertile soil of hardship. But even Thoko is not enough. He and his fellow athletes struggle against more than weight and gravity: the crueler burden of disadvantage.



Coach and PCV Patrick Corbett and weightlifter Thoko Kakhongwe stand with a makeshift weight bar made of scrap iron and car parts in 2012 in Malawi.



Thoko Kakhongwe lifts at the Blantyre Youth Center in Blantyre, Malawi.

stage, into phantom camera flashes and applause. He savors the last, particularly, as his own hearing is severely impaired. Thoko closes his eyes, smiles. Then, with a tinge of reluctance, he reopens them to reality: a bar of scrap iron, weighted with car parts, inside a dilapidated army barracks machine shop. The 20-by-30 foot building, reeking of gas and oil, is held up with prayer, 2-by-4s, and rusty tin roofing. On hot days, it is an oven; on wet days, a pool, though the rips in the concrete floor at least drain some of the water.

Through the dark haze of these circumstances, 24-year-old Thoko

Through my involvement with the Malawi Olympic Committee, the National Council of Sports, and participation in regional and national competitions, I have seen firsthand the obstacles that athletes in this region of Africa face. Conditions are not just difficult, but unsafe: No weightlifter in the Western world would attempt lifts with car parts and salvage iron. But here in Malawi, options are more endangered than the once-prolific black rhinoceros: 85 percent of the population are subsistence farmers who live on less than \$2 a day; they dwell in thatched- or tin-roofed

homes without electricity, running water, or sanitation. In the entire country, there are only two proper Olympic training bars and bumper plate sets, donated by the International Weightlifting Federation several years ago. One set is housed in the capitol city of Lilongwe, the other in Blantyre at the Blantyre Youth Center, where Thoko and the rest sometimes visit to escape the barracks. The days of this equipment serving 60-some athletes daily are nearly over; if we are lucky, enough scrap iron will be found to replace it when it gives out in the near future. Those who come to use the ancient, cracked plates are no less worn in old sneakers, beaten loafers, and bowling shoes, and antique, over-large wrestling singlets that drape across lean muscle like funeral shrouds. The Blantyre facility is small and crowded, and it is a daily coin toss if there will be running water. Still, the athletes converge on the place. Like steel-slinging penitents on their pilgrim's road, they walk and run miles each day to train before the doors close at 5 p.m. Lifters have the 2–5 p.m. time slot, but with the sheer number of participants, many never touch the equipment; those who do receive far too little time to progress.

It is just as challenging for other sports in Malawi. Wherever team sports are attempted in schools and colleges across the country, there is typically one community ball shared by all. What meager facilities exist are not maintained, for one simple reason: It is unaffordable.

The story is the same for gifted individual athletes. In many countries, Olympic Committees provide for prodigies with transportation funds, housing, food, equipment, and expensive visas for international travel. There is none of this in Malawi. Athletes rely on themselves and family, and often come up prohibitively short. This makes Thoko's story so much more impressive.

There is national will for the 2012 London Olympic Games, and Thoko is likely the way. For the snatch and the clean and jerk—the lifts that epitomize Olympic weightlifting—he raised a combined personal total of 265 kilos (585 pounds). Less than two years before, it was only 125 kilos (275 pounds). If he can push his total to 300 kilos (660 pounds), Thoko has an excellent chance to represent Malawi in the Olympics.

At the 2012 Malawi National Championships in Blantyre, Thoko slipped twice on a competition platform that was cracked, warped, and unanchored. Only luck and this remarkable young man's athletic prowess allowed him to stick his final lift without injury, and earn his rightful place at the 2012 African Weightlifting Championships in Nairobi, Kenya. Qualifying, though, was the easy part. Raising the resources necessary for Thoko and his four teammates to attend the competition is the real work. In the meantime, Thoko waits. He dreams of London fog and stone towers, of trading a busted concrete floor for the Olympic stage.

Epilogue: The 2012 African Championships are a distant memory. While Africa's top weightlifters grunted and groaned under impossible weight and their own Olympic dreams, Malawi's best were at home. The 2012 London Olympic Games have come and gone. As the rest of the world competes, Thoko and other Malawian weightlifters remain in limbo.

The ugly truth of money and its ability to determine the outcome of people's lives is all too common for Malawi's athletes. The days, weeks, and months of training continue with little or no reward.

In a world of contradictions, we share a common humanity and sense of connection. If this connection is true, we can move past the contradictions, level the playing field, and give these athletes the opportunities they deserve—even more, the opportunities they have earned.



# NOTES *from the* FIELD

## *A Brief Look at Posts and Projects*

### DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

#### Conference Helps Youth Create Sustainable Business Plans

Volunteer Brian Humphreys (2010–2013) recently collaborated with local organizations for the 2012 National Business Plan Competition and Conference. During the three-day conference, Humphreys and business leaders helped more than 70 at-risk Dominican youth create small business proposals outlining ways to alleviate poverty in their communities. The youth submitted 34 business plans; the top two participants received 10,000 pesos each to carry out their proposals. Humphreys and organization members will help the remaining youth to develop their proposals.



Youth participants in the Dominican Republic's business plan competition gather at the three-day event.

### GEORGIA

#### Spelling Competition Engages Thousands of Students Nationwide

Volunteer Guszt "Gus" Davidson (2011–2013) and five other PCVs are working with local nongovernmental organizations, government officials, private-sector companies, schools, and community members across Georgia to organize the first National English Spelling Competition open to students nationwide. More than 2,400 students from grades eight–12 participated in local preliminary competitions held in October 2012 and, of those, 1,000 students moved on to the regional competitions held in early December. The 34 winners of the nine regional competitions will head to Tbilisi to participate in the national competition on March 30.

### KENYA

#### Health Training Benefits Men in Community

Volunteer Andrea Flynn-Schneider (2011–2013) helped organize a week-long training for more than 30 men in her village to educate them on HIV prevention and healthy lifestyle choices. In Kenya, women receive the majority of family and health education while men make decisions for the family. Topics discussed during the training included gender equality, male and female anatomy, family planning, and HIV

prevention. On the last day of training, the men took part in a graduation ceremony and shared their new knowledge with family and community members.

### KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

#### Volunteer to Publish First Kyrgyz-English Dictionary

Volunteer Willoughby Ann Walshe (2012–2014) is publishing the first comprehensive Kyrgyz-English dictionary to be printed in the nation. When she started teaching English at a small secondary school in her village, Walshe learned her students didn't have dictionaries to make translations from their native language into English. With over 30 years of publishing and translation experience, Walshe and a local university English teacher teamed up to compile a dictionary of 80,000 terms and phrases. The dictionary is expected to be available in spring 2013.



Volunteer Willoughby Ann Walshe is publishing the first comprehensive Kyrgyz-English dictionary.

### SENEGAL

#### Volunteers Lead Mangrove Reforestation Effort

Volunteers Garrison Harward (2010–2012), Robert Rivera (2011–2013), and Jamie Whitehead (2010–2012) collaborated with 45 PCVs and 25 local community members to lead the reforestation of a mangrove forest in the Sine Saloum Delta region of Senegal. Mangroves help clean the water and air, prevent erosion, provide habitat, and contribute nutrients to the fertile waters off the Senegal coast. The Sine Saloum Delta provides habitat for countless species, including some endangered species, and is essential as a nursery for fish. This effort, the third annual mangrove reforestation event in the region, resulted in planting 40,000 red mangrove seedlings.

### MOROCCO

#### Youth Citizen Journalism Group Votes on Future

Volunteers Maureen Sieh (Morocco, 2010–2012) and David McDonald (Morocco, 2012–2014) facilitated a four-day journalism workshop for 28 Moroccan youth who were part of a citizen journalist club, Ouarzazate

eNews, based in Ouarzazate, Morocco. Founded in 2011 through Sieh's leadership, the journalism club recently transitioned to a sustainable, youth-run organization. In November 2012, the club discussed and voted on the organization's future. During the workshop, youth learned the basics of journalistic writing, photography, and videography, with the goal of empowering them with skills to mold their society's future via mass communication.



Workshop participants and members of Ouarzazate eNews vote on the future of a citizen journalism group in Morocco.

### SWAZILAND

#### Sanitation Workshop Teaches the Importance of Hygiene

Volunteers Addy and Ryan Hall (2011–2013) teamed up with fellow PCVs and local Swazi organizations to lead a weeklong sanitation workshop in a refugee camp of more than 300 residents. In addition to cleaning up garbage, the workshop included sessions on hygiene, recycling, and preventable diseases. Throughout the week, camp residents participated in discussions and activities about the importance of sanitation. They also learned new ways to recycle trash and to generate income through recycling. The group collected more than 100 bags of trash, built a fenced-in trash pit, and developed a new plumbing system for the camp.



Participants of the sanitation workshop collaborate during a session.

### VANUATU

#### Computer Skills Enable Women to Support Families, Communities

Volunteer Willow Denker (2011–2013) is helping seven women from across Vanuatu gain access to computers and learn basic computer skills. After recognizing the need for public access to comput-

ers and basic skills training, Denker and seven interested women formed Mamas' Computer Group. The group meets regularly to learn computer skills and hold fundraising events to buy more computer equipment and attend advanced classes. The group recently raised money to attend a 20-hour typing class.

### UKRAINE

#### Dental Hygiene Demonstrations Improve Health

Volunteer Alex Eaton (2010–2013) is working with local dentists and teachers in his community to educate youth on the benefits of dental hygiene. Eaton and the dentists traveled to area schools and gave demonstrations on proper tooth brushing and flossing since many of the students have never been to the dentist. After each demonstration, Eaton distributes dental hygiene kits with toothbrushes, toothpaste, floss, and mouthwash so the students can continue the healthy habits at home.



A local dentist demonstrates proper flossing to kindergarteners in Ukraine.

## PEACE CORPS | Times

*A publication for Peace Corps Volunteers serving worldwide*

#### Staff

Director of Communications	Maureen Knightly
Acting Deputy Director of Communications	Kristen Fernekes
Editor	Sarah Blazucki
Writer	Jodi Hammer
Staff Contributors	Erin Durney Mary Fuller
Design and Layout	Juan Carlos Polanco Bethany Poteat Theresa Welling
Interns	Yara Bishara Kelsey Hulbert Jennifer Vitek

We welcome all Volunteer submissions and suggestions. Contact us at:

Peace Corps Times  
c/o Office of Communications  
Paul D. Coverdell  
Peace Corps Headquarters  
1111 20th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20526  
or email: [pectimes@peacecorps.gov](mailto:pectimes@peacecorps.gov)

FPO FSC logo