



PEACE
CORPS

Times

INSIDE ISSUE 2, 2013



COMMUNITY ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT

- ▶ Traveling Back to Suriname
- ▶ Success in Failed Projects
- ▶ Creative Corps in Ecuador

PCVs Help Women's Co-op Build, Rebuild, 25 Years Apart

In 1985, PCV Juliet Mason helped a women's cooperative in Hopkins, Belize, develop a plan to build an ecotourism beach resort that would use renewable building materials and local food sources, close to the jaguar preserve. Using Mason's plan, the women obtained funding for the project, eventually building a total of 10 cabanas on the property, including a restaurant.

It was the first of its kind in the area, which at the time had no tourist accommodations. The resort grew into a unique cultural epicenter, welcoming guests from Belize and around the world.

In 2003 and 2005, fires destroyed the buildings—arson was blamed for one of them—and the women had to start rebuilding, literally from the ground up.

"Before the fires, Sandy Beach Resort was an excellent representation of a community enterprise, a place of culture, and a source of local pride," said PCV Meghan VanDeventer (Belize, 2011-13).

After many years of hard work, the women reopened the restaurant last year and are determined to return the resort to its prime.

The resort's rise and heyday

When Mason worked with the women's cooperative in Belize, it was the first of its kind in the country. A core group of about 10 women came to her with their project idea of a cooperatively owned resort that would be the first ecotourism accommodations for travelers and would provide income to help villagers support themselves locally.

"The population was special in that they were more closely associated with the land and could stay local," Mason said. "They were close to fishing and food sources; there were farms a little outside of Hopkins. On the beach, it was a pretty ideal situation if you could stay there."

Mason added that one of the goals of the project was to encourage the local population to stay rather than leave the country to find work.

Working with the women, Mason developed a business plan and connected them to grant- and loan-making development agencies.

Eventually, funding to jumpstart the project came through as Mason was



Members of the Sandy Beach Cooperative gather on the restaurant deck (clockwise, from left). Diners enjoy the food and the view at the Sandy Beach Restaurant. The Sandy Beach co-op board members and PCV Meghan VanDeventer (third from left) stand on the beach by the restaurant in Belize earlier this year.



closing out her service in the mid-'80s.

Over the next two decades, the co-op built a thriving business—and a cultural center—for the village of 1,500.

"My counterparts have always described Sandy Beach Resort as a place they'd call home before merely considering it a place of business," VanDeventer said. "To them, it represented so much more as they could informally share their culture—making home-cooked meals for traveling guests, who had interest in the Garifuna culture and desired a unique, authentic, and adventurous experience—while providing food for their families at the same time."

It was here that a well-known Garifuna musician, Andy Palacio, recorded his last album. They hosted community events at the resort, and it allowed the women to fund community events and projects elsewhere.

"Sandy Beach Resort provided a source of income that would allow their children to pursue higher education outside the village," VanDeventer said.

"Period of depression"

During Mason's service in the 1980s, Hopkins was a relatively isolated community with subsistence farming and fishing and no running water or electricity.

Since the mid-2000s, an economic

divide developed between the locals and foreign business owners, as the area has been rapidly developed.

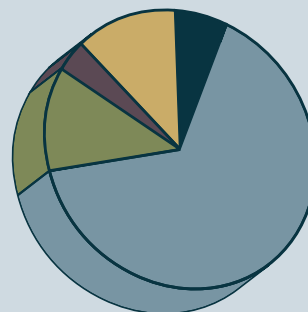
"A handful of high-end resorts were built up within a mile from Sandy Beach, along with restaurants and convenience shops," VanDeventer said. "The village they'd known when Sandy Beach Resort was fully operational has completely changed, and so has the

tourism market. The rest of Hopkins had not just been positively modernized by a running water system and electricity, but was transformed by a newly consumer-driven economy."

With the influx of tourism, the costs of living for the rural community increased, resulting in the divide between wealthy foreigners and local na-

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What's the best way to stay in touch with friends and family back home during your Peace Corps service?



- Email: 6%
- Social Media: 65%
- Skype/Video Chat: 12%
- Snail Mail: 4%
- Phone Calls/Texting: 12%

There's nothing like receiving a letter or package in the mail to brighten your day. —E.C.

IMessage! My sister has an iPod touch and I have an iPhone; we text every day. She's over in China right now. —R.C.

My first year, good old-fashioned mail. The second year in-country, cellphones started coming out, so texts and the occasional call from parents. Looking back, I loved that we had to write letters because you have them forever. While I was in country though, I loved that I could text anyone back home at anytime. —J.S.D.



That Was Then ... This is Now

RPCV Returns to Suriname for Closure

On April 11, the Peace Corps announced the phasing out of its program in Suriname after an 18-year partnership. Peace Corps Office of Third Goal and Returned Volunteer Services sent Program Specialist Kat Edwards, who served in Suriname from 2006–09, to assist in the final close of service conference for the post.

“I served for two years in a small Native American pineapple farming village on the northern edge of the Amazon rainforest as a Community Economic Development Volunteer,” said Edwards. “While in my village, I worked with the local women’s group to create crafts to sell to tourists who visited the village on their way to see Jodensavanna, a nearby historical site. I then extended for a year and worked with UNICEF.”

Although Edwards had not been back to the country since her service closed, she had no trouble readjusting to her Surinamer lifestyle. “It felt like I was returning home when I got on the plane and heard the fluid mix of Sranan Tongo and Dutch that I learned to speak,” she said. “I returned to my village and was even able to visit my host mom. I was humbled to see a picture of the two of us is still hanging in her house, seven

years after it was taken.”

Many of the sites and faces Edwards remembered from her time living and working in Suriname remained the same, but she did notice one major difference upon her return. “In Suriname, children call women who are older than them ‘tante,’ which means ‘aunt.’ When I was a Volunteer the children just called me Kat because they saw me more as a peer, but many of the elders would get angry with them and tell them it was disrespectful. When I returned, most of those children were in their late teens and were suddenly calling me Tante Kat.”

Throughout her two-week stay, Edwards attended many of the final events hosted by Peace Corps, including a reception at the Ambassador’s residence, a photo exhibit featuring photos taken by 17 generations of Peace Corps Volunteers, the premiere of a legacy film and the three-day close of service conference for the last group of 20 Volunteers. She also spent time work-



PCV Kat Edwards poses with local children during her Suriname service.



Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Kat Edwards returns to Suriname for the close of the program.

ing with the last group of currently serving Volunteers to learn about various projects and provide readjustment advice and career counseling.

“I spent a week working with the 20 PCVs stationed throughout Suriname. I am truly proud of how they have carried on the legacy of the 16 groups that served before them and have seamlessly integrated into their communities to foster sustainable development and mutual understanding.”

While the Peace Corps office in Suriname will officially close in July 2013, Edwards believes the program’s strong legacy and the friendships cultivated throughout the partnership will continue.

“The friendships between the people of Suriname and America are still strong, and I believe they will remain that way.”

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tives considered economically poor.

The fires in 2003 and 2005 leveled the resort. As the cabanas were made of thatch, the damage was irreparable and insurance didn’t cover the damage. They’d lost nearly everything.

Moreover, after the fires the women, who had been considered leaders and proud business owners in a machismo society, lost much of their standing in the community.

“They went through a period of depression because they lost everything after the fires and, unfortunately, that included much respect from the community in the years following,” VanDeventer said. “Many of the members had to find work elsewhere, while others have showed up at the empty property, trying to earn income by catering food, but failing to sustain. They said they ‘felt like fools,’ but didn’t give up hope for their dream of restoring Sandy Beach and regaining their financial dignity.”

As local businesses don’t often succeed in the area, the community saw Sandy Beach co-op as hopeless.

“For the most part, the Garinagu natives in Hopkins cannot compete with the sizable population of foreign business owners,” VanDeventer said. “Due to transportation issues, along with a lack of education, business de-

velopment, and marketing know-how among locals, it’s become common for the Garifuna people in the community to accept poverty as their lot in life.



Members of the Sandy Beach co-op cook in the rebuilt kitchen.

“Other community members started to rely on the foreign-owned businesses for jobs, typically earning \$15 a day—a working man’s wage—while still living in a comparatively expensive community, and few people who were able to earn educations after primary school remain in Hopkins Village.

“Truth be told, six years after the second fire destroyed Sandy Beach Resort, most of the community considered Sandy Beach co-op a long lost cause,” VanDeventer said. “When I first moved to the village, people would laugh at me when I’d tell them I’m a Peace Corps Volunteer and explained what my pri-

mary assignment was here in Hopkins.

“Everybody familiar with Peace Corps, as we have a long-standing positive reputation in Hopkins, would tell me that I was crazy to think I could help them to get Sandy Beach back up and running. Meanwhile, the remaining ladies of the cooperative knew they were thought to be helpless and felt ashamed because they knew people had written them off as failures.”

Rebuilding their dreams

In 2007, the women used their savings to put down a foundation for the new restaurant.

When VanDeventer first came to Sandy Beach co-op in spring 2011, the women themselves were putting up the cinderblocks to make the walls and roof.

“They didn’t have money or financing for the rest of it,” she said. “They’d been trying raise money locally, continuing to do that over the last couple of years. But it didn’t get built until the fall of 2011.”

The women obtained a few small grants and slowly made progress.

In May 2011, VanDeventer was assigned to Sandy Beach Cooperative, and began working with the women to apply for additional funding.

It wasn’t until October 2011 that

the co-op received a \$20,000 grant from the Self-Development of People organization that enabled the completion of the construction of the restaurant, which reopened in November 2012.

Since re-opening, VanDeventer has worked with the co-op on a business plan for the rest of the resort, as well as business, marketing, and financial management skills and customer service.

The restaurant brings in mostly tourists for the lunch crowd and has hosted cultural events and private celebrations, including a wedding.

The restaurant was recently added to TripAdvisor and will be listed in the next edition of “Lonely Planet Belize.”

In the short term, the women hope to earn income and become profitable as a micro-enterprise. In the long-term, they want to rebuild the cabanas, buy a vehicle, and have the property landscaped so they can compete with other area businesses.

“They wanted to feel good about themselves again by being business owners, and I believe they have been accomplishing just that,” VanDeventer said. “As they regularly encounter the reality that the industry has changed rather dramatically, and consequently, face unexpected challenges every day, they are continuously learning, growing, and adapting.”

From Peace Corps to Marriage Equality Advocate

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court will hand down rulings on two cases that affect marriage equality for same-sex couples. One case seeks to overturn the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which forbids the federal government from recognizing state-sanctioned same-sex marriages. At issue in the other case is whether a state referendum can reverse marriage rights already awarded by the court and/or legislature.

One of the main drivers in the same-sex marriage effort is Evan Wolfson, a returned Peace Corps Volunteer who served in Togo from 1978–80.

Wolfson was an education PCV who taught English at a middle/high school, as well as philosophy and sex education.

He also helped build a library, which became the second largest in the country, and taught animal traction, also known as cattle plowing.

Wolfson earned his bachelor's degree from Yale before his service, then his J.D. from Harvard afterward.

The long-time marriage equality advocate said he joined the Peace Corps for much the same reason as many others: to make a difference.

"It was a combination of wanting to do something in the public interest, in public service," he said. "And the opportunity to have the experience of living abroad, the adventure."

Though Wolfson has had many successes since his service, he credits the Peace Corps with shaping his views on society and the impact of language.

"The Peace Corps was an enormously enriching and important experience for me," he said. "I gained the extraordinary benefit of living in another society, being on my own, and having the chance to learn from a different society and group of people at a young age."

Wolfson also credited his service as the catalyst for his awareness of the deep impact of societal discrimination.

"It contributed to my understanding of how discrimination can shape people's lives and their own identity. This was original to me: I met friends who, had they grown up in a different society, they would have been gay. But Togo didn't give them that opportunity. They conformed to a very different set of expectations and even an understanding of who they were."

As Togo didn't have concepts of gay and lesbian identities at the time, Wolfson said he came to understand that language was central for people to understand and define who they are.

While in service, Wolfson said he came to accept that he was gay though it wasn't something he could have shared: Homosexual activity is illegal in Togo, and there was neither language nor tolerance for it at the time. (As of a 1980 Togolese law, impudent acts or crimes against nature with an individual of the same sex are punishable by up to three years of imprisonment and a fine.)

After his Peace Corps service, Wolfson graduated from Harvard Law School in 1983. He served as a pro bono attorney for Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, a national nonprofit that works to achieve equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, from 1984–89, then as a full-time attorney there from 1989–2001.

In 2004, Wolfson founded Freedom to Marry, which advocates for marriage equality at the state and federal levels, as well as works to increase public approval of marriage equality. The organization now has about 20 employees and a \$9 million annual budget.

"Freedom to Marry is the key driver



Freedom to Marry president and returned Peace Corps Volunteer Evan Wolfson (Togo, 1978–80) teaches during his service.

of much of the work on three tracks: winning more states, growing the majority, and tackling federal marriage discrimination," Wolfson said.

State laws are changing, with three states passing same-sex marriage laws in May. When these go into effect later this year, 12 states and the District of Columbia will allow same-sex marriage.

For Wolfson, states are key to gaining national marriage equality, particularly in the Supreme Court's upcoming rulings on California's Proposition 8 and DOMA.

"If the court overturns DOMA, it will add the moral weight on the side of the couples," he said. "But the real question is how the court rules on Proposition 8. We have this momentum—assuming we can restore California and bring down DOMA, so that the federal government is not adding an additional layer of discrimination. We can continue

to add more states even as we continue to see public support grow.

"One of the most moving successes we've had is seeing the marriage equality movement now understood not just as important for gay people but as part of core American values and part of the great American experiment."

Wolfson's end goal for Freedom to Marry is to put itself out of business: When marriage equality is legal and respected in all 50 states, and all couples have access to the 1,138 rights and responsibilities that marriage provides, Freedom to Marry will be obsolete.

Then, he can return to international work.

"I very much hope that, when the time comes, I can move beyond marriage," Wolfson said. "I would like to live abroad for a while for the next chapter with my husband. Hopefully the right job and the right opportunity will come."

Career Corner

Lemonade Out of Lemons: Finding Success in Failed Projects

Though it may come as a surprise, some of the best transferable skills are gained from overcoming challenges and failed projects. Even for Volunteers who report having a deeply challenging service overall (whether due to a site assignment, health struggles, counterpart match, etc.), the lessons learned from failures and struggles can be instrumental components of professional development. For example, patience and perseverance in the face of bureaucracy or seemingly unending setbacks are marketable skills, as is adaptability in a constantly changing environment.

Most Volunteers are extremely proud of their successful projects, and rightfully so. But often Volunteers don't give themselves enough credit for—or even reference—work related to unsuccessful projects on résumés and don't discuss them in job interviews.

There are many reasons for a project to not be successful, and often the reasons are out of a Volunteer's control. However, that doesn't detract from the work a Volunteer contributed to the project. The key

to discussing challenges or even failed projects with prospective employers is to stay positive and focus on the skills developed and/or lessons learned in the process. This will demonstrate maturity and a positive attitude—highly in demand in today's job market.

For example, many Volunteers apply for at least one grant during their service, yet not all grant projects come to fruition, sometimes because of unrelated circumstances such as the medical evacuation of a Volunteer or the unexpected closure of a country program due to safety and security issues. Even in these cases, PCVs can reference the work they put into the grant application such as proposal writing, budgeting, and forging relationships with community leaders.

For interviews, discussing a failed project can be extremely beneficial and allow a job applicant to conquer one of the more challenging interview questions. You may hear some variation of the question, "Tell me about a time where you had to deal with failure on the job. How did you handle the situation and what would

you do differently now?" This is an excellent opportunity to talk about a failed project while emphasizing the part you took in the development of the plan and what you learned from the experience. Be prepared to discuss one or two examples.

For résumés, always include successful projects first. However, experience from a failed project can also be included. This work can include grant writing, community organizing, youth development, conducting a training or needs assessment, monitoring and evaluation, or working with community leaders. Just because a project failed or a grant wasn't funded doesn't mean it can't be included on a résumé.

Remember, we've all experienced failure. Most employers are looking for someone who can learn from mistakes and maintain a positive outlook even in the face of challenges. The key is to acknowledge challenges and failures, while focusing on the valuable lessons learned and how to use that experience in subsequent projects.



Peace Corps Partners With Mondelēz International

The Peace Corps announced a strategic partnership with Mondelēz International Inc., the world's largest chocolate company, to strengthen sustainable agriculture and community development efforts in countries around the world. The first partnership initiative, launching this year in the Dominican Republic, will focus on the development of youth business and entrepreneurial skills with the Build Your Dreams training program.

Through Build Your Dreams programs, PCVs will help youth in host communities build entrepreneurial skills, such as financial literacy and market research. The Build Your Dreams curriculum comprises 14 business-oriented lessons followed by regional conferences, where participating youth get help writing a business plan. The best plans from across the country are judged by a panel at a national conference, and winners receive loans to start up their ventures.

Mondelēz International has pledged more than \$165,000 over three years to support the program. During that time, the Peace Corps plans to train 1,200 Dominican youth using the curriculum, expects 360 business plans to be submitted to the national competition, and is preparing PCVs to consult with 120 youth-led start-up businesses.

Top PCV-Producing Hispanic Serving Institutions Announced

The Peace Corps recognized the top Volunteer-producing Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs) in April. University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, N.M., jumped four spots from No. 4 in 2012 to lead the 2013 list with 24 undergraduate alumni currently serving as Peace Corps Volunteers and 439 alumni having

served since 1961. Currently, more than 615 PCVs report they are Hispanic.

The top 10 PCV-producing HSIs are University of New Mexico, 24; California State University—Fullerton, 23; California State University—Northridge, 19; University of Miami, 16; Florida International University, 15; California State University—Los Angeles, 14; California State University—Fresno, 11; University of Texas—San Antonio, 10; California State University—San Bernardino, 8; Texas A&M University—Corpus Christi, 8.

Top Historically Black Colleges and Universities Announced

The Peace Corps is proud to recognize the top Volunteer-producing historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). This year, Howard University in Washington, D.C., holds the top rank for HBCUs with 21 undergraduate alumni serving as Peace Corps Volunteers and 204 alumni having served abroad since 1961.

The No. 2 school was Morehouse College with eight PCVs and the No. 3 school was Spelman College with five.



Howard University grad and PCV Christina Titus with students in Rwanda

Suriname Program to Phase Out by July 2013

After an 18-year partnership, Peace Corps announced in April that it is phasing out its program in Suriname. The agency office will officially close at the end of July 2013.

Nearly 450 health and community economic development Volunteers have served in more than 100 villages, towns, and cities in Suriname. In accordance with Suriname's national priorities for development, the Peace Corps program

has focused on supporting underserved communities, particularly small towns and remote villages with predominantly minority populations.

In commemoration of the program, Peace Corps Suriname began a legacy project in September 2012 to document current and past Volunteer projects throughout the country. The legacy project culminated with a week-long series of events that included a reception at the ambassador's residence, a photo exhibit featuring photos taken by 17 classes of Peace Corps Volunteers, the premier of a legacy film, and a three-day close of service conference for the last group of 20 PCVs. Seven Peace Corps Response Volunteers will continue to live and work in Suriname until the post officially closes.

The final legacy event took place on April 5 in the capital city of Paramaribo. Speakers from Peace Corps headquarters, the U.S. Embassy in Suriname, and the Surinamese government participated in handing over the project work.



Acting Country Director Lenny Teh, U.S. Ambassador to Suriname Jay Anania, and two Peace Corps Volunteers unveil a world map project in Suriname before the July program closing.

St. Kitts and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda to be Phased Out

The Peace Corps announced it is officially phasing out of St. Kitts and Nevis and Antigua and Barbuda after five decades of meeting the island nations' need for trained men and women in education, health, agriculture, environment, youth and development, and community economic development. These two island nations, part of the Eastern Caribbean post, have reached a high level of development and, as a result, Peace Corps of-

ficially closed the programs on January 1.

Volunteers in St. Kitts and Nevis worked in youth development, institutional development, small business development, and HIV/AIDS prevention, and as Peace Corps Response Volunteers. Volunteers in Antigua and Barbuda worked in youth development and as Peace Corps Response Volunteers.

The Eastern Caribbean post also has programs in Dominica, St. Lucia, Grenada, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, which will continue.



A Peace Corps Volunteer works with students in Nevis prior to the program's close after five decades.

Sierra Leone Head Visits PC/HQ

Peace Corps Deputy Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet welcomed President Ernest Bai Koroma of the Republic of Sierra Leone on March 23 to Peace Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C., as part of the Loret Miller Ruppe Speaker Series. Since 1962, more than 3,615 PCVs have served in Sierra Leone in the areas of education, environment, and health.

After closing in 1994 due to political unrest, the Peace Corps program in Sierra Leone reopened in 2010. Currently more than 90 PCVs work in math, science, and English education in 12 districts across the country and four Peace Corps Response Volunteers are training teachers in higher-education institutions.

Before the event, Koroma was reunited with returned PCV Sharon Kasper Alvarado. Alvarado served in Sierra Leone from 1964–66 as an education Volunteer and knew Koroma's family and schoolmates. The two had not seen each other for nearly 50 years.

Koroma was first elected in 2007 and is the fourth president of Sierra Leone.

Banana Bread

INGREDIENTS

1 STICK BUTTER
1 1/2 CUPS SUGAR
2 EGGS
1/2 CUP MILK
3 MASHED BANANAS
2 CUPS FLOUR
2 TSP BAKING SODA
2 TSP BAKING POWDER
1 TSP VANILLA
OPTIONAL: CINNAMON, NUTS, RAISINS, OATMEAL

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Cream together butter and sugar. Add eggs. Mix in mashed bananas and milk; mix well. Add 1 cup flour, then baking soda, baking powder, and vanilla; mix well. Add remaining 1 cup flour and any optional ingredients. Mix well and pour into greased baking pan. Bake for 25–30 minutes, or until golden brown and knife inserted into the center of the loaf comes out clean.

Recipe and photo submitted by Sarah Robinson (PCV, Nicaragua, 2011–13). Source: "The Food Security Cookbook: Based on the Rural Nicaraguan Experience"



PCV Sarah Robinson and local women in Nicaragua bake banana bread.



NOTES *from the* FIELD

A Brief Look at Posts and Projects

ALBANIA

School green space raises environmental awareness

Volunteers Sarah Collier (2011–13) and Karl Enchelmayer (2012–14) received a Small Projects Assistance grant to revitalize the grounds of a local school. By collaborating with school staff and students, Collier and Enchelmayer were able to add nearly 100 square meters of improved green space to the school's grounds. Several varieties of trees and vegetation were planted, and new benches and trash bins were donated by local businesses. The green space will provide ongoing hands-on learning experiences and will raise environmental awareness for the school and community.



In Albania, PCVs Sarah Collier and Karl Enchelmayer watch as a tree is planted at a local school.

BENIN

National spelling bee brings diverse students together

Volunteer Serena Cheung (2011–13) is working with communities across Benin to bring together 54 students from 27 secondary schools to take part in the fifth annual National English Spelling Bee. The event aims to bolster student motivation and generate discussions of health and gender rights. The spelling bee brings people from different communities and backgrounds together while also supporting creative learning opportunities to further the education of participants.

BOTSWANA

Renovations to art center bring unity to community

Volunteer Shanta Adeeb (2011–13) is working with her community to renovate and expand the local art center. The center currently serves as a space for more than 65 area artists and craft producers to create and sell contemporary pieces in the traditions of their ancestors. Built in 1990, the center provides space to local artists, most of whom have no formal training, to create and display their work. Art produced at the center has

been exhibited in galleries around the world, sold to private and public collections, and featured in publications. Due to the art's popularity and increasing community participation, the center needs renovations to update infrastructure and provide the artists with more space, including a new craft shop, silk printing room, and dark room.



An artist in Botswana paints at the local art center, which PCV Shanta Adeeb is helping to renovate and expand.

ECUADOR

Souvenir shop establishes women as community leaders

Volunteer Kristin Farr (2011–13) is working with nine Ecuadorean women to develop a souvenir shop that will generate income through the sale of local items. Items for sale will include screenprinted T-shirts and chocolates made from cocoa cultivated in the area. In addition to generating income for the women, the business will encourage fellow community members to pursue business opportunities of their own. Twenty percent of the profits earned will go toward funding community-based projects focused on environmental awareness, women's empowerment, and education.



In Ecuador, PCV Kristin Farr is working with a group of women to open a souvenir shop to sell locally produced goods, such as chocolate and screenprinted T-shirts.

GEORGIA

Project provides working sinks and toilets to 200 students

Volunteer Kelley Gallagher (2011–13) recently refurbished three bath-

rooms and the kitchen of a school in Georgia, which now provides more than 200 students and 20 staff members with access to working sinks and toilets. Three new toilets and three new sinks were installed and old pipes throughout the building were replaced. Prior to this project, the pipe that carried water to the second floor of the school was broken, and teachers had to carry water up the stairs in order to clean up messes and dispose of waste.

PARAGUAY

Sunshades encourage sustainable gardening

Volunteer John Bottcher (2011–13) is working with his community in Paraguay to build sunshades for the community gardens that will allow crops to thrive during summer months. The project will provide 40 families with the materials to build sunshades, and a member of each family will attend five seminars related to building the shades, nutrition, and gardening. Community members will be invited to attend seminars on a variety of topics ranging from climate change, nutrition, and soil and water conservation to the use of trees and vines to create natural shade. A portion of the funds were raised through the Peace Corps Partnership Program.



In Paraguay, PCV John Bottcher works with his community to build sunshades so that crops can be grown through the hot summer.

UGANDA

Mobile clinics give communities access to health services

Volunteer Chris Peterson (2012–14) is working with a Ugandan organization that provides assistance to orphans across the country to prepare and lead three mobile health clinics each week. More than 100 villages are serviced by the clinics, which are attended by 70–120 community members interested in learning about healthy lifestyle choices. Attendees also receive free preventive and curative medicines and participate in a malaria prevention lesson.

UKRAINE

Cultural events spur creativity

Volunteer Robert Dekay (2010–13) is working with members of a local nongovernmental organization to provide his community with free access to cultural events, including concerts, art festivals, and photography exhibitions, without having to travel to larger cities. The events aim to eliminate the stigma attached to creativity, freedom of thought, and artistic expression that historically exists in Ukraine. The first event of the series was attended by more than 50 community members and featured films by local artists, giving attendees a chance to interact with the artists and discuss their work.



Local community members in Ukraine play instruments and work to erase the stigma against creativity.

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Volunteer Life

Spurring the ‘Creation Corps’ in Ecuador

By MARISA CATALINA CASEY | PCV Ecuador, 2012-14

When I was younger, I remember people telling me things about myself in that way that parents and older siblings do: “You’re so creative,” my sister would say. “You have a strong internal compass,” my mother often told me. I didn’t always know what they meant, but as I grew older I realized they were right. When I think about what guided me to join the Peace Corps and why I think service is important, the voices of my mother and sister echo in my mind. I have come to realize that Peace Corps service is one of the most creative and meaningful experiences of my life.



The women artisans of Mujeres Cambia proudly display jewelry they’ve made.

Why is volunteering with the Peace Corps important? For me, it’s important because I want to spend my time, energy, and enthusiasm on projects that are meaningful and fulfilling. I want to know that my work has value, that I am helping to shape a world in which I would want to raise children, that I am appreciated and appreciative of each and every experience. I also want to be challenged—challenged to find the uncommon answer, to stretch beyond my comfort zone, to stay positive, and to test my creativity. That’s what Peace Corps means to me personally.



Recycled paper jewelry made by Mujeres Cambia is for sale in Ecuador, the States, Canada, and Europe.

In a broader sense, though, I think that being of service—to a country, to a community or to a family—is important. One of the most difficult and humbling things that you can do is to give of yourself, and that’s what you have to do nearly 100 percent of the time in the Peace

Corps. Whether it is communicating in a language that is not your own, navigating unfamiliar terrain, learning new cultural cues, challenging your own (and others’) assumptions, testing new business practices, or fighting stereotypes, a Peace Corps Volunteer is always on (even when said Volunteer is hiding from it all watching movies on a laptop and eating comfort food).

Always being on means that the life of a Volunteer in a community is constantly producing ripple effects, even unbeknownst to the Volunteer. A good example of this is one of the projects my husband Paul and I work on called Mujeres Cambia. This is a micro-enterprise run by 18 female artisans, founded by now returned Peace Corps Volunteer Jessica DeLallo nearly two years ago in the fishing town of San Pablo, Ecuador. We have been advising the group since April 2012.

The members of Mujeres Cambia come together to make and sell recycled paper jewelry, working toward individual goals that each woman has set for herself. The goals range from earning enough money to buy more nutritious food for her family to building a new house to running her own business.

While I could rattle off impressive data about our first year with the group—earning over \$10,000 in sales; setting up a website; initiating a financial literacy program; selling jewelry in boutiques across Ecuador, the United States, Canada, and Europe; working with several government ministries; and even being invited to present at a Hewlett Packard corporate event—the moments I hold most dear are the smaller ones.

Witnessing Elba, who dreams of being the first in her family to attend college, making her first sale over \$10. Jenny, who didn’t attend secondary school but who Paul trained to be the group’s treasurer, proudly displaying the group’s balanced books. Gina, president of Mujeres Cambia, leading a workshop for 100 people at the Peace Corps training center.

Then, I think about the children of Mujeres Cambia members. In particular, I think about the daughters who watch their mothers succeed, who see them making financial contributions to the family, who start to learn that their futures are not pre-destined. They have the choice to continue attending school, to not start a family if they don’t want to, to graduate from secondary school, or to go to college or work outside the home. Those are the ripple effects I imagine will continue long after we leave. This is why the Peace Corps is essential.

In a popular song from the musical “Rent,” there is a line that has always stuck with me: “The opposite of war isn’t peace...it’s creation.” In my experience, Paul and I are definitely part of the “creation corps.” Each and every day we have to be innovative in the ways that we solve problems large and small.

On the surface, it’s obvious how starting an art and design center with the local youth group in our town of Palmar would be creative. Less obvious is how crafty one must be to find the resources to set up a computer lab that can only be accessed through a hidden passageway (hint: pull one of the books on the bookshelf to find the secret room). Motivating people, taking risks, and inspiring the best in ourselves and others are skills we took from our former lives in New York City, me as the founder and executive director of a nonprofit arts center in Brooklyn and Paul as a financial consultant to nonprofit organizations on Wall Street.

I had the good fortune several years ago to be named a YouthActionNet Global Fellow through the International Youth Foundation (IYF). This meant becoming a member of a network of young social entrepreneurs from around the globe. When I heard about

a competitive grant program funded by Starbucks through IYF, I knew that the local youth foundation called Neo Juventud would be the perfect candidate. As Paul’s official counterpart, Fundación Neo Juventud is about as perfect a fit as you can get. This dynamic organization owns and operates several micro-enterprises in Palmar including a cyber cafe, pizzeria, oyster company, community-based tourism collective, and now the Centro de Arte y Diseño.

Thanks to a very generous Starbucks grant, we have been able to set up the computer lab, buy several Nikon digital SLR cameras, and renovate an old storage space into a beautiful studio with a stage and classroom. Now in our second semester of teaching classes, from digital photography to graphic design to crafts and leadership, the Centro de Arte y Diseño serves dozens of children and adults each week. Additionally this semester, we are currently training seven teen interns to run the center and complete professional design projects to benefit the community.

The grant provides stipends for the students to learn professional design software, as well as get paid to create a community map, brochure, website, video, and marketing materials for local tourist-related businesses. This is quite a feat for Palmar, a fishing village that has no street signs, no restaurants with printed menus, and just one paved road.



Marisa Catalina Casey silkscreens a T-shirt with artisan group Mujeres Cambia.

While I could go on and on about all of the things I’m loving about my service so far, I have to say the best thing about it is that I’m doing it with my best friend. It sounds cheesy but it couldn’t be more true. I can’t imagine what this experience would be like without Paul by my side. We work on nearly every project together as partners (our blog is aptly named Partners for Peace), and we are there to support one another but also to challenge one another to always give and do our best.

We’ve had our struggles, but being together means that we have another person to laugh with when we make a language faux pas, to reminisce with about Thai food, to dream with about the future.

Although we have only been at site for about a year, I have already learned so much. I’ve learned that most things that I used to stress about don’t matter. I’ve learned that what is important to me is continuing to work in international development or in the public/nonprofit sector. I’ve learned that Paul and I can make any place into a home; that living in a small town has its perks; that being on time is overrated; and that conveniences like hot water, electricity, and a sewer system are just that—conveniences and not necessities.

Whatever the next challenge is, I know that I will be a stronger more patient and understanding person when facing it thanks to my Peace Corps experience.