

9-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Canavera, Mark and Andreassen-Barker, Veronica (2011) "Lessons in Service," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 54 : Iss. 3 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol54/iss3/5>

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Lessons in Service

*Commemorating 50 years
of the Peace Corps*

Since President John F. Kennedy announced the establishment of the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961, more than 200,000 people have volunteered to spend two years of their lives — or more — in the cause of world peace and friendship.

While the organization may have reached middle age, its heart and commitment remain forever young. Today more than 8,600 people (average age: 28) work in 76 countries as advocates for education, health, business development, environmental and agricultural causes, and more.

Through the years many Furman graduates (and faculty) have committed their time and energy to the Peace Corps. To recognize their contributions — and the organization's anniversary — *Furman* magazine asked two alumni to offer reflections on their experience and its impact. Their stories follow.



As newlyweds, my parents served as Peace Corps volunteers in Brazil in the late 1960s.

Taking up John F. Kennedy's call to service, my father taught forestry and helped to launch a tree genetics program at a university, and my mother trained teachers and worked with the children of people with leprosy. "It was the best two years of our lives," was a mantra I heard often growing up, and from both sides; my parents agreed on this point unequivocally. My fourth-grade teacher must have found it strange that I knew the quote "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country" well enough to correct another student presenting a book report, but that's just the kind of home I grew up in.

When I began exploring career options during my junior year at Furman (nearly 30 years after my parents had served), I pretty much knew that a two-year stint in the Peace Corps would be the starting point. I was thinking through any number of potential pathways, but they all existed on the other side of those 27 months during which I would serve as a volunteer. How could I not try out this experience that my parents had so adored?

Just 10 days after graduation in 1999, I went to Burkina Faso, a wind-swept, hard-scrabble, poverty-stricken country in the heart of West Africa. Despite its challenges, I found Burkina to be downright wonderful. I taught English, managed a high school building construction project, engaged in the fight against HIV and AIDS, and worked with promising young women to persuade them to stay in school. The work was tough and sometimes confusing, but it felt vital to me. To this day, I have never felt more alive than I did during my years as a Peace Corps volunteer.

Burkina seeped into my skin. Day by day and conversation by conversation, I fell in love with a land and its people. Two years turned into three, then three and a half. I eventually returned to the United States to attend graduate school, but I went back to Africa for short pieces of work or research whenever I could.

A few months after I completed graduate school, I succumbed to the urge again and returned to West Africa for several more years. Without having set out to do so, I ended up dedicating my career to development and humanitarian assistance in West Africa.

Although I no longer work for the Peace Corps, my work continues to focus on children and families in a region where poverty, conflict and disease have put families under siege. The work has been thrilling and a constant source of joy despite circumstances that can gnaw at one's psyche and seem hopelessly entrenched.

I have contributed to efforts to reintegrate former child soldiers into their communities in northern Uganda, to control arms trafficking in Senegal, and to protect children from sexual violence and the exploitation of their labor in Côte d'Ivoire. This year alone I have been fortunate to work in Niger, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Benin.

I am currently helping the national government of Benin better understand its child welfare system, pushing and probing to clarify what kinds of services it hopes to provide its citizens and how best to do so on the most threadbare of shoestrings. Recently I sat across the desk from the chief of staff of the Ministry of Justice, Legislation, and Human Rights, talking with her and wondering to myself, "How in the world did I end



up at this place at this moment in time? Am I really here shooting the breeze with the chief of staff of a ministry?"

My journey to that moment began with my parents' Peace Corps service. My education at Furman also played an undeniable role. In fact, today I do all of my work in French and fondly

remember my French studies at Furman. (Special thanks to Cherie Maiden for introducing me to West African literature and to David Morgan, my French major advisor, who insisted that I take a course in advanced French grammar. That course, taught by Harlan Patton, proved to be crucial to my professional development.)

But without a doubt, my service in the Peace Corps was the single largest determinant in setting me on my current path. I could not be more grateful.

The Peace Corps celebrated its 50th anniversary this year, and even if we don't hear much about it these days, it's still going strong. Last year, it received its largest-ever budget allocation from Congress — although that amount was still a microscopic speck when compared to federal defense spending.

The Peace Corps is that ever-rarer point of convergence in Washington, D.C., that transcends partisan politics. Just about everybody is on board in supporting its work.

And why shouldn't it receive widespread support? It represents Americans at our best — striving to be of service to some of the world's most vulnerable people. The ethos of the Peace Corps is one of compassion, of learning, of teaching, of understanding, of reaching out, of creating dialogue across cultures. These hallmarks typically get rare air time in the corridors of power, but I take heart that the Peace Corps and its intrinsic investment in idealism are holding steady.

I am proud to be a "Peace Corps legacy," as we volunteers who served in the footsteps of our parents are called. I hope that America continues to be proud of the international legacy of peace and dialogue that it has created through the Peace Corps. May we remain committed to its principles and to its continued success.

The author lives in New York City and works with Child Frontiers and Save the Children, two agencies that help communities improve the care and protection of children. The photo was taken on a recent trip to the Democratic Republic of Congo. His story "Six Days in the Fields," about his Peace Corps service in Burkina Faso, appeared in the Fall 2000 issue of Furman. He is also a blogger for www.huffingtonpost.com.

VERONICA ANDREASSEN-BARKER

When people think about Peace Corps service, they envision volunteers living in mud huts, digging wells and working the land, cut off from friends and family. But as Peace Corps volunteers in Romania, my husband, David, and I live in a Communist-era bloc apartment with running water, super fast Internet, and even a washing machine.

On the street outside our bloc, Mercedes-Benzes, Dacias (Romanian-made cars), bicycles and *carute* (horse-drawn wagons) are parked next to each other. In the town center is a McDonald's, just a block away from the bustling farmers' market offering local fruits, vegetables, meats and cheeses. Walking down the street is a young woman wearing Dolce and Gabbana, and another in traditional costume.

These juxtapositions of wealth and poverty, of globalization and small-town life, of modernity and tradition, may seem contradictory. Part of Romania's challenge is reconciling and blending these dualities as Romanians seek to establish their national identity. As Peace Corps volunteers we have the opportunity to share skills, build capacity, and encourage civic engagement during this crucial phase of Romania's developmental process.

During pre-service training we were warned that Peace Corps service in Romania is different from service on other continents. We might enjoy the creature comforts of living in a European Union country, but Romania wears the scars of an oppressive regime, including apathy and hopelessness. We were told that we would work toward social and behavioral changes yet produce few tangible results. Without wells and crops to mark our progress, we would need to persevere and focus on small victories.

So we did. Learning new vocabulary was a small victory toward my language acquisition. Getting my butcher or the veggie lady to smile was a small victory for my community integration. But teaching Radu is the biggest small victory of my Peace Corps service thus far.

With my background in expressive arts therapies and mental health counseling, I was placed at a rural non-governmental organization (NGO) providing therapeutic services to youth and adults with disabilities. Radu is one of the beneficiaries at the NGO.

With salt-and-pepper hair and a limp, he seems older than his chronological age of 24. He is quick to anger and quick to smile. His father struggles with alcoholism, his mother is working in Italy, and his grandmother is sick and bedridden. This young man with physical and mental disabilities takes on most of the adult responsibilities at home.

At our NGO, Radu had trouble working with others and complying with expectations. Staff said that he couldn't learn or was too belligerent. As a result, he acted out in frustration and felt marginalized.

In my first months of service, as I was seeking a sense of purpose, I began building a relationship with Radu. He was patient with my



efforts to speak Romanian, and I was patient with his quirks. I noticed that he often spoke about *gherghef* (looms) because he made braided rag rugs for the NGO workshops. So when a fellow Peace Corps volunteer offered me some plastic looms, I immediately thought of Radu. I could teach him to crochet.

I met some skepticism from staff, but with encouragement and practice Radu made progress. He was beaming with pride when he showed off his first scarf — and caught the workshop seamstresses by surprise. The staff asked Radu to make them scarves, and his fellow NGO beneficiaries suddenly wanted him to teach them to crochet.

Radu's whole attitude and demeanor changed. He was leading, teaching and working collaboratively with others. He learned to make winter hats on circular looms. Soon his hat and scarf sets were being sold on consignment in stores across our small town. With the crochet frenzy in full swing, Radu's father visited the NGO for the first time in five years to find out why Radu had changed and who Veronica was, because Radu frequently mentioned me in talking about the workshop.

Radu finally had a sense of purpose, which had a positive effect on his behavior in the workshop and at home. The staff saw that by breaking tasks into small steps, Radu could learn and become a positive contributor. I also benefited by finding my niche within the organization. I could share therapeutic interventions that were inclusive, adaptive and creative. I count these as big small victories on all fronts.

As Peace Corps volunteers, we dream big dreams of sustainable national projects — the kind that are featured in press releases. It may not be so newsworthy, but by teaching Radu to crochet I had an impact on his quality of life.

I remind myself daily that the Peace Corps is a person-to-person organization. My small victories may not be the epitome of international development work, but I would assert that building people up helps build nations up. Our shared experiences and cultural exchanges are fundamentally strengthening both nations — Romania and our own. [F]

The author graduated with degrees in music (1999) and psychology (2000). She and her husband, David, live in the Oltenian region of Romania and are third-year Peace Corps volunteers collaborating with Biblionet, one of the Global Libraries Initiatives of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Follow their work at <http://daveronica.com>.



Horse-drawn wagons are still a common site in Romania. Opposite: The author with her friend, Radu. Photos courtesy of the author.