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Building connections — and trust

“How far are you willing to go to make a difference?”

The Peace Corps slogan challenged me three years ago as I was faced with the decision to leave everything comfortable, everything easy, everything I knew in the States.

I cannot remember exactly why I decided to do it. It may have been the thrill of the adventure, the travel bug in me or, more likely, the desire to give back to the world.



But as the plane carrying our group of 41 college graduates took off for Nicaragua — a country that until a month earlier I could not have located on a map — I remember thinking, “What the hell have I gotten myself into?” And I recall my first impressions after we landed in Managua: the smell of burning trash, the muggy tropical heat, the rusty corrugated tin covering the sides of homes. I wondered how I would survive the next two years.

We spent our first three months in intensive language, cultural and adaptation training. Then it was off to Samulali, in Nicaragua’s northern coffee highlands, to work on sustainable agricultural projects and live alongside rural farmers.

When the Peace Corps decision makers in Washington decided to send me to Nicaragua to teach people how to farm, I was afraid I would be in way over my head. I may have majored in Spanish, but the closest thing to an agricultural background I had was picking grass out of my cleats from the Furman rugby pitch.

But here lies the beauty of the liberal arts education I received from Furman. I discovered that I had learned how to learn. I was able to apply my Spanish skills, communicate with people to determine their strengths and weaknesses, and then assign them tasks where they could be the most effective.

I began my job knowing nothing about agriculture, forestry or deforestation. But I soon

realized that people couldn’t just keep chopping down trees every day for firewood. So I looked for solutions.

I found several low-cost designs for stoves that burned less wood, then taught community members how to build them. I learned to grow tree nurseries and to motivate communities to plant trees. I found farmers burning their fields and tainting their water supplies with chemical pesticides, so I studied how to use chemicals responsibly and passed those techniques on to the farmers.

We labored side by side. During times of hardship we suffered together, and in times of joy we celebrated as a group.

I lived in a wood hut with a dirt floor, used a latrine, showered out of a bucket, and ate beans and rice with a tortilla and a cup of coffee or juices from harvested fruits. I milked cows and harvested coffee, corn and beans. I lived the life of a Nicaraguan farmer. In doing so I developed the community’s trust and was able to implement projects that would help my new friends meet their individual and group needs.

My years as a Peace Corps volunteer were the most valuable learning experience I have ever had. I am now back in Nicaragua as part of the Peace Corps staff, training the newest agricultural workers.

All Peace Corps volunteers are deeply affected by the bonds they develop with the people and the countries they serve. These bonds go a long way toward promoting peace and making a difference in the world.

Trash piles may still burn next to the Managua airport, and houses are still made of rusted corrugated tin. But more Peace Corps members are arriving to help. They can and will make a difference — in their own unique way.

— MATT BERGEN '03

This article appeared in its original form in the fall issue of the Furman rugby alumni newsletter.