

Elizabeth (Vernon) Kelley*, Peace Corps Volunteer, Bulgaria (2003–2005)

Biography

“Welcome, Isabelle!” said the sign children held as they greeted me when I arrived in my Bulgarian town. On paper, my name is Elizabeth Vernon, but in Bulgaria, I answer to all sorts of



Elizabeth Vernon

names. Among them are *gospozha* (“Mrs.” in Bulgarian—never mind that I’m not married), Miss, Missus, Teacher, and Elli. Having many names and wearing many hats—English teacher, project organizer, translator, and token American—is what keeps life here interesting. I get to do all sorts of things I never did back in the United States, where my main title was editor. I worked as a newspaper copy editor—editing stories, writing headlines, and designing pages—for five years before I decided it was time to stop sitting in front of a computer. I wanted to see more of the world and do something to help people improve their own lives in the process. When I’m not working or socializing with my Bulgarian neighbors, I enjoy reading, cooking, hiking, visiting other Volunteers around the country, and keeping in touch with family and friends in America through e-mail. I’m an only child in America, but here I’m lucky to have become part of many families. I grew up in Northern California, then went to Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, where I studied communications, Spanish, and religion. After a short jaunt to southwestern United States, I headed back to Washington State for several years, so I’m not quite sure where to call home. But if home is where the heart is, this

little corner of Bulgaria will always be one of my homes.

Site Assignment

My town is in north-central Bulgaria, where the Balkan Mountains slope down onto the Danubian Plain. Winters are cold, icy, and snowy, and summers are super hot. About 10,000 people call this town home, but it’s the municipal center for many villages, so that bumps the area population to about 30,000 people. About 70 percent of the residents here are Turkish, 20 percent are Roma, and 10 percent are ethnically Bulgarian. This means I’m more likely to hear Turkish on the streets—and in the classroom—than Bulgarian. The diversity of the area and the fact that the majority of children speak Turkish at home makes my job of teaching English to fifth through seventh graders at Academician Daki Yordanov Junior High School challenging. But my students have lots of questions about America and love hearing stories from my home. I also work on a variety of small projects, including seeking donations of books in English for my school, helping an orphanage in the region, teaching an English class for adults, and working on summer camps.



Elizabeth's sixth graders display traditional folk costumes

*Elizabeth married after her Peace Corps service. At the time she wrote this, she was Elizabeth Vernon.