

Jess Wysopal, Peace Corps Volunteer, Niger (2001–2003)

Biography

Hello, my name is Jess Wysopal. I am from a small town in West Virginia named Augusta, where I grew up with my two brothers and a multitude of



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animals. Judging from the number of animals I raised growing up, I thought I would become a

veterinarian. However, while attending Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, I realized that raising and training animals was completely different from healing them.

Also around this time, I discovered that my love of the natural world was far greater than I'd given it credit for. So, I changed my major and joined the college's fledgling environmental studies program, doing most of my work in sustainable systems and farming. Ever since, healing the land and growing things have become the passion that drives me.

After graduating from college, I entered the Peace Corps and was posted in Niger, West Africa, as an agriculture Volunteer. I spent much of my first year learning Hausa, the local language, getting to know the people in the village, and identifying potential areas of need expressed by the locals.

In Niger, each Volunteer's work depends on the village's needs and existing resources, as well as the community's commitment to a project. For the past year, I spent most of my time conducting

demonstrations on animal nutrition—the preparation and use of salt blocks for livestock as a small income-generating activity, networking within the village, and living like the locals. Living like the local villagers entails following the ebb and flow of village life—the house I live in, the food I eat, and the work that I do. Everyone in my village does field work, so I acquired a field and do field work. Another major occupation in my village is gardening, so I have gardens that I tend.

This year I am adding two additional projects: planting and cultivating a woodlot for wood for cooking, and growing open pollinating seeds to start a seed bank.



Jess with her horse, Noel, in Niger



Jess with children from the village where she lives in Niger, West Africa