



INTRODUCTION

Years ago, I woke to look out the window of a plane I had been riding all night, and in the still-dark morning knew I was home. Minutes later, the pilot announced that we were beginning our descent, and I watched as the black shadows slowly dissolved into mountains and trees, roads and houses. The sun, hiding beneath the horizon, cast the city in a pink-orange light. The plane swooped down closer, and I could see a patch of huckleberries by the railroad tracks, a gnarled log floating down the Susquehanna, and a stack of coal outside the old, abandoned church. We hit the ground with a dull thud, and I turned away from the window and gathered my bags. But a sensation stayed with me for days, months, and even years after: Peace Corps service had given me new eyes.

And ears. Because everything around me spoke, whispering of other possibilities.

Peace Corps service can have this effect. For two years you struggle to say words in a little-known dialect—simple words like “water” and “teacher”—and one day you wake up to realize that the words for “dream” and “intention” are there, at the back of your throat, waiting for the moment when you need them. And one day, you need them. Words like these can change the way you see and the way you hear, and conversations like these can cause your heart to beat in a different rhythm....

—Beth Giebus

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer, Morocco

Voices From the Field

“Our classrooms ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive,” writes Maxine Greene in *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, Art, and Social Change*. “They ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said. We must want our students to achieve friendship as each one stirs to wide-awakeness, to imaginative action, and to renewed consciousness of possibility.”

Voices From the Field: Reading and Writing about the World, Ourselves, and Others is a response to Greene’s challenge. And it is a celebration of, and an invitation to, “wide-awakened” lives.

*It takes a thousand voices
to tell a single story.*

Native American saying

Peace Corps Literature

For the past 42 years, a quiet revolution has been taking place in the minds and hearts of 169,000 Americans. One by one, they travel thousands of miles to villages seldom found on any map. There, they live and work with the people of their host communities—eating the same food, speaking the same language, living in the same environment, and adopting some of the cultural norms. And somewhere, somehow, at some point, something happens:

*My Peace Corps service was a watershed experience.
It is the single most important event in my life.*

*I see my life as divided into two parts,
before Peace Corps and after Peace Corps.*

*Peace Corps shaped me, transformed me—
shaking me out of the deep fog that was my life.*

Long after Volunteers return home, they struggle to answer the question, What happened? Everyday speech proves inadequate; it is too fleeting, too trite. Only the written word—the creative outlets of poetry, memoir, and fiction—can capture the nuances and grasp the complexities of their experience.

These creative endeavors have not gone unnoticed. The *Washington Post* (September 9, 2001) reports that the Peace Corps community is “churning out enough works—thousands of memoirs, novels, and books of poetry—to warrant a whole new genre: Peace Corps literature.”

Ripples of Hope

Voices From the Field is, as the name suggests, a collection, or chorus, of voices. Although the voices of Peace Corps writers resound loud and clear, it is the voices of the Volunteers’ friends and neighbors that will no doubt linger in the minds of readers long after the stories have ended. This is as it should be, for the Peace Corps experience is never the Volunteer’s alone; it is yours, it is ours. As such, there is much to be learned from it—lessons that can affect us all.

“Every time a man or woman acts to improve the fate of others,” Charles Baquet, former deputy director of the Peace Corps, once remarked, “they send a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from many similar efforts, these ripples build a current that can sweep away what ails us all.”

Peace Corps literature is a ripple of hope. And we invite students to join their voices in this dialogue that is always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said. Together, we can stir one another to wide-awakeness. Together, we can build a current that can sweep away what ails us all.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS COLLECTION

Voices From the Field: Reading and Writing About the World, Ourselves, and Others is designed for use by language arts teachers in grades 6–12. The collection is divided into two sections: Peace Corps Stories and Curriculum Unit.

The **Peace Corps Stories** section contains nine texts written by Peace Corps Volunteers, on which the lesson plans are based. Representing a variety of genres (personal narratives, fiction, and folk tales), the texts are grouped under three themes: *Heroes & Friends*, *Perspectives*, and *No Easy Answers*.

The **Curriculum Unit** contains language arts lessons focused on *Reading and Responding to Literature*. The lesson plans are standards-based and use the *Understanding by Design* curriculum framework (see Appendix A). They can be adapted for use in grades 6–12. The lessons are especially useful for increasing students' reading comprehension and writing skills. They are designed

- To engage students' minds in the content of the story.
- To stir their hearts with the author's unique message.
- To encourage them to identify and explore the questions the story inspires.
- To increase their reading comprehension skills.
- To enhance their writing skills.
- To invite them to find connections between the author's experience, the story's content, and their own lives.

ABOUT THE PEACE CORPS

The Peace Corps is an independent agency of the U.S. government that was established through the vision and efforts of President John F. Kennedy, who challenged Americans to dedicate two years of their lives to helping people in developing countries. The Peace Corps mission is to promote peace and friendship by making available willing and qualified U.S. citizens to interested countries to achieve the following three goals:

- To help the people of interested countries in meeting their needs for trained men and women
- To promote a better understanding of the American people on the part of the peoples served
- To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of the American people

Since the first group arrived in Ghana in 1961, Peace Corps Volunteers have served in 136 countries. Although programs vary from country to country based on the host nation's needs, Volunteers traditionally offer skills in education, agriculture, small business development, community development, the environment, and health.

PAUL D. COVERDELL WORLD WISE SCHOOLS

An innovative global education program of the Peace Corps, Coverdell World Wise Schools seeks to engage U.S. students in an inquiry about the world, themselves, and others, in order

- To broaden perspectives.
- To promote cultural awareness.
- To appreciate global connections.
- To encourage service.

Since the program's inception in 1989 on the initiative of Peace Corps Director Paul D. Coverdell, more than 2 million students in all 50 states have communicated directly with Peace Corps Volunteers all over the world. Initially set up as a correspondence match program between Volunteers and U.S. classes, World Wise Schools has expanded its scope by providing a broad range of resources for educators—including award-winning videos, teacher guides, classroom speakers, a website, and printed materials. For more information about Coverdell World Wise Schools, see www.peacecorps.gov/wws.



PEACE CORPS STORIES

Throughout time, there have been many eloquent calls to service. In his inaugural address, John F. Kennedy spoke words that stirred the minds and hearts of a generation: "... Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.... Ask not what America can do for you, but together what we can do for the freedom of man."

A call to serve can take many forms—something you hear or read or see. You can't respond to every call, but in your lifetime there will be at least one that moves you to action. For more than 169,000 Americans, the call came from the Peace Corps.

Bill Moyers, former deputy director of the Peace Corps and a contributor to this collection, sums up why people join. "It was said that the urge to join the Peace Corps was passion alone. Not so. Men and women, whatever their age, looked their lives over and chose to affirm. To affirm is the thing. And so they have—in quiet, self-effacing perseverance."

In the more than four decades it has spanned, the Peace Corps has held a special attraction for Americans—a way of serving their country and helping others. Peace Corps Volunteers are different from other Americans who go overseas. They are not missionaries. Or tourists. They are not intelligence agents or academics. They are not there on business trips or to advise foreign governments.

Peace Corps Volunteers are invited by developing countries to come and share their skills. They live the way the people in that country live—not in big houses or behind high walls. They don't drive fancy cars. In fact, they don't even own cars.

Most visitors to developing countries will never venture outside of the capital city or an isolated vacation spot. Peace Corps Volunteers live and work in villages and cities that may never be tourist sites, and towns at the ends of the Earth. They unpack their belongings. They settle down. They set about to do a job. And they make some lifelong friends along the way.

Two or three things I know, two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that to go on living I have to tell stories, that stories are the one sure way I know to touch the heart and change the world.

Dorothy Allison
Author



In many of the stories you're about to read, you will see how the Peace Corps changed the lives of these Volunteers. As Mike Tidwell, a Volunteer in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, writes, "For two years, I lived among the Kalambayan people. I spoke their language and taught many of them how to raise fish. My goal was to increase protein consumption. But what I gave these people in the form of development advice, they returned tenfold in lessons on what it means to be human. There, at the center of the continent, they shared with me the ancient spirit of Africa's heart."

Peace Corps Volunteers have served in over 130 countries—in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, the Middle East, Eastern and Central Europe, and the former Soviet Union. They're working on education, business development, technology, and the environment. They are working in health and agriculture. But as many schools and roads and wells as Volunteers have built, perhaps the most important thing they have built is hope. It's a very American sensibility—to think that with hard work you can improve your life. And it's a very Peace Corps sensibility to go out and actually help people do it.

With all the problems and challenges facing us today, one person's work may seem insignificant. But perhaps Robert Kennedy said it best: "Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation."

What you have here, then, is history—with many more generations still to be written.