



PEACE
CORPS

Times

INSIDE ISSUE 4, 2012

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Fighting AIDS in Africa for 20 years

From Peace Corps Volunteer to head of NGO, 45 years in Senegal

In 2011, there were 34.2 million people living with HIV. In some 15 African countries, between 5–25 percent of the population has HIV. But Africa is by no means homogenous and regions vary greatly. While the disease currently affects southern Africa severely, West Africa faces much lower rates of infection, with countries averaging between less than 1–4 percent, and North Africa averages less than 0.1 percent.

Some of the difference in infection rates can be attributed to how countries responded to the epidemic in the 1980s, when the disease emerged in full force. Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Gary Engelberg (Senegal, 1965–1967) was in Senegal at the time, where he now runs Africa Consultants International (ACI), a nongovernmental organization focused on health-care advocacy, study abroad programs, and cultural orientations.

After his volunteer service, Engelberg was Peace Corps associate country director for Senegal from 1967–69, then was a regional training officer for west and central Africa from 1969–72.

He started ACI in 1983 with another RPCV, Lillian Baer (Côte d'Ivoire, 1966–



RPCV Gary Engelberg (standing, right) facilitates a national advocacy group to teach men to work on behalf of sexual minorities in Senegal.

1968), with a staff of about five. Today, ACI's 40-person staff consults with NGOs on HIV/AIDS issues in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Togo.

"ACI began health work in the 1980s—family planning and maternal

health," Engelberg said. "Then the United Nations Development Program HIV in 1990 invited us to help them develop a response for HIV and development: The U.N. understood what the development impact would be."

"In the beginning, it was a lot of

work," said Engelberg. "In the 1990s, this was still a fairly new phenomenon. We were trying to get civil and religious society to be aware of how this would impact the country."

Essentially, ACI worked with NGOs already operating in Senegal to incorporate HIV-prevention education and care into their existing structures.

"After that year of consultation [with UNDP], we moved our organization to face that," he said. "Across the country, we worked as advisers to medical people, mobilizing civil society and organizations, adding an AIDS program to whatever they were doing—grafting it on to the existing network.

"In the beginning, there was this idea to have a separate network—to create a whole new network—which wouldn't have the reach. Instead, we had this network of NGOs and we got them to add on a mobilizing component. Basically, in Senegal, there are hundreds of organizations that provide HIV support: We don't have specialized organizations for the support; we can't afford to create a whole new network."

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Using Sports to Build HIV/AIDS Awareness

Peace Corps Volunteers across the globe often use sports to break through cultural barriers and connect with community members at a grassroots level. Through sports, Volunteers are able to bypass language difficulties and connect directly with people in their communities. In fact, many Volunteers have successfully used sports and activity-based learning to engage communities and overcome stigmas that often exist around HIV/AIDS and health education, including soccer and cross-country bike rides and walks.

More than 110 Volunteers from Botswana, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Madagascar, Malawi, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Ukraine, and Zambia have been trained in the Grassroot Soccer SKILLZ program to deliver HIV/AIDS prevention education to youth. Specifically, Grass-



In this game of penalty kicks, the soccer ball represents HIV: Condoms and circumcision equate to more goalies and narrower goal posts—reduced risk.

root Soccer works with Peace Corps Volunteers to educate, inspire, and mobilize young people in some of the most rural and underserved areas of the world to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Volunteer Samantha Croffut has worked with over 200 students through the Grassroot program in

South Africa. "Incorporating sports into HIV/AIDS education separates the Grassroot Soccer program from other more traditional learning and teaching techniques," she said. "The sessions are much more interactive and really involve the kids so that they can understand HIV/AIDS."

In Costa Rica, two Volunteers organized a 375-kilometer cross-country bike ride, spanning from the northern border with Nicaragua to the southern border with Panama. Community members and 10 Peace Corps Volunteers rode various legs of the ride, hosting demonstrations and sessions on healthy lifestyle choices along the way.

In Mali, 11 Volunteers rode 70 kilometers visiting seven villages on an HIV/AIDS awareness bike tour. Over 1,500 Malians learned about the dangers of HIV/AIDS, protection methods,

and the importance of getting tested. In addition to the educational sessions presented by Volunteers, nongovernmental organizations tested 227 people for HIV during the three-day bike tour.

In Armenia, a group of 12 Volunteers walked across the country to raise awareness about healthy lifestyle choices. The group was split into two groups of six Volunteers, with one team starting at the northern border and the other at the southern border. The two teams taught lessons on healthy lifestyles in the communities where they stopped, contacting myriad children, organizations, and unsuspecting passersby before meeting in the central city of Yeghegnadzor. During the 20-day journey, the two teams collectively walked 600 kilometers, stopped in 18 villages and towns, and spread information to more than 750 Armenians.

Volunteers Meet in Ethiopia for 50th Anniversary Celebration

A plane carrying nearly 100 returned Peace Corps Volunteers touched down in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on September 24. Like the arrival of the first group of Ethiopia Volunteers in 1962, passengers disembarked down a portable ramp and across the tarmac.

Inside the airport, cups of hot coffee and a brief message from Marian Haley Beil, president of Ethiopian & Eritrea Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, welcomed the travelers back to the region where they had previously served. Among them were 65 Ethiopia RPCVs, 23 of whom were part of the first group of Volunteers to set foot in the country 50 years ago.

The group visited the National Palace, formerly the Jubilee Palace, where the first volunteers met Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1962. There, the RPCVs met Ethiopia President Girma Wolde-Giorgis, who spent over an hour answering their questions.

“He was clearly pleased to meet the group and I believe really enjoyed the visit,” said Leo Cecchini (Ethiopia, 1962–1964), one of the first Volunteers to serve in the east African country. “We, of course, were excited—especially those who remembered meeting the emperor in that very same room 50 years ago.”

U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia Donald E. Booth, Peace Corps Regional Director for Africa Dick Day, and

Peace Corps/Ethiopia Country Director Greg Engle also visited with the RPCVs before they dispersed to visit the communities where they had served.

“The 100,” as the group was dubbed by local media, were even guests of honor at Ethiopia’s annual Meskel celebration, attended by some 50,000.

But RPCVs said the most memorable moments from the two-week celebration were interacting with currently serving Volunteers.

After a conference on education held jointly for RPCVs and PCVs teaching in Ethiopia, Ronald Peterson (Ethiopia, 1973–1975) and others talked with current Volunteers.

“The experience of Peace Corps goes across generations,” said Peterson.

While visiting the community where he served, Peterson saw hotels and a college—something he would not have imagined existing during his service.

Regardless of how much the landscapes and circumstances change, the culture and challenges of adapting to it are part of every Volunteer’s experience, Peterson said. Cecchini said the meetings between the RPCVs and the PCVs were the most emotional part of the visit for him. “Imagine talking to a person who taught where you are now teaching 50 years ago,” he said.



RPCVs mark 50 years of Peace Corps/Ethiopia with a return to the country, including a visit to the National Palace.

Despite the changes in agency culture—Cecchini volunteered at a time when farewell parties were celebrated in the White House with President John F. Kennedy—he said he could relate with the challenges and achievements of currently serving PCVs.

“We even renamed our visit from ‘Return to Ethiopia’ to ‘Still Here, Still Serving’ in recognition of the strong new bonds created between those who have served and those who are still serving,” said Cecchini.

FIGHTING AIDS FROM PAGE 1 ■■■■■■▶

The result is that Senegal has integrated care and support for people living with HIV and sexual minorities, unlike other countries such as the United States, where early prejudice forced activists to initiate a parallel system of care when primary doctors refused to accept or treat HIV patients.

Over the years, Engelberg said ACI’s work has evolved, moving from prevention education to advocacy, then to care and treatment.

More recently, ACI began working with the media to create a more favorable environment, then with associations of people living with HIV/AIDS and men who have sex with men (MSM).

“Most recently—the past two-three years—we’ve been working with sexual minorities, MSM in particular,” Engelberg said. His group now helps facilitate a national organization for MSM to develop a strategic plan to advo-

cate for the rights of sexual minorities.

“In Senegal, a wave of homophobia has destroyed a lot of the HIV/AIDS work” of the last decades, he said.

On a recent Islamic holiday, Engelberg said many of the Muslim leaders’ sermons condemned homosexuality.

“There’s still an awful lot of religious prejudice,” he said. “We have to find a way of neutralizing that message. It’s important for them to understand the relationship between oppression of gay people and their role to provide prevention and care.”

“The young gay community is particularly at risk because they are not careful,” he said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we had a regression.”

As part of a subcommittee created to work on sexual-minority issues—same-sex sexual activities are illegal in Senegal—Engelberg has trained MSM to be advocates for themselves, “to give them a voice so they can actually talk about

their perceptions.”

Another challenge Engelberg noted in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa is a return to family planning as a major international aid focus.

“Funding for AIDS is waning—it’s more difficult to maintain the HIV/AIDS work,” he said, adding that the funding shift makes sense as family planning can incorporate HIV prevention.

“But on another level, there are still millions of people who need care and support,” Engelberg said. “There are still areas in Africa where people don’t have access to antivirals. There are many places in Africa where AIDS remains shameful—there’s stigma.”

For Peace Corps Volunteers working in HIV-prevention and education specifically, Engelberg said the challenges are myriad.

“Volunteers are young, foreign, and, in most cases, unmarried, and they are going into a culture and talking with older

people about something very intimate,” he said. “They don’t fully understand—and have to be very careful—how tenuous the situation is for a white foreigner.”

Engelberg emphasized the need for PCVs to work through and with African counterparts to build capacity.

“It’s important to help those groups become more effective in what they do,” he said. “It’s easy to dismiss what people are saying when they are very different from you. The challenge is to raise awareness and train people from the host culture.”

“There’s not one epidemic: There are thousands going on. Even though [PCVs] may have received training on how to respond HIV/AIDS, it takes time to understand the dynamic of the area they are working in: It could be in the zone with injection-drug users, homosexuality. They have to understand what is affecting the epidemic in the zone they are in. From that, they can determine what their strategies should be.”

Mary’s Favorite Skillet Cornbread

INGREDIENTS

- 1 CUP ALL-PURPOSE FLOUR
- 2 1/2 TEASPOONS BAKING POWDER
- 5 TABLESPOONS SUGAR
- 1 TEASPOON SALT
- 1 CUP CORNMEAL
- 1/4 CUP POWDERED MILK + 3/4 CUP WATER (OR SUBSTITUTE 1 CUP MILK)
- 1 LARGE EGG
- 3 TABLESPOONS MELTED BUTTER OR MARGARINE, OR VEGETABLE OIL, FOR SKILLET



Directions

1. Over low heat, heat a 9-inch cast-iron skillet or pan with a cover. Mix flour, baking powder, sugar, salt, cornmeal, and powdered milk in a large bowl.
2. In a small bowl, whisk together egg, 3/4 cup water (omit if using milk instead of powdered milk), and melted butter. Make a well in the center of dry ingredients, and pour the egg mixture into it. Stir until just combined.
3. Brush bottom, sides, and inside of skillet lid with vegetable oil; pour in the

batter. Cover and cook over low heat until top feels almost dry, about 35 minutes. Check the bottom occasionally to make sure it’s not burning; reduce heat if necessary. Invert onto the skillet cover; oil pan bottom again. Slide bread back into pan, and cook for additional 5 minutes, until dry and light brown. Transfer to a plate, let cool slightly, and cut into wedges.

Adapted by Mary Fuller (Zambia, 2009–2012) from Martha Stewart Living, June 1995

From the Corps to HIV/AIDS Service Organization

By MARK SEAMAN | RPCV Niger 2006–2008

Triple-digit temperatures. Spotty phone service. Unreliable electricity. Amoebic dysentery. Dust storms. Spiders. Scorpions.

“Tell us, Mark. Have you ever been in a situation where you faced limited resources, but had to accomplish something?”

Where to begin?

In 2008, I'd only been back in the U.S. for a few months and I was interviewing for a job that really interested me. The opportunity was with a regional nonprofit and would combine my interests in communications, fundraising, and public policy with my passion for HIV education and public health. It was a perfect fit after my Peace Corps service in the Republic of Niger.

“Yes. Yes, I have. Let me tell you about my time in West Africa ...”



Mark Seaman speaks with Nigerien youth during a stop in a village along the route of Peace Corps/Niger's annual AIDS Bike Ride. The ride took 30 volunteers through 22 villages in six days to raise awareness about HIV prevention and stigma reduction.

In my first year of service, I was a community and youth education Volunteer in the “bush” of south central Niger. Mirriah was a small town, about 30 minutes from the regional capital, and life there moved very slowly.

The schools had none of the books they needed. Teachers were on strike for lack of a living wage. And

despite the efforts of the government and various NGOs, boys outnumbered girls by far. Nevertheless, the people of Mirriah were thrilled that the Peace Corps was part of their community.

Together with the secondary school district and the local people, we held two soccer tournaments for young girls and shared with more than 200 kids the importance of HIV/AIDS awareness. We used the local radio station to talk about education and health topics, created a peer mentoring program where students helped other students learn, and shared our cultures in a variety of settings, from one-on-one discussions to lectures at the local youth center.

We did all of this with almost no money, computers, or phone service. And we did it because people were inspired to be helpful and wanted to make a change.

In my second year of service, I moved to the capital, Niamey, to work in the Peace Corps office as the HIV/AIDS program coordinator and a community health agent Volunteer.

The move to the big city brought with it a new culture shock. Contrary to my time in the bush, I had access to a computer, telephone, and even some financial resources, but local cooperation was as difficult to predict as the electricity back in Mirriah. Because we had some resources, no matter how scarce they seemed to us, people at all levels assumed they would be paid for their participation in our projects. It was hard to earn collaboration without negotiating.

Despite this, together with other NGOs and embassy partners, we organized the first annual AIDS Awareness Concert in downtown Niamey, which helped spread the HIV awareness message to more than 600 men, women, and children and to the entire urban community via television broadcast. Volunteers banded together to organize an AIDS Awareness Bike Ride, taking us to 22 villages and educating more than 7,000 about HIV and how to prevent its spread.

As part of my work, I helped 130 field Volunteers access HIV education resources, condoms for distribution, funds for projects, and regional NGO partners to execute HIV prevention and education projects. I served as the Peace Corps representative to the Nigerien government's Intersectional Committee on the



Peace Corps Volunteer Mark Seaman entertains local children during his pre-service training in Hamdallaye outside of Niamey, Niger.

Fight Against AIDS and wrote a \$71,000 proposal for a USAID-Peace Corps interagency agreement for HIV/AIDS work.

If Peace Corps Volunteers can accomplish all they do without basic tools Americans take for granted and in the extreme conditions in which we operate, imagine what we can do at home in the U.S.

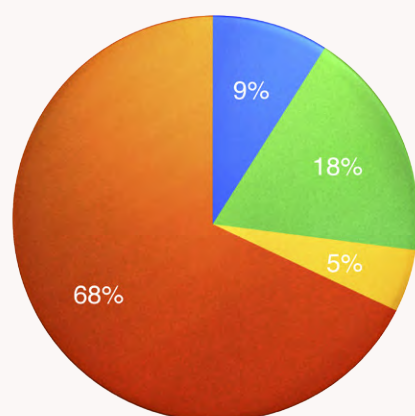
I got the job.

As the director of development and communications at Philadelphia FIGHT, the city's largest AIDS service organization, I manage corporate, foundation, and individual funding and marketing and public relations for our programs. I meet with funders and donors and tell them our story, communicate with the media, and buy advertisements. I love what I do. And while my degree in political science and economics helped, the Peace Corps is what truly prepared me for it.

There was a TV commercial for the Peace Corps that ran when I was a kid in the '80s that used the slogan “The toughest job you'll ever love.” In college, I knew I wanted to do something “different” when I graduated: I knew I wanted to travel, to interact with people, and to work for something important. Before I joined, I thought back to that commercial and that slogan, wondering if it was just an effective campaign or if it was true. After my service I realized that it is absolutely true. Getting a job you love is tough, but it's not as hard as the toughest job you'll ever love.

Which HIV/AIDS outreach method have you found most effective in your community?

- Prevention of mother-to-child transmission programs (9 percent)
- Creating community demand for HIV counseling and testing (18 percent)
- Building sustainable community care for orphans and vulnerable children (5 percent)
- Youth education programs (68 percent)



Start planning for Peace Corps Week now

February 24–March 2, 2013

Visit peacecorps.gov/pcweek for ideas and information



Agency News

Williams Resigns as Peace Corps Director

Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams resigned September 17. He served as director from 2009–12.

Carrie Hessler-Radelet (Western Samoa, 1981–1983), became acting Peace Corps Director on September 18.



During his tenure, Williams led several reforms, including instituting an annual portfolio review to ensure the agency maximized its resources and strategic focus and expanded into Sierra Leone, Indonesia, Colombia, Tunisia, and Nepal.

The agency also increased its partnerships, working with the Special Olympics, launching the

Global Health Service Partnership, and engaging in presidential initiatives such as the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the President's Malaria Initiative, and Feed the Future.

Williams also increased support to Peace Corps Volunteers in the field, hiring a victim advocate, enhancing safety, security, support, and response for Volunteers, and improving training.

Hessler-Radelet served as deputy director from June 2010 until September 2012, during which she managed the agencywide assessment and implemented reforms across the organization.

Peace Corps Collaborates on Story Contest

With a kick-off on World AIDS Day, Dec. 1, the Peace Corps launched a collaboration with filmmaker Global Dialogues for a juried HIV/AIDS story-writing contest.

The contest will run through April 2013, and all PCVs are encouraged to involve young people in their communities in the competition.

The winning ideas will be made into short films by professional filmmakers.

Story ideas can focus on any aspect of HIV or a related social issue, such as violence against women or discrimination against a vulnerable group. Ideas can be submitted in any form, including a short story, script, poem, comic strip, song, short description, or video.

For more information, visit globaldialogues.org.

Nine Returned Volunteers Honored

Nine RPCVs were recognized with the Franklin H. Williams Award on Sept. 21 at Peace Corps headquarters. The award honors ethnically diverse returned Volunteers committed to the Peace Corps Third Goal of promoting Americans' understanding of other peoples.

The award recipients were Rodney Davis-Gilbert



(Micronesia, 1989–1991); Barbara Ferguson Kamara (Liberia, 1963–1965); Leslie Jean-Pierre (Guinea, 1994–1996); Rollin Johnson Jr. (Nepal and Burkina Faso, 2003–2005); Richard Lopez (Mongolia, 2008–2010); Joshua Marshall (Morocco, 2007–2009); Rosette Nguyen (Guinea, 1994–1996); Seth Pickens (Haiti, 2001–2003); and Jon Santiago (Dominican Republic, 2006–2008).

In addition, the Director's Award was presented to Drs. Milton and Fred Ochieng' for their work as co-founders of the Lwala Community Alliance, the Kenyan village's first health center, in 2007.

New Library Training Addresses Needs

Peace Corps staffers Gail Wadsworth and Marcy Carrel, with input from Peace Corps field staff, recently developed a set of resources for training PCVs in sustainable library development. The training package provides Volunteers with standardized training and guidance for library activities and recommendations for other appropriate resources to support library development in their communities.

It includes session plans developed by librarians, as well as an idea book, PowerPoint files, and a training manual. For more information, visit peacecorps.gov.



AIDS-FREE GENERATION PHOTO CONTEST: Grammy-winner Alicia Keyes selected the top four images (above, from left) in the Peace Corps AIDS-Free Generation Contest this summer, which were displayed at the 2012 International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C. The photos won in the following categories: education and prevention (from left); treatment, care, and support; reducing/eliminating stigma and discrimination; technical merit, and People's Choice. All submissions are available in the Peace Corps Digital Library.

Career Corner

Making Peace Corps Service Marketable to Employers

Few would dispute that the Peace Corps is a life-changing experience: an unparalleled opportunity for total immersion in a foreign culture while working alongside local populations on grassroots development projects.

Upon coming home however, many returned Peace Corps Volunteers struggle to communicate the value of their service to prospective employers, likely the result of several factors:

- Many RPCVs are often literally at a loss for words as they re-acclimate to thinking and speaking in English after being immersed in another language and culture.

- It's impossible to describe two years of field work in 30 seconds. It's vital for RPCVs to break their Peace Corps work into short sound bites to use in conversation rather than a monologue.
- Some employers see the Peace Corps as a "kumbaya" experience of peace, love, and happiness. Moreover, the title "Volunteer" may not convey the value of Peace Corps service. While technically volunteers, the work of PCVs is equal to, if not more substantive than, a traditional 40-hour/week paid position. Instead, RPCVs can use program

titles on résumés and in interviews. Thus, "Peace Corps Volunteer" becomes Rural Health Extensionist, Community Development Adviser, or English Educator.

And there are many skills, both technical and "soft," often developed during Peace Corps service: patience, flexibility, grant writing, project management, facilitation, team player, budgeting, leadership, community empowerment, leveraging limited resources, working with limited supervision, evaluation, needs assessments, and intercultural communication.

Many employers need candidates with project management experience. Almost every PCV has managed primary

and secondary projects, involving designing a plan, managing the implementation, and evaluating the outcome.

PCVs who apply for and manage project funds gain grant writing and budgeting experience: Even unfunded proposals provide experience in compiling information, writing goals and objectives, and devising a budget.

Here's a final tip: When applying for a job, write down the qualifications and then list experience(s) for each that shows competence in that skill, including but not limited to the Peace Corps. Then, tailor the résumé and cover letter using those examples.



NOTES *from the* FIELD

A Brief Look at Posts and Projects

AZERBAIJAN

Film festival showcases student art

Volunteer Mike Raybourne (2009–2012) organized a student film festival for nearly 50 students aged 13–23 from across Azerbaijan. Each festival participant submitted a film to one of three categories: short narrative, music video, or documentary. Each entry was screened and evaluated by a panel of local judges and a ceremony was held at the end of the festival to recognize the top three films in each category. The community hopes to expand the festival into a two-day event next year to showcase film entries and musicians from around Azerbaijan.



Volunteer Mike Raybourne (second from left) stands with students after the film festival. Nearly 50 students from across Azerbaijan participated.

BOTSWANA

GLOW camp focuses on leadership and women's health

Volunteer Parisa Kharazi (2010–2012) organized a three-day Girls Leading Our World (GLOW) camp benefitting 30 girls aged 14–16. Camp activities included team-building exercises, arts, and crafts along with seminars to educate participants on HIV/AIDS prevention and women's health. The camp also addressed gender equality and gave the girls the opportunity to make new friends and learn life skills. At the camp, the girls learned the importance of a healthy lifestyle, both mentally and physically.

COSTA RICA

Small sewing business helps women develop business skills and generate income

Volunteer Dorian Diaz del Castillo (2010–2012) is working with eight women from his small Costa Rican community to develop business skills and generate income through the sale of hand-sewn products. The women came up with the idea for the sewing business after they participated in a free community sewing class together. Since the first class, they have participated in advanced sewing courses, taken courses dedicated to finance, accounting, and marketing, and

met weekly with Diaz del Castillo to learn basic computing and business skills. Diaz del Castillo viewed the group as a step toward economic development for women in his small rural community.



Volunteer Dorian Diaz del Castillo (left) stands with four members of the Costa Rican sewing business.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Volunteer builds first community library

Volunteer Claire McManus (2011–2013) is working with Dominican community members to build a library in the local school, which will be the only library in the village. The new library will provide 215 students, aged 5–18, and 20 staff members access to computers, books, and reference materials. To ensure the project's sustainability, McManus' community has created a library committee, which will receive Peace Corps training.



A student stands in front of the new library in Volunteer Claire McManus' Dominican village—the first and only library in the village.

ETHIOPIA

Medical waste incinerator improves sanitation in community

Volunteer Jessica Mims (2011–2013) worked with her community to install a medical waste incinerator to combat the overflow of medical waste, which had previously been discarded in an open pit next to the local health center. The incinerator protects families that live nearby from contaminated waste, including bandages, surgical instruments, needles, and swabs. Mims trained health-center staff about responsible waste management and continues to work with the local community to clean up waste deposited prior to the installation of the incinerator. She also offers seminars to educate her community about health sanitation to prevent the spread of disease.

GUYANA

Volunteers build solar-powered computer lab

Volunteers Harmony Hill (2011–2013) and Travis Weber (2011–2013) are working with their Guyanese community to build a solar-powered computer lab in the local primary school that will provide some 300 students and community members access to computers and technical training. The computer lab will also allow local residents to expand communication and trade with other communities. Hill and Weber will lead the first training sessions and, within a few months, teachers will facilitate classes using various computer programs.



Guyanese primary-school students will benefit from the new solar-powered computer lab in Volunteers Harmony Hill and Travis Weber's community.

KYRGYZSTAN

Workshop develops team-building and leadership skills

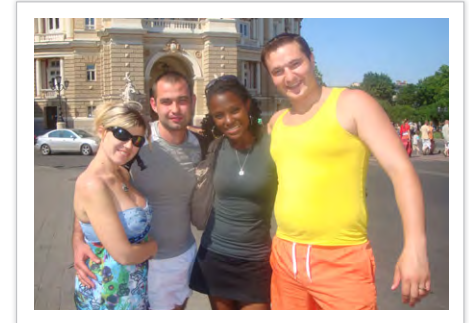
Volunteer Brian Itoh (2011–2013), with fellow Volunteers and community members, organized a handicraft workshop for 26 disabled children aged 12–17 in Kyrgyzstan. Throughout the three-day event, workshop leaders taught participants to make various handicrafts, including hair ties, slippers, pin cushions, and small wooden toys. In addition, participants acquired team building and leadership skills through learning activities, which they will share with peers and community members. Income generated through sales of the handicrafts will be used to fund future workshops in communities throughout Kyrgyzstan.

SOUTH AFRICA

Volunteers help organize inaugural Africa Unity Cup

Peace Corps Response Volunteer Meisha Robinson (2012–2014) teamed up with 12 of her fellow Volunteers, Special Olympics staff, and community members to organize the inaugural Special Olympics Africa Unity Cup. Soccer teams with disabled youth from 11 African countries competed in the tournament and the winning teams will compete in the Special Olympics Unity Cup next year in Rio de Janeiro. Peace Corps Volunteers contributed to the success of the weekend by

teaching participants about healthy lifestyles, performing health screenings for the athletes, and hosting a forum for youth and families who attended the event.



Volunteer Natalie Legrand (center), with Ukrainian community members, works on energy-efficient housing projects.

UKRAINE

Housing project emphasizes energy efficiency in homes

Volunteer Natalie Legrand (2011–2013) is working with an NGO in her Ukrainian community to support 10 capital repair projects that will improve the quality of living and housing conditions for many local families. The project also marks the launch of the Energy Efficiency Assistance Pilot Program in Legrand's community, which increases energy efficiency in homes through installing building insulation and automated light controls, replacing doors and windows, and weatherization.

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Volunteer Life

Charting Growth—My Own—in ‘I Choose My Life’

By JOSE VAZQUEZ-RUELAS | PCV Dominican Republic

In 2010, there were 768 new cases of HIV in the Dominican Republic (DR). From 2002–07, HIV prevalence in individuals between ages 15–24 dropped from 0.6 percent to 0.3 percent. In men, condom use during last high-risk sexual encounter went from 44 percent in 1996 to 70.7 percent in 2007. Lastly, HIV knowledge in peoples between ages 15–24 was measured in 2007 at 38.5 percent. (All stats from DR-MSP, 2011.)

By focusing on just the numbers, one could assume that efforts to curb HIV incidence in the DR are having the desired effect. However, as a health PCV having just completed one year in-country, I know disparities still continue. Barriers such as access to health care, gender dynamics, sex tourism, and lack of sex education persist. A Haitian migrant worker may be denied treatment at a local clinic. A woman might feel powerless in condom use negotiation. Sex work provides a steady source of income that inhibits girls from seeking other employment. And lack of sexual-health education at home or at school perpetuates a cycle of unawareness in Dominican youth on the consequences of contracting the infection.

In 2004, Peace Corps/DR initiated Escojo Mi Vida (I Choose My Life, EMV). The objectives of EMV are two-part: (1.) Youth understand consequences of teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STI), and HIV contraction through information disseminated by youth leaders and (2.) Youth acquire tools necessary to practice effective communication and healthy decision making to achieve life goals. In a way, EMV serves to address the gap in local school systems and in the home as it pertains to information provided to youth about sexual education. In its simplest form, EMV attempts to prevent HIV and other STI incidence, along with teen pregnancy, through interactive educational models organized and presented by other youth. Today, EMV has graduated 250-plus groups and counts on a country network of PCVs, a national coordinator, regional coordinators, and group leaders.



Peace Corps Volunteer Jose Vazquez-Ruelas (center) works with Dominican Republic youth in his Escojo Mi Vida group to empower them in decision making and communication to help them achieve life goals.

When I arrived in my community, there was already an existing EMV group. The group was comprised of two regional coordinators, five group leaders, and about 20 youth. In our pyramid model, myself, along with the



Youth Escojo Mi Vida (I Choose My Life) leaders march for community values in the Dominican Republic.

two regional coordinators, would collaborate in new group formation as well as provide support for group leaders. Leaders would organize presentations and host meetings for the group of community youth, who would then work toward close-to-perfect attendance during the course and participation in other group activities leading to the graduation. What I neglected to notice was how upside-down this pyramid was.

I went to my first EMV meeting in slacks and a button up; I took my fake leather folder and clipped on my Peace Corps photo ID. I showed up 15 minutes early and found the community center gate locked and no youth in sight. About 45 minutes after the scheduled start time, the doors opened and a leader posted the paper presentation on the wall. Once inside, I sat in the corner, trying to look official while avoiding conversation with anyone. I was secretly battling feelings of confusion and anger in not knowing how I could help get the meeting started. I also could not understand how this lack of time control was possible. About an hour after the scheduled start time, the meeting began. I was dumbfounded.

Those first months of service were filled with reflections as to the lack of organization and time control in the EMV group. I would think, “I’m working with this group that is formed and running, but not to its fullest potential. Why?” I kept going to meetings, coordinating with group leaders, and brainstorming with my regional coordinators. Regardless, items such as start times seemed totally ignored and my suggestions for efforts to better organize the group felt like pieces of the wrong puzzle.

Now that I’m midway through my service, I realize that my work with youth has been both challenging and rewarding. As teenagers, youth are going through the confusion of not being a child, but not being fully an adult; as adults we easily forget how items such as gender roles and expectations start taking full force

as girls turn into women, boys into men. When I think about that first EMV meeting, I feel I must have presented myself as imposing, impatient, and even bitter. I’m almost embarrassed because I made the mistake of interpreting small logistical issues as lack of interest in the course and my presence. Again, I was very wrong.

In finding common ground and working at a pace that is appropriate for both the youth and project objectives, we have come a long way. An example of this is a play that one of the EMV groups presented to observe World AIDS Day, December 1. “Que hay debajo de la falda de Melina?” (What’s under Melina’s skirt?) is comedy about a sex worker who develops AIDS and infects men in her village with HIV. A regional coordinator wrote the script, the cast was composed of group leaders, and community members facilitated the use of rehearsal space. Two Dominican theater professionals gave acting workshops to the youth, and the play was presented to PC staff and community members. The play is the first such to receive PEPFAR funding.

I remember one of my first days of training when a Peace Corps medical officer (PCMO) showed up with two pairs of oversized glasses. One pair was yellow, the other was blue. The PCMO went on to describe how, as Americans, we should imagine ourselves as wearing the blue glasses and the people in our host country wearing the yellow. Somehow, we both have to come together and create a green pair of glasses, which symbolizes finding common ground. It is this common ground that facilitates acceptance and understanding, where communication evolves and collaboration begins.

As I continued to go to the EMV meetings and met with group leaders, I recalled those green glasses. Slowly, I began to gain the youth’s trust by acknowledging them. I eased into a more lax perspective of time and started to observe and listen, not critique. After about four months, I found that pair of green glasses.