

# FROM THE PEACE CORPS TO THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS, PART II

*Dozens of Foreign Service employees who are also Returned Peace Corps Volunteers responded to the AFSAnet the Journal sent out soliciting insights as to how the Peace Corps and Foreign Service experiences compare and contrast. Part I ran in our October issue. Our thanks to all who responded, including those whose contributions we were unable to use.*

— Steven Alan Honley, Editor

## RECONCILING WITH MY UNCLE

**T**he early 1970s were turbulent times on American campuses: protests and demonstrations, the killings at Kent State, and a nationwide strike in response to widening the war into Cambodia. As a graduate of Princeton in 1971, these developments left me with a dilemma: a low draft lottery number and severe alienation from my Uncle Sam.

Peace Corps Tunisia was my escape. Sure, technically I was working for my uncle, but in fact, the lunatics ran the asylum! Slightly older and way cooler volunteers ran the training alongside savvy, young Tunisians fluent in English, Arabic and French. The director was a foul-mouthed, non-conformist Lebanese-American whose rebellious attitude exceeded anything from our ranks.

Teaching English in Mahida's Lycee Mixte was largely an exercise in futility, but the Arabic I learned there was my non-refundable deposit for a lifetime of language study under the rubric of the Foreign Service. I would later use those language skills to gauge Palestinian reaction to Anwar Sadat's trip to Jerusalem and the Camp David Accords, U.S. military cooperation in Egypt, the U.S.-PLO dialogue in Tunis and counterterrorism cooperation in Yemen.

But all that Foreign Service stuff was far in the future. I was still having problems with my Uncle Sam; on one occasion I was dismissed from the embassy health unit for asking if they could supply condoms to Peace Corps Volunteers. "We don't do that here" was the indignant response.

Nevertheless, the embassy snack bar on Avenue de la Liberte did provide hamburgers and, over time, my anger about U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia cooled. So when the embassy announced that it would be administering the Foreign Service Exam during my second year, I signed up.

My uncle had put up with me. I could put up with him. I could also use my Arabic and my skills in crossing cultures to build a career.

Would I do it again? Yes, vicariously. My daughter Lena worked with her Uncle Sam as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ouled Taima, Morocco, from 2005 to 2007. With Dad's blessing.

*Edmund J. Hull*

*FSO, retired*

*Washington, D.C.*

## A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER IN FS CLOTHING

My job as a Peace Corps Volunteer was to teach English in the only secondary school for boys in Kamphaengphet, Thailand. A small town of 6,000 (and that may have included water buffalo) when I arrived in 1963, Kamphaengphet was one of the country's most backward provincial capitals. Water for most residents came from a nearby well and electricity (when the town generator was working) was available only after the sun went down. I was the first volunteer ever assigned there and the only foreigner in the province throughout my two-year tour. It was just what I had hoped for.

That experience led me to join the Foreign Service. Thanks to Jerry Kyle, a branch public affairs officer and one of the few foreigners to visit the area, I learned what a U.S. Information Service officer did. Jerry regularly bumped about the region showing movies, passing out Thai-language brochures and carrying out the USIS mission of building confidence in the government's plans to improve rural life and counter the threat of an incipient insurgency. He made a deep impression on me.

But it was not until after graduate school, in 1967, that I accepted an offer to join the Foreign Service. On my flight to Thailand for my first FS posting, I recalled many positive things about my time in Kamphaengphet. But I also remembered the occasional conferences in Bangkok when we were briefed by FSOs who spoke little Thai and adopted a patronizing and self-important manner with us. I was dead set against turning out like them.

So over the next 32 years, whether in Thailand, Japan, Ireland or Great Britain — the four countries I was posted to with USIA — I went out of my way to be a Peace Corps Volunteer in FSO clothing. I polished my language skills (even making a futile effort to learn Irish in Ireland), got out of the office to meet all levels of people, ate the local cuisine and demonstrated my interest in the local culture.

Throughout my Foreign Service career, I often asked myself: "How would a good Peace Corps Volunteer handle this?" or "What would have worked in Kamphaengphet?" More often than not, the answer was the right one.

*Robin Berrington*  
*FSO, retired*  
*Washington, D.C.*



## FROM MUN-JU TO YU

About halfway through my "rest year" after college, I accepted the Peace Corps' invitation to teach English and math to middle school students in Boda, a remote village of 4,000 people in the Central African Republic. I went for public service, but came back two years later with personal and professional growth I could never have gained elsewhere.

I was the only Peace Corps Volunteer there and one of only a dozen "mun-ju" ("white person" — though I'm Asian-American) in our village. Each day, I walked 20 minutes from one end of town to the other on my way to and from school. In the beginning, children ran alongside me shouting, "mun-ju, mun-ju." Old women pointed and laughed. I later learned they were all bewildered because no mun-ju walked in Boda; they all drove through town in their Toyota trucks. The lack of respect bugged me at first, but it was a humbling experience. Over time I realized that I needed to

find my proper place in village society and become a respectful partner in this assistance/human relationship enterprise. After I did, the yells became "Yu, Yu, Yu," and the women stopped laughing.

It was easy to lose hope as a teacher in the CAR — too many children squeezed into too few school benches in grim classrooms, without books and often without chalk. Most of my students would not go on to high school; they were called back to their future as subsistence farmers. We all knew escape from the village was a long shot, yet in many of these kids' eyes there was an incredible hope and enthusiasm for learning. Now, when facing the direst of circumstances at work or home, I sometimes think back to those students and remind myself of how lucky we all are — and of our obligation to help others.

My first exposure to the Foreign Service there was almost my last. The ambassador's Office Management Specialist took pity on a grungy volunteer and invited me over for lunch whenever I made the 60-kilometer, six-hour journey to Bangui, the country's capital. On one visit, she invited me to dinner with two FS couples. I put on my cleanest jeans and was ready to regale the group with all the classic Outward Bound-like stories that volunteers love to trot out. But there was no interest. Instead, discussion centered around the hardships of FS life in Bangui — which sounded pretty good from where I was sitting! It was when all of them (except my friend) complained far too long about their frozen turkeys not arriving in time for Thanksgiving that I swore to myself I would never join an organization of such namby-pambys.

Obviously, I broke that pledge, but I have tried to maintain the other life lessons of gratitude, optimism and humility in my post-Peace Corps life.

*Alan Yu*  
*Political Counselor*  
*Embassy Kabul*



## OPENNESS GETS RESULTS

I see the influence of my Peace Corps experience on my State career in two broad areas: cultural and cross-cultural approaches, and management practice.

My Peace Corps service in Gabon left me with a legacy of wanderlust and a sense of adventure. Learning in such detail about another culture only whetted my appetite. There is always more to be learned, and I find it exciting that, for all their diversity, humans have more in common than not. There is no place that I don't want to go, for the world is a busy, buzzing, phenomenally interesting place to be. There is almost something spiritual about it.

The roots of my management approach derive from my days as a volunteer leader, post administrative officer, and

Africa Region chief administrative officer for the Peace Corps. Volunteers are independent folk with strong views, so mandates do not work with them. To be effective, I used approaches that stressed consensus and collaboration. Results can take longer to achieve, but they are more applicable to the situation at hand.

I also learned to value open communication, for when feedback is stifled, the result is distorted and lacks value. Such an approach requires time for listening, mentoring, persuasion and patience. But as a team becomes well-oiled and uses its open channels to coordinate between its various parts, results come more quickly. When I transferred over to State, I found that this philosophy does not always mesh with its top-down structure. But I still try to practice that approach in my small world, and it has worked for me so far, despite resistance in some quarters.

*Bob Riley*  
*Management Counselor*  
*Embassy Hanoi*

~\*~  
**THE THREE KEYS  
TO SUCCESS**

After serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Bangladesh from 2000 to 2004, working for the Foreign Service feels very natural. I have learned that success in both roles requires flexibility, teamwork and a commitment to public service.

Working under hardship conditions, you must adapt quickly. Going to the bank may take two hours because you have to drink two cups of tea with the manager and greet the entire staff. During monsoon season, you might have to take a boat to work instead of a car because the road has flooded so much that the only other option is to swim in murky waters. If you can't adapt, you can't survive.

Next comes teamwork. As a for-

eigner working abroad, you must rely on the locals. During my time in the Peace Corps, I quickly realized that as I trained my co-workers and students, I, too, was being trained.

Finally, we must embrace our public service role as the face of America abroad. We not only represent the U.S. and teach foreigners about our culture and values, but embody the broad perceptions that other nations have of Americans.

Both the Foreign Service and the Peace Corps are service organizations, facilitating cultural exchanges and showing the rest of the world what America is truly like.

*Monica Isaza*  
*Economic/Political Section*  
*Consulate Guangzhou*

~\*~  
**GETTING OFF THE  
PLANE IN DAKAR**

I don't think I had even heard of Senegal before the Peace Corps recruiting office in San Francisco sent me my country assignment letter. I spent days in the map room at the Library of Congress trying to come up with an image of this exotic place. A few months later, I trembled with excitement getting off the plane in Dakar, my first time in Africa. At the bottom of the stairs from the airplane door, the tarmac was so hot I could feel my Birkenstocks melting into the asphalt.

The sights, the sounds and the tastes were all overwhelming at first, but I had dreamed of this moment for a long time. Ever since high school I had told my family and friends that I was going to be a Peace Corps Volunteer. And now I was there!

As an agro-forestry and environment volunteer, I was immediately immersed in debates about sound natural resource management practices. Living in a village of 100 families, I helped my hosts farm a hectare of mil-

let and about two hectares of ground nuts and watermelon once a year. I quickly learned what it was like to derive one's entire sustenance from the ground, using only the natural resources at hand.

My Peace Corps experience taught me a number of other important things, as well, almost all of which have enhanced my career as a USAID Foreign Service officer. I learned to assess a situation from the perspective of the host country, while resisting the urge to build monuments to myself. And I quickly realized that learning the local language, culture and traditions would endear me to the people I was there to work with, support and learn about.

My meetings with Senegalese officials gave me the confidence and experience to represent the United States as an FSO. And the Peace Corps not only gave me important training in the technical skills I use every day, but led me to understand that the U.S. is making a significant effort in many important areas.

Most importantly, I learned the truth of my father's observation: Our similarities are much more interesting than our differences.

*Michael Satin*  
*FSO*  
*USAID/Afghanistan*

~\*~  
**WHERE THERE'S  
A WILL...**

After serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer with a USAID-funded public administration team working for the municipality of Guayaquil, and later as a community organizer in a USAID-funded self-help housing project in Quito, I was in the early group of Peace Corps Volunteers that joined USAID in 1966. In addition to my other tasks, I helped promote closer working relationships between volunteers and USAID.

While I was managing the mission's Community Action Division, some Peace Corps Volunteers sought funding for an indigenous leadership training program. When I told them there was no money for such a program, they suggested I speak with the acting USAID director — who happened to be the embassy economic officer. He supported the project and told me the program officer would find the necessary funds. The pilot program was extremely successful and became a part of USAID's response to Congress on how it was implementing the provisions of Title IX (popular participation) of the Foreign Assistance Act.

As a result of these and other similar encounters with the Peace Corps around the globe, USAID established the Special Development Activity Authority, informally known as the ambassador's "slush" fund. At last there was a mechanism for Peace

Corps Volunteers to petition the agency for small development grants that the volunteers would administer.

*Paul G. Vitale  
FSO, retired  
Vallejo, Calif.*

~\*~  
**FROM THE OUTSIDE  
LOOKING IN**

Once a year, we Peace Corps Volunteers in Gabon (where I served from 1976 to 1979) got to use the ambassador's pool. It was a chance to chug watered-down American beer and wolf down lots of hot dogs and chips, all free — allowing us to save our precious funds for the stronger national beer and canned pork-and-beans back in our villages. Despite our gratitude, we were youthful and raucous and really mucked up the place. So it took true generosity for

the ambassador to keep inviting us back.

We volunteers only rarely got a taste of life inside the protective bubble that the embassy staff enjoyed, but we told ourselves that we were the ones who *really* knew the country. Our encounters were with the majority of the population who lived outside Sofia, on less than a dollar a day. The 70-plus students in our classrooms squeezed three to a bench, eager to learn, even walking barefoot to school and putting their shoes on there, so they would last all year.

Fast forward a few years to when I joined the Foreign Service — the other side. Having Fulbrighters sleeping on the floor of my embassy townhouse was not quite the same as opening up my house to fellow Peace Corps Volunteers a few years earlier. Excursions to get out of the capital and rough it with two small children

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in tow meant allowing them to swim in the same parasite-infested waters, or stay in the same rooms with mice and rats, that hadn't bothered me so much a few years earlier. Dancing all night in bars in questionable neighborhoods lost its appeal. Trying to justify the U.S. interest in giving grants to help poor schoolchildren, instead of organizing U.S. speakers to explain constructive engagement, became increasingly hard.

How long did it take to stop pretending that I could remove myself, and now my family, from that protective bubble, from the mercenary work of baldly promoting U.S. interests? I don't know, but eventually I found myself more comfortable in that bubble than I had been outside of it.

There's still a vestige of that earlier attitude in each and every one of us who went through that transition, whether it is to try the palm wine or eat the street food or get a ride in the truck or the local bus — all the things that drive the security officers and the health units crazy. And that vestige is one of the many features of our Foreign Service that sets us apart from other diplomatic services. Nor is it the exclusive realm of former volunteers either, as the Foreign Service is full of colleagues who would otherwise qualify as "honorary volunteers."

One thing remains true. All the Peace Corps Volunteers I know would say they got more out of the experience than they gave. While I love being in the Foreign Service and feel indebted to it in so many ways, it just occurred to me that I've never said that about the Foreign Service. Nor have I heard anyone else say it out loud.

*John Dickson*  
FSO  
Director, Office of  
Public Diplomacy  
Bureau of Western  
Hemisphere Affairs



## AN EYE-OPENER

My stint as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Chad (1977-1979) helped prepare me for the Foreign Service in many ways. Living in a remote village without electricity or running water, I discovered how little I really needed. Using French, Arabic and tribal tongues in daily life facilitated the process of learning other languages. And the experience of evacuating from the country in an overland convoy to Cameroon when civil war broke out made me much more sensitive to dealing with the local American community as a Foreign Service officer.

But one lesson still stands out from my first day of handling a class of 90. When two students kept talking, I did what my teachers had done when I was in school: I ordered the pair to sit in differing areas of the open-air classroom. But they refused to budge. I considered making a bigger issue of it, but I really wanted things to go smoothly. Eventually, the two students stopped talking enough so that I could finish the lesson.

After class, the director approached me and explained why the two students had not moved. They were from the Mboum tribe and I was asking them to sit with the Lakka and the Moundang tribes. I'd had no clue that the classroom was organized that way.

That experience, and others like it, made me realize how much I needed fresh eyes to understand other cultures. When sitting across from diplomats from other nations, I came to see that we could look at the same facts yet see them very differently. And I had a better sense of why, in some negotiations, my counterparts could not budge.

*Michael Varga*  
FSO, retired  
Norcross, Ga.



## FOND MEMORIES

I am a USAID Foreign Service officer because of what I experienced and learned in the Peace Corps. In 1986, after graduating from the University of California at Berkeley, my husband and I were posted to a remote village in southern Zaire, one of Africa's poorest regions. Living one day at a time took on a new meaning, as I quickly learned the realities of life without electricity, running water, grocery stores, and even doctors.

My two years there firmly cemented my view of the world and my career path. The Peace Corps taught me compassion, gave me the understanding and patience to work cross-culturally, and provided me with the coping mechanisms I use every day to navigate life in developing countries. It also gave me a deep appreciation for the United States and our unique focus on aiding others around the world based on need, not ideology.

My success managing USAID projects is directly tied to my Peace Corps experience. I now know first-hand how a water, health or education project can transform lives and put people on a path to a better life.

While life in the Foreign Service is far from the hardships of that village in Zaire, I do enjoy the occasional power cut and water shortage. Candles and bucket baths bring back fond memories.

*Dana H. Rose*  
Regional Contracting  
Officer  
USAID/Egypt



## THINK LOCAL

My involvement as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco was in the "good" old days of the 1980s, before the 9/11 attacks heightened security concerns and before rising urban

crime in developing-world cities became endemic. In 2004, I was briefly a staff member in another Arab country and the Peace Corps seemed to have changed radically.

Today's volunteers are no longer "development tourists," as many of us were in the 1980s. They are also much more answerable to Peace Corps management and to local communities than ever before.

Like the State Department, the Peace Corps is being called on to do more with less and to justify its role in many areas. It helps that volunteers understand that the impressions we make on our contacts last long after we've departed, and our job effectiveness flows from the curiosity about our external environment that we bring to the table. In contrast, State's huge mandate and the rapid clip at which we gallop through portfolios and postings often don't allow time for in-depth relationship development.

I also worry that many of us confuse serving at a post with living in a country, particularly in today's security environment.

*Ellen Peterson  
Vice Consul  
Tijuana, Mexico*



## A LITTLE HUMILITY

Probably the greatest lesson I've learned from my time as a Peace Corps Volunteer that has been relevant to my work as a USAID Foreign Service officer is the importance of humility.

I went to Nepal as a volunteer in 1974 and, after spending three months in Kathmandu learning to speak Nepali, was sent to a village reachable only by riding a bus for half a day and then walking five more days. When I got there, I discovered that everyone spoke Tibetan, not Nepali. Unable to converse at first, I quickly learned to be deferential, and

found I could learn a lot just by silently watching. For example, when offered yak-buttered tea or arak (the distilled spirits made from barley), it was not polite to just gulp the whole glass down. Instead, one took a small sip, allowing the host to refill the glass — a process that was repeated two more times before the host moved on to another guest.

Respectful and thoughtful behavior was just part of Tibetans' daily lives. And when I started using the same mannerisms, I noticed the matriarch of the family I was staying with nodding in approval of my behavior.

Too often, residents of other countries are exposed to the arrogance and haughtiness of diplomatic personnel — "Don't you know that I work for the U.S. embassy?" How many of us have not heard that refrain, or perhaps even uttered it ourselves at times when frustrated with Third World bureaucrats?

Whether it has been with nomads in Mongolia, farmers in Afghanistan, or government officials in India, I have observed that a little humility and respect go a long way in building relationships with people as a Foreign Service officer. And it is these relationships, established on the basis of mutual respect and understanding, that are at the heart of diplomacy and development.

*Daniel J. Miller  
Project Development  
Officer  
USAID/New Delhi*



## THE SECOND TIME AROUND

I was a Peace Corps Volunteer and trainer in Thailand from 1982 to 1985, and later served as a staffer with the agency back in the U.S. from 1988 to 1996. The next year, I joined the State Department and ended up

assigned to the same city where I'd been a volunteer 14 years earlier. But whereas before I mostly associated with younger and less well-off students and working-class people, as an FSO I befriended a wide circle of people, including some of the wealthiest and best-connected industrialists in the area.

The key insight from my Peace Corps time that I have applied to my Foreign Service work is the importance of understanding the local culture and showing an appreciation for it. Speaking the local language is, of course, a big part of that.

I have found a major difference, as well. While both jobs have the goal of making friends for America, as a consular officer I sometimes have to make decisions mandated by our laws and regulations that are not well received. Still, as a diplomat I look for ways to do my duty while interpreting U.S. laws and regulations in a way that helps the host country and improves bilateral relations.

*Miguel Ordonez  
Consular Chief  
Casablanca, Morocco*



## COPING MECHANISMS

My experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in San Jose from 1998 to 2000 with the Children, Youth and Families at Risk Program persuaded me to apply to the Foreign Service. I'd toyed with the idea since college, but it was my time in Costa Rica that made me realize what a good fit the career would be for me.

That experience taught me not only to accept cultural differences, but to embrace them. It also taught me to more fully appreciate the many good things my American heritage has offered me, as well as to recognize its baggage, from a foreign perspective. Both as a volunteer and FSO, I have sought to dispel the

stereotypes some foreign nationals have about Americans, both positive and negative, or at least to try to explain them.

Another benefit has been the incentive to develop coping mechanisms, such as staying in touch with family and friends back home. It was in the Peace Corps that I first started using e-mail on a regular basis. And it was during my first assignment in the Foreign Service that I started using instant messaging and webcams. Finding new and more effective ways to communicate across many miles and time zones has helped me to overcome bouts of loneliness and frustration.

On the other hand, forming new friendships was equally important, if not more so. I have found that the friendships I formed as a Peace Corps Volunteer have been some of the most significant in my life. This is proving to be equally true in the Foreign Service. I am continually amazed by all the bright and interesting people I have the opportunity to meet. Whether getting to know my FS colleagues, local staff, neighbors or expats at post, it is always an enriching experience. The diversity of people I had the privilege to meet and know in the Peace Corps was enriching and gave me a taste for what life in the Foreign Service would be like and, so far, has been.

*Marcia S. Anglarill*  
*Vice Consul*  
*Consulate General*  
*Monterrey*

~\*~  
**THE VALUE OF  
“GOING NATIVE”**

The single most important insight from my Peace Corps service in Senegal (1966-1968) that I've applied to my Foreign Service career is also the most obvious: Most of the world is not American.

In Senegal, I lived with two nationals. I spoke their language, met their families, befriended their friends, and learned about their (very different) values and religion. For two years, I rarely saw another American, or even another Westerner.

Before joining the Peace Corps just out of college, I had wanted to be a lawyer. Afterward, I knew I wanted an international career. The Foreign Service was always part of the plan (or the hope), but it took me a while to get there. I was sworn in as a junior FSO in 2001 at the age of 58.

Critics of the Foreign Service often complain that we “go native,” identifying more with the countries in which we serve than with the United States. Balderdash! The most effective Foreign Service employees are precisely those who appreciate the extent to which foreign nationals have a different perspective. FSOs do not have to agree with that mindset, but if they do not understand it, their attempts at diplomacy will fail.

*Craig Olson*  
*FSO, retired*  
*Arlington, Va.*

~\*~  
**THE “REVERSE  
PEACE CORPS”**

Unlike so many others who went from the Peace Corps to the Foreign Service, you could say I did the reverse.

When I moved to New Delhi to accompany my wife on her first tour as a Foreign Service officer, I found a great job in the embassy helping coordinate efforts to fight human trafficking. The job was a nice fit with my experience, and India was a life-changing experience.

While there, I developed the idea of bringing nonprofit leaders from the developing world to the U.S. on a one-year fellowship — what some people have called a “reverse Peace

Corps.” For 47 years Americans have had the opportunity to volunteer abroad, but overseas leaders have not had access to the same experience. (Interestingly, the founders of the Peace Corps intended for overseas leaders to volunteer in the U.S., but after two years the funding for that was cut.) Due to the expense and visa restrictions, it is difficult for someone from the developing world to volunteer in the United States.

While many people I know took their knowledge from the Peace Corps to make them better employees of State, I took my experiences at State to launch a new kind of Peace Corps. I learned about J-1 visas from the consular section and picked up best practices from the public affairs section about the International Visitor Leadership Program. I also borrowed an idea from AmeriCorps, where host organizations (U.S. nonprofits where fellows are placed for one year) cover about 50 percent of the expenses.

After New Delhi, we moved to Bogota. There, after two years of working for State, I launched Atlas Corps ([www.atlascorps.org](http://www.atlascorps.org)), incorporated it as a nonprofit, and got the Department of Homeland Security to certify it under the Student and Exchange Visitor Program. I found funding from host organizations, foundations, corporations, individuals and even the Colombian government — all despite my mediocre Spanish-language skills.

Last year we launched the program with two fellows from India and four from Colombia, placing them at organizations like Ashoka and the Grameen Foundation. We have now doubled the size of the program, to 12 fellows.

*Scott Beale*  
*Founder & Executive*  
*Director*  
*Atlas Service Corps, Inc.*  
*Washington, D.C. ■*