

RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS WHO TEACH

Fulfilling the Third Goal

by Angene Wilson

President John F. Kennedy, speaking to the first group of Peace Corps volunteers in 1961 said, “Come back and educate us.” In 1981 Peace Corps Director Dick Celeste told returned Peace Corps volunteers: “There is a third goal and, in many ways, it may be the most important.” He urged a consistent, determined effort to educate Americans about the people and cultures of the so-called developing world.

Twenty Years of Peace Corps cited figures of 26 percent of 1960s returnees going into teaching and 27 percent in the 1970s employed by educational institutions. Author Gerald T. Rice concluded that “perhaps the most exciting and profound impact of returned volunteers has been in the field of education,” one of the primary benefits being that sharing their experiences took “some of the fear and mystery out of the American view of the Third World.” He also quoted a 1980 poll of universities which attempted “to evaluate what effect returned volunteers had. The response was overwhelmingly favorable,” especially in public health and international studies.

In the mid-1980s, as a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV) university teacher educator, I wondered what RPCV teachers themselves thought about our impact. So I visited and interviewed 17 RPCVs who taught in Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio, Michigan, North Carolina, and Washington D.C. and then used their comments to develop a questionnaire which garnered responses from 36 RPCVs teaching in 23 states, from New York to California, Alabama to Alaska. The surveyed teachers responded most positively to the statements “I teach that American culture is not the only culture; just because you don’t believe it or understand it doesn’t mean it’s wrong” and “It’s not just knowing a country’s

economics but also a cultural sensitivity to the country’s point of view that’s important in my teaching.”

Bob Leupold, (Indonesia, Thailand 63-65), the teacher who stressed that American culture is not the only culture, explained: “When some student has his feet up on the desk pointing toward me, I point out that pointing the sole of your foot toward someone is a deep insult in some cultures.” The teacher who made the second statement, Washington D.C. teacher Billie Day (Sierra Leone 61-63), talked about the African side of exploration and colonization in her classes.

Although teaching about one’s Peace Corps country was not always possible, fourth grade teacher Kurt Liske, who was in an early Tunisia group before teaching in Ohio, told me: “There isn’t a day goes by that I don’t use my experiences. Today we were talking about communication in a story we were reading and I talked about calling my friend Beshear in Tunis who sounded like he was next door. I also tell lots of stories. So someone talks about oranges and I tell my story of riding on top of an orange truck in Morocco.”

Other teachers I visited described how Peace Corps had made them accepting, understanding, and appreciative of differences. A Michigan teacher whose high school had a large minority of Hispanic students and also had six exchange students in his classes said, “I just accept that kids are brought up differently.” An English as a Second Language teacher in an Illinois elementary school tried to attack problems from a cultural perspective. She told about a teacher who had diagnosed a student as dyslexic because he was writing from right to left—he was Arab and Arabic is written from right to left! Surveyed RPCV teachers wrote about “conferencing with Spanish-speaking students in Spanish,” “helping



Patrick Bell (Costa Rica 97-99) teaches Spanish at Sayre School in Lexington, Kentucky. Over the years he has taken students to Costa Rica, Spain, Argentina and Mexico for educational trips into Spanish-speaking culture.

Iranian and Afghan students,” and being more understanding of both poor and problem children.

In the last six years, for the Oral History Center at the University of Kentucky, my husband and I have interviewed 86 Kentucky-connected Returned Peace Corps Volunteers from all decades, a third of whom are educators, not surprisingly since 35 percent of Volunteers are still in the education. Examples? A county math supervisor who learned to write curriculum as a math teacher in Ethiopia, an elementary school Spanish teacher who learned the language in Ecuador when she was a special education Volunteer, an electronics technician Volunteer who became a teacher of English on the Internet to people all over the world because he learned French in Cote d’Ivoire.

RPCVs have made their mark in colleges and universities in teaching, research, and service, too. At the University of Kentucky (UK), for instance, historian Bob Olson (Turkey 63-65), retiring as a Middle East specialist, told us: “Being in Peace Corps introduced you to international politics, and I got introduced not only to the Turks but also to the Kurds who subsequently became my academic career.” Education professor Kristen Perry (Lesotho 99-01) won an award for her research on how culture impacts literacy development, a topic she got interested in partly because of an old man’s perceptions about the relative difficulty of Sesotho and English languages. Theater professor Andrew Kimbrough (Sri Lanka 84-86), found Peace Corps helpful in applying for a teaching job. “One of the questions

I was asked was ‘How do you think you’d be able to support our efforts with multiculturalism?’ Well, one of the degrees I earned was with the Peace Corps. I might be some middle-class, middle-aged white guy, but the Peace Corps puts all of us ahead of the curve in that respect.” Andrew teaches a course in Asian theater that includes the bharata natyam, an Indian dance form he first became acquainted with in Sri Lanka.

Another university-connected educator is Kay Roberts. For Roberts (Ecuador 82-84), “bringing the world back home has been something I’ve worked very hard at.” As Community Liaison as well as Kentucky-Ecuador Partners Director at UK’s Office of International Affairs, she led a project with Kentucky Educational Television in 91-92 and another more recent project at public libraries around the state, both with RPCVs. The earlier Wavelengths to the World project, developed for sixth grade geography teachers, included short stories and classroom activities written by RPCVs. Roberts also organized three telecasts featuring returned volunteers and international students and sent teachers information on World Wise Schools and Peace Corps Partnership programs. She remembers sixth graders calling in to ask questions about guinea worms of a returned health volunteer.

In the end, of course, “educating us” is not just the job of RPCV educators but of all returned Peace Corps Volunteers. We all know that until one has visited other villages one will think only Mother’s cooking is sweet!

*You can read and hear the more recent interviews online at the Center for Oral History at University of Kentucky.

Angene Wilson (Liberia 1962-64) began bringing the world back home in 1965 by developing a primary source curriculum unit about Nigeria for a new world studies course at her alma mater high school in Lakewood, Ohio. She led the secondary social studies program at the University of Kentucky from 1975 to 2004 and taught African history for three years after she retired. With fellow RPCV Merry Merryfield she wrote Social Studies and the World: Teaching Global Perspectives in 2005.

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