Diversity: Challenges and Opportunities

All Peace Corps Volunteers go through the trials and tribulations of adjusting to a new culture and integrating into a community, but their experiences vary significantly based on various aspects of their identity. Everything from race to socioeconomic status shapes the lenses through which an individual sees the world, and how he or she is seen.

Depending on where they serve, Volunteers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds may have different experiences adjusting to a new culture. “I was very taken aback by the fact that people were always staring at me and that cars would always come to a screeching halt every time I was around,” says Allison, a Bulgaria Volunteer.

As an African-American, Allison was subject to a lot of attention and curiosity. She says the key to her successful integration was learning the language.

This unwanted attention also poses some safety and security concerns. In Allison’s case, police officers stopped a bus she was riding, demanding she explain why she was there and that she produce legal documentation.

With the assistance of the safety and security officer, such incidents stopped. Allison says when people in her village heard what happened, several of them went to the police station to tell them “yeg e neobitutu muniche,” which means, “she is our girl.”

Safety and security concerns also apply when a hidden aspect of identity is revealed. Religion, disabilities, and sexual orientation are not always apparent, yet they often impact a Volunteer’s adjustment to a new culture.

In some countries, for example, Jewish Volunteers are advised to be careful about sharing their religious or cultural identity.

In a number of countries, in a context in which homosexuality is not only socially unacceptable but illegal, some Volunteers are advised not to share their sexual orientation. Such warnings are relevant and necessary, but taken alone, they can cause anxiety and fuel fear.

The warnings can be balanced through such formal mediums as a Peer Support Network (PSN), Diversity Committee, or diversity training; or through everyday interaction. In a number of cases, diversity issues have been integrated into PSNs. Volunteers are trained in coaching and active listening skills to help support fellow Volunteers.

In Bolivia, trainees not only explore perceptions in the local cultural context, but also the impact it has on relationships within their training group. Volunteers are advised not to share their sexual orientation.

In Bulgaria, staff and Volunteers co-facilitate a “Diversity Story Circle” during PST. During this activity, four to six Volunteers from diverse backgrounds share their experiences with trainees. Instead of a panel format, all trainees and Volunteers sit in a circle and group sharing is followed by a reflection activity on how to be allies.

In conversation with her coworkers, Brasil highlighted the diversity in Asia, Africa, as well as within Swaziland itself. The Korean-American Volunteer later expressed her appreciation for Brasil’s efforts.

These are just a few examples of how Volunteers around the world recognize and address diversity-related challenges. To learn more about how you can support diversity, contact Cross-Cultural and Diversity Training Specialist Shilpa A. Hart at shart@peacecorps.gov.

To learn to co-facilitate diversity training during pre-service training and beyond, the “Diversity Training Modules for Pre-service Training” manual is available in the Volunteer Resources and Support section of the Peace Corps website: www.peacecorps.gov/library.

Volunteer Voices

I really like being an African American in the Peace Corps because in this community, I don’t think a lot of people have ever seen an African American.

They’d ask questions about my hair—they’d come up and touch it.

I think that’s one of the intricacies of just being somebody different from the United States. The reaction I’ve gotten here has been really interesting, and I like being able to talk from a different perspective about the United States.

Community Health Education Volunteer Kadesha Thomas, Nicaragua

At first, when I got to my town, people would ask me where I’m from and I’d say, “The United States,” and then they would say, “OK, but no, where are you really from?”

And so I would say I was born in Bangladesh and they’d say, “Oh, so you’re Asian.” And then they understood that I was an immigrant and that made me a little closer to them.

They understood what the immigrant experience was like because so many of their sons or daughters or nieces or nephews are often immigrants in other countries, so they understand what the struggle is about. I was much more easily accepted here, I think, because of that.

RPCV Tanushree Dutta, (Nicaragua, 2006-08)
Behind the Volunteer

The following is an interview with Shirley Everest, Manager of Peace Corps’ American Diversity Program:

Anyone meeting Shirley Everest will quickly learn of her love of penguins. On her office door at the Peace Corps Headquarters in Washington, D.C., hangs a cartoon depicting one of the birds taking a photograph of his (or her) peers.

“Why on earth would you spring for colored film?” an inquisitive penguin asks the photographer.

Everest would likely tell the inquiring bird that it’s important to look beyond the surface. After all, in her role as manager of the American Diversity Program, nothing is merely a matter of black or white.

“It’s important for staff and Volunteers to realize Americans come in many different colors, ethnicities, religions, and ages, and all of those differences may be understood differently by Americans and host country nationals,” she says, adding, “To understand the way we interact with people who are different than we are, I think we really need to recognize our own personal frame of reference about how we perceive ourselves and other people.”

Such a frame of reference may find Volunteers reacting to a similar situation in different ways. “Each of us can only interact in order to work together is very important to understand,” she says, adding, “Not having good information about American diversity and foreign cultures can damage a relationship, which can become a disruptive influence in the workforce and can also reach the point where it’s detrimental to the staff as a whole. When that happens, it hinders the level of support afforded each Volunteer.”

Referring to the differences in culture, where a woman’s role at work may be more limited due to accepted norms, Everest says sexual harassment remains at the forefront. However, a proactive approach has lessened such incidences within the Peace Corps family.

“We discuss how certain attitudes exist. In countries where we have had a longer presence, the chance of resolving issues is very real and possible. I have to start from a point where people don’t raise their eyebrows, wondering, What is she talking about? In many of the posts we go to, diversity is just not something they’ve heard a lot about.”

However, that has changed since management adopted a more aggressive approach. “Even though our office is (Continued on page 4.)

Volunteers in the Dominican Republic Create Diversity Camp for Kids

Referred to as the Island of Hispaniola in the Eastern Caribbean, the Dominican Republic occupies two-thirds of the island’s eastern region. Haiti occupies the remaining western region.

In 2003, Volunteers noted tensions between Dominican and Haitian youth, who were given the opportunity to foster relationships and gain a better understanding of one another’s culture. Highlighting topics such as Dominican and Haitian culture, global cultures, and personal identity, the youth participated in discussions and activities aimed at finding solutions to prejudices, and shared their experiences and ideas to initiate cultural exchange within their communities.

Participants also learned about different world cultures, and discussed and acknowledged prejudices in their communities. They also sought to define their own personal and professional goals as future leaders of their country.

“Celebrando el Cibao empowered Dominican and Haitian youth to abandon years of prejudices,” said Rachelle Olden, a returned Volunteer who helped establish the camp. “It helped them to begin cultural reconciliation in the Dominican Republic.”

Each participant received a diversity awareness toolkit, with ideas for interactive games and campaigns to reproduce in their respective communities. With the assistance of Volunteers, each youth assessed the specific needs, strengths, challenges, and limitations within their own communities, then created a strategy to incorporate their assessments within their respective communities in an attempt to affect further change.

To organize the camp, a “host committee” was comprised of 20 Volunteers of the Cibao Region of the Dominican Republic. The host committee met monthly for six months to coordinate the logistics and implementation of the conference.

The estimated cost of the conference was $5,000, funded through the Peace Corps Partnership Program, small grants, and in-kind contributions from family and friends of Volunteers in the U.S.

The Celebrando diversity camp idea has continued in Cibao and has been adopted by Volunteers in other sections of the Dominican with Celebrando El Sur (Celebrating the South) and Celebrando El Este (Celebrating the East). The Celebrando groups are now official PC/Dominican interest groups and, as such, will continue indefinitely.

Peace Corps/Dominican staff say some of the best program ideas come from Volunteers, and the Celebrando diversity camps are a good example of how Volunteers can find new and exciting directions for a national Peace Corps program.

Activities at Camp:

Present regional and global cultures through an interactive setting to promote a better understanding and appreciation of diversity.

Discuss the stereotypes and prejudices that perpetuate inequality in the world and in the local region.

Foster national and personal pride among Dominican and Haitian youth.

Encourage the development of personal goals and self-identity of each youth in relation to the world around them.

Motivate participants to organize activities in their respective communities to eliminate racism, end negative stereotypes, and promote peace.
50+ Volunteers in the Peace Corps

Introduction by Peace Corps Director
Ron Tschetter

Since becoming Peace Corps Director in September of 2006, one of my priorities has been the 50+ Initiative, which aims to increase the percentage of 50+ Volunteers in the Peace Corps from approximately 5 percent to 15 percent over the next few years. While the initiative is called 50+, it is not just about broadening our organization’s demographic profile—it is also about broadening the diversity of life experiences and professional expertise the Peace Corps can offer to our partner agencies, and the communities served by our Volunteers.

The Peace Corps is generally thought of as an organization of young people, but 5 to 10 percent of Volunteers have always been 50+. Surveys and work with Volunteers in the field have shown there are remarkably few differences in motivation and service experiences between older and younger groups. Both are motivated by ideals, a desire for adventure, and a strong commitment to volunteering.

50+ Volunteers tend to have added responsibilities, with three and even four generations (siblings, children, grandchildren and aging parents) back home. They also tend to have more “stuff” (houses, finances, pets) to deal with before leaving home.

They share other concerns with younger Volunteers, such as appropriate training, site placement that utilizes expertise and life skills, and the desire to work with counterparts, staff and fellow Volunteers in the exciting process of becoming useful partners in their communities.

The following stories demonstrate this group’s enthusiastic engagement.

Dale Mosier, Malawi CD

My wife and I served as Volunteers in South Africa after retiring from the business world. This provided a total change of life’s direction—part of which was anticipated and part of which was not. I am currently the country director for Malawi and have observed, for the young Volunteers, that no two experiences are the same. This is even truer for 50+ Volunteers as we bring our broader experience base to our Volunteer role.

Additionally, age is more respected than we typically find in the U.S., giving us an even further advantages in use of our skills and experiences. One delightful surprise that came with the job was the number of lifelong friendships we made with young Volunteers.

IAP:
Martha Landis, St. Kitts (Eastern Caribbean)

Here I am, 2,000 miles from “home” (and I use that word lightly), having spent almost two years in the village of Mansion on the island of St. Kitts. My life has been irreversibly changed. I will never see anything the same. I left four grandchildren behind and gained a village of them. At 7 a.m., they arrived at the gate to put the finishing touches on their kites to fly today. It is Good Friday. Most every day here is good. Even the worst of them. No car to drive, unbearable heat, the snails’ pace of accomplishment, letting go of outcomes and expectations, and missing “home.”

I’ve learned more about myself in these two years than in the 65 previous ones: That I can persevere. That there are always options. That there are other ways to think about things.

It’s been a journey into the great unknown, literally and figuratively. I’ve learned “the stuff I’m made of” and, so far, I like what I see. They told us that when we started, and I can tell you “for true” (as they say here), that it is so.

AFRICA:
Madeline Urane, Lesotho

There are many photos I don’t take here in Lesotho, southern Africa’s tiny mountain kingdom. I have photos of thatched-roof rondavel huts and cemeteries with fresh HIV/AIDS graves. But I have few photos of myself, since I’m seldom with anyone who has used a camera.

I planned my Peace Corps service as a late-in-life career change—from international education to international development. I’m less sure about the wisdom of that now: grass-roots development is so hard.

I did not plan, however, for the gifts I have received: My healthiest year in ages—25 pounds lost to mountain walking; my most challenging career assignment ever—training isolated teachers who have few desks, chairs, or textbooks; my strongest lessons in patience and compassion—the death of a teenage orphan neighbor to HIV/AIDS and the death of my brother in the U.S. to cancer. Both times, neighbors gathered to share my tears and teach me the importance of joy amidst sorrow.

I didn’t plan on feeling, for the first time, that I’m a member of this planet’s human community—sharing its scarce resources, looking up at clear mountain stars, imagining a better way.

EMA:
Dorie Mueller, Romania

At the ripe young age of 68, I decided to pack away my golf clubs and do something meaningful. Here I am in Romania, serving in the Peace Corps. Yipes! From North Carolina’s mountains to the rolling hills of Romania! Living in another culture is a new experience for me; one that I find challenging (my lack of language skills) and at times stressful (my lack of language skills), but always interesting (wonder what I just said to that woman in the bakery?).

I am living with a gazda (host) so I can learn more about the culture. “Living with Lili” is an adventure in itself. She is very superstitious and has found my happy-go-lucky attitude both puzzling and entertaining. After a year together, we have found a common ground to navigate our living situation.

She knows I love having my window open and I know she thinks I am going to die from the “draft.” I’ve shown her how to make a mean grilled cheese sandwich, and she has shown me how to make cheiuru (sour soup).

Although I miss my two children more than I ever imagined, the most difficult aspect of living in a culture where my language skills are so weak is the inability to converse with the older population. I enjoy hearing people’s stories. Doing this through a translator loses its appeal.

My love of children has brought me to an organization whose focus is on the Roma community. Children laugh, play, and cry in the same language. They are patient with me and accept my hugs without question. When one of their mothers said, “I hope you stay past your 2009 end of service,” I felt my presence here had made an impact. My life has meaning beyond the golf course.

The PC Times Reader Survey—Here’s What We Heard from You

The majority of PCVs are receiving the PC Times “reliably.” Some Volunteers may not get the PC Times delivered to their site, but the majority (71 percent) do.

The most popular feature right now is “Volunteer Life,” followed in order by “Notes from the Field,” feature stories, blogs, recipes, and agency news.

Community development is the most popular subject of interest, followed by HIV/AIDS, education, youth development, health, environment, business/ICT, and agriculture.

Eighty-four percent of readers want the PC Times to run longer (6-8 pages), a preference in line with suggestions that content be “meatier”—that the feature articles run longer, and delve more into technical issues relevant to Volunteers and staff in the field. In addition, Volunteers are asking for less veneer and more realism.

The PC Times staff appreciates hearing your point of view and is working hard to respond to your requests. We also appreciate your stories and articles—submitting material to us is the best way to get representation for your projects, and countries.

So...take your best shot—put something together about your Volunteer experience (between 250-750 words is the desired length for articles) and send it to: peacercpsites@peacecorps.gov.

We look forward to hearing from you soon!
The Food Crisis: Top 10 List of Things Volunteers Can Do

"This agency's approach is to provide proactive training... our whole purpose is to provide a positive working environment for everyone involved.”

Shirley Everest, Peace Corps American Diversity Program

Excerpt from a letter by Jeffrey Cornish, country director, Tonga

1) Start a vegetable garden.

2) Promote the use of improved storage facilities.

3) Work to improve irrigation systems that sustain food crops.

4) Improve the pest control of local crops and gardens, preferably without expensive and difficult to manage man-made chemicals.

5) Create a seed bank either at a household or on the community level.

6) Establish a market price surveillance system with your fellow Volunteers and promote collective marketing.

7) Promote the consumption of locally produced foods.

8) Help individual families reduce household costs, which will provide more income for needed food.

9) Conduct an agroforestry project if you have the resources.

10) Decrease consumption of scarce food and promote healthy eating.

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The Peace Corps Food Security Task Force continues to collect information and monitor the global impact of the worldwide food shortage. Country Directors and Volunteers are collecting information to be shared throughout the Peace Corps community. The task force is looking into identifying successful Volunteer project models that already exist, collaborating with organizations outside of the agency, and ensuring strong support to Volunteers during the ongoing crisis.

If you have any observations or suggestions for the task force to consider, please e-mail: PCTimes@peacecorps.gov.
Nicaragua

A Change of Pace
We’ve been attending our assigned schools for about two months. The needs of this task were to survey the families in my schools’ community. Although Peace Corps Volunteers tend to be very unique people, they are surely products of their culture. Along with our flexibility and hunger for cultural difference, we intend to work hard to produce tangible results. Three houses in a total of over four hours.

Initial frustrations led to deeper understandings and appreciations ... and resignation.

Our own concept of how to approach “work” does not always coincide with those here. People do not walk into someone’s house and start firing questions all in the name of efficiency and progress. Relationships are everything and work is not done before relationships are forged.

Morocco

Green Lenses
I have to express that “I’m in love.” This country has transfixed me to see with green lenses. There was a story that a man was from a village where everyone had yellow eyeglasses. This man traveled to travel to distant lands. He traveled to a land where everyone had blue lenses. When he returned to his village they asked him, “How were the people? What was their culture like?” He responded, “It was green.”

I hope everyone understands that we will always see with our yellow lenses, yet we can still see the green ones. The main goal of Peace Corps is to promote peace and friendship in the world. Peace Corps wants to define peace.

Bulgaria

Spring Holidays
Saturday, March 8, was Women’s Day (March is women’s month). This day has a lot of symbolism. Not only is it a day to recognize all the efforts of women, but it also follows the continuation of holidays in spring that celebrate new life, a new start, and good health. Women give life and maybe even one can connect women with the family/children healthy.

I had been invited to a little banquet. I was at least one-third the age of most of the women there, but it was so much fun. We danced the horo, ate till I thought I would never move, and exchanged spring bouquets with each other.

Corrections
Some of the people we gave major props to last time for their help with the Food Crisis issue of the PC Times had their job titles listed incorrectly—we apologize, and have made corrections to e-version of the issue, housed in pdf format in the “Media” section of the Peace Corps website: www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=resources.media.pctimes

Biennial Volunteer Survey
Let your views be known—provide feedback in training, work and overseas experience through the 2008 Biannual Volunteer Survey online: BVS2008@peacecorps.gov
**EASTERN CARIBBEAN**

For All Children

At St. Benedicts Day Nursery and Infant Hospital, Volunteer Katie Sheridan works with special needs children, engaging in tutoring and behavioral therapy. The Day Nursery and Infant Hospital were established in Georgetown, St. Vincent, as a response to the malnutrition and other associated complications of local children. The Infant Hospital has extended its services to abandoned, orphaned, and battered children, as well as children with physical and mental disabilities.

**BELIZE**

Art & Identity

Married Volunteers Cheryl Frances, an artist and art educator, and John Tuck, a counselor, have developed the Art & Identity Program (A&I) for youth of the Toledo District. Representing Mopan and Kek-chi Maya, Garifuna, Creole, East Indian, Mestize, and Chinese ethnicities, a great mix of populations come together in this district. The A&I program asserts, “In our multicultural world, images are increasingly necessary to communicate across language and cultural barriers,” and aims to encourage tolerance and emphasize celebration of diversity. Students of A&I incorporate diversity into many aspects of their program, including the creation of a tapestry as part of a group art project.

**GEORGIA**

Crossing Boundaries

One of the largest minority groups in Georgia, the Azeri population, is concentrated in the region of Kvemo Kartili. Volunteer Ruth Decalo works with four NGOs in this area, including the region’s first community radio station. Radio Marneuli runs news and music shows in Russian, Georgian, and Azeri, so all communities may benefit. IREX Europe, a nonprofit organization working to develop the station, says, “The community radio approach allows the raising of awareness of diversity issues, the rights of ethnic minorities, and the responsibilities of journalists and journalism.”

**SWAZILAND**

Walk for HIV/AIDS

Walk the Nation is a grassroots campaign initiated by Volunteers to promote awareness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in rural Swaziland. Participants from villages across Swaziland walked from the Mozambique border to the South African border for two weeks in March 2008. Over 100,000 residents participated in the campaign to create awareness and spur behavioral change.

**PHILIPPINES**

Between the Ages

While 50+ Volunteers help youth around the world, younger Volunteers are reaching out to older community members as well. Jill Kwan is working with a local senior citizens association on a rice wine production project in the Philippines. Essential to helping the program succeed, Jill must understand how the older community members accept new attitudes and behaviors. Senior citizens, in turn, are enthusiastic about being models for the local youth by maximizing their full potential, as their ages permit.

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**RECIPES**

**BUEA DIRTY RICE**

**INGREDIENTS:**
- 2 cups rice, washed
- 3 cups water
- 1 medium tomato, chopped
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 2-3 large cloves of garlic, crushed and minced

**DIRECTIONS:**
Wash the rice well (especially if using local rice), add water, salt, tomato, onion, garlic, pepper, and oil. Bring to a boil uncovered over high heat. Stir once. Reduce heat and simmer, covered with a tight lid for 15 minutes or until rice is done. Remove from heat. Fluff with fork. Cover and allow to steam an additional 5 minutes. Add plenty of cumin and black pepper. Serve.

**PREP TIME:** 25 min.  
**COOK TIME:** 20 min.

**Say Bill:** “When I lack the creativity, wherewithal or money to make something more original, this is the one I turn to time and again. It’s simple, has a lot of flavor, and I’m willing to bet it tastes good on any continent.”

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**PHOTO GALLERY**

**We’re Eco-friendly**

The Peace Corps Times is printed on 100 percent recycled paper using forest products that are Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified, an environmentally-friendly standard for this and future editions of the publication.

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**Walk the Nation campaign participants raise awareness about HIV/AIDS in Swaziland.**

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**Walk for HIV/AIDS**

Walk the Nation raised funds as it raised awareness among local and international communities. The “Walk the Nation Journal,” an account of HIV/AIDS in rural Swaziland, was then given to the government to inform HIV/AIDS policy.

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**Times Peace Corps**

*A publication for Peace Corps Volunteers serving worldwide*

Do you have something to share about your Volunteer experience? We want to hear from you! Send your inquiries to:  
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**In upcoming issues:**

Please send us your thoughts, ideas, and stories related to Peace Corps Partnership Projects and other forms of sponsorship of projects, and working with youth.

We want to hear from you!

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