It’s been said that one man’s trash is another man’s treasure. While this doesn’t usually apply to discarded bottles and inorganic trash, one Volunteer has taken the idiom to an extreme, helping her community in Guatemala turn waste into one of its most unique and useful structures.

Laura Kutner, a third-year Volunteer leader from Portland, Oregon, and her host community collected 6,000 discarded bottles to complete construction of a local school, a room measuring 7-by-20 meters divided in two with 3-meter walls. They used the bottles—which were cleaned and filled with plastic bags, food wrappers, aluminum, and Styrofoam—as an alternative to cinder block, enclosing them in chicken wire before covering them with concrete. Students and community partners collected so much trash, they had to go to surrounding communities to find more to build the school.

Kutner credits Guatemala RPCV Jonathan Miller (2006-2008) with being the brains behind bottle-school construction. She had heard of a project completed by Miller and other Volunteers and proposed the design at an Earth Day event in 2008. The idea stuck.

“This all came about due to an Earth Day event I coordinated with the [local school’s] director and her host community collected so much trash, they had to go to surrounding communities to find more to build the school,” she said. “It really sparked the community’s interest in pollution, recycling, waste management, and in how long it take things to decompose. The idea was then proposed to build new classrooms out of bottles, and the [local school’s] director was totally in support of it.”

Kutner and the school director held a parent-teacher meeting to gauge support for the project; met with the mayor, who pledged to supply building materials; and visited elementary and middle schools. They also promoted the project by visiting local stores to encourage owners to save plastic bottles and spoke about the project during a town fair. It took more than six months to collect the majority of the bottles. Each elementary school student stuffed 20 bottles, while middle and high school students also got involved and local store owners, parents, and teachers helped.

“We worked every morning for 1½ hours with the elementary students and teachers, for about five months, putting the bottles in the wall. We worked with middle school and high school students for about three hours once a week, mostly putting bottles in the second section of the wall where we needed to make scaffolding because it is higher up. They worked really fast,” Kutner said, noting that students of all ages helped with the sifting of sand and mixing of cement that was donated and carted in by various adults.

Then, Kutner hit a roadblock. Though the mayor had pledged to fund some materials, they still lacked enough resources to finish the classrooms. Kutner called on Hug It Forward, a non-governmental organization (NGO) that had expressed interest in completing a project in Guatemala. Two months later, they had the funds and five volunteers from Hug It Forward. Two weeks later, the school was finished.

“Some of the best days of my service were spent working on this project, so despite all of the frustrations, it was totally 100 percent worth it,” said Kutner. “Guatemalans think it is fantastic, and are really proud of themselves. They still can’t believe all of the walls are really made out of bottles and trash, and sometimes, neither can I.”

The idea was born when Miller and fellow Peace Corps Volunteers Sarah Scott and Brendan Brink-Halloran were looking for a useful project that would raise environmental awareness and involve the community. During research they came across a local group, Pura Vida, that had used bottles in construction. After gauging community interest, they decided to upgrade a small one-room school, made of wood, which was unable to house all of its students.

Miller and Scott then began a competition among areas schools to collect dry, clean plastic bottles filled with inorganic, clean trash. They gave toys and bookshelves to those students and teachers, respectively, who collected the most bottles. One student collected 200 to 300 bottles on his own. In the
Mentoring Program Supports Volunteers and RPCVs

(EDITOR’S NOTE: Following is the first in a series of articles on Volunteer support groups and their activities.)

A nationwide network of over 200 “Friends of” and other RPCV groups have helped fund Peace Corps projects and offered support for Volunteers over the years. Such groups form the foundation for a mentoring program launched by the Peace Corps and the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA) in 2007.

Whether you are looking to connect with an RPCV during or prior to entering service or to reconnect with fellow RPCVs upon your return home, such groups provide a medium whereby helpful advice and networking are at a premium. Nearly 500 mentors and 400 mentees are currently enrolled in the program, which pairs an applicant or Volunteer with an RPCV. All returned Volunteers are eligible to be mentored for up to one year after their close of service. However, they can serve as a mentor at any time.

“At first we did a face-to-face mentoring test program in Miami, Chicago, and Portland, Oregon,” explains Anne Baker, NPCA vice president. “We would get applications from returning Volunteers and those who had served and matched them up. It went well, but highlighted the fact that Volunteers are not all coming back at the same time. That’s the reason we decided to take this online and broaden it.”

Geographical location and country of service are considered when an incoming Volunteer or recently returned Volunteer is matched to a mentor through the NPCA. There are also groups such as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Peace Corps Alumni, which provide their own mentoring programs.

“Our most important activities are running a very active mentor program for LGBT applicants and nominees,” Group Leader Mike Learned (RPCV/Malawi) says of a system that was launched in 1995.

Peace Corps applicants and Volunteers can also post questions to the group’s website. One recent applicant to a predominately Muslim country identified himself as gay and asked what he should expect in terms of harassment, homophobia, and support networks. Extensive advice was provided by an anonymous RPCV who had served in that country.

Several regional groups also do their own mentoring through face-to-face meetings with Peace Corps applicants and recently returned Volunteers. They may host a monthly potluck dinner or provide a phone call to offer advice to ease the difficult transition back home.

“A COS, many Volunteers discover that it is harder to come home, but 200,000 have done it before them and they want to help (as mentors),” Baker says.

Ariane Burger (RPCV/Kazakhstan) is president of RPCVs of Colorado, which currently has eight mentees and 28 mentors. “It is my hope that you connect with an RPCV group before your close of service, because there might even be people out here who can help you with the work you are doing in-country,” she says.

The group also has two popular annual events that cater to interested applicants and the RPCV community, a holiday potluck in December and a picnic in June. “We partner with local PC recruiters and invite nominees, invitees, and other interested folks, as well as the RPCV community. Last year we had over 100 guests!” Burger says.

In similar fashion, the Atlanta Area returned Volunteers (AARPCV), formed in 1983, invited 14 RPCVs to lunch with six board members in February. “New members had the opportunity to connect with other RPCVs in their career field, socialize, and learn about AARPCV activities, the NPCA mentoring program, and noncompetitive eligibility status,” says Juli Powers, board president (RPCV/Ecuador).

To become a Peace Corps mentee or mentor, go to rpcmentoring.org. Current Volunteers can also go to peacecorps.gov to learn about the many resources available to them during and after their service.

See related article, “Haiti RPCVs Reach Out to Earthquake Victims,” on Page 6.
I wake up early every morning to the sound of roosters, goats, birds; the ground being swept; and radios playing gospel music, and, at 5 a.m., I can’t say that I’m always pleased by this. But these are sounds that my students will never hear.

My school, which teaches students from nursery school to junior high, as well as vocational students, has 90 staff members and about 370 children. Our students often come from remote villages where they have been marginalized or isolated and they have few language skills when they arrive.

The children are taught American Sign Language with a Ghanaian twist, which provides my biggest challenge. I teach mostly junior high students, who range in age from 12 to 25. They have had years of signing experience and have developed their own slang as well.

My vocabulary is limited and my signing is small-like compared to their rapid-fire delivery. I have to remember to make sure they are looking at me before teaching and that writing on the board is no substitute because English has a different structure altogether and they don’t read well. They can’t hear when they drop something on the floor, and I’m constantly picking up crayons or pencils. If they don’t understand something, they all sign to me at once, which is very confusing. I don’t have the vocabulary to explain it in a different way so I do lots of demonstrations.

The children are well behaved, polite, and helpful. This ranges from helping me when I’m struggling with signing to carrying my book bag. Religious and moral education is part of the curriculum. The older ones look after the younger ones, and they all have to do service work, such as cutting the grass, working in the gardens, sweeping the yard, and hauling water.

They love sports, especially soccer, netball, and volleyball. The students have virtually nothing in the way of possessions, but are inventive in the games they play. They also love to hug and laugh. I haven’t seen a sign of self-pity. Although some have developmental problems, most just go about their lives as other teenagers do. It makes me work harder at improving my skills.

Working with Ghanaian teachers has been wonderful. They love to laugh and have been very helpful as I struggle with cultural issues or teaching under the Ghanaian education system. I sit in on their classes, which helps me understand how to work better with the deaf.

There are seven Peace Corps/Ghana Volunteers teaching art in the deaf schools, and we’re spread throughout the country in very different geographical areas. Our schools and resources vary widely. Most teach primary school, but I’m glad I was assigned to older students. I work with a Ghanaian art teacher in a well-established program. One of the other Volunteers had to start his program from scratch.

Finding art supplies calls for a great deal of creativity. You can’t just walk into an art supply store and buy things. We ask for flour sacks in the market to use as canvasses or make our own glue from cassava. Teaching Ghanaians how to do this, rather than giving them supplies, helps make the program sustainable.

Teaching art helps the children use their imaginations. A lot of the subjects are taught as rote memorization, but in art you have to think about every mark.
Daughters Inspire Mom to Serve with Peace Corps

By Connie Goddard | PCV Romania

Taking Stock with Mr. Sock

PCVs Turn in Gold-Medal Performance

The Winter Olympics wrapped up in Vancouver, Canada, in February with China taking home 11 medals to lead the field of Peace Corps host countries. Kazakhstan was the only other Peace Corps entry with a medal, winning silver in the women’s biathlon.

Youth throughout the world were also winners, thanks to the creativity of our many Volunteers who regularly turn in gold-medal performances. In a winter Olympics, Kazakhstan’s one-medal count was trumped by a winter Paralympic games for disabled youth, launched by Peace Corps Volunteer Shannon Huett of Poplar Bluff, Missouri. Mirroring the 2010 Winter Paralympics held in Canada, the games began with a torch relay and parade. Twenty participants enjoyed everything from ice skating to karaoke and one Kazakh woman with hip and leg disabilities was able to ice skate for the first time in her life.

Another Peace Corps country that may be better suited for the 2012 Summer Olympics enjoyed its third annual Olympic games hosted by Volunteers. More than 100 youth participated in Jordan’s National Physical Education Games in April. The event was coordinated by youth development Volunteers and the Higher Council for Youth. Volunteers throughout the world regularly seize upon such events as the Olympics and World Cup to teach youth about other cultures and host both educational and sports competition. This year’s World Cup, scheduled for June 11 to July 11, will surely serve as the impetus for soccer tournaments throughout the world. It is the first time the tournament will be hosted by an African nation, with South Africa having the honor.

Any Volunteer or returned Volunteer from Africa can attest to the soccer-crazed atmosphere. One RPCV left his mark on Niger when he distributed soccer balls to schools and community groups nearly 30 years ago, launched the group Project Play Africa. In 2008, Michael Mitchell (Niger, 1983–1985) returned to Niger with 2,016 soccer balls, with a new generation of Peace Corps Volunteers being asked to distribute many of them.

In March, Mitchell went to Benin to distribute 2,100 balls. Perhaps even more importantly, he has taken a page from such Volunteers as those profiled on this issue’s front page who have helped build schools out of bottles and inorganic trash. Mitchell and his organization have taught communities how to make soccer nets out of the plastic bags that litter many municipalities.

With the Peace Corps approaching its 50th anniversary, it is no surprise that many Volunteers are the offspring of previous Volunteers. Two currently serve with me in Romania. In another sort of legacy, my younger daughter, Nell Goddard Wilson, followed her sister into the Peace Corps six years ago, serving in the environment sector in Bulgaria. My older daughter, Kate Goddard Rohrbaugh, served from 1997 to 1995, being among the first group of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) Volunteers in Ukraine. Now their “legacy” has gone in the opposite direction.

In August 2009, I was sworn in as a Peace Corps Volunteer, and now I am comfortably nestled in Romania, teaching English at a secondary school. Given my daughters’ experiences, perhaps its fate that located me somewhat between Kate’s site in the eastern Ukrainian city of Poltava and Nell’s in Rousse, a northeastern Bulgarian city on the Danube. However, a crow flying from one to the other would miss my site in northwest Romania, an area that is also somewhat different in spirit from their sites. Mine is closer to Budapest than to Bucharest, and the area feels more Central European than Slavic.

More intriguing than the irony of our placements though are the changes both in technology and in the countries themselves during the 15 years since Kate served in Ukraine. For one, the Peace Corps’ mission in Eastern Europe during those early years was concentrated in larger cities like Poltava, where Kate was one of three TEFL Volunteers.

After nearly two decades in Romania, today’s TEFL teachers are more likely to be in rural areas, where English isn’t as evident. My school is in a town of 10,000 or so, but it serves several smaller communities as well. About 22 miles west is Oradea, a city of 225,000, or about the same size as Rousse, where Nell worked for a large provincial park.

Among my favorite juxtapositions here is the anomaly, in my mind, of listening to an American radio station, via the Internet, while watching a horse cart clomp by my window as it delivers wood for the ceramic sobas many Romanians use to heat their homes—most of which have both the Internet and a soba.

TEFL Volunteers here are serving primarily in rural areas, while both the environmental and youth development programs are being phased out. As these countries join the European Union, some of the services earlier Volunteers provided are now redundant or addressed more capably by host country nationals.

These changing needs reflect how these nations have changed in the two decades since Peace Corps began serving Eastern Europe. When Kate was in Ukraine, she could save some of her monthly allowance because there was so little to spend it on. Now, when I go to the mall in Oradea, the names of stores, as well as the products they sell, are all relatively familiar—and there’s little I need that I cannot buy there.

The cars here are the same as we see at home, though I have become fond of some relics, like the 25-year-old Dacias that provide informal transit between my village and Oradea. Bus and train schedules are all available on the Web, as is international and local news, which my computer translates without having to be asked.

When Kate was in Poltava, it was a real treat to discover a fax from her when I arrived at my office in the morning, while arranging for an occasional phone call was a major event. A decade later, I recall a cellphone conversation with Nell while I was wading in Lake Michigan and she was sitting on a Black Sea beach. Her delightful missives from Bulgaria were sent from an Internet café; I can send my messages from my apartment.

Fortunately, some things don’t change. Kate spoke of how most Poltavites had a place in the countryside where they could grow their own food, a nécessité back then. Today, many Romanians still rely on family gardens for food, but mainly because it is “ecologic,” not essential. And Nell and I both have stories to tell about attending a pig kill, something all my students have done. Romanians, like Chicago’s famed meatpackers of yore, use everything but the squeal.

The largest adjustment I’ve made here is accepting some limitations on my freedom of movement. For the first time in my adult life, I am not living in a major metropolitan area with an all-night transit system. On the other hand, I attend an aerobics class at a nearby school gym for about one-tenth of what it would cost in the U.S. Also, when I return home, there are thoughtful gifts my knowledgeable daughters have provided a tiny flashlight for lighting my way down dark hallways in block buildings and a set of measuring cups that offer gradations both in ounces and milliliters.

Aside from raising my daughters, this is probably the most instructive experience I have ever had!

Goddard is an education Volunteer from Wilmette, Ill. She is scheduled to complete her service in 2011.

Ukraine Volunteer Connie Goddard shows children in her village how to carve a pumpkin.

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That Was Then ... This is Now
Fellows/USA Celebrates 45 Years

PC Combines Forces with City Year, The Corps Network
City Year, which engages young Americans in a year of full-time community service as tutors, mentors, and role models, is partnering with the Peace Corps.

The partnership will allow the exchange of training and technical assistance materials and link City Year members with PCVs for reciprocal mentoring and support.

“Partnering with City Year will allow more Americans with a strong commitment to public service to continue to contribute their enthusiasm and creativity at the grassroots level with communities abroad,” said Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams.

A similar partnership has been formed with The Corps Network, which represents service and conservation programs that annually enroll more than 29,000 young men and women. Those with experience in youth development, conservation, and the environment will be encouraged to apply to become Peace Corps Volunteers.

Returned Volunteers will also be encouraged to serve American communities through this partnership.

The organizations hope to link The Corps Network members with Peace Corps Volunteers.

Peace Corps Week, 49th Anniversary Celebrated
The Peace Corps celebrated its 49th anniversary March 1. During Peace Corps Week, the agency’s nine regional recruiting offices hosted over 140 recruiting and celebratory events across the country.

Top Colleges, Universities Cited
The Peace Corps released its 2009 Top 25 rankings of those colleges and universities producing Volunteers in 2009.

The University of Washington, Seattle, holds the top rank for large schools for the fourth year in a row, with 101 undergraduate alumni currently serving. The University of Colorado at Boulder is runnerup with 95.

In the medium school category, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., ranks number one for the second consecutive year, with 53 undergraduate alumni serving. Fellow D.C. school American University is close behind at 51.

For small schools, St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn., ranks at the top for the first time, with 26 undergraduate alumni serving. The University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Va., has 23.

Historically, the University of California-Berkeley maintains the number one all-time rank, with 3,412 returned Peace Corps Volunteers.

Partnership to Benefit PC, Health Centers
The Peace Corps and the National Association of Community Health Centers (NACHC) have formed an agreement to encourage NACHC’s Community Health Corps AmeriCorps members to serve throughout the U.S. in preparation of potential Peace Corps assignments abroad. Returned Peace Corps Volunteers will also be encouraged to seek employment in the community health care work force.

NACHC was organized in 1971 to provide a unified voice and common source for research, information, training, and advocacy. Community health centers serve 20 million people at more than 7,000 sites located throughout all 50 states and U.S. territories.

Continued from page 3

The Peace Corps Fellows/USA graduate school program, encompassing more than 50 universities, can trace its roots to Columbia University. A partnership that began in the 1960s continues today.

Then ... Trainees Work, Study in New York City

Slum neighborhoods of New York City are the testing ground for a new concept in training Peace Corps Volunteers to work in community development in Latin America. During October, 90 trainees for Colombia served in a field-work program in Manhattan’s lower East Side and in East Harlem and Cheleba districts.

Organized by the New York School of Social Work of Columbia University, the training program provides for seven hours a day of community work with New York City welfare agencies, in addition to classes in social work and in Spanish.

This phase of training for the Colombia project followed eight weeks of training at the University of New Mexico and four weeks in Puerto Rico. The total training program of 16 weeks is the longest ever undertaken by the Peace Corps and the first to include field work in a specifically urban environment.

The New York training is designed to prepare Volunteers for community development under the auspices of CARE in eight cities in Colombia.

Assignments in Colombia will include work initiating and developing neighborhood self-help projects in urban areas and in helping to establish programs in adult education, home economics, health education, child care, and recreation.

Now ... Fellows Program Trains Over 700 Educators

Today’s Volunteers are trained exclusively in their country of service, but a select few have the privilege of following up their service by engaging in a program that can trace its roots to that early training model.

The Colombia post closed in 1981, but a Volunteer from that country who became a researcher for Columbia University in New York has served as the driving force behind a partnership that would benefit thousands.

Returned Volunteer Dr. Beryl Levinger (Columbia, 1967-1969) realized returned Volunteers had the specialized skills sought by the New York Board of Education in the early 1980s. Resourceful teachers who had practical, innovative ideas about education were needed. In cooperation with the Peace Corps, Levinger proposed a program in which returned Volunteers would fulfill this need. In 1985, Teachers College launched a pilot Fellows/USA program to prepare RPCVs as teachers in New York City public schools.

Since then, 550 urban educators have been recruited and trained. Currently, 36 first- and second-year Fellows are teaching full-time in New York City elementary, intermediate, and high schools, as well as in several alternative and specialized school settings.

Fellows/USA has developed similar initiatives with over 50 universities around the country. More than 500 Fellows work in fields other than education, including urban policy, environment, business development, social services, and community development.

To learn more about the program, go to peacecorps.gov and follow the Fellows/USA quick link.

Agency News

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

A student in Nancy Haggarly’s class practices her graphic design skills.

I have found that the students also “can’t hear when they don’t want to.” Their teachers call it “being out of service area.” Just like other teenagers.

Nancy Haggarly is a visual arts teacher in the deaf education program in Ghana. She was a teenager when the Peace Corps was launched and had always wanted to join. The Watertown, Massachusetts, resident became a Volunteer in 2009, shortly after retiring, and is scheduled to complete her service in August of 2011.
BULGARIA

Smart Foods Workshop Conducted
Vanessa Raymond and her counterpart, Momchil Stoev, who has been trained at the National Academy of Sports, have been working in conjunction with the Peace Corps and the community foundation Mostove Nad Tundja to promote community awareness about healthy food choices.

Together, they designed a three-part healthy foods workshop called Smart Foods, which is tailored to reach children ages 6 to 11. Children are introduced to the topic of healthy food and its nutritional elements. Training also explores food groups and how to use the food pyramid, in addition to examining how food labels can help children make healthy choices. For more information, contact Peace Corps Times at pctimes@peacecorps.gov.

EASTERN CARIBBEAN

Volunteers Provide Mental Health Training
Community development Volunteers George Stouter and Mike Fallahay have been drawing on their experience as family therapists (acquired prior to Peace Corps) to aid a committee drafting Mental Health and Substance Abuse Policies and Procedures for their island country of St. Kitts and Nevis.

In conjunction with drafting the policies, the Volunteers have been presenting monthly trainings on various health and safety topics to mental health workers. The workshops have also been used during staff training for St. Kitts’ first substance treatment program. Fallahay has also been teaching many people in his community about domestic violence and healthy relationships.

ECUADOR

Volunteer Forms Bank to Help Small Businesses
Agriculture IT Volunteer Shelley Jackson assisted members of her indigenous community in starting a community bank near her site to help launch several small businesses.

After attending meetings with local officials, Jackson’s community bank group formed a bank of 25 members. In 20 weeks, each member saved $440. Loans of $15 to $200 could be withdrawn monthly with a 10 percent interest rate. Community members used the loans to start small projects, which included a bakery, a grain bodega, and a sewing machine used to make traditional blouses.

The project “really contributed to the lives of others,” Jackson said. She noted that the bank will continue to lend long after she finishes her service in April.

HONDURAS

Volunteer Empowers Girls Through Workshop
Health and HIV/AIDS Volunteer Sarah West and her Honduran counterpart organized a workshop for 15 girls and four Honduran women aimed toward empowering young women by helping them formulate their goals and future plans and understand their cultural identities.

The girls, ages 12 to 15, completed self-esteem activities, spoke about their goals, and heard from Honduran women who have risen from poverty and abuse to find success. The weekend workshop culminated with a visit to the Copan Ruins, where the girls learned about ancient Mayan culture from a female park guide.

UGANDA

Demonstration Farm Benefits Children
When Moses Mubala and Volunteer Jessica Dyer (2007–2009) started their demonstration farm last year, they had a small piece of land and high hopes to support orphans and vulnerable children through an income-generating project that breeds pigs and goats.

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Volunteers are implementing the Male Engagement Initiative in all 13 regions of the country. The campaign also highlights how transforming gender norms will be necessary in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS and gender-based violence. A total of 325 people have received training through the workshops.

NAMIBIA

Male Engagement Initiative
Peace Corps/Namibia has been implementing an initiative to help youth, non-governmental organizations, teachers, health care providers, and community members to understand gender roles and recognize how they influence both male and female behavior in relation to health and well-being.