

FROM THE PEACE CORPS TO THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS



Dozens of Foreign Service employees and family members who are also Returned Peace Corps Volunteers responded to the AFSAnet the Journal sent out this summer soliciting their insights as to how the Peace Corps and Foreign Service experiences compare and contrast. In fact, the response was so great — and so varied and interesting — that it will be presented in two installments. Part II will appear in the November issue.

— Steven Alan Honley, Editor

A SMALL HITCH

My first assignment with the Foreign Commercial Service was to Lagos. I figured they picked me because I was an ambitious new officer who had lived in West Africa before (the fact that I had a pulse and they could direct-assign me may also have played a role).

In fact, my wife and I had met in the Peace Corps about six years earlier, when we were both serving as volunteers in Cameroon. We figured that Nigeria would be similar in many ways, except this time we'd have a few perks like indoor plumbing and electricity.

In some ways, that turned out to be true. Although we were unprepared for how lavish our housing and work environment were in comparison with what we'd had back in our volunteer days, the overall atmosphere of the city was familiar and comfortable to us. I ate daily with my Foreign Service National employees in local chop houses across from the consulate, and was even able to use the pidgin English I'd spoken in Cameroon to break the ice with counterparts and haggle in outdoor markets.

But a key difference quickly became apparent. One weekend I was trying to get to the American Club to meet a friend for tennis. My wife had the car, and it was too long (and hot) to walk, so I did what I would have done on any given day anywhere in Cameroon: I stuck out my hand as a motorcycle was passing by and hopped on the back to hitch a ride. The driver took me right to the club, I "dashed" him the equivalent of about 20 cents, and he thanked me and zoomed off.

The following Monday, I was called into the regional security officer's office. Apparently I had been seen — and reported. Riding local transport was a big no-no in Lagos. My initial reaction was disbelief. Could the embassy really be this paranoid? I griped to my wife that evening, but complied with the RSO's rules from that point forward.

Though I'm still not convinced that taking a moto-taxi that day was grounds for reprimand, I do appreciate that approaching a Foreign Service assignment through a Peace Corps lens is not always appropriate. But those of us with that background can definitely draw on our volunteer experience to enhance our role as official representatives of our government.

Incidentally, I have written a book (available via Amazon.com) for prospective Peace Corps applicants: *You Want to Join the Peace Corps: What to Know before*

You Go (Ten Speed Press, 2000). A second edition is due out in the spring of 2009.

Dillon Banerjee
Senior Commercial Officer
Embassy Lisbon



THE NEED TO BE FLEXIBLE

Based on my experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Russia from 1997 to 1999, I would say one of the strongest similarities between the Peace Corps and the Foreign Service is the existence of high levels of ambiguity. Members of both organizations operate with varying degrees of uncertainty about their surroundings, roles, responsibilities and communities. In fact, comfort with this aspect of overseas life is probably one of the single best indicators of whether Peace Corps Volunteers and Foreign Service personnel will thrive and succeed.

The biggest difference between the two organizations is the weight and inertia of the State Department's bureaucracy. Getting a \$500 educational grant approved as a Peace Corps Volunteer is easier than pitching a new idea — even a cost-free one — at an embassy or consulate.

Stetson Sanders
Vice Consul
Consulate Chennai



THANKS, SILVIA!

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in rural Jamaica in 1988, I was on the mailing list for the monthly newsletter from Embassy Kingston. One issue mentioned that the Foreign Service Written Exam would be given in the USIS library and had instructions on how to register. On the appointed date, I rode my usual overcrowded bus to town and took the exam. At the break, I met a woman named Silvia, who told me she was the ambassador's secretary.

I asked her a plethora of questions, like "Do you have a car? A telephone? Air conditioning?" These were all things I missed, yet I knew I loved living abroad. She cheerfully answered all my questions and must have sensed a kindred spirit, for after the long exam was over she offered to drive me in her car (a rare pleasure for me)

to the bus park. On the way, I continued to pick her brain. As she told me about her job and her lifestyle, I realized it was exactly what I was looking for.

I went on to become a consular officer at six overseas posts, always managing to avoid a domestic assignment. It was a real blast, and I never would have known about it without the embassy newsletter and Silvia.

Linda Eichblatt
FSO, retired
Amarillo, Texas



LESSONS LEARNED

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mauritania from 1987 to 1991, I taught English as a foreign language in a small village in the middle of the Sahara. Here are a few lessons learned that I still use in the Foreign Service:

Know your audience. I was posted to a Muslim country, so I read the Quran and bought an English-Arabic concordance. That facilitated questions (and answers!) and helped me tailor my approach in the classroom.

Learn the local language(s) if possible. It isn't easy to learn an obscure dialect, but even mastering a few phrases will help. I learned enough expressions to get everyone to laugh, and then I had their attention.

Listen and observe. Remember that you are going to be there a long time, so be sure to listen and observe more than you talk. After all, while you have something to teach, you also have things to learn.

Be open. Audiences are much more receptive if you show appreciation for their culture. And the more you are accepted, the further you may get.

Paul Dever
Contracting Officer
Embassy Manila



RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

My experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mali from 1986 to 1988 was at the grassroots level, literally and figuratively. I lived in a mud hut, rode in crammed trucks, and ate many meals of millet porridge with my host family. Now, as a Foreign Commercial Service officer, I recognize how easy it is to distance myself from the host country. If you live in a compound with other expa-

triate and don't make an active effort to travel within the country, you may see only a veneer of the host culture.

A key lesson that has served me well is that to get things done, relationships matter. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, this meant chatting with the village chief, taking tea with the local bureaucrats, or spending time playing games with the children. The players and activities are different for me now — paying courtesy calls on local government officials, having lunch with company executives, or chatting with office staff — but the impact is the same. Often people want to know who you really are before they commit to supporting your projects, no matter how important, or pressing, the initiative seems to be.

Francis "Chip" Peters
Commercial Officer
Consulate General Shanghai



BOTTOM UP, NOT TOP DOWN

Dealing with poor farmers as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Guatemala, I quickly came to realize how many farmers were smart and had truly enviable leadership skills. They were people who could see possibilities and whip up enthusiasm in their colleagues for any endeavor.

Largely because of that experience, as an FSO with USAID I have always relied heavily on getting the views of people at the village level via direct interviews. This can sometimes take a bit of digging because my interlocutors' communication skills may not be the best, due to a lack of formal education. However, their experiences and perceptions are critical when deciding what interventions in any given project make the most sense.

Similarly, regular follow-up with the people directly affected by a development project to get their feedback is critical to making sensible modifications along the way. Good project design is usually bottom up, not top down, because people at the very lowest level, closest to the ground, know the facts. The rest of us only think we do!

In Mali, we were on the verge of chucking a small hand-pump irrigation project because our technical advisers were saying the pumps had too many problems and farmers, after purchasing them, weren't using them. Yet during on-the-ground demonstrations and interviews, purchasers said they liked the pumps. In addition, sales continued at a fairly decent rate. I felt there must be some disconnect between our technicians and the

farmers so, after much debate, we ended up maintaining our minimal support. Today this USAID “graduate” project is an expanding, private-sector success.

Alex Newton
Mission Director
USAID/Bamako



A DIFFERENT REALITY

Before I began my Peace Corps assignment in Kharkiv, Ukraine in 2002, I thought it was going to be the easiest experience ever. Though I had never lived overseas before, I had traveled a lot outside of the United States. I also had a few years of work under my belt. And as if all that weren't enough, I'd grown up around people of other cultures: not only is my father an immigrant, but he's from Slavic Eastern Europe.

Considering myself a sophisticated New Yorker (OK, you caught me — Long Islander), I remember worrying about a fellow volunteer I'd met during the pre-departure orientation. Adam was from Alabama, and I was sure he was in for a huge culture shock when we landed in Ukraine.

Naturally, I was wrong. Adam adjusted with no problem, while I was the one who struggled. But I promised myself I'd stay at least a year, and if I was still lost and confused then — well, life is too short to stay someplace where you are not happy.

Fortunately, a few months into my stint I started to find my way, settle in, do meaningful work and make real friends. Two things helped me do that. The first is, I stopped asking “why?” For instance, Ukrainians don't smile on the street or stand in a line, and in a business situation it may take a while before someone will be up front with you (if ever). Once I learned to stop being upset about all that, take it for what it is, and work within their context — after all, I am a guest in their country — things really came together quickly. (And now I, too, wonder why Americans smile so much. They must be a bunch of happy idiots.)

The second lesson I learned is that what we think is rational behavior is actually culturally defined. The correct reaction to a given situation seems ridiculously obvious to us, so it can be really frustrating when people act “irrationally.” But once I realized I was in a different reality, and understood that I needed to be open

to redefining the best way to achieve a goal, everything changed for the better.

And while I was at it, it never hurt to check to be sure that my Ukrainian counterpart and I were actually talking about achieving the same goal.

Emily Ronek
Public Affairs Section
Embassy Caracas



SPIES R US

When I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in the early 1990s in Tunisia, we bought into the idea that folks from the embassy, including the USAID mission, were all spies and couldn't be trusted. Any request for a conversation or information was to be carefully considered, analyzed for its ulterior motive, and perhaps avoided. This line did not come from the Peace Corps leadership. Rather, it was lore among the youthful volunteers, perhaps based on some grain of truth from a different time.

Now, as a Foreign Service officer on the other side, I see how wrong we were to be so suspicious, and how valuable good communications between volunteers and the embassy really are. Talking to volunteers helps us understand what is going on at the local level.

David Thompson
Director, Municipal Development and
Democratic Initiatives Office
USAID/Tegucigalpa



IT'S A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL

For my first two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in The Gambia (1980-1982) I was an audiovisual adviser to the Department of Cooperation's Training Center in Yundum, just outside the capital. There I taught my counterparts how to edit the monthly co-op extension worker newsletter and trained them to teach groundnut (peanut) farmers to read the scale.

The editorial training went well, but the scale-reading instruction was an abysmal failure. It turned out that the extension workers didn't want the farmers to read the scale, because they were cheating them when they sold their groundnuts. But that's another story.

In 1983, while serving as a third-year Peace Corps

FOCUS

Volunteer Leader, I attended a trainers workshop in Cotonou. At a reception the chargé d'affaires, Charles Twining, held for our group, we had the chance to chat a bit about being a diplomat.

The next year my spouse, Ed — also a Peace Corps Volunteer in The Gambia (see next item) — entered the Foreign Service and was assigned to Douala as administrative officer. Unfortunately, there was going to be an unavoidable two-month gap between him and his predecessor — not a good thing at a post that supported all incoming and outgoing shipments to five other posts. Feeling cocky after my Peace Corps experience, I pitched the idea that I come to post in advance of Ed and do his job. I would then move into my position as budget assistant when he arrived.

It happened that Charles Twining had become Douala's consul general! He remembered me from our brief meeting in Cotonou, and welcomed my offer.

After Douala, I accompanied Ed on his tours to Bombay, Bridgetown, Dakar, Abidjan, Djibouti and Berlin — working at interesting jobs at each post. In 2003, while in Berlin, I became a direct-hire Office Management Specialist.

My first Foreign Service tour was for 14 months in Kabul, sans spouse. But Ed and I reconnected in Stockholm in 2005, and are now both back in Washington.

Susan H. Malcik
GSO Training Assistant
Foreign Service Institute



DIPLOMATIC BOOT CAMP

Much of my Peace Corps experience (The Gambia, 1980-1982) was fun. But a lot was tough, like hunkering down during the 1981 coup d'état or living with the constant threat of malaria. The Peace Corps advertises that it is the toughest job you will ever love, and that is not hyperbole.

In fact, a Peace Corps assignment is diplomatic boot camp: two years of intense, full-contact, sandals-on-the-ground, cultural immersion. The skills a volunteer acquires are not bookish but experiential, and immediately put to use: eating without utensils, taking a bucket bath, knowing when shaking hands is appropriate, butchering a chicken, speaking Mandinka and Woloff. These were survival skills.

They were also learned in a context quite different from the Foreign Service Institute. FSI teaches culture via language instruction and area studies, but that doesn't come close to equipping you to speak about the weather in the local language while a rainy season gale is blowing through the open classroom window.

Those skills have helped me tremendously as a Foreign Service officer. I now have a template that assists me in understanding any culture, in the same way that learning one foreign language helps you learn another. Although I have gone on to live in many places, it is to The Gambia that I most often make comparisons. For instance, when I went to Bombay for my consular tour, I found many things different from back in the United States, but some were closer to the Gambian context.

I've found my Peace Corps experience so important, so useful to my current career, that I think it should be listed on my employee profile. (At least time spent as a Peace Corps Volunteer counts toward State Department retirement.) A volunteer's performance probably tells as much about his or her diplomatic potential as a university transcript.

My experience as a management officer is that former volunteers make for happy FSOs. The transition from a mud-brick thatched hut to an embassy-funded house with a generator and running water is pretty easy. The frame of reference for what former volunteers expect in living standards overseas is not purely American, but tempered by what they see the locals have — because they have lived as locals in another country. Thus, I find that former volunteers are pleased with their housing and willing to put up with small inconveniences that drive other Americans batty.

Former volunteers also can make for happy local employees because they are not reticent about shaking hands with the facilities maintenance guys when they show up at the door!

Ed Malcik
FSO
Director IO/OIC



COMING FULL CIRCLE

The Peace Corps is a perfect preparation for the Foreign Service. All too many Americans serving over-

seas, especially in the Third World, are shocked and upset when the electricity, air conditioning or water goes off. State has done a wonderful job in recent years in minimizing problems for its overseas employees, but they still exist.

Many Peace Corps Volunteers have lived with no electricity, running water or indoor plumbing. When I was a volunteer in a small town in northern Dahomey (now Benin) from 1969 to 1970, I had to pay the landlord to build an outdoor pit toilet. Hence, when we join the Foreign Service we tend to be much more tolerant about overseas hardships than many of our colleagues ever are.

Another benefit is that a stint with the Peace Corps between college and graduate school can make getting a master's degree a piece of cake. During my two years in the School of International Affairs at Columbia University, I based most of my term papers on my Peace Corps experiences.

Finally, Foreign Service folks should consider getting involved with helping to set up Peace Corps programs. When I was chargé d'affaires in Moroni from 1987 to 1990, I was able to draw on my experience as a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer to help in an appropriate manner, and I enjoyed hosting periodic lunches and dinners for the volunteers.

Karl Danga
FSO, retired
St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands



CULTURAL IMMERSION

If the Foreign Service can be described as insular, bureaucratic and removed from a host culture, then the Peace Corps is expansive and loosely defined, and requires complete cultural immersion. Peace Corps Volunteers are expected to live off the local economy, learn the language and approximate the same standard of living as host-country nationals, all while receiving minimal support from headquarters.

I spent two tours with the Peace Corps as an English teacher, and that experience more than prepared me for the Foreign Service (particularly extremely undeveloped hardship postings such as Mali). I am now tolerant of procurement delays, differences in cultural work standards, construction problems, and the dozens of minor annoyances that plague life in so many countries.

And I'm especially thankful for the great, free Foreign Service housing, the fact that we usually have hot water, our generous shipping allowances, and access to the diplomatic pouch or military mail services.

The complete cultural immersion I received in the Peace Corps also instilled knowledge of how other cultures see the world and how they see the United States. Although developing nations differ substantially, the infrastructural and procedural challenges they face are often surprisingly similar. Therefore, experience working at a grassroots level in one developing country teaches lessons that can be applied throughout the developing world. It has also afforded me a degree of understanding of, and empathy with, the challenges other countries face, even as it equips me to view them more realistically.

My time with the Peace Corps also taught me to truly love America. Ever since, I've been acutely appreciative of the extraordinary privileges, rights, opportunities and responsibilities that come with U.S. citizenship. Being a Peace Corps Volunteer taught me to do more with less, to value intangible assets such as freedom and education, and to be patient when the bus broke down. It reminded me to concentrate on what I had, not what I didn't.

Finally, it instilled in me an unquenchable desire for travel and expatriate living, which led me to join the Foreign Service. For that matter, without the Peace Corps, I wouldn't have even known what the Foreign Service was.

Lisa W. Cantonwine
Executive Assistant to the Ambassador
Embassy Bamako



TRULY TRANSFORMATIONAL DIPLOMACY

Being a Peace Corps Volunteer, as I was in Bulgaria, is all about living in a small community, adopting the local dress, drinking the local wine and using the local toilet paper (if any) — in short, integrating into the local society, including its sights, sounds, tastes and (sometimes unfortunately) smells. The experience demonstrates how societal and cultural beliefs buried deep below the surface can provide insights into how people think and act in particular situations.

My Peace Corps service taught me to be wary of statistics and those who bear them, for they rarely tell the entire story. For that matter, most work plans and action plans are best used to start fires. My service also taught me that there are at least five sides to every story, and finding the right one sometimes depends on where you're standing — except when it doesn't.

Above all, I believe the Peace Corps has instilled in me, and my fellow returned volunteers who are now in the Foreign Service, the knowledge that there is a wide world outside the embassy gates. As we work in embassies and consulates, often overburdened by the weight of Washington-mandated reports, it's tempting to see the world as a series of three-minute visa interviews. And when you're offered almost all the creature comforts available in the U.S., it can sometimes be challenging to remember that your purpose is not just to push paper, but also to form real connections with other people, exchange ideas, and thereby promote American ideals and values.

Peace Corps Volunteers have crossed cultures before and know that, though difficult, it can indeed be done — and the time investment is well worth it. The more returned volunteers we have in the Foreign Service, the more likely that FS personnel will move beyond the embassy walls and truly engage with locals, in the tradition of the Peace Corps. And the better positioned we will all be to engage in *truly* transformational diplomacy.

Tyler Sparks
Vice Consul
Embassy San Jose



TWO TYPES OF IDEALISM

Some Peace Corps Volunteers find welcoming communities in their host countries and leave two years later with a genuine extended family. But this was not my experience in Mauritania between 2000 and 2002.

Everything was difficult about our Peace Corps experience there: the living conditions, the oppressive heat, but most of all, our interactions with the host-country nationals. We encountered pervasive hostility, both in the form of groups of rock-throwing children and more subtle manifestations. The second Palestinian intifada had riled public sentiment against the

United States; then the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath added fuel to the fire.

For many volunteers, this was a shock for which they were unprepared. "We're here to help, and they treat us like this?" The hostility, along with the difficulty of launching projects and the tortoise-like pace of change, sent many well-intentioned volunteers back home early.

Yet despite all of these challenges, the Peace Corps Volunteers who remained in country did amazing work, offering a vision of the United States that was drastically different from the one Mauritians knew (or thought they knew). By their words, but even more so through their actions, the volunteers peeled away layers of distrust, replacing stereotypes and misconceptions with individual faces.

Every time I hear the phrase "transformational diplomacy," I cannot help thinking of my former Peace Corps colleagues, who taught me to recognize two distinct types of idealism, a lesson I've carried with me into the Foreign Service.

First, there is the naïve sort of idealism, the kind that people often associate with Peace Corps Volunteers. This variety expects the best from people but needs the adulation of others to sustain itself, so it seldom lasts long. And when the world doesn't change overnight, these idealists are disillusioned — as happened to many volunteers in my former host country.

The second kind of idealism is more enduring because it understands human shortcomings and does not expect too much from people. It is hardened by real-life experiences and knows that partnerships take time to develop. This kind of idealism still dares to make the world a better place, but it has a longer horizon and is not expecting praise or even tangible results along the way. It sustains itself with nothing more than a belief in its mission and unshakeable perseverance.

Now that I am a Foreign Service officer, I try to remember this distinction. No matter how hesitant our partners may be, no matter how slow progress may seem; this second, patient strain of idealism is the one worth guarding. Though the path may be long and winding, why else would we be serving our country abroad — if not to make a positive difference? ■

Erik J. Schnotala
Vice Consul
Embassy San Jose