

STHS grad: Peace Corps struggling to be relevant

Publisher's note: The Peace Corps turns 50 this month. Two 2005 South Tahoe High School grads are in the Peace Corps having different experiences. Jessica Wackenhut today weighs in with her thoughts from Paraguay. On March 11, Michelle Aguilar will share her opinions from Panama.

By Jessica Wackenhut

ENCARNACION, Paraguay – When one thinks of Peace Corps, the first thing that tends to come to mind is living in a mud hut in the middle of Africa, experiencing incredible hardships in a new culture, but overcoming such obstacles by bonding with community members and bringing in amazing infrastructure such as a new school, library, or modern bathrooms.



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This, however, is far from my experience as an Environmental Education Volunteer in Peace Corps Paraguay (2009-2011), where during the last 17 months I have truly questioned whether we should be celebrating or, instead, re-evaluating Peace Corps as an institution.

Peace Corps, founded in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, was created to encourage development and cultural exchange for recent college graduates who had little to no experience

abroad. During the first two decades of Peace Corps, volunteers were able to help their communities develop through sharing the technical knowledge they acquired from their bachelor's degrees – a level of education way beyond that of their community counterparts. Additionally, volunteers had to integrate with their communities because if they did not, they would have no one to talk to.

It was incredibly challenging to visit other volunteers because of little infrastructure, and conveniences such as cell phones and Internet were still decades away. In fact, much communication with family from the States was limited to snail mail that took more than months to arrive.

Now let's fast forward 50 years to Peace Corps 2011: Today's Peace Corps has changed significantly since its creation because of globalization, higher rates of education for host country nationals, and the rapid spread of technology. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay, my life is a bit easier than those volunteers who served in the first years of Peace Corps' existence. If I am tired of traditional Paraguayan food, I can find Coca Cola, Sprite, Doritos, M&Ms, Pringles, among many other American foods, in my local supermarkets. If I am feeling homesick, all I have to do is insert the Internet device that I pay for monthly with my Peace Corps salary into the laptop I brought with me and call my parents on Skype. And if I'm not close to my computer, I can use my Peace Corps issued cell phone to call my volunteer friends and talk for free, thanks to the Peace Corps phone plan.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. It's truly impressive how far technology has come. And while the rate of globalization can be a bit overwhelming at times, it's nice to get a small reminder of home.

The problem lies in the fact that Peace Corps continues to recruit the same recent college graduates they were searching for 50 years ago, even though more host country nationals are

obtaining higher education degrees from universities in big cities or abroad. In this sense, globalization has so profoundly affected Peace Corps that many volunteers no longer have a higher knowledge base than their community counterparts. Therefore, it is not hard to find agriculture volunteers whose prior experience is limited to a summer of landscape architecture or a construction job, a health volunteer who was qualified based on her undergraduate biology degree, or an environmental education volunteer who was accepted based on her minor in environmental studies.

Fortunately, upon entering their country of service, each volunteer must undergo roughly three months of mandatory training. Many volunteers, however, finish training feeling like they touched the surface of so many different themes but never truly learned about anything that will actually be of assistance in their sites. For example, one of the largest environmental problems in Paraguay is trash. However, during training, my group had only a 45-minute session dedicated to trash where we learned several different activities about how to teach trash decomposition and stories about why burning trash is bad.

We never learned that throughout all of Paraguay there is only one sanitary landfill, nor did we learn how to set up a trash management system in our own sites. The general consensus post-training is the only thing we get out of it is language training, which, I must admit, Peace Corps does an exceptional job with.

This, in essence, is the question I have been struggling with for the past year and a half while I've been in Paraguay: what makes it OK, then, for a recent college graduate turned Peace Corps volunteer to come into a foreign culture and try to tell their community how they should change their way of life because she thinks it will be better that way? Who am I as an environmental studies major from the U.S. to come into Paraguay and say how to plant crops and trees when I have

never studied this climate and most farmers in the country will know the soil, weather, pests, and plants far better than I ever will since they have been working on the land for their entire lives.

There are college graduates who have come to Peace Corps and completed impressive projects with their counterparts. Many times all communities need is a little cheerleading and organization to make their projects come to fruition. But my project area, which is to increase environmental awareness in Paraguay, doesn't include making modern bathrooms or libraries. And because my projects are harder to conceptualize, it's harder to receive grants from Peace Corps Partnerships. Additionally, I've found very little resources at the Peace Corps Office in the capital. My bosses seem more concerned with placing new volunteers in their sites and expanding the number of volunteers in Paraguay than helping current volunteers acquire the resources and knowledge needed to have successful projects.

When I ask the workers in the office of possible projects ideas and what has been done in the past, I am almost always pointed to the same five classroom activities instead of actual community projects. Many times my community members ask me examples of what Peace Corps has done to develop their country. I have yet to respond to them because Peace Corps Paraguay has no collection of examples of their work in Paraguay over the last 45 years they've been here. This is especially discouraging when I hear about some of the projects more professional Japanese (JICA) and Korean (KOICA) volunteers are doing within Paraguay as they work with large institutions such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Education – two powerful institutions that rarely work with Peace Corps Volunteers who they view as inexperienced and immature.

I want to be clear, I do thank Peace Corps for giving me an opportunity I would have never had otherwise. I have learned a

great deal about myself, others, the world, and how to do projects without the support of the institution who I am supposed to be working under. I came to Peace Corps in the hopes that I would be doing some small-scale projects that would be positive development models that in turn help my community grow more sustainably. After I got here, I quickly realized Peace Corps is not a development organization as it advertises, but is more of a cultural exchange program. The projects I have done or am working on have had little to no support by Peace Corps, some of my projects were even discouraged.

In my experience, I have had many hardships thus far in my service and although some of them were a result of mere cultural differences, a majority of the stresses arose from Peace Corps as an institution and the lack of resources or even support given to myself and many volunteers. This experience will be one of a lifetime, one I will never forget. The people I have met, the relationships created, the projects I worked on with various counterparts throughout my site will never be replaced.

As Peace Corps celebrates its 50th anniversary, I hope this organization refocuses to become more meaningful if it wants to be a development organization, or be clear if its intentions truly are to be a cultural exchange program via the social responsibility department of the U.S. government. During the celebrations, Returned Peace Corps Volunteers will lobby Congress to increase the number of volunteers, is this making this organization more quality?

Peace Corps embarks on its 50th anniversary and what does it have to celebrate?