

STHS grad: Redefine what success means in Peace Corps

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. Michelle Aguilar today weighs in with her thoughts from Panama. On March 4, Jessica Wackenhut shared her opinions from Paraguay.

By Michelle Aguilar

BOCAS DEL TORO, Panama – I was the first and only person waiting that morning when the gate opened. I didn't realize that a place like this had hours of operation. The guard let me in, handed me a map, and pointed me toward my desired destination. I cautiously checked my watch. I had hours until my very first Peace Corps meeting in Washington, D.C. This was my first visit to the East Coast; I was bound for Panama the next day. But first I wanted to visit the person who was responsible for me being there in the first place.

As I stood at President John F. Kennedy's burial place in Arlington Cemetery and read some of his words that are engraved in the surrounding rock, I couldn't help but feel motivated. I thought about some of the words he spoke in 1961, when he first introduced the idea of Peace Corps to our country.

"Our peace corps, I want to emphasize, is not designed as a weapon of propaganda, it is not designed as a tool during the cold war. It is a genuine effort, by the people of the United States, particularly those who are young, to play their part in working for peace and improving the lives of all mankind. They will learn as much as they will teach."



Michelle
Aguilar,
middle, is on
a two-year
Peace Corps
mission in
Panama.

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Today, as Peace Corps celebrates its 50th anniversary, I think once again about those words Kennedy spoke, and wonder whether today's Peace Corps still has the same vision.

Peace Corps is currently in 77 countries worldwide. There are more than 8,500 volunteers and we are a government run organization. What happens in Washington directly affects us in the field. Even though the Peace Corps logo can be seen and recognized globally, I think when we talk about efficiency and effectiveness of the Peace Corp organization, it is only fair to speak on a country-to-country basis. The truth is that no two Peace Corps countries are alike, and the success or failure of a volunteers project is dependent upon the support and resources the volunteer receives from their country director, program director, language instructors, and medical staff. Through personal experience, I can with confidence say that Peace Corps Panama is doing it right.

I am living in a community of less than 300 indigenous people. I was brought here to do community economic development with an artisan and tourism group. But, after living here for a year, I realize the needs were more critical than the lack of

economic income. My people live off of their land. They are not going hungry due to lack of cash flow. What they needed was clean water, latrines and clean stoves. They also need health education and basic community organization. They need the basics met before they can start worrying about bringing in tourists and stimulating cash flow. I felt like I had freedom and numerous resources from the Peace Corps Panama staff when my community and I decided to work on a water project. Yes, it was technically not part of my program sector, but it is what my community needed, and most important, it is what my community wanted.

Peace Corps has three main goals for their volunteers. One relates to providing a community with trained men and women, but the other two goals revolve around cultural exchange. There is a good reason for this. In communities like mine, the first goal, the one relating to development, could never be achieved if the other two goals didn't happen. If I didn't live with my community, work with them shoulder to shoulder, ask them questions, answer their questions, learn their traditions, customs and language then I would never be able to provide true aid. I believe there is a very fine line between helping and hurting a community like mine. I have seen too many non-government organizations and nonprofit organizations implement volunteer projects that cross that line. The saddest part is that they think they are doing good. You can't truly know what the community needs, and what the best and most sustainable way to provide aid is, until you are one of these people. Our current Peace Corps director, Aaron S. Williams, reminds us "we are not just witnesses to a countries development, we are participants."

Peace Corps has been forced to make some cuts lately. My program was recently cut. When I leave my community in October, no volunteer will take my place. I think often the in country leadership of Peace Corps struggles in trying to prove to Washington and the taxpayers that the work we are doing is

truly making a difference abroad and on our home soil. But what is the best way to measure the outcomes of our projects and experiences?

Sure, building infrastructure and/or facilities could be a type of development, and easy to measure, but what about building capacity? Capacity building refers to assisting a community to adapt a new skill or competence to become sustainable. This is a more common outcome of Peace Corps projects, and very hard to measure. Do we need to start giving our communities and host country counterparts standardized tests to prove that capacity building is happening? For example, we just installed rainwater systems in my community. That is infrastructure development and something concrete that we can count and put onto paper to show Washington. But really, the most important part of this rainwater project is the education and capacity building. My people need to learn why their babies were getting sick, how and when to use the rainwater, how to maintain and clean the tank. If we just installed the tank and left, that tank would eventually yield water that is more dangerous and harmful to their health than what they were drinking before. Capacity building is the only way a project like this is going to be sustainable. And work like that does take time, hence the two-year commitment to Peace Corps.

A common argument I hear against Peace Corps is in reference to the time commitment and how two years is a lot to "sacrifice." Sure, two years is a significant amount of time, and it really does take this amount of time to do true development work. However, I do not see the Peace Corps experience a sacrifice at all. I see it as the opposite actually. I see this experience as an investment in myself, an investment in my future and an investment in my country.

Another common argument I hear is: "Why would you go volunteer in another country when there are plenty of people to help here in ours?" I would like to remind these people that it was

the same President Kennedy who declared, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." Do you find it a bit contradictory that he would say something so profound and patriotic, and then establish an organization that uses taxpayer money to send our "trained men and women" overseas to help other countries? Remember Kennedy also said, "There can be no greater service to our country and no source of pride more real than to be a member of the Peace Corps of the United States."

Peace Corps volunteers help our country in two major ways. First, after 27 months abroad the volunteer usually returns to the United States. There are returned Peace Corps volunteers in every facet of the American workforce. They are in medicine, education, government and politics. They take what they have learned abroad and use these skills in their home communities. And second, these foreign countries that we are working in already have an American Embassy and American ambassadors to promote American policy. Some would say the Peace Corps volunteers are ambassadors as well, but we are not promoting American policy in our communities, we are promoting America. What could be more patriotic than that?

Nineteen months have passed since that day I stood in Arlington cemetery. I paid my respects to President Kennedy and walked away, having absolutely no idea what would lie ahead. Today, I celebrate Peace Corps 50th anniversary. I am grateful for the opportunities and experiences that this organization has given me and has allowed me to give to others. For the seven months that remain in my service, I will continue to make a "genuine effort" just as Kennedy had hope for 50 years ago.

Sometimes the hardest part about doing a development project in our communities is finding the necessary funding. Peace Corps does not give us any monetary resources to realize our

project ideas. If you would like to donate to any Peace Corp project, go to this website.

Choose your favorite country, read the current project descriptions and make a confident donation because you can be certain that the volunteer receiving these funds is using them in the most efficient, effective and sustainable way.

Also, if you would like to follow my adventure, check out my blog.

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