

PEACE CORPS FOR LIFE

Reinvigorating the agency by reframing the experience

by Joby Taylor, Ph.D

Ware in a unique moment in history. The staggering social and material needs of our nation and world are matched by a growing global citizen desire to be engaged in solving problems and a rapidly expanding potential for connecting global needs with citizen solutions through emerging technologies and communications tools. Now is a moment for a powerful Call to Service and Peace, a call backed by a broad slate of programmatic opportunities for those (millions?) who can and will respond. True to the framing of its founding days, the Peace Corps of the 21st century must strive to blend compassion and pragmatism in its mission. To use Sargent Shriver's term, it must continue to seek the recipe for Practical Idealism, a commitment to social hope blended with the skills and savvy to get things done.

What is the proper ordering of goals in the Peace Corps: Is it primarily a cultural exchange program? An aid and development organization? An instrument of U.S. foreign relations? The answer is: All of the above. The Peace Corps, at its best, is a transformative personal experience for our own citizens and their host country counterparts; it is a grassroots development agency offering an effective hand up (not a hand out) in thousands of communities around the world; and it is the smartest "smart power" in our international affairs portfolio. This integration of goals is the elegant genius of the Peace Corps.

Now, more than ever, we have the potential to roll together Peace Corps' Three Goals into a single mission to "promote world peace and friendship." Sargent Shriver's audacious hope and vision for the Peace Corps is worthy of renewed attention today. As late as the days immediately after 9/11/2001,



Shriver Peaceworker Fellows

Joby Taylor with Shriver Peaceworker Fellows at the Gandhi Memorial in Washington, D.C.

the Agency's first director spoke these challenging words: "Our present world cries out for a new Peace Corps—a vastly improved, expanded, and profoundly deeper enterprise.... I'm not defending the old Peace Corps—I'm attacking it! We didn't go far enough! Our dreams were large, but our actions were small. We never really gave the goal of 'World Wide Peace' an overwhelming commitment. Nor did we establish a clear, inspiring vision for attaining it." (Nov. 2001)

We should take up Shriver's challenge and develop a new "Towering Task" for a 21st century Peace Corps: Preserving that which is good, adapting that which is not, and thinking creatively and intelligently about the future potential of the Peace Corps as it approaches its 50th anniversary. Anticipating this timely opportunity, the NPCA and individual Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) have been generating big ideas including discussions of new country partners,

new service partnerships, new uses of technology, new volunteer models, new types of projects, and new administrative structures. Their ideas are diverse, but their collective wisdom agrees about this unique chance to reinvigorate the Peace Corps and make it better and bolder.

Here's a starting place: For volunteers, the Peace Corps is often, and with good reason, thought of as an experience of a lifetime. That's not bad, but our opportunity today is to reframe the Peace Corps as an "Experience for Life." Those two years of engagement shouldn't be something we head into planning to look back on with longing and nostalgia...as an adventurous and idealistic timeout between college and career (or at other life stages). We know that the Peace Corps is an experience that transforms lives, so why not reframe it as *Peace Corps for Life*. In our flattening world, all three Peace Corps Goals are now actionable at all stages of Peace Corps service. Let's draw a matrix with Before/During/ and After Peace Corps along one axis and Goal One/Goal Two/ and Goal Three along the other, and then let the brainstorming of those nine boxes begin!

While this simple exercise will generate new ideas for the pre- and in-service stages of Peace Corps, perhaps the largest untapped potential of the Peace Corps for Life reframing lies in life after the close of service (COS). I propose that COS should be re-described as *Continuation of Service*. Goal Three, typically reserved for RPCVs, should be blown wide open conceptually to include pre- and in-service volunteers, and, upon COS, it should be given teeth through programmatic opportunities. Both Shriver and Kennedy envisioned

RPCVs as *the* chief impact of the Peace Corps experiment (a vision that was both a key political argument for its early Congressional support, and went way beyond classroom slideshows). In their same spirit of Practical Idealism, RPCVs should be charged and expected to become model global citizens for life.

One way to make Peace Corps for Life real would be to make Peace Corps Response a universal experience for all RPCVs. The model could be flexible, offering diverse opportunities for RPCVs at different stages: pre-, mid-, and post-career. For example, within the first five years of returning, RPCVs should be supported to creatively integrate a continuing project in their primary Peace Corps post site into their graduate studies or as part of their professional development. RPCVs in mid-career positions should be supported to develop creative ways of applying their skills and expertise through short, in-the-field consulting roles, or as PCV or host country trainers and mentors through online professional development systems. And post-career RPCVs, while re-upping as PCVs themselves in some numbers through Peace Corps's 50+ initiative, remain an enormous and barely-tapped resource if we would simply commit to finding creative ways to engage their expertise while supporting their specific needs such as continuing health care. In many cases, these last two RPCV groups could be challenged to bring

matching resources to support their ongoing engagement.

Another way to give Peace Corps for Life programmatic teeth is to expand and enhance the pathways bridging Peace Corps service to professional careers in service and development. New public service pathways could build directly upon the longstanding Federal retirement and non-competitive employment benefits of Peace Corps service. For example, within that first year window, RPCVs with adequate qualifications should have special eligibility for programs like the Presidential Management Fellowship. While I hesitate to undermine its importance, the longstanding "readjustment allowance" seems unhelpfully framed as a retrospective "thank you" for service. Let's keep this modest unrestricted award, but create a new and larger Peace Corps for Life Education Award. Given that most RPCVs return for graduate school, this transition stage is a pivotal bridge for connecting Peace Corps experience with a career and life pathway in service. Similar to AmeriCorps or the GI Bill, RPCVs should earn Education Awards that universally encourage them to deepen and apply the knowledge and skills they gained in the Peace Corps.

The current Peace Corps Fellows/USA and Masters International programs already constitute a network of over 100 universities nationwide, diverse institutions offering dozens of

disciplinary options and, importantly, building in significant domestic community service and service learning experiences. Domestic service-learning helps RPCVs readjust to life at home by engaging them in local issues while connecting them with a new community of service peers and partners. These independently run Fellows programs could match the new Peace Corps Service for Life Education Award, giving RPCVs double the incentive to get involved as professional service leaders across the country. (An alternate way to realize this could be to have the Peace Corps Fellows/USA programs simply become a national AmeriCorps Consortium. In this way, the continued domestic service of RPCVs would earn them an AmeriCorps Education Award.)

RPCVs have certainly been realizing Kennedy and Shriver's bold vision independently for nearly 50 years. The Peace Corps can take this powerful organic phenomenon to scale, creating a powerful engine for service leadership in our nation and worldwide. By bringing the call to lifelong service and peacebuilding into the very heart of the Peace Corps mission; we can create programmatic pathways that allow every Volunteer to turn a transformative two-year experience into *Peace Corps for Life*.

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