

# THE **P**EACE **C**ORPS



by James I. Deutsch



## FIFTY YEARS OF PROMOTING WORLD PEACE AND FRIENDSHIP



On August 29, 1961, thirty-two men and twenty women from the United States—all in their mid-twenties—boarded a chartered Pan American World Airways turboprop bound for Accra, Ghana, from Washington's National Airport.



Two days earlier, they had arrived in Washington from the University of California at Berkeley, where they had just completed two months of training in educational pedagogy and African studies. Arriving in Ghana on August 30, they stepped off the plane and sang the Ghanaian national anthem to the waiting crowd in Twi, one of the local languages.

This musical gesture of friendship underscored the goals of the organization that had brought these young men and women to Ghana. This was the first group of Peace Corps volunteers to arrive in their host country. Close behind them were twenty-four young men, who left Washington on August 31, on their way to volunteer in Tanganyika (now Tanzania), and sixty-two young men who left New York on September 7, headed to Colombia. The work ahead for all of these volunteers would be challenging. The Ghanaian group was assigned to teach English to high school students; those in Tanganyika would be engaged in building and developing roads from farms to markets; and the Colombian contingent would take on a variety of construction projects, such as building schools, rural roads, aqueducts, health centers, sports fields, and latrines.



The first Peace Corps volunteers to travel overseas pose on the tarmac at Washington's National Airport, August 29, 1961, shortly before boarding the flight to Ghana. Photo by Associated Press









*The purpose of this Act is to enable the Government of the United States to develop a genuine people-to-people program in which talented and dedicated young American men will teach basic skills to the peoples of the underdeveloped areas of the world, with a view to assisting them in their struggle against poverty, disease, illiteracy, and hunger, and with a view to promoting a better understanding of the United States.”—Senate Bill 3675,*

*introduced by Hubert Humphrey, 1960*

Because of the varying dates when these three groups started their training in 1961, each can make some claim to being the “very first” Peace Corps volunteers. Pinpointing the exact moment when the idea for the Peace Corps first emerged is equally difficult. Some observers point to the legislation proposed in 1957 by Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota to use “talented young men and women in an overseas operation for education, health care, vocational training, and community development.” Three years later, on June 15, 1960, Humphrey introduced Senate Bill 3675, titled the “United States Peace Corps Act.” The bill’s purpose was “to develop a genuine people-to-people program in which talented and dedicated young American men will teach basic skills to the peoples of the underdeveloped areas of the world, with a view to assisting them in their struggle against poverty, disease, illiteracy, and hunger, and with a view to promoting a better understanding of the United States.”

Around the same time, Senator Richard Neuberger of Oregon and Representative Henry Reuss of Wisconsin were proposing a “Youth Corps,” which would consist of “young Americans willing to serve their country in public and private technical assistance missions in far-off countries, and at a soldier’s pay.” Reuss and Neuberger had first articulated this idea in 1958, and managed to insert language into the Mutual Security Act of 1960, which provided ten thousand dollars in federal funding to study the feasibility of this Youth Corps.

However, neither Humphrey nor Neuberger and Reuss had the charisma and political acumen of the forty-three-year-old Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, who in the fall of 1960 was campaigning as the Democratic candidate for president—having defeated Senator Humphrey in the primary contests. Shortly after

2 a.m. on Friday, October 14, Kennedy stepped onto the campus of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Kennedy had just arrived by plane from New York, where he and Vice President Richard M. Nixon, the Republican nominee, had debated that evening for the third time on national television—sharply clashing on farm programs, the oil depletion allowance, and the defense of two small islands off the coast of China.

By all accounts, Kennedy arrived exhausted in Ann Arbor, but was reinvigorated, even at that late hour, by the thousands of University of Michigan students who had been anxiously awaiting his appearance on the front steps of the Student Union building. Without any prepared remarks, Kennedy began by joking, “I’ve come here to go to sleep, but I guess I should say something.” What came next was an apparently extemporaneous challenge: “How many of you are willing to spend two years in Africa or Latin America or Asia working for the United States and working for freedom? How many of you who are going to be doctors are willing to spend your days in Ghana; technicians or engineers, how many of you are willing to work in the Foreign Service and spend your lives traveling around the world? On your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country will depend the answer whether we as a free country can compete. I think Americans are willing to contribute, but the effort must be far greater than we have made in the past.” Kennedy’s speech lasted only three minutes, but its impact has endured for more than fifty years.

(Right) At the University of Michigan in the early morning of October 14, 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy challenges students to work for world peace.

(Inset) President Kennedy signs the Peace Corps Act legislation at the White House on September 22, 1961.

All photos in this article courtesy of the Peace Corps, unless otherwise indicated

*“On your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country will depend the answer whether we as a free country can compete. I think Americans are willing to contribute, but the effort must be far greater than we have made in the past.”—President John F. Kennedy, 1960*







Alan and Judy Guskin, and Tom Hayden, present then-Senator Kennedy with a petition containing the names of eight hundred students.

Photo courtesy of Alan Guskin



Peace Corps volunteers undergo field training in New Mexico before starting their two years of service in Brazil.



A Peace Corps volunteer meets members of her community in Brazil.

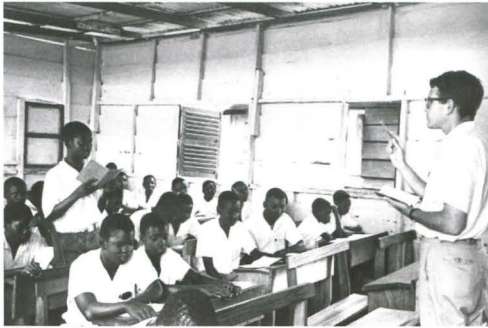
All photos taken 1960–1973

The early 1960s was a time when students from across the country were eager to change the status quo. Students were already active in the civil rights movement by “sitting in” at lunch counters in Kansas, Oklahoma, North Carolina, and Tennessee to protest the segregation of eating establishments. In the same spirit, hundreds of students immediately responded to Senator Kennedy’s challenge by writing letters to his staff, to their college newspapers, and to the Democratic Party Headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Realizing he had hit a highly responsive chord, Kennedy quickly expanded on the idea he had raised in Ann Arbor. Facing an enthusiastic twenty thousand people in San Francisco on November 2, 1960, Kennedy urged the crowd to “think of the wonders skilled American personnel could work, building goodwill, building the peace.” He continued, “I therefore propose that our inadequate efforts in this area be supplemented by a

‘peace corps’ of talented young men willing and able to serve their country in this fashion for three years as an alternative to peace-time Selective Service.... We cannot discontinue training our young men as soldiers of war, but we also need them as ambassadors of peace.” When the crowd responded enthusiastically, Kennedy and his staff knew they were onto something.

Two of the students who had heard Kennedy speak in Ann Arbor and had immediately written letters to the *Michigan Daily* were Judy and Alan Guskin, a young married couple—she studying comparative literature; he a student of social psychology. They formed a committee, “Americans Committed to World Responsibility,” to promote this idea of a peace-time youth corps. The Guskins and Tom Hayden, editor of the *Michigan Daily*, met Kennedy on the airport tarmac in Toledo, Ohio, as he was heading east on November 6, 1960. The three students presented Kennedy with a petition containing



Peace Corps volunteer Kenneth Baer teaches high school students in Ghana.



Peace Corps volunteer Elaine Willoughby shares a smile with one of the more than three hundred children with whom she worked in Jamaica.



Robert Ballew, an agriculture volunteer in Bolivia from 1964 to 1966, embodies the youthful image of the Peace Corps in its first decade. Photo courtesy of Robert Ballew

the names of eight hundred students who were eager to serve their country overseas. The Guskins further proved their commitment to the fledgling program by becoming two of the earliest Peace Corps volunteers to serve in Thailand from 1961 to 1964.

Judy and Alan Guskin are just two of the more than 200,000 Peace Corps volunteers who have served in 139 countries since 1961, when the agency was established by Executive Order 10924. Signed by President Kennedy on March 1, less than three months after his inauguration on January 20, 1961, the two-page Executive Order simply established "an agency in the Department of State which shall be known as the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps shall be headed by a Director." That person, appointed by Kennedy three days later, was Sargent Shriver, his brother-in-law. The U.S. Congress made it official on September 22, 1961, by authorizing the Peace Corps Act and

appropriating \$30 million for the new agency's first annual budget. The very first paragraph of the Act declares that the Peace Corps should "promote world peace and friendship" through three interrelated goals:

- to help the people of interested countries meet their needs for trained workers;
- to help the people in those countries better understand Americans; and
- to help Americans better understand the people in those countries where Peace Corps volunteers are serving.

Half a century later, the annual federal appropriation reached a high of \$400 million in Fiscal Year 2010, but the three goals of the Peace Corps, its Congressional mandate, and its commitment to building world peace and friendship have never changed.



*I owe much to Sarge Shriver; so do hundreds of thousands of others, and so does America.... So do millions of people out there, who got to know us through the Peace Corps, got to learn from us, and got to teach us.”—Chris Matthews, Peace Corps volunteer in Swaziland from 1968 to 1970*

### THE CULTURE OF THE PEACE CORPS

This year the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is pleased to host—and recognize—the Peace Corps volunteers who have served the organization since its founding fifty years ago. In this regard, the Peace Corps program in 2011 builds upon previous Folklife Festival programs that have examined occupational and organizational traditions, such as *American Trial Lawyers* in 1986, *White House Workers* in 1992, *Working at the Smithsonian* in 1996, *Masters of the Building Arts* in 2001, *Forest Service, Culture, and Community* in 2005, *NASA: Fifty Years and Beyond* in 2008, and *Smithsonian Inside Out* in 2010. At the Festival, these occupational and organizational groups have each demonstrated their own sets of skills, specialized knowledge, and codes of behavior that not only distinguish them from other occupational groups but also meet their needs as a community.

As sociologist James Q. Wilson has observed, “Every organization has a culture, that is, a persistent, patterned way of thinking about the central tasks of and human relationships within an organization. Culture is to an organization what personality is to an individual. Like human culture generally, it is passed on from one generation to the next. It changes slowly, if at all.” The fiftieth anniversary of the Peace Corps in 2011 provides a wonderful opportunity for understanding and appreciating its organizational and occupational cultures.

Admittedly, it is difficult to generalize about those who have served as Peace Corps volunteers over the past fifty years. All of the Peace Corps volunteers who went to Tanganyika and Colombia in 1961 were male, but sixty percent of Peace Corps volunteers today are female. In 1961, almost all Peace Corps volunteers were in their twenties; today, seven percent of volunteers are older than fifty.

Nevertheless, there are several generalizations that unite Peace Corps volunteers from 1961 to 2011.

- Peace Corps volunteers enjoy challenges. They pride themselves on their ability to face problems and resolve them directly. They relish a can-do, boots-on-the-ground, get-your-hands-dirty mentality.
- Peace Corps volunteers are altruistic, idealistic, and optimistic. They believe that the world is moving towards progress and improvement, rather than decline and ruin. They believe that most human beings have a clear choice between doing good and doing harm and that they will do everything in their power to aspire towards and achieve the former. Their mandate—according to the Peace Corps Act of 1961—is to “promote world peace and friendship.”
- Accordingly, Peace Corps volunteers believe that their actions do matter and that human beings are not victims of random forces beyond their control, but rather can most definitely impact their own world. The challenge for Peace Corps volunteers is to make sure that their impact on the world is positive and constructive.
- Peace Corps volunteers are profoundly changed by their service. If they come back to the United States (and some of them choose to return to the countries to which they were assigned, or to live and work elsewhere), they do so with the knowledge that the American perspective is not the only way in which to view the world. They have learned that there are other cultural outlooks, perspectives, and angles of vision.

Not surprisingly, several of these generalizations about Peace Corps volunteers may also apply to mainstream American society. In many countries around the world, Americans are regarded as well-meaning but unrealistically optimistic—people from a relatively young

Sargent Shriver, the first director of the Peace Corps, pumps water with children in Nepal in 1964.



country who naively believe that their ingenuity, strength, and moral values will inevitably make the world a better place for all humankind.

To its credit, Peace Corps volunteers have always understood that many of the world's most pressing problems are not so easily resolved. Indeed, from the very beginning, the Peace Corps has recognized the delicate nature of its mandate. Because few people could object to its overarching goal of promoting world peace and friendship, the organization has received a great deal of support from both sides of the political aisle. But it has also dealt with criticism from many different sources. Volunteers have been called draft-dodgers and spies, in some cases seemingly at the same time. As one Peace Corps volunteer wrote in the early 1960s, the Colombians on the one hand "think we have come to solve all their problems. At the other extreme they accuse us of being instruments of imperialism." It would take a group of very talented persons to navigate the risky currents between the two extremes.

#### ROBERT SARGENT SHRIVER

Shriver was born into a prominent Maryland family that could trace its ancestors to colonial America. He attended prep school in Connecticut, followed by degrees from Yale University (1938) and the Yale Law School (1941). Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Shriver enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served during the war on board a battleship in the South Pacific. Afterwards, he worked as a journalist in New York, where he met Eunice Kennedy, one of John F. Kennedy's younger sisters. In 1946, Eunice's father, Joseph P. Kennedy, offered Shriver the job of managing the Merchandise Mart in Chicago—part of the Kennedy family's vast business holdings. Seven years later, Shriver and Eunice Kennedy were married in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York.

Being part of the Kennedy clan was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it brought Shriver access to the highest circles of political power and public service. On the other hand, a "half-Kennedy" like Shriver was more likely to remain in the shadow of his more famous relatives. For instance, when President Kennedy named Shriver in March 1961 as the first director of the Peace Corps, the headline in the *Los Angeles Times* was "Kennedy Picks In-Law to Head Peace Corps." However, Shriver very quickly demonstrated his talents for convincing skeptics—not only in the United States, but also around the world—that the Peace Corps could and would promote world peace and friendship.

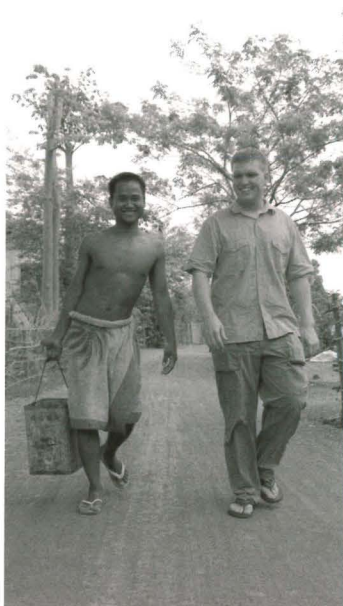
Shriver led the Peace Corps for its first five years, but accomplished much more in a highly distinguished career: director of the Office of Economic Opportunity (which created Head Start and Job Corps), U.S. ambassador to France, Democratic vice-presidential candidate, president of Special Olympics (established by his wife, Eunice), and founder of the National Center on Poverty Law. But he remains most closely identified with the Peace Corps—and with the volunteers, who knew him always as "Sarge."

When Shriver passed away at age ninety-five in early 2011, tributes and reminiscences poured in from around the world, praising his dedication, enthusiasm, idealism, joie de vivre, and the legacy of Peace Corps service he helped establish. One of those tributes came from journalist Chris Matthews, who served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Swaziland from 1968 to 1970. Speaking on his television program *Hardball*, Matthews acknowledged, "I owe much to Sarge Shriver; so do hundreds of thousands of others, and so does America.... So do millions of people out there, who got to know us through the Peace Corps, got to learn from us, and got to teach us.... What a great man we lost today."





Sabreen Dogar looks at a world map with her students in Kazakhstan.



Colin Doyle, an education volunteer in Cambodia, explores his village with one of his neighbors.



Environmental volunteers Veronica Pesinova and Paul Ruesch (center) work with their Mexican colleagues at a sewage treatment plant.

All photos taken 2004–2010

### THE PEACE CORPS AND THE WORLD

Under Shriver's leadership, the Peace Corps quickly expanded. This was no small feat in the Cold War period of the early 1960s. Shriver traveled far and wide, persuading world leaders to extend official invitations to the Peace Corps to work in their countries. As a result, there were 750 Peace Corps volunteers and trainees serving in nine countries by December 1961. And there was no shortage of applications from prospective volunteers. After an initial flurry of 17,000 applications during its first twelve months of operation, the number leveled off at 1,000 applications a month. Similarly, requests for Peace Corps volunteers from countries around the world kept arriving by the thousands. Accordingly, the number of volunteers rose to 2,816 in thirty-six host countries by June 1962; to 7,300 volunteers in forty-four host countries by December 1963; and to a record number of 15,000 volunteers serving in

sixty host countries by June 1966—three months after Shriver stepped down as director of the agency.

Today there are approximately 8,650 Peace Corps volunteers serving in seventy-seven countries around the world. While many volunteers are still working in the “traditional” areas, such as education and agriculture, others have shifted to new initiatives such as business development, HIV/AIDS, climate change, and information technology. And while five of the first nine countries from 1961 still host volunteers today—Colombia, Ghana, the Philippines, St. Lucia, and Tanzania—the Peace Corps has expanded into many other areas—including eastern Europe, China, and the former Soviet Union—that were not accessible in the 1960s.

During the past fifty years, Peace Corps volunteers have worked to achieve the agency's three goals, serving as a representative face of America in some of the most distant corners of the globe. As such, they:



Nicole Legrand weaves a mat under the watchful eye of a neighbor in Vanuatu.



Agriculture volunteer Sergio Arispe helps herd a pack of alpacas in Ecuador.



MaryAnn Camp assists a couple of her neighbors with fieldwork in Botswana.

- Engage with host country partners in a spirit of cooperation, mutual learning, and respect;
- Represent the people, culture, values, and traditions of the United States to their host country; and
- Represent the people, cultures, values, and traditions of their host country and community to people in the United States both during and following their service.

Similarly, one of the goals of the Smithsonian Institution for the twenty-first century is to serve as “a steward and ambassador of cultural connections” by building “bridges of mutual respect” and presenting “the diversity of world cultures.” Accordingly, the Peace Corps program at the 2011 Smithsonian Folklife Festival will bring together Peace Corps volunteers—both past and present—with roughly one hundred of the people with whom they have served from more than a dozen countries around the world in order to promote a greater understanding of world cultures.

#### HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PEACE CORPS PROGRAM

- Artisans from Kenya, Kyrgyz Republic, Mali, Morocco, Peru, and Tonga will demonstrate some of their traditional crafts, which Peace Corps volunteers have supported through the promotion of craft cooperatives and economic development.
- Performance groups from Belize, Botswana, Philippines, and Ukraine will present examples of music, dance, and theater, which Peace Corps volunteers have supported through consultative capacity-building and partnerships.
- Small businesses and enterprises from Georgia, Ghana, Guatemala, Jamaica, and Zambia will demonstrate and exhibit their production techniques and partnerships supported by Peace Corps volunteers.





Peace Corps volunteer Heather Ludvigson poses with her young students in Jamaica.

#### COUNTRIES WHERE PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS HAVE SERVED SINCE 1961

Afghanistan, Albania, Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belize, Benin, Bolivia, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, China, Colombia, Comoros, Congo (Democratic Republic of), Congo (Republic of), Cook Islands, Costa Rica, Cote d'Ivoire, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Dominica, Dominican Republic, East Timor, Ecuador, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Estonia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Gabon, The Gambia, Georgia, Ghana, Grenada and Carriacou, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Jamaica, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kiribati, Kyrgyz Republic, Latvia, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Lithuania, Macedonia (Republic of), Madagascar, Malawi, Malaysia, Mali, Malta, Marshall Islands, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Micronesia (Federated States of), Moldova, Mongolia, Montserrat, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Niue, Oman, Pakistan, Palau (Republic of), Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Samoa, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Slovak Republic, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Swaziland, Tanzania, Thailand, Togo, Tonga, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Turks and Caicos, Tuvalu, Uganda, Ukraine, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Vanuatu, Venezuela, Yemen, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE PEACE CORPS

Times have changed since President Kennedy established the Peace Corps in 1961, but many of the same needs persist. In some ways, they have even grown. As the Peace Corps moves into its next fifty years, the inequities that existed half a century ago—poverty, disease, illiteracy, and hunger—still loom large in much of our world, often exacerbated by such contemporary challenges as climate change and HIV/AIDS. And the need for world peace and friendship is certainly as important today as it was fifty years ago.

Peace Corps volunteers are always looking for creative new ways to address these problems. For instance, volunteers in Namibia recently launched a health-education program geared toward teens and young adults in which they use text messages to receive and respond to health-related questions—including questions about gender roles or HIV/AIDS that young people might find too embarrassing to ask in person. In the program's first month this text-based helpline answered more than one thousand message inquiries, which prompted Peace Corps volunteers elsewhere to adopt the same model to meet similar needs in their countries of service.

The Peace Corps' activities and countries will change, as they always have. The challenges and tools used to address them will also evolve. And at some point in the future, someone might declare that the first goal of the Peace Corps has been accomplished—that trained Americans are no longer needed to work in countries around the world. However, the equally important, and no less optimistic, principle remains: exchanges of cultures, food, language, knowledge, and life—like the need and desire to promote world peace and friendship—are essential.



Peace Corps volunteer Jessica Bliss (left) wears both traditional and nontraditional clothing in Niger.



By the end of 2011, the Peace Corps anticipates having more volunteers serving overseas than at any time since 1971—when that figure was close to ten thousand. But the Peace Corps is much more than its aggregate numbers. Its most essential ingredients continue to be the individuals involved and committed to cultural exchange. The need for these will always endure.

*James I. Deutsch is the curator of the 2011 Folklife Festival program The Peace Corps: Fifty Years of Promoting World Peace and Friendship. He previously curated the National World War II Reunion in 2004 and Festival programs on the U.S. Forest Service in 2005 and National Aeronautics and Space Administration in 2008, and the Mekong River (as co-curator) in 2007. He is also an adjunct faculty member in George Washington University's American Studies Department.*



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Peace Corps volunteer Raquib Jamal plants a tree in her village in Ghana in 2000.