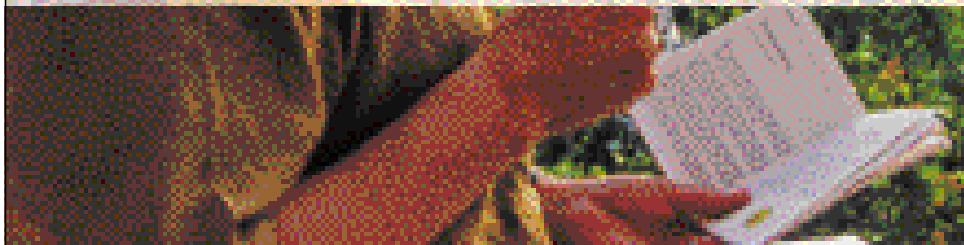


Peace Corps Volunteers:

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GLOBAL SADORS

*alumni share lessons from
the Peace Corps*

by Brian Builta





*"Our own young men and women ...
will return better able to assume the
responsibilities of American citizenship
and with greater understanding
of our global responsibilities."*

— President John F. Kennedy, 1961



Ruth Junkin '88 fell asleep early, rose with the sun, and shared a shower with a chicken. **Martha Edwards** '75 lived with no air conditioning, no telephone, and no running water. **Dung Le** '02 endured intense heat that left her soaked with sweat as soon as she left her house. Why would college graduates sign up for this?

"I came back a better citizen, a better friend, a better daughter," said

Colleen Lyons Gardner '91, who spent her two Peace Corps years in Niger. "I appreciate so many things now on a deeper level. I feel less selfish and so much more in tune with the world."

The brainchild of President John F. Kennedy, the Peace Corps was established in 1961 in the hope that, in the president's words, "Our own young men and women ... will return better able to assume the responsibilities of American citizenship and with greater understanding of our global responsibilities."

Wallis Westwood '63 was the first Austin College graduate to volunteer, serving in Panama from 1963 to 1965. In total, 49 Austin College alumni have served the Peace Corps in 42 countries. Since 2003, the Peace Corps Southwest Regional Recruitment Office has named Austin College among the top 25 Southwestern volunteer-producing schools. A few of those volunteers share their experiences.

When **Virginia Smith Volpe** '90 was 24, she spoke only two languages: English and Texan. She had been abroad once on a January Term trip to study theatre in London, and did not care much about international issues. "I was about as redneck as you could get," said Volpe, who planned to study economics, earn a doctorate, and eventually teach.

Wetakedeniya changed all that.

Tucked amidst three mountains in the tea country of Sri Lanka, Wetakedeniya was a poor and quiet village of 1,200 when Volpe lived there with the Sirisena family from 1992 to 1994. During those years, she helped initiate the Mahila Samithi, a women's society that taught nutrition, trained teachers, and built latrines. Volpe taught the village the power of petitioning in having their grievances addressed, and shared composting techniques that improved tea plants and cleaned the drinking water. For everything she tried to give, Volpe said she received a thousand times more in return.

When Volpe completed her two years in the Peace Corps, she was hooked on international life — "international politics, geographies, history ... everything." Today, Volpe speaks Singhla, Italian, and Spanish. She has studied international economics and policy studies at Johns Hopkins University, specializing in Latin America. She has lived in Italy, married an Italian, and, as a senior vice president for Citigroup, competes in the international market

everyday with people from Latin America, Europe, China, Japan, and elsewhere. Volpe credits the Peace Corps with making her a better manager, but more importantly, with giving her another family. "I have never been more at peace than when I lived in the village of Wetakeneniya," Volpe said. "I have three families: my parents here in the U.S., my host family in Sri Lanka, and my in-laws in Italy. Who could ask for more than that?"

The world is much different today than it was when the Peace Corps was created in 1961. It is a world of laptops, cellular phones, the Internet, email, ebay, and e-commerce; it is a wireless world where technology has created a web that extends from our homes across every continent. Yet for millions of Earth's citizens, the world has not changed at all. They battle daily against hunger, disease, poverty, ignorance, and oppression. As the needs persist, so do the goals of the Peace Corps, established to promote world peace and friendship by helping the people of interested countries meet their needs, helping promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served, and helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of all Americans. Since its founding, 178,000 volunteers have served in 138 countries.

Rebecca Wood Wyatt '80 remembers questioning the wisdom of joining the Peace Corps when she found herself in a remote section of the Central African Republic during summer 1980. A bloodless coup the previous summer drove out the Peace Corps and Wyatt was one of the volunteers re-establishing a Peace Corps presence. She received shots for yellow fever, typhoid, cholera, and tetanus, so of course, she came down with malaria. She regularly spent weeks without contact from the outside world and when a truck she was traveling in crashed in the middle of nowhere, Wyatt realized how truly alone she was. "It was so mind blowing to be in the middle of Africa," Wyatt said. "You learn quickly what you can live with and what you can live without."

If it was up to her, Wyatt said, she would make it mandatory for high school or college graduates to spend time working in inner cities or overseas so they can discover that all people do not experience life as it is in the United States. "We are so insulated here," Wyatt said. "It's important for people to get away from everything they know and to learn to live without televisions and computers. When you have to give all that up, you learn what's truly important."

Colleen Lyons Gardner '91 said all U.S. politicians should be required to give at least one year to Peace Corps service, "as a prerequisite to writing bills for this country or for policies abroad." Remembering Abraham Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs, Gardner said many countries have not moved beyond the food and water base of the pyramid. "These countries," Gardner said, "cannot possibly be expected to have the same priorities we do."

The people of the Central African Republic knew about the outside world, Wyatt said, knew how other people lived, "but all



they were concerned about was where the next meal was coming from.” After the Central African Republic held its first free elections in 1981, violence erupted and Wyatt had to leave. Like many volunteers, she is not sure that her time in the Peace Corps actually brought change for the people she went to serve. “My intentions were good, but my resources were limited.” But Wyatt left with a parcel of courage and fortitude that she did not have before, qualities she has carried to her work at a charter school in Miami Shores, Fla. “If one life was changed,” she said, “it was mine.”

In today’s war-torn world, **Dana Fienning Minaya ’66** draws on her Peace Corps experience daily. She volunteered in Ghana from 1966 to 1968. In the years since, she has observed other cultures demonized out of ignorance.

Take Iraq, Minaya said. “Without understanding Iraq’s culture and religions, without understanding the whys and

wherefores of the peoples’ actions, we tend to make comparisons to our own culture and then call theirs demonic.” By gaining an understanding of their culture, she added, “we can then understand what we are doing that is causing a certain reaction on their part.”

Time in the Peace Corps allowed Minaya to place a human face on another culture. Peace Corps veterans find this makes other cultures less abstract and more personal. “The Peace Corps has helped the United States create a body of people who think internationally,” Minaya said, “people who think peacefully, with their eyes open to other avenues.”

Minaya echoed a common refrain among Peace Corps volunteers: “My experience opened my mind to the way people are and has taught me to really enjoy their differences. Studying those differences has allowed me to grow.” Minaya, who now

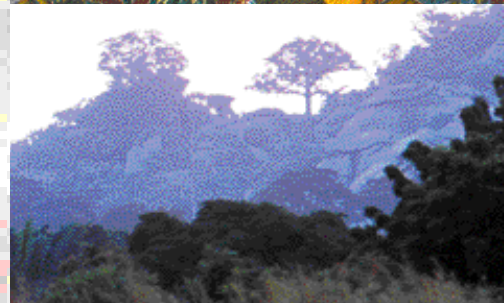
Alumni Peace Corps Volunteers

Peace Corps records indicate that 49 Austin College alumni have volunteered since 1961. The 19 names listed below were obtained through the College’s research efforts. Anyone with information on those missing from this list are asked to call Brian Builta at 903.813.2018 or write him at bbuilt@austincollege.edu so the College’s records are complete.

ALUMNI	LOCATION	YEARS
Wallis Westwood ’63	Panama	1963-65
Jean Clark ’64	Puerto Rico/Panama	1965-67
Dana Fienning Minaya ’66	Ghana	1966-68
Winifred Jones Bellido ’66	Peru	1969-71
Martha Edwards ’75	Western Samoa	1976-7
Rebecca Wood Wyatt ’80	Central African Republic	1980-81
John McGown ’86	Philippines	1992-94
Mark Adcock ’88	Honduras	1989-91
Ruth Junkin ’88	Marshall Islands	1988-90
Helen Lowman ’88	China	
Virginia Smith Volpe ’90	Sri Lanka	1992-94
Julie Ell Lugar ’91	Guinea-Bissau, West Africa	1994-96
Colleen Lyons Gardner ’91	Niger	1996-98
Sally Altland ’02	Botswana	2003-05
Amy Evans ’02	Armenia	
Dung Le ’02	Honduras	2002-04
Suzanne Price ’02	Mongolia	2003-05
Carolyn Wilson ’03	Micronesia	

Louise McLoughlin Gonzalez ’73 participated in a 1973-1974 VISTA project (known as the “domestic Peace Corps”) in Iowa.

All photos on pages 24 to 28 are courtesy of Peace Corps.



works with her husband on humanitarian projects in the Dominican Republic, has internalized her interactions with other cultures, “incorporating what I’ve learned into my being, my philosophy, my spirit,” Minaya said. “It has opened my mind to all sorts of possibilities.”

Winifred Jones Bellido '66 entered the Peace Corps after a parent-teacher conference at which one of her students had to translate the conversation into Spanish for her mother. “During the conference, I kept thinking about this sixth grader speaking two languages fluently and I, a college graduate with two years of Spanish, couldn’t. It bothered me a lot.” Bellido’s two-year stint in Peru was her first time abroad, and it changed her life. She became a bilingual mathematics teacher after the Peace Corps.

Bellido also learned that life is fragile. “In Peru, a public bus full of men, women, and children goes over the side of the mountainous Andean roads every week,” she said. “There are earthquakes.” Two Peace Corps volunteers died in earthquakes while Bellido was there. “I would have been visiting them that weekend,” she said, “but I was back in the U.S. at the funeral of my father.”

Bellido said language and culture are veneers. “We’re all human beings,” she said. “Americans don’t have all the right answers, and neither do Peruvians, and neither do I.” What is important, Bellido added, is simply diving in. “People are people. Most are loving and caring of family and friends, just like your neighbors.”

Jean Clark '64 is celebrating the 40th anniversary of her entry into the Peace Corps. She served in Puerto Rico and Panama from 1965 to 1967 and remembers the rural area where she served, west of Panama City, as a scattering of huts across a hillside. “I soon felt that I had little to offer women who cooked over wood fires, washed clothes in creeks, and bore and raised nine children,” Clark said. “They were way ahead of me, a 22-year-old.” But there were benefits — “warm and caring Panamanian people, traveling on wildly painted buses, shopping in fragrant markets, dancing the cumbia, and growing up.”

President Kennedy’s hope for the Peace Corps was that young people “will learn far more than they will teach, and that we will therefore have another link that binds us to the world around us.” Hispanic culture and language have become a part of Clark’s identity. “You come back a lot more informed about the United States, with a view of how your country treated that country while you were there.

“You come back,” Clark said, “with your eyes opened.”

[Comments? Write \[bbuilta@austincollege.edu\]\(mailto:bbuilta@austincollege.edu\)](#)



COURTESY PHOTO

Sally Altland '02, pictured above in blue, spent 2003 to 2005 in Botswana and came back with much more awareness and gratitude. Here, she poses with other Peace Corps volunteers and dignitaries, including President George W. Bush, in Botswana.

Ruth Junkin '88 spent 1998 to 1990 in the Marshall Islands as a junior high English and health teacher. Today, she works in Costa Rica as a rural finance specialist with the Center for the Competitiveness of Eco-Enterprises. “It is clear to me, as a U.S. citizen living outside the United States, that most U.S. citizens do not understand how we are perceived by most of the world. At the same time, we also have minimal understanding of what makes others think and act the way they do.”

Martha Edwards '75 spent 1976 to 1978 in Western Samoa as a lecturer in art education at the Teachers Training College. “I relished their sense of family, that there were no orphans, no homeless. Everyone was taken care of in that society; no one was hungry.”

Dung Le '02 spent 2002 to 2004 in Honduras as a health care worker. “I really miss waking up in the morning and walking outside to my yard to pick up ripe mangoes for breakfast that fell the previous night.” Le attends the University of Texas at Arlington and plans to enter dental school.

Julie Ell Lugar '91 spent 1994 to 1996 in Guinea-Bissau as a teacher in the national teaching college. “When I was sitting on my front porch hiding from the withering midday sun, watching the day march slowly by, it occurred to me that one could lose oneself quite easily in the third world and never reconnect with technology and all of the things that come with it.” Lugar is an attorney in Los Angeles, Calif.

John McGown '86 spent 1992 to 1994 in the Philippines and 1999 to 2002 in Kenya, working mainly as a water technician. He has since dedicated his career to water resource management, “largely due to seeing the effects of people not having access to basic resources, like safe drinking water.” McGown also has worked in Sudan, Gambia, and Kyrgyzstan and filmed a 21,000-kilometer bicycle expedition from Thailand to Poland. He is studying water management at Cranfield University in England. 🐾