

Peace Corps Volunteers: **Sharing Your Stories**



Whatever we were before, and none of us is quite sure, that's all gone. Peace Corps service tempers one by its sheer and irresistible intensity.

*Richard Lipez, Novelist
(Peace Corps Volunteer, Ethiopia, 1962–1964)*

We are delighted that you have chosen to incorporate the World Wise Schools match program into your overseas service. Not only will you be playing an important role in fulfilling the third goal of the Peace Corps, but you may also find that your correspondence with U.S. students enhances your experience abroad.

As a currently serving Peace Corps Volunteer participating in World Wise Schools, you will probably find that the match provides a nice balance to your work and experience of living in another country. Corresponding with young people back home can help you recognize how much you have learned about the people and culture of your host country. It may give you a renewed appreciation for the difficult lessons that can only be learned firsthand. And it may inspire you to learn even more about the history, traditions, and culture of your host country families and friends.

For the students with whom you are corresponding, the benefits are immeasurable. Peace Corps Volunteers serve as excellent role models for U.S. students, and you should not underestimate the positive influence you can have on kids back home. Students who have recently moved to a school or community may relate well to your experience of adjusting to a new place, especially those from other countries who are in the process of adapting to a new culture themselves. You may even be serving in or near the country from which some of your World Wise Schools students come. Knowing that someone else is experiencing the same feelings and frustrations of cross-cultural adjustment may help to smooth their transition and make their peers more sensitive to the difficulties of assimilation. Exposing students to the work of Peace Corps Volunteers may also instill a community service ethic and motivate students to volunteer locally.

In short, the World Wise Schools correspondence match can have great benefits to both you and U.S. students—and it's fun!

One of the most important things to understand about your correspondence match with a U.S. teacher and his or her students is that it is up to both of you to determine the nature of your exchange.

By signing up to be matched with a class of U.S. students you are committing yourself to write them on a regular basis, so please honor that agreement. You may not realize it, but the students are likely to become quite attached to you and to look forward to your letters with great anticipation.

Also remember that you may very well be the first contact the American students have with your host country, so the way you describe things will invariably affect the impressions the students develop. Be alert to what you say and how you say it. Reinforce to both the students and the teacher that your letters show only one perspective of your host country. Letters are always better if you write when you are emotionally “up,” and while we encourage you to share both your joys and frustrations, try to avoid writing if you are in a particularly negative mood. By the same token, be creative and try to make your letters personal. The more your students get a feel for who you are, the more they will be interested and the more they will learn.

Students will carry your stories home with them, so what you say will influence the way that many people perceive your host country and, more broadly, the way they perceive people from other places. Many children view those who are different from themselves as “weird.” Although differences may be entertaining and sometimes important to illustrate, try to emphasize the similarities between the United States and your host country. What are some of the common concerns and joys that both peoples share?



In your first letter to your students, simply introduce yourself. Give the students an overview of who you are: where you come from, your interests and hobbies, the size of your family, why you joined the Peace Corps. This introduction will give your students a better picture of who you are, and make you more real. Sending a picture of yourself can also help students put a face on a name.

When writing to your students, try to keep in mind the national education standards outlined on pages 9–11 of this handbook. Some of these may be useful brainstorming tools for your own writing. For example, take one day or week to reflect on examples of the essential question, “How does where you live influence how you live?” With this question in mind, describe your living situation, the food, the climate, and the local geography. Describe what a typical day is like for you.

My worldview developed and solidified during my years as a Volunteer in Niger. That is to say, an innate curiosity toward exploring “differences” (for lack of a better term), and a belief that the world was designed for me to discover, were already a part of my life pre-Peace Corps or I wouldn’t have signed on for two years in Africa. My experiences showed these ideas to be true and confirmed that there is a definite place for me in the world beyond home.

*Susan Rich, Poet
(Peace Corps Volunteer,
Niger, 1974–1976)*

Letters Home

by Shawn Davis

Shawn Davis served in Dologou, Mali, as a health Volunteer from 1996 to 1998. His letters reflect his genuine interest in and respect for the people, language, and culture of his host country.

Pre-service Training Katibougou, Mali September 7, 1996

The sounds of a thousand chirping birds slicing the air in their yellow jackets, then weaving their nests in the djella trees; the earth throbbing with crowds of insects that raise their voices like an orchestra of bamboo chimes; the roosters, so confused by the brightness of the stars, crowing restlessly through the blue-black night....

This is now my world. The sounds of Richford, Vermont, have been replaced. No more drone of engine, honk of horn, and buzz of busy bee. No more fire engines in the night. No more lawn mower to break my Sunday morning slumber.

In these letters I will paint a picture. And in the interest of truth, in which I think you are all interested, I will paint as freely as I can.

Peace Corps training continues until November, when we're sworn in as official Volunteers and go to post. I will be in the Mapti region up north toward Timbuktu. Check your map.

The Road to Mapti October 4, 1996

The bus ride from Bamako to Mapti lasted a sweaty, non-air-conditioned 10 hours that was passed with countless games of Uno played on sweaty thighs. The bus was full. The center aisle had fold-down seats, so if you looked back, the bus was just a solid mass of people sweating bullets and waving their hand-held fans made of palm fronds. Every so often the bus would stop and everyone would pile out. The faithful would spread out their plastic multicolored mats toward Mecca to pray while the rest scrambled around for a stretch and some quick nourishment. On shorter stops, when only the driver got out, women and children would swarm around the bus to sell their goods through the window: corn on the cob roasted black; fried bananas and hot pepper sandwiches; green oranges; fried millet-dough balls; long, clear plastic bags of water; and more palm fronds at 20 cents apiece for those who had forgotten them at home, or for the extravagant, who wanted one in each hand....

My Site Visit Dologou, Mali October 11, 1996

Dologou is situated on a small plateau that dips in the middle, forming the crease into which the town snugly fits. The tall, green millet fields lead up to the edge and frame the blank canvas of the sky. Blank, except for the huge baobab trees that look like elephants with a hundred trunks reaching up to drink the sky; and the acacias with their leaves perched so high that a giraffe with its neck stretched high would fit perfectly into the picture.

As soon as we arrived in the village that first day, we went to see the host family with whom John, another Volunteer, had previously made contact. We were greeted at the door by a beautiful woman with teeth that beamed white from her smooth ebony face and whose body was wrapped in a delicate indigo cloth. Nestled in her arms was a newborn wide-eyed baby with what seemed like six months' worth of black curly hair. John asked her what the baby's name was and then looked ultimately puzzled at her response. "I've never heard of a baby named Tomorrow around here," he said. He asked again just to clarify and got the same response. "How old is she?" he asked. The baby was only six days old. With that response, it made sense. Tomorrow would be the one-week anniversary of the baby's birth, when the baptism and traditional name-giving ceremony would take place. She didn't have a name. We'd have to wait until "tomorrow."

Later that afternoon, after having visited the 90-year-old village chief and making the traditional offering of kola nuts to show respect, I was informed that tomorrow's big event would be a double baptism. I would be receiving my new Dogon name at the same time....

After dinner one night, my neighbor, Samba, decided to tell one of his favorite cow-herder stories. He told of a time when he led his herd of over a hundred cattle on a two-and-a-half-month journey from Douentza, not far from Timbuktu in northern Mali, clear across Burkina Faso and into Ghana. To do this, Samba and his herd had to cross the expansive Niger River. "If you ever get tired swimming across the river with your cows," he said, "just grab onto one of their tails and float."

"Is America close to Ghana?" he asked, swinging the conversation back toward me. I explained that, no, it was very, very far away. "Did you have to cross a river to get from America to Mali?" "Yes, I crossed a very, very big river," I responded in my rudimentary Fula. "Did you swim across?" he asked sincerely. "No, I took a *lana ndiwoka*." *Lana ndiwoka* is "airplane" in Fula, or literally translated: flying canoe! He said he knew of them but didn't approve....

Flying Canoes

Katibougou, Mali

November 16, 1996

It was a Thursday night and the town was bathed in that eerie blue light of the full moon that casts midnight shadows and illuminates the town's many pools of stagnant water. I had turned in early that night after a full morning of language class, a long afternoon field trip, and a seemingly endless dinner of rice and heart.

Safely tucked beneath my mosquito net, covered in beads of sweat, I lay dreaming. It was a musical dream. In all honesty, it was another of my fanatically vivid food dreams. This time it was an upscale Italian restaurant in New York City. But in between my ravenous mouthfuls of mile-high lasagna, I was keenly aware of an African drummer positioned next to the bar. Just as my tiramisu was about to arrive, I bolted awake. All that delicious food was gone. But what was that? The drummer was still going strong.

I pulled open my mosquito net, slipped into my muddy flip-flops, and stepped outside to investigate. The family in the compound next to ours was going crazy, banging everything in their reach that was bangable and singing their lungs to a premature death.

Suddenly there was a lull in their concert and I realized, in that brief moment of silence, that the whole village was pulsating with hundreds of different irregular rhythms. Had the village chief died? I ran in to check my alarm clock: 3:30 a.m. What was going on?

My host father, Namorey, came out of his hut calling my Malian name, "Moussa! Moussa!" He stuck out his arms and clenched his two fists, which I could barely see, it had gotten so dark. "*Tile, kalo*," he said, as he slowly brought the two fists together until one covered the other. "*Amainye!*"

Whatever it was, it concerned the sun and moon and it was bad. I looked up at the overcast sky and, as the clouds parted, the dusty pink penumbra of the moon revealed itself to us. It was a total lunar eclipse.

With a pained expression on his face, Namorey repeated, "Bad moon. Tomorrow no sun, no moon." The women and children continued to dent all of the pots and pans in the wailings of the faithful.

As I turned to go back to my hut, the whole village entered into a chaotic uproar unbelievably surpassing, with what seemed like an electrical surge, their already highly energetic state.

Their prayers had been answered, their sympathy heard. The moon was slowly beginning to reveal itself again, sliver by sliver. With this confirmation of their efforts they continued in full earnest, now accompanied by crowing roosters and braying donkeys confused by the sudden new source of light.

By 4:45 a.m. their celestial job was complete. The long-held tradition had worked again. They had brought back the moon.

Bringing Back the Moon

Katibougou, Mali

November 30, 1996

You've Got Mail!

If several weeks have passed without a piece of mail from your World Wise Schools class, you may find it waiting for you at the Peace Corps office. Your CWWS teacher initially receives the address of your in-country Peace Corps office—not your specific site address. We encourage you to write your teacher as soon as possible to touch base and provide your site address. Please make a special effort to spell the address out clearly. It is not uncommon for letters to get lost simply because of an incorrect number or letter. If your site address is complicated, write it out clearly and encourage your teacher to photocopy the address as you wrote it and affix it to the envelope rather than attempting to write it by hand.

Try to come to an agreement early on as to how regularly you will write, and then stick to it. Even if it's only a short letter or a postcard in between longer letters, the students will love hearing from you. You are like their personal explorer and, in some cases, a mentor. Long periods of silence may lead them to worry about you. Because postal systems in some countries can be unreliable, also try to avoid the pitfall of “waiting for a letter before responding.” This sort of question and response can be quite difficult to maintain, and it may inadvertently lead to months of silence while both you and the teacher wait for the other's letter.

Tips for Writing Letters to Younger Children

- Limit your vocabulary in your letters. Did you know that the Dr. Seuss classic *The Cat in the Hat* uses only 225 different words? Remember to phrase your experiences in terms youngsters are familiar with. Take your clues from the letters they write to you.
- A week can seem like a long time when you're seven years old—six weeks is forever! A speedy reply to your class's letters is especially appreciated by younger grades. Likewise, younger students can become attached to “their” Volunteer. Please let them know if you become medically separated, end your service early, or can't write for an extended period of time.
- Try to relate your experiences in your host country to everyday things your young correspondents might encounter. Describe an event or object, then ask them a question, such as, “Do you see dogs in the street on your way to school?” Think Mister Rogers!
- Not everything you experience while living overseas is appropriate for younger students. Your U.S. teacher may ask you to avoid certain topics, or you may wish to establish some topic guidelines together before you commence writing directly to the class.
- Younger students often ask the same kinds of questions. You may find it helpful to combine their questions for a group response to the class. Try mentioning individual names when possible in your responses.
- Think small. Even the paper you write on and the stamps you use to send your letters will be of interest to your young fans. Stories of how you make your breakfast or buy bread can be enough to start a long discussion in a first-grade classroom.
- Linguistic differences can be explored by asking children in your host country what the words are for common animal sounds. Your U.S. students might be surprised to learn that “quack quack” is far from universal!
- Observe and relate the sights, sounds, fragrances, and textures of your host country. Is there a children's game comparable to hopscotch? Or a song every child knows? A scrap of local cloth included in your letter will give the students a real “feel” for your environment overseas.



Incorporating World Wise Schools Into Your Overseas Projects

Providing insights into your main project can help U.S. students understand the culture of your host country. Below are some correspondence ideas for Volunteers working in various sectors:

The Peace Corps experience stretched our view of the world, and then focused it, mightily precisely.

Health

Every child studies health at some point in elementary school. Most often it's the human body systems and hygiene. In secondary schools health issues may be included in home economics or family life classes. Try to relate your health work to the students, using simple language to explain the nature of the health issues you are working on.

*P.F. Kluge, Novelist
(Peace Corps Volunteer,
Micronesia, 1967–1969)*

Small Business Development

Volunteers working in this sector have a lot to offer U.S. students. By relating your stories of working with local entrepreneurs, you will give students a grass-roots look at what is involved in starting and running a small business. You can put abstract economic principles into simple terms by showing real-life examples. Try to illustrate how an idea can be transformed into a product or service. And try to show the constraints of running a small business in a developing country.

Agriculture/Forestry/Environmental Education

The experience you are gaining in this field can be of great interest to U.S. students. If you are working on a gardening project, describe it. How is it similar to or different from gardens in the United States? Discuss such issues as reforestation, soil erosion, and composting, and try to find connections to the community in which your students live. Describe an environmental problem in your region. Perhaps it is desertification, rain forest depletion, or industrial pollution. Share your work in this area, and ask your students to do some independent research to learn more about the issue. Is it unique to your region? What environmental problems exist in your students' hometown, city, or state?

Education/TEFL Education/Youth Development

World Wise Schools is a natural fit for Volunteers working in these sectors. With your education background and skills, you can easily adapt your experiences to your correspondence. Maybe there is a way for you to involve your host country students. We encourage you to refer to the Educator section of this handbook for ideas to supplement your correspondence.

Suggested Activities to Support Your Correspondence

I have never been to Tanzania, and yet I feel closely connected to life in a Tanzanian village. I have listened to people in Tanzania talking. I have listened to their music. I have listened to their laughter. I have even listened to their chickens squawking. This understanding has opened up the world to me in a way that simple textbook facts never could. I feel like I know people half a world away, in a place I've never been....

This opportunity to understand more fully the world I'm living in was made possible by an ongoing correspondence with Justin Frodella, a Peace Corps Volunteer in Tanzania....

This wasn't just my experience, though. I know that everyone in my class enjoyed the Tanzania project just as much as I did. When we talked about Justin's life, and Justin's letters, we didn't just connect to Tanzania, we connected to each other. Justin also seemed to enjoy the communication and the link between two very different worlds. In our letters, we shared with him not only our questions and comments but our thoughts about life, the universe, everything. This wasn't just obligatory letter writing, this was actual communication.

*12th-grade student
Horace Greeley High School
Chappaqua, New York*

Try to help U.S. students see and feel the rhythms, smells, and sounds of your host country. Work with them on projects. The activities listed below are some suggestions to get you started. We encourage you to read the suggestions in this handbook's Educator section as well. Be creative and have fun with it, and please share any success stories with us so that other participants can also benefit.

Cassette Recordings

Make cassette recordings of daily sounds such as people talking, animals communicating, music and singing, and children playing. Send the tape to your U.S. students and ask them to identify the sounds. Send cassettes with local music. Is the music traditional, Western, or a hybrid of the two? What kind of music do young people in your host country listen to?

Artifacts

Send small items that can easily fit into a padded envelope to keep your costs down: rubbings of small coins, paper money, food labels, newspaper clippings, stamps, and photographs. Remember to provide translations if needed. Try to explain the meaning of the stamps you use on your card or envelope. Stamps often have a historic context or relevance to the country.

All in the Family

If you have members of your own family near your CWWS class, see if the U.S. teacher would be interested in having one of them visit. The students would love to hear stories about you and see pictures. Likewise, if you send items to this family member, that person could share them with the class, thereby cutting down on your postage costs.

Maps

Draw a map of the community in which you live, and ask your local students to do the same. Exchange maps and compare important locations and landmarks. How do people orient themselves? Make a map of the country, showing regions characterized by different ethnic groups and languages, terrain, and crop production.

A Day in the Life

Describe an average day for a local woman in your area. Do the same for a man. Ask the U.S. students how this compares with the United States. Interview a child in your host country or describe an average day for a child the same age as the U.S. students. At what



age do students in your host country go to school? How long are semesters? What classes do they take? Perhaps you can even send a picture of the local school. Ask your CWWS class the same questions and share the responses with both groups of students.

Americans Abroad

How do individuals in your community view people living in the United States? What factors contribute to their opinions? Collect stories, movie ads, TV listings, newspaper clippings (consider translating appropriate sections), and comments from people that provide clues. Try to explain the history of relations between the two countries.

Water: An Essential Element

Describe the method by which you and your neighbors acquire drinking water. How much water do you use for various tasks, e.g., laundry, dishes, personal hygiene? Is your water usage similar to theirs? Are U.S. water-use patterns different? If so, how?

Food, Glorious Food!

Share your favorite recipes. Maybe your U.S. students can prepare them at home or in home economics class. Also include a description of what is involved in shopping for ingredients and how long it takes to prepare a meal in your host country.

Communications

Describe the different languages and forms of communication that people in your host country use. Do they have phones, faxes, and computers? How does this affect work and general communication?

A Funny Thing Happened ...

Have you had any funny language mistakes, where you thought you were saying one thing and, in fact, said another? Share these funny episodes with your U.S. students and describe how you felt.

Passages of Time

Do people in your host country wear watches? How are their perspectives on time similar to or different from those of people in the United States?

Historical Perspective

Make a timeline of your country's history, marking significant events. You can stretch the timeline back as far as you want. Are there any similarities between your host country's history and that of the United States?

Photographs

Take photos of your everyday life: your housing, the local market, your host country family and friends, roads and cars, musical instruments, clothing, the countryside, how people cook and how they do laundry. This may seem mundane to you right now, but it will be of great interest to your U.S. students, and you will definitely come to appreciate these pictures in the years after your service.

Oral Histories

Use a cassette recorder to gather the oral histories and stories of your host country family and friends (provide translation, if necessary). Ask grandparents how things have changed since they were young. Suggest to your U.S. students that they do a similar exercise with their grandparents. Describe the role of older people in your community. How are they treated? What role do they perform in the family and community? This would be a great opportunity to do informal interviews of some of the older community members.

Kalahari Desert: Sunset

*The sun is slow. It settles
its burning cornea into
the womb of the earth*

*as camels, shadowed against a bath
of blood, shuffle across the fading eye
toward the kraal, and sleep,*

*and smoky birds begin their night songs
and insects, their soft
and various chitterings.*

*Heat, savage and blind,
slinks away, like an old dog
finding a place to lie down, die.*

*And when the slow eye closes last,
tinier eyes, silver and shining,
awaken: blood becomes balm;*

*and everywhere, slow darkness
is a phoenix; and cradle-pink clouds
are the skeletons of fish.*

*Christopher Colon, Poet
(Peace Corps Volunteer,
Botswana, 1988–1990)*

Volunteers: Frequently Asked Questions

How does World Wise Schools determine which U.S. class I will correspond with?

If you indicated on the enrollment form the name and mailing address of a teacher with whom you wish to correspond, you should be matched to that educator. If you did not indicate a specific teacher with whom to correspond, we matched you with an interested educator from our database. We try to accommodate any preferences you indicated on your enrollment form; however, that is not always possible and we appreciate your flexibility.

Can I wait until I get to my site to enroll in the World Wise Schools program?

You can sign up to be matched to an educator anytime before or during your service, but we recommend you enroll as early as possible to get the most out of your exchange. We prefer that U.S. students have the opportunity to correspond with a Volunteer for at least seven to eight months.

How old are the students who participate in World Wise Schools?

Students range in age from 8 to 17. But it is possible to correspond with younger students, as long as the U.S. educator is willing to take on the extra effort that may be involved in explaining the issues and experiences of the Volunteer to his or her students.

Whom should I contact if I have a question or need more information about Coverdell World Wise Schools?

Your in-country contact. The World Wise Schools in-country contact (ICC) is a staff member or Volunteer leader in your local Peace Corps office. This person is in regular contact with CWWS. If you are having a problem with your match, please let your ICC know. Your ICC can provide you with information faster than if you write to Peace Corps headquarters.

Please find out who your ICC is the next time you are in your local Peace Corps office. This person's name is also listed in your match letter, which provided the name and address of your teacher.

You can also contact us directly at Peace Corps, World Wise Schools, 1111 20th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20526, or by e-mail at wwsinfo@peacecorps.gov.

Will I be reimbursed for postage costs?

You are provided with a postage reimbursement for the cost of one letter a month for each educator to whom you write. This reimbursement is most likely included in your living allowance. If you do not think it is, talk to your ICC for details. Unfortunately, it is not possible to use the diplomatic pouch or APO to send or receive items or mail.

You should be aware that your U.S. match teacher does not get any postage reimbursement for the mail sent to you. Therefore, we encourage you not to request having large items sent. The teacher, on the other hand, does receive educational materials such as videos and teacher guides from the World Wise Schools program. These materials may not address your country specifically, but they do cover general themes that should be compatible with your correspondence.

The postage reimbursement policy can be found in the *Peace Corps Manual*, Section 835, paragraph 6.5.

I haven't heard from my CWWS class. What should I do?

While you are waiting to receive a letter, try to avoid the “I will not write until I first get a letter” mentality. Because of irregular postal delivery times, mail will often get delayed in transit. If several months go by without your hearing from your teacher, let your in-country contact know. Your ICC will get in touch with CWWS and we will contact your teacher to see what is going on. Sometimes it is something as simple as a misspelled word. We will do everything possible to get you and the educator in touch, but unless we know there is a problem there is nothing we can do to help.

What do I do if I don't have the time to participate in World Wise Schools once I get to my site?

If you find that you cannot participate for any reason, inform your teacher and your ICC. Do not just stop writing. We fully understand that circumstances change, and that you may be unable to continue your correspondence. But we urge you to inform us of this decision so that we can work with the teacher to find another Volunteer. Please do not leave your students and teacher hanging; they may actually be worrying about you.

What if I think that one of my letters has gotten lost in the mail?

Number your letters so you and the teacher know if something has gone astray.

What if I move in the next month?

If you transfer sites or countries during your service, please send a letter to your class with the new address and have your ICC report this information to CWWS.

What should I do if my CWWS teacher changes schools?

Teachers may retire or change schools without letting CWWS staff know. If we do learn that your teacher has moved, we will inform you. Likewise, if you learn that your teacher has moved, please have your ICC report this information to CWWS.

What do I do if I lose the address of a person with whom I'm corresponding?

Let your in-country contact know. He or she will then contact us in Washington, D.C. Or, if you have access to e-mail, contact us directly at wwsinfo@peacecorps.gov.

Can CWWS participants correspond with more than one person?

Yes. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, you can be matched to more than one educator in the United States. But because of the limited number of Peace Corps Volunteers overseas, educators may write to only one Volunteer.



Sharing Our Stories: Peace Corps Day*

by Beth Giebus, Teacher
(Peace Corps Volunteer,
Morocco, 1990–1993)

“You must have run out of everything at the same time,” said the pharmacy cashier, glancing down at my overloaded basket of lotions, pastes, creams, and gels. Embarrassed by my zeal for health and beauty aids, I started to explain.

“I just came back from Morocco,” I said. “I was a Peace Corps Volunteer.”

The cashier stopped. Putting down my bottle of Aussie Miracle shampoo, she looked me in the eye and said “God bless you!” with such earnest admiration it frightened me. She called out to another lady, who was inspecting a box of Altoids. “Did you know this young woman just got back from the Peace Corps?!”

“My goodness,” the Altoids lady joined in. The two looked me over from head to toe, seemingly in search of some lingering Saharan sand. Suddenly conscious of my fingernails, I fumbled for my pockets.

“All that you must have been through! What was it like?” Before I could answer “It was great,” the Altoids lady shook her head and clicked, “Tsk, tsk. You poor thing! What a great sacrifice you made!”

After ringing up my \$42 purchase, the cashier picked up a Hershey’s chocolate bar from the candy counter and pressed it into my hand, saying, “That’s for you.”

For over a week—a record for me—I left the Hershey bar untouched. Then, in a fit of “reentry” depression, I ate it (for medicinal purposes only). As I suspected, it stuck in my throat, like the words I didn’t say.

The pharmacy ladies weren’t the only ones who considered my Volunteer service a “great sacrifice.” I didn’t see it this way, and I struggled to explain. Once I practically shouted, “Moroccans gave me much, much more than I ever gave them!” to my Aunt Ann. Judging from her beatific grin, I knew that, in her eyes, a golden halo was shining over my head, more brilliantly than ever before. This frustrated me immensely, since I sensed that underlying such good-hearted intentions was a misperception not only of me but of the developing world as well.

Growing up in middle-class suburbia, I got my introduction to the developing world from the evening news. According to Walter Cronkite’s reports, wars, famines, and natural disasters were daily occurrences in the world beyond the Jersey shore. Later at college, I stumbled into an anthropology class and gained a larger worldview. For many of my relatives and childhood friends, however, the most vivid images of the developing world continued to be photographs and newsreels of devastation.

In *Another Africa*, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe—concerned about the effect of such images on the world psyche—quotes a joint statement made by Amnesty International and the International Committee for Photography: “The apocalyptic vision of the newsmakers does not accurately document the world community. Nor are they particularly helpful in forming a picture of our common humanity.” Achebe then goes on to support their appeal to “document authentic humanity.”

“Documenting authentic humanity” is what Peace Corps Day is all about. For me, Peace Corps Day offered an opportunity to (finally) clear my throat; to answer all those questions that no one was asking; and to depict a personal portrait of the developing world that was alive with common joys and common sufferings.

At 9 a.m. on March 3, 1998, I traipsed up to the doors of the John Eaton Middle School in Washington, D.C. Wearing a pink *djellaba* and toting my biggest, brightest *meeka* bag—bursting with baubles and teapots, veils and slippers—I felt like a Moroccan version of Mary Poppins. Once inside the sixth-grade classroom, I was unnerved to find the students sitting so quietly at their desks. With arms folded in front of them, they stared at me with wide-eyed passivity, suggesting that they had already tuned in to their own inner Nickelodeon channels. Luckily, my cassette tape of Berber music knocked Nick’s reception into static, causing the class to twitter and squirm.

“Is this the kind of music they listen to?” one boy asked, obviously unimpressed.

I gave him my Marrakeshi hand drum. Then, digging into my bottomless *meeka* bag, I passed out four sets of gourds and two tambourines. I divided the rest of the class into stompers and clappers. Soon, happily and noisily, we caught the Berber rhythm. And we were awake.

Although our virtual tour of Morocco ran the gamut from Arab history to the word *zweena*, I discovered that students were most curious about my own (minor) triumphs and (major) gaffes. I also found that, not only did I have a large collection of stories, I had recurring themes. There were animal stories (“The Camel With Indigestion” was a big hit); transportation stories (generally involving death-defying bus rides and chickens with indigestion); and food stories (here, I waxed poetic on the glorious wonders of couscous and Fez fish tagine). But the stories about my Moroccan neighbors, students, and friends sparked the greatest enthusiasm. Like the story about how my neighbor, Amina, and I chased runaway sheep during Ramadan; or the story about how a little Berber girl, living at the edge of the Sahara, insisted on giving me her doll, made from scraps of cloth and wood.

“A Berber girl made this?” asked one girl, holding the doll close. The doll’s raw beauty resonated with a spirit, joyful and content. “She’s so nice!” said the girl, transfixed. I wondered if she was admiring the doll or the little Berber girl.

“Did you always know that you wanted to be a Peace Corps Volunteer?” asked a girl wearing fluorescent-green overalls.

I had to stop for a moment to think. My usual response to this question was either too standardized (“Anthropology has had a significant influence ...”) or too vague (“I think, maybe, I saw a commercial somewhere ...?”).

Then, it hit me. When I was 11, Huckleberry Finn and Harriet the Spy were my heroes. I liked Huck Finn because I understood what he meant when he said he didn’t want to be civilized. He wanted to find out about the world for himself and not be force-fed answers by “society.” I liked Harriet because she was smart and curious about people. One day, I heard about the Peace Corps and was relieved to know that I could be true to the values of Huck and Harriet and not be imprisoned.

“... So, yes, I always wanted to be a Volunteer. It just took me a while to find the name for it.”

Staring straight ahead, one boy half-whispered, “Very, very cool!”

Yes. Very cool....

Distill it down to its most essential element: Peace Corps Volunteers are wordsmiths. We arrive in a country offering words about health, words about education, words about technology. We translate, trade, share, and weave words—enwrapping ourselves in dialogues and stories, histories and fables. If peace is a conversation, where words flow fresh and plentiful, then war is a painful silence, where words stop, and stagnate. In the face of ignorance and devastation, what is there to say?

Peace Corps Day is an opportunity for Volunteers—past, present, and future—to celebrate our medals of service: the words and stories given to us by neighbors, friends, and students.

Speak to clear your throat of the stories welling up inside. Speak for the sake of peace. Keep the conversation alive.

Peace Corps Day recognizes important work by the Peace Corps to provide U.S. teachers, students, and others with a better understanding of the people, cultures, languages, and customs of other countries.

*Richard Riley
Former U.S. Secretary of Education*

**In 2003, the celebration of the Peace Corps anniversary in early March, originally known as Peace Corps Day, became Peace Corps Week. To find out how to participate in Peace Corps Week, visit www.peacecorps.gov/pcweek.*