

Peace Corps Slovakia

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I joined the Peace Corps as a mid-career professional working in higher education. At a recent board meeting for an educational organization, I had realized that none of us sitting at the table had had an in-depth international experience in twenty years, even though our professional interests centered on international education. I realized that if I wanted to contribute to that field and to students' abilities to be ethical participants in an interconnected world, I needed to immerse myself in another cultural and linguistic environment for an extended period. Peace Corps would become my vehicle for this.

When I arrived in Slovakia, I was asked to consider an assignment at a university. I felt that option was too safe. If I really wanted to be challenged, I needed to be in a less familiar environment. Ultimately I was placed in an organization working on rural development. I changed placements after one year, but continued to work on rural development for two more years. My first assignment taught me to look at life through the eyes of residents living in villages and a city of 30,000 who were trying to figure out how to make their way into the future, but were more comfortable looking at the past. In the second organization, I was able to draw on those lessons to create workshops and handbooks that my colleagues then used to work with villagers trying to find common ground amongst each other in order to create a better life for their villages as a whole. The people I came into contact with in this work, particularly rural women, taught me how important it was to them to hold on to tradition and to value the everyday, but also creative, work of sustaining families and building communities, even as they were finding ways to adapt to a future very different from the socialist life they had grown up in.