

In Memoriam

Time as a Peace Corps Volunteer never leaves you. I have been back from Peace Corps for longer than service was; some days that fact seems completely impossible. I became a Volunteer when I was a fresh college graduate, but had been waiting to be one since I met a group of PCVs serving in Jamaica, where my family lived at the time. Talking with them, I was inspired and excited about the types of lives these people had chosen to undertake, and I decided then, that I too wanted to be a Volunteer. The idea of living this challenge while using what I had learned in school in order to be a 'do-gooder' was something that was in the back of my mind until the day I was accepted as a Volunteer.

I served in Braila, Romania from 2004-06, Group 18. I was an NGO Consultant for Environmental Management and Education; the small NGO I joined was called Eco-Alpex 024, led by Cornel Apostol, my counterpart. This NGO had evolved from a group of camping, mountaineering and environmental enthusiasts into a formal group by one man stepping up to lead the city and its youth in environmental awareness. My years in Romania were instructive, challenging, fun and liberating. As expected, I changed in a lot of ways as one does when adulthood really begins. Just as many Volunteers do, I believe I got at least as much as I gave during my time in Romania. From the people and experiences I encountered, to the learned skills I maintain, I know I discovered more about life and practicalities of the world from being a Volunteer during these first years out of school, than I ever could have experienced in simply finding a job and learning to live. Time does go quicker the older you get, but even after four years since my close of service, everyday, Peace Corps is with me. The people, the projects, the memories, and the world as it was then, is, ever-present to me. Even while I am still connected to my friends in Romania, it seems like the Romania I left must be the same forever; good or bad as that fantasy may be, life and places are not static.

In July of 2010, I heard Cornel, had become seriously ill and died after being in a coma. He was only 56, and left a family. He always treated me in a fatherly way. It took me a while to understand him, figuratively and literally; as my Romanian improved, so too did his English it seemed. "You are young, Amy..." is often what he would say. Sometimes, I felt like a child, or a puppet being his Volunteer. I didn't know what I could really do for this man and his organization, though I knew he had requested someone like me. He had wanted a young female, and my first thought was that he was sexist, typically American of me, but of course he had had reasons. He'd asked for a 'young female' because his organization primarily worked with teachers and students. Teachers are usually young women, and the young learn languages faster. At times, in my work with Eco-Alpex and its president, we clashed spectacularly. Along the way though, we each learned many things, often the hard way; but sometimes I wonder if there is any other way, and if there is, if it's as good.

Cornel was a friendly, exasperating, inclusive and crazy man. He was a strong leader in the community and an exuberant and vocal proponent of democracy. Despite all

the informalities and irregularities of how jobs and people work in Romania, we did accomplish things. Some were too slow for my American blood, but over time and projects, things progressed. Time is more open to living there, and is not set-aside in blocks of hours for certain tasks only; Cornel unknowingly showed me this. The work day won't fall apart if you have your laptop fixed in the middle of the week at whatever time of day works for you, by a man sitting on the floor in the back room of a shop, smoking while surrounded by hard drives, his only required payment being a two-liter bottle of real Coca-Cola; it is ok. Yes, there is corruption. To ensure I had solid vama (customs) service I inadvertently gave away the chocolates I had just received in the mail to the 'Vama-man'. Being a foreigner could be very useful or very dire; Cornel had answers and advice for this issue too. Other Volunteers who knew Cornel, knew him to be hilarious, helpful and often a better counterpart to them for Peace-Corps-Romania-life's-monkey-wrenches, than their own assigned counterparts. He was also good for a spontaneous party and the ever-amusing 'Romglish' language games. I should have invited him over more, and relaxed a little earlier and been more patient too; but he probably could have said the same about himself with me. Living in the land of cars next to horse and carts alongside tramlines running through the cobble-stoned streets, makes you appreciate the many faces of what life offers to the world; between Cornel and myself, we embodied many of them.

Cornel loved having a Volunteer and wanted me to know about Romania, the good and the bad. He supported me in traveling and working on activities outside of our town, as much as within our community; this was an unusual trait, since often counterparts wanted to keep their Volunteer to themselves. This may have been because Cornel too wanted to see and know more about his country; he was enthusiastic in telling me Braila's history, unusual Romanian ideas and about his own life. One of the first stories he ever told me was about what happened in Braila during the Revolution. He showed me a video of himself physically protecting the communist mayor, who during the Romanian Revolution of 1989, the town wanted to kill. Cornel was no communist, but an idealist in a lot of ways, and he prevented a sacrificial and riotous crowd execution. As real or as manufactured as the Revolution may have been, the ramifications amounted to change. Just as the crowds of rebels and demonstrators eventually dispersed in Braila, Timisoara and Bucuresti, democracy wafted slowly over the country, becoming more than nominal ideology throughout the years. The mayor Cornel saved was finally voted out of office during my time in Braila, 15 years later. The bullet holes from the 1989 clash can be seen in the outside walls of the Primaria (City Hall) from the window of our organization's office.

For what Cornel gave me during my time as his Volunteer, I will always be thankful. He introduced me to some of my favorite people in Romania; namely my Romanian tutor who became a very good friend. He let me live in his home with his family, and his dog Oopsie. He took me to the market and taught me how to buy things properly. He always tasted the peppers before he bought any; he liked the spiciest best, they

added intensity to his ciorba (sour soup). Knocking back a tumbler of vodka or tuica probably gave his lunch bite too; however, he always asked if I wanted to drink with him, an unnecessary nicety since I was a 'young girl'. He even found me a fabulous apartment, informally voted one of the best in Peace Corps Romania, with a view of the Danube.

Cornel was by no means a saint or someone I could spend all day every day with, but Peace Corps Romania could not have been the same without him. He may have dressed me up like a gypsy and then gotten me to take a picture with a real member of the Roma community, but he also worked with the Roma when others wouldn't. He once introduced me without warning to speak to an entire assembly of students, who then stared as though I couldn't possibly be an American who could speak Romanian. But, in the process of educating students we managed to work with over twenty-six schools, cosmopolitan and rural, to encourage recycling and personal responsibility; and after presentations, he always introduced me proudly to the principals and teachers. In Braila, Cornel helped launch Danube Day, a European Union educational celebration of the river. He wanted to make Romania more familiar with Europe Union ideals, and was brave in his outlook for Eco-Alpex, Braila and Romania, as well as always thinking of how to involve me with projects. I hope Eco-Alpex can continue on for Cornel, even without him.

I first met Cornel at the train station of our town where he came to pick me up. I did not know who I was looking for, but he found me. He rushed over to welcome me, kissed me on the cheek while giving me a flower, and then carried my luggage.

Numai Bine,
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