

## My Journey to Peace Corps: 1961- 2011

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Is this a Peace Corps story worth telling? When I met the then-Peace Corps Director Gaddi Vasquez in Romania, I told him that I was living my dream of being a Peace Corps Volunteer. I related how the image of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 at his inauguration challenging ordinary US citizens to go forth and spread what it means to be an American throughout the world also inspired me. I was then a newly arrived bride of a US NAVY veteran from the Korean conflict. How could I dream so big and how it actually came to be is the essence of this story.

My transplantation from the Philippines to America was at that time full of finality. Exiting from a Pan American Airways plane and stepping on US soil in San Francisco was stunning in every way. There my husband and his family met me. His father was a proud immigrant from Ecuador and his mother was an even a prouder expatriate from Mexico. Fortunately I spoke and understood Spanish, thanks to my mother's education in a Spanish convent and my teaching degree from a college of the Maryknoll Sisters who came from Ossining, New York. My in-laws had two questions of me: when would I bear them a male heir and when would I become a US citizen. Everything else about me was a mote point.

Now that Peace Corps is about to celebrate fifty years of sending American citizens to serve as volunteers throughout the world, I can't help but relate one small part of that far-reaching encircling of the globe by Volunteers. The seed that was planted in my psyche as early as 1961 took hold of me and never let go. It took almost forty years to realize that lofty goal. When I took the oath as a Peace Corps Volunteer, it was the very same oath that President John F. Kennedy took that noon in January in freezing weather. It took many years and events in my life before raising my right hand under the American flag and flying on Lufthansa with 34 other volunteers to start our service in Romania. Never losing sight of the dream finally paid off.

Retracing those steps can start from March of 2000 when my husband of forty years passed away. Somehow I wanted my new status as a widow to have more meaning. The four children we raised together were well on their way to independence and with no grandchildren in sight, I was suddenly unencumbered of the traditional family obligations. I was free to pursue my dream. Coincidentally, a recruiter came to the Palo Alto library to speak about the Peace Corps. It was a simple informational meeting led by a very young recruiter who had just returned from her two year tour. It was the right time and place for me to be there. I filled out an application and by putting my signature on that form, my fate was sealed in my mind. I left there feeling that there was a bright path in front of me. I was sixty five years old and a newly retired special education teacher. Surely, I thought, my experience could be useful to some country near or far that needed Volunteers.

The process was just like applying for a new job, only this time it had a profound meaning with not a trace of economic or physical ramifications. One had to put a blind eye on the extent of what one would encounter. My face to face interview took place in San Francisco, my port of entry as a Filipino bride forty years ago. I secretly thought that it would be nice to launch my career as a Peace Corps Volunteer from the city where I first landed.

My letter of acceptance to the Peace Corps came on July 4<sup>th</sup>, an auspicious date which raised my patriotism and love of America to a high degree. My four children stood by me and supported this decision wholeheartedly. They knew and experienced having a mother who volunteered a lot at their elementary school, bringing cupcakes for mother's coffee meetings, tutoring children with limited English proficiency and monitoring the student crossing guards. I might have embarrassed them at times when I showed up at their school so I kept a low profile.

Upon arrival in Braila, Romania it was winter and very cold but the friendliness of our Romanian counterparts and their families warmed our hearts. The assignment given me was a happy choice as who could resist those beautiful angelic babies. However, my first sight of the children in a home for abandoned children was both heartbreaking and eye-opening. Newly born babies were wrapped cocoon-like and were silent. Toddlers longed for attention or to be held and no one came to comfort them. As volunteers we did not question what we saw as severe. The Romanian government agencies in charge of abandoned children did their best to feed and keep them warm. I placed myself in their shoes. While I respected their directives and the strict rules that governed them, I had to understand that we were guests and any changes we introduced had to come slowly and carefully. Cross-cultural exchange may sometimes mean "don't cross your host country" by imposing your western ways over their time honored and traditional views.

In Romania, the word volunteer was a throwback to when the communist government sent them to forced labor camps. Thus even if it had a new meaning, introducing volunteerism to their society was to be take one small step at a time. By the time my two years were up and time was flying quickly, I wrote in my description of service that my success was clearly as the person who showed them that a child could grow and develop better if the child could be placed with a family that would treat them as their own in foster homes. Perhaps this model of training women to become foster mothers could alleviate the overcrowding and change the care from impersonal caregivers to one of nurturing from a loving family.

Five years after returning from Romania, I tried again to become a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer. These were for short term assignments specific to one's experience and the country's need. Here was a school for developmentally delayed children that needed a teacher trainer. It was on the island of Palawan between the Pacific Ocean and the China Sea. As a teacher in the Philippines fifty years ago, I still remembered the language and with my recent experience in special education. I kept my fingers crossed that I would be chosen. I went to Washington, DC for the interview. I was sixty four years old and tried hard to show youthful enthusiasm. I knew there would be an exhaustive medical check-up. My primary care physician in New York was retiring and did not feel he could help me get through all the testing and questionnaires he had to fill-out. I felt dejected and marginalized by my own long-time physician. Maybe this was a sign I should not have applied again. Luckily I had a new doctor in California who was fascinated about what I was attempting. He did due diligence and looked into all the questionnaires and ordered the dozens of tests and analyses that Peace Corps medical staff wanted. So when I got the call that I was medically approved, there was no hesitation on my part. I packed my bags and was ready to leave.

This week, I sent a new application for another Returned Peace Corps Volunteer assignment. I am seventy five years old. It is fifty years since my first landing in the United States. It is fifty years since Peace Corps was inaugurated. Wouldn't it be a fantastic ride to make this fiftieth anniversary of Peace Corps my third time around as a Peace Corps Volunteer? Just wait and see!