

My story as a volunteer, who made a difference, lasted 2 years and 3 months. I wanted a “real” challenge, a wake up call! So when I joined the U.S. Peace Corps at age 35 I got my wish, in spades! It was a shock of a lifetime for me, nothing like that silly TV show Survivor. That ends after 39 days, huh! This was real too and 12,000 miles away from my home in Massachusetts. This was going to be a challenging experience and I knew it. I had no problem giving up my job, my car and lifestyle it was only my family that I would miss.

Armenia suffered a terrible earthquake in 1988, that earthquake one of the worst in the history of modern man, killing an estimated 50,000 people. It crippled the nation and its people. Soon the U. S Peace Corps would send Volunteers to help. I was one of them arriving in June of 1995. The past earthquake, had left the people poor and hungry. Most families lived with rationed electricity, rationed water, and lack of basic sanitary conditions.

The role of a Volunteer anywhere in the world is pretty much the same. You “wing it” It is one of a role model, as a teacher or a business consultant or another skilled profession. Me, I was a small business consultant I had to meet with small micro enterprise business owners. Many had bread baking business, (see B/W photos), sewing, and rug weaving businesses. I was working using my poor language ability and a part time translator in the destroyed city of Gyumri, It had a fairly active marketplace for such products. I was given a real challenging assignment by the Peace Corps office in Armenia. I soon accepted my fate, which basically included getting dropped off in the earthquake region, with only 3 months of language training, and told to make a difference. So I did! I wrote a grant to Oxfam U.K. for a small business center- an incubator of sorts. We slowly received the funding and shortly after that we were giving out small financial grants of \$50 to small businesses in our city. Next, while trying to keep warm with my kerosene heater at 6,000 feet I kept writing, I then received additional funding to administer a micro credit loan program. SIDE NOTE: I had to wake up at 1am each night to use the little electricity the country had and doled out nightly, to charge my laptop battery. Soon I was giving out loans of up to \$1500. During my two years in the “field” I touched the lives of countless Armenians who had no hope. I feel good that I made a real difference in helping them get ahead, through the micro credit business loans, I got those families. I left feeling really good about the work I did there!

In conclusion becoming a Volunteer was a life altering experience and truly wonderful!