

Peace Corps Reflections

September 1, 2010

It was Mexican night at the O'Hara household. Colin and his wife, Jackie, had prepared tacos and refried beans. This wasn't so unusual, unless you considered the location — a Muslim minority community in Macedonia — and the guests — a mixture of native Macedonians and Albanians.

“Macedonian and Albanian food culture is centered around several main dishes that haven't really changed in hundreds, if not thousands, of years,” says Colin. “Our friends thought it was hysterical that the very same ingredients they used for their traditional meals could be used to make everything from Mexican to Indian food.”

Colin and Jackie spent just over two years in Macedonia as Peace Corps volunteers. She ran youth programming for teen girls and he worked in business development for a public/private utility responsible for garbage-disposal efforts, ultimately leading a nationwide recycling campaign.

The cultural differences in the post-transitional communist country were pronounced. “It was fascinating seeing the interplay of the cultures and religions and how, in a post conflict environment, people were trying so hard to get along,” says Colin.

A year later, the O'Haras are in Syracuse, where Jackie is director of Girls Inc. and Colin is a graduate student in the Maxwell School's MPA program. “The drive to serve a larger community sent us overseas, but then we had such a strong desire to return home and use the skills we'd sharpened to better affect our own communities here in America,” says Colin.

He is not unique. In Maxwell's graduate student body, there are at least 18 former Peace Corps volunteers. “There's a strong correlation of what drives people toward either program, and that is a strong sense of public service,” he says. “The things that motivated me to become a Peace Corps volunteer are the exact same things at work when I was considering master's programs.”

The Peace Corps was launched in 1961, and the only formal relationship between it and Maxwell was a volunteer training program operated in the early 1960s. (See page 25.) Nonetheless, 739 SU alumni have served in the Peace Corps during its nearly 50 years — the lion’s share from the Maxwell School. Whether it’s returned Peace Corps volunteers coming to the Maxwell School for graduate programs, or Maxwell alumni volunteering for the Peace Corps, these two groups share common values and goals.

Colin is focusing his MPA on foreign policy with a potential interest in national and international security. “My experience in the Peace Corps really enhanced my appreciation for my own country,” he says. “The Maxwell School is giving me the tools for a career in government service.”

While there are literally dozens of examples of alumni whose dual Maxwell/Peace Corps experience has been instrumental in shaping their lives, we decided to reach out to these seven. We hope their testimony symbolizes the values shared by two service-minded institutions.

The Founder

George Marotta ’50 BA (PSc)/’51 MPA

Peace Corps Service: 1961-63, not as a volunteer, but as one of the program’s architects.

A career civil servant — he’d worked in the State Department and as a member of the White House National Security Council Staff under Eisenhower — Marotta was tapped by Sargent Shriver to help establish the Peace Corps, part of a diverse group that included Bill Moyers and Harris Wofford.

The initiative was originally known as the Youth Corps, but a new moniker was selected to set it apart from any other program. “We needed countries to realize that this was different from other U.S. activities that were diplomatic, or commercial, or church-related.”

As soon as word got out about the new program, countries around the world expressed interest in receiving volunteers, Marotta says. “We worked together with the various embassies and the Agency for International Development to identify areas of the world where young Americans could be helpful.”

Marotta became responsible for establishing relationships with universities that would train volunteers before their deployment overseas.

Lasting Impression: Being part of the start.

“The program was extremely popular from the get go. Young people were volunteering before we

even had forms for them to fill out.”

What Came Next: Marotta was recruited by the Pentagon to help prepare Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara for meetings of the National Security Council. Later, he served with the Agency for International Development and served in Vietnam, earning a Meritorious Honor Award in 1968 for service during the Viet Cong offensive in Saigon. In 1975, Marotta joined Stanford’s Hoover Institution as a research fellow on international finance.

On the Maxwell/Peace Corps Connection: “I think it has to do with the words *service* and *citizenship*, because the Maxwell School is the epitome of that.”

Currently: Retired since 1995, Marotta enjoys a sideline as a cruise ship lecturer, speaking on topics of international relations and foreign affairs related to the countries visited.

The International Citizen

Tony Zola ‘76 MA (Econ)

Peace Corps Service: 1970-72, doing agricultural community development in Thailand.

“Since I grew up on a dairy farm in Western New York, I knew about agriculture.”

Lasting Impression: Having persuaded several farmers to raise chickens, Zola’s job was to arrange markets for the chickens — namely, American wives of Air America pilots who lived on a large American airbase during the second Indochina war. “I was obligated to slaughter and dress the chickens myself, preparing them in a way acceptable to the American wives.” He recruited Peace Corps friends “and we had a chicken dressing party over the weekend.”

What Came After? Three years working as an USAID contractor in Laos, followed by graduate study in development economics.

“The Peace Corps convinced me to work as a development economist. Maxwell made my career possible.”

Zola founded his own consulting firm, the MIDAS Agronomics Company, advising agricultural development projects in Southeast Asia. A few years ago he was asked to consult with the Princess Mother’s Foundation on the Doi Tung Project, to help villagers grow crops other than opium. Today, the area is free of opium production and has secondary schools, running water, and a sanitation system. The project has become a model for alternative sustainable livelihood development and has won a UN award.

On the Maxwell/Peace Corps Connection: “Roy Bahl, Jesse Burkhead, Steven Strand, and

Irving Swerdlow — all at Maxwell in the mid-1970s — instilled in us a realization that public finance and development economics could contribute to balanced growth, well before any one was talking about the concept of sustainability. Maxwell was way ahead of the curve.”

Currently: Senior Researcher, Mekong Environment and Resources Institute, Bangkok, Thailand, and Vientiane, Lao PDR. “I experience the Peace Corps daily working with the poorest of the poor.”

The Government Servant

Michael Scherger '07 MPA

Peace Corps Service: 1996-97, assisting business development in Romania.

“After the collapse of communism, people had few ideas about how to make a business plan or market an idea. There was a shell-shockedness about their whole lives having been politically controlled.”

Lasting Impression: “Being asked, ‘Why are you here?’ which is common to all Peace Corps volunteers, wherever they serve.

“Romanians didn’t really understand why you would stop your life to be in their country, learning their language and culture. And they don’t understand why the female volunteers aren’t married.”

What Came Next? Scherger liked the Peace Corps organization so much he applied for a job. He worked first as an analyst, became the desk officer for the Balkans, and then was an associate director for five years. After hitting his term limit, Scherger decided to pursue graduate school.

On the Maxwell/Peace Corps Connection: “Maxwell reinforced my experience from the Peace Corps. Organizational ability, innovation, tenacity, and working with ambiguity were skills that translated well to government service. Getting a professional education in some of these skills, through an MPA, made a lot of sense.

“There were five returning Peace Corps volunteers during my year at Maxwell. It attracted all of us, I believe, because of our desire to continue on with our public service and what a Maxwell degree could do to that end.”

Currently: As branch chief for U.S. Customs and Border Protection in Washington, D.C., Scherger develops and leads professional development programs. “My job is more than the salary I receive. I work for the federal government and feel an obligation as a citizen to always do the best I can because what I do affects the American public.”

In four years, he will be eligible to return to the Peace Corps, and would like to go back overseas as a program director.

The Filmmaker

Mukesh Vidyasagar '06 MA (IR)

Peace Corps Service: 1998-2000, as a math teacher, librarian, and basketball coach in Zimbabwe.

Lasting Impression: Bringing electricity to both the school library and teachers' quarters.

In his second year, he applied for a Peace Corps special project grant, and received funds to build a basketball court at the school. "We actually had a basketball team, which was pretty fun." A chance encounter with a filmmaker led to Vidyasagar spending a day assisting with a short film about a local women's shelter, which ignited his interest in film.

What came next: Vidyasagar worked in an animation studio for three years while also taking courses at the University of California Berkeley. He enrolled in Maxwell's MA (IR) program and then successfully petitioned to earn an MA in film from the Newhouse School concurrently. He had a succession of TV-producing gigs before writing and producing his own short film, *Silent Water*, a fictional story that illustrates the need for clean water on a global level. Proceeds from the film will help build water pumps and purification units in India.

On the Maxwell/Peace Corps Connection: "I think anyone who has worked abroad and had to grapple with policies on the ground has an inherent curiosity to learn more about those policies, how they affect populations, and how they can contribute to the greater good."

Currently: In March, Vidyasagar began the two-year Universal Pictures Leadership Program. "It's a great experience and I'm learning a ton."

The Expatriot

Sven Stafford '10 MPA

Peace Corps Service: 2006-2008, teaching English as a second language and training teachers, in Kazakhstan.

Lasting Impression: "I would usually walk to school, uphill both ways, in the snow, for kilometers at a time. I fell in a big hole once that was covered by ice water. Luckily, someone I

knew was driving by and took me home, otherwise I might have frozen. The next week the municipality filled it in and the mayor personally forbade me from ever walking near the filled-in hole again. That's when I fell in love with local government.”

What Came Next? The jobs Stafford was interested in after the Peace Corps required a master's degree. He was attracted to the Maxwell MPA because it “brings together people (professors, students, staff) who are practical with the right balance of idealism.”

On the Maxwell/Peace Corps Connection: “I think Maxwell attracts people with balls — conviction, determination, sense of adventure and fun — and to do the Peace Corps you have to have balls.”

Currently: Director of Special Projects at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

His purview includes IT and website upgrades, alumni relations, continuing education and outreach, new campus construction, and fundraising. “The Peace Corps gave me the confidence to do a job like this. You get thrown into the fire and have to learn and adapt quickly, and especially learn to rely on the people around you. Maxwell increased that confidence and also gave me the practical skills — stats, evaluations, etc. — to be competent.”

The Foreign Aid Worker

Rebecca Semmes '05 MA (IR)

Peace Corps Service: 2007-09 in Senegal, teaching women basic health information.

She also promoted education for women and held a camp for middle school girls.

Lasting Impression: After finding her weekly health lessons ineffective, Semmes enlisted other volunteers to help her perform skits about health topics. The first was about malaria. Semmes played the role of the mosquito, buzzing around, trying to bite people. “We had a packed house, and nobody was cracking peanuts or braiding hair. They were paying attention, cracking up at how ridiculous the *toubabs* (white people) could be. And for months afterward when I would ride my bike into a village where we had performed the skit, people would yell, ‘It's the mosquito!’”

How she got there: Semmes came to Maxwell to prepare for a career as a foreign service officer. During her studies, she took an internship at the refugee office at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, where she developed an interest in refugee and humanitarian issues. After finishing her Maxwell degree, she worked in the refugee section at InterAction, an umbrella

organization for NGOs working in development and humanitarian assistance. Two years later, she volunteered for the Peace Corps, to learn first-hand about the challenges of a developing country.

On the Maxwell/Peace Corps Connection: “I think there is a natural complement between a Maxwell education and the practical experience of the Peace Corps for individuals interested in government, development, and other internationally focused careers.”

Currently: Crisis, stabilization, and governance officer for USAID in Nairobi, Kenya.

“There is no way I would have gotten this job without the Peace Corps, an experience invaluable for helping me understand the situations and dynamics I confront with humanitarian assistance programs.”

The Former Lawyer

Jeremy Johnson '03 MA (PSc)/JD

Peace Corps Service: 2008- 2010, as a community-based organizational development worker in Thailand.

Projects included planting sunflowers along the Mekong River, and building sanitary facilities for one of the community groups.

Johnson volunteered after three years working as an attorney in Phoenix, Arizona.

Lasting Impression: “In a country where many people have very little, I was continuously impressed by how kind and generous people were. In my village, people were especially giving, frequently inviting me over for dinner, taking me places, and otherwise taking care of me. This never stopped over my two years.”

What Came Next? After a positive experience in Thailand, Johnson accepted a position lecturing at a university in Northern Thailand. “Although I don’t know where my professional life will lead me, I am most certain that my career will be related to international topics and/or be located internationally.”

On the Maxwell/Peace Corps Connection: “My project work in the Peace Corps gave me real-life international experience in both public administration and international development, something that would have been very difficult to obtain otherwise. My Maxwell courses, seminars, and teaching assistantship broadened my perspective and gave me the background to better understand development theories and thus serve.”

Currently: Recently accepted into the LLM program at King's College, University of London.

By Renée Gearhart Levy

This article appeared in the fall 2010 print edition of Maxwell Perspective; © 2010 Maxwell School of Syracuse University.

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