

RPCVs: making a difference at Peace Corps House

A few months back, Peace Corps Worldwide editor Marian Beil asked me two primary questions: “Why is Peace Corps House a perfect match for RPCVs? What do they bring to the project that is special?”

While little in the world is perfect, but can they bring a special contribution? Yes. Beyond having the cross-cultural skills generally essential to successful service overseas, I believe certain RPCVs will rise to a challenge to serve again. And have yet another adventure that results in something positive for the common good — a self-selected chance to make a difference. Particularly that with 400 settlement houses in America and thousands overseas since the 1880s, like the Peace Corps at its inception, they were, as Jane Addams wrote in 1910, “an experimental effort to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems which are engendered by the conditions of modern life in a great city.”

Remember that the Peace Corps actually began at 2:00 a.m. on October 14, 1960 when John Kennedy speaking on the steps of the student union at the University of Michigan began with a series of challenges: “How many of you who are going to be doctors, are willing to spend your days in Ghana? ... So I also come here tonight to ask you to join in the effort.” Hundreds of thousands have risen to that challenge.

While it's possible that some of today's Volunteers might be driven by a different impulse [?], given those original conditions present at its founding, I believe that if the programs are both sound and interesting, there are sufficient local RPCVS who would volunteer to work at Peace Corps House. They would then participate in a rigorous orientation, followed by yet another Peace Corps-related selection process. The volunteers would be those RPCVs who have successfully finished their two year assignment and thereby have gained a unique confidence in their ability to manage new adventures and challenges that serve others. A call to service which they will always look for.

This because they have learned the intrinsic value of service. But what is *service*? Among the several spiritual gifts essential to the growth of the early Christian church, mention of service is found in Paul (Romans 12:6-8), “If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve.” If you have the Gift of Service you will see yourself in these attributes, here described by Charles Stanley, scholar and senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Atlanta:

Those with the Gift of Service see and meet practical needs, free others to achieve, have no regard for weariness, have difficulty saying no, are alert to your likes and dislikes, have a strong desire to be with other people, need approval and recognition, are eager to see progress and achievement, are quick to action when they observe a practical need.

What counts is that the need must be met.

Based on a lifetime of RPCV relationships, I also believe that some of the RPCVs who would volunteer at Peace Corps House would have what Daniel Batson, who taught psychology at the University of Kansas, called a quest dimension in their lives which leads to a consistent altruism, to a higher frequency of helping. Such “questers” are not initially any more eager to help than others, but those who volunteer always work harder than others to earn the chance to actually help — they respond to a challenge. For such individuals, Peace Corps House will serve as both a career training ground and also a place of seeking and finding.

On an even higher plane, Notre Dame theologian John Dunne wrote about the spirit of the journey, the adventure, and the bridging with love to other peoples which was also a quest of understanding, the stuff of Peace Corps service. Given that there are upwards of 2,000 RPCVs in the Washington area, I believe that if the standards are high, the training serious, and the leadership exceptional, there will be a sufficiency of suitable RPCVs for service at Peace Corps House.

Notes: Carrie Hessler-Radelet, director of the Peace Corps also supports the concept of RPCVs serving at Peace Corps House. She wrote on March 11: “I very much appreciate your sharing the many letters of support you have received. There is clearly a lot of interest in your plan by prominent RPCVs, the National Peace Corps Association, and others.”

Glenn Blumhorst, president of the NPCA, wrote on January 6: “The opportunity described for Peace Corps House in South East Washington reflects the commitment of the Peace Corps Community to have an impact in our local communities, particularly underprivileged neighborhoods where returned Peace Corps Volunteers are willing and able to continue to serve after our Peace Corps assignments abroad.”

And Chris Robinson, president of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Washington, D.C. wrote on January 28, 2016: “We applaud you for offering up constructive, heartfelt solutions to the deprivations and injustices we witness every day in our own communities, and welcome any idea that draws on our experiences abroad and uses them to improve the lives of our neighbors.”

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