News of the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Buffalo, New York

Happy holidays. After a brief hiatus from the Buffalo RPCV newsletter, it is back and lengthy. I have settled into a new position at a Customs Brokerage firm, iCustom Broker, after two years with the nonprofit, Educators of America. I still am a supporting board member and will do the most to the most of my capacity with them. Moving forward…

This newsletter offers an exciting and incredibly in-depth interview with former Buffalo RPCV Chair and RPCV Costa Rica, Andy Smith. Andy dives deep into her love for Costa Rica, her host family, service drama, and a near catastrophe with a cow, a bicycle, and a dirt road. A HUGE thank you to all that attended the Buffalo Peace House Thanksgiving. Shout out to everyone who brought a dessert or salad or side dish. The children didn’t like my ginger snaps but they were taken at the end so my feelings are only slightly damaged.

The WNYRAC fundraiser is still occurring so please consider donating to help resettle our incoming Afghan neighbors. Peace Corps is offering Virtual Service opportunities and check out companies to shop for the holidays that support the Peace Corps Community.

We will be sending out updates on the January social event toward the latter part of the month so keep a close eye on our social media and email campaigns. I hope that you all had a Happy Hanukkah and will be celebrating Christmas and Kwanzaa with your respective friends families. Take time to slow down this holiday season and enjoy the company of others or if you’re like me, alone with The Grinch film and a liberal pour of Bourbon.

Any happenings, updates, social events, recipes or items of interest can be sent to RPCVOfBuffaloWNY@gmail.com to be included in the newsletter. Thank you for reading and hope to see you soon. Go Bills.

- Brett Claydon
Upcoming Events & Save the Dates

December 14: Global+ Emotional Intelligence Webinar

December 15: Global Reentry Program | PODCAST: So you want to be a Foreign Service Officer?

December 16: Affiliate Group Leaders Networking Hour

December 17th - 19th: The Christmaskindlmarkt at Hofbrauhaus Buffalo

December 17: A Night of Bad Caroling at Flying Bison Brewing Company

December 17: Global Reentry Program | Rebooting Your Career in the New Year

December 20: Peace Corps Community Connect December Leaders Meeting

Thank You to all those who came out to the Buffalo Peace House Thanksgiving!
Check out some of the pictures below.
Tell us your name, your country of service, length of service, and the program that you were involved with in Peace Corps.

My name is Andy Smith, I served in Costa Rica from 1994 to 1996 and I was in the adult education program.

So, during your time in Costa Rica what was your “typical day” like?

I was up early. my host sister was the pre-k teacher and she had it in her head that I would go to work with her and teach these kids English songs, colors, and numbers. That’s how I started my morning and then I would return home and be the dutiful Costa Rican woman and make sure that everyone saw me cleaning my house and then I would spend a great portion of my day prepping for my classes. Many days, I was just one step ahead of my students, so my main job was teaching night school to teenagers who didn’t have the means to get down the mountain to the city to attend classes. The Ministry of Education had started this night program and we taught the equivalent of middle school and high school math, science, social studies civics, Spanish language arts, ESL, and geography. I didn’t know half this stuff so I would spend a great portion of my day preparing to teach it and then I would clean up and in the late afternoon I would go visit someone’s house for coffee. While I lived in a community that was full of coffee and sugar plantations, I didn’t drink the coffee, but I would go visit someone every day before class and then I taught from five to nine at night and come home and I’d crawl into bed and start my day all over again. Once a week though, I was asked to help with the 4H club and I was put in the position of coming up with arts and crafts ideas for the girls in the program. I had a few other side projects here and there. My second year, my side project was working with the Ministry of Transportation and a German NGO after my community had suffered from mud slides and flooding. We were put in charge of helping figure out irrigation systems and clearing the rocks from the ditches. The process of cementing those ditches was important so that the water would just run down the mountain in tunnels rather than out on the streets. So, I kept myself quite busy. Other volunteers would ask to say how many books they read or letters they would write but I really never had the time for all that.

Sounds like your hands were full a good amount of the time. What was the most rewarding part of your service?

The people. Meeting the people during those afternoon visits. So, when I swore in in December, the school year doesn’t start till March, so I had three months to start planning. I took those three months to go visit houses and recruit students and teenagers and convince them to come to classes and the benefits that they could get while still working in the fields during the day and getting an education at nighttime. I firmly believe that those first three months set my ways, but people got to know me, and I was truly accepted as a member of that community. I loved those afternoon visits. I will admit one of my biggest lessons that I learned was to not judge a book by its cover. There was a family that was constantly asking me when are you going to come to my house, when are you going to come to my house?
And there was a reason why I didn’t want to go to that house because I knew it was the poorest home in my community and I was kind of afraid to go into that house, but I finally did. It was a Sunday and I literally walked out of there in tears. I’ll tell you why, the mom had gotten up in the morning and walked down the mountain because she heard that I liked ice cream so she went to the ice cream store, got ice cream and dry ice and then she walked back up the mountain so after she served me lunch, she could serve me ice cream. When I walked in the house, they had maybe three chairs or so and each chair was really broken in but oh my gosh, I went back to that house once a week after my first visit there. I was so mad at myself for judging them. It was a lesson well learned and I discovered that they were one of the hardest working families in that community even though they were so broken. When I left my service, she told me that she would never write me until she had a new brick house and when she got her brick home, she did finally write me. The kids were so cute and so adorable giving me hugs all the time. They lived further up the mountain so when they were going to school, they would stop by and knock on my door and just say hello. I felt like at times it was pulling teeth when I would walk into someone’s house because they would be sitting there watching TV and they’d be watching cartoons and I’m thinking ‘you’re a grown adult, you’re watching cartoons’ but those were the times where they learned about my culture, and I learned about their culture. They were constantly asking at the time about 90210 and Beverly Hills and they just thought that in America, everyone lived in those big fancy houses, had swimming pools, all teenagers had cars and I was like no no no. So, those afternoon visits I learned a lot about myself, but I learned a lot about them. That was where we were working on those other goals for the peace corps. When I ended my service, my community pulled off the best surprise going away party for me. I had no idea it was coming. They hired a mariachi band and the community brought me gifts and food. It was unbelievable.

**How large was your community? What was the population?**

About 600 people.

**So pretty intimate.**

I was part of that community, and I am still in touch with my host sisters. My host sisters came here two years ago to celebrate my 50th birthday. That was a dream come true to finally be able to return the favor because every time I come to visit them; they insist on paying for everything. All I ever wanted to do was for them to come and for me to be able to share my culture, my community, and my family with them and so for my 50th that was we did. I did enjoy working with my students. I’m sure like many volunteers you start out with a lot and then they dwindle down and down but I never I never gave up on my students. At times it was frustrating, and I felt like I wasn’t doing a very good job but when I went back, I remember my students came to where I was staying with my host family and they thanked me. A cool thing I taught them was to have a bonfire at the end of the semester and to burn their notes.

**What major city were you close to?**

I was two hours from the capital San Jose.
What was the mode of transportation you typically used?

I would take a bus down the mountain and to the closest city which was Turrialba and Turrialba used to be a main hub on the old train line from San Jose to the Atlantic Coast. It was the banana line and the communities would load their banana products and then they would go out to the coast but in 1991 there was a huge earthquake and it damaged the train tracks so that hurt the communities around where I lived. People then started looking for other means of making a living from Turrialba. I could take a bus which would be stop and go but it would stop in the next big city which was Cartago and then San Jose. I didn't have to transfer buses and I was lucky that I was one of the few close to the capital.

Provide an overview of Costa Rica.

Lots of mountains, obviously there’s the coast and San Jose is on a plateau. Very windy all the time but usually six months of the year we had rain and six months of the year we had the dry season.

Is it hot a lot of the time?

Where I lived, no. And this is what I tell people, when we had our COS ceremony, we had to say one thing that stands out in your mind about your service and mine was I never thought I’d freeze my ass off in a tropical country. I was up in the mountains with no heating and your house is open because they cooked with wooden burning stoves. Many nights I felt like I was getting dressed to go to bed because I would just put on as many layers as possible. I remember my mom sent me a scarf and hat and gloves and I walked around with my gloves on, and people will be looking at me like but you’re from Buffalo you live in snow. The East Coast is where the banana plantations are, and the pineapples are on the Pacific Coast. One of my best friends in the Peace Corps, she lived on the Dole plantation.

As a Spanish speaking country A) where are indigenous languages that existed and B) outside of the capital was English widely spoken?

In the capital, when I lived there, English was not very big. I am sure now it is, however, when I go back to Costa Rica, I usually just go back to my community. A few times I have been to the beach and English is everywhere because of the tourism that comes in. Yes, there are indigenous languages near my community. While I never visited, there were indigenous people that had married into my community. I never heard them speak their language though. One of the volunteers that was in my region, she was in one of those indigenous communities.

What was the most challenging part of your service?

I’m going to have to say outside of being homesick at times, the one-year mark was my most challenging time. I got sick and I had lost a ton of weight. I didn’t exactly know was wrong and I knew that our one-year service training was coming up, so I figured I’d just deal with it then. However, I had this issue at school where some of the students were spreading rumors about me. It really hurt, so I did not leave my house except to go to work for almost two weeks. Finally, my host sister stopped by and she’s like what’s going on and I just broke down in tears. They ended up calling a Board of Education meeting and my students and their parents come in and of course it was simply teenage drama. The rumors ended up coming from a girl, who turns out was pregnant, and she was simply trying to divert attention from herself.
At the time, I felt like half the class was divided. Half the class supported me, and half the class didn’t. At that meeting, my students that did support me stood up and advocated for me and told me how much they had appreciated me and my lessons and what I was doing for the community.

**Now, let's talk about food because every volunteer usually must eat. So, what are some of the staples of the cuisine in Costa Rica?**

Rice and beans and rice and beans and rice and beans. Not a meal without rice and beans. However, when I when I lived on my own I didn’t I didn’t eat a lot of rice and beans, only when I went to people’s houses. Also, there are a lot of soups and for celebrations, weddings, and Saint days, there is Arroz Con Pollo, or Rice with Chicken. It’s usually yellow rice with cilantro and red pepper and carrots and then the chicken has been boiled and shredded and then all mixed in. I can’t remember the name but whenever there was a soccer tournament, they would make tamales and the tamales is kind of the corn mush that wrap up in the banana leaves and then they boil. In some countries they bake them and in Mexico and Ecuador they’re wrapped in corn husks. They bring them to their neighbors how we bring cookies to our neighbors during Christmas time. I think I would have to say that when my host sisters came two years ago for my 50th birthday, they smuggled in tamales and I was like “you can’t do that, you have to declare those at customs” but they got them in somehow; I think it was between big bags of coffee beans.

**Being from Western New York, what's one food that you wish you could have shared with your community in Costa Rica?**

Back then, I don’t think I thought about that. I mean there was food that I missed but from Western New York…I guess chicken wings. Chicken wings and Nick Charlap’s ice cream. And I forgot those things from Crystal Beach, those waffles...what are they called? It’s the fried dough and they’re thick and crispy they have powdered sugar on the top and they come in a big bag.

**Funnel cakes?**

I think so. I guess probably those things but what I did introduce to my community was chocolate chip cookies. We would make chocolate chip cookies and because we didn’t have chocolate chips, we would take a chocolate bar and chop it up for the cookies. At the time you couldn’t buy chocolate chips but now, you can buy that stuff because they have. Wal-Mart in Costa Rica now. There used to be a store called Poly but I guess Wal-Mart bought it out. Now, when I would go visit, I would bring brownie mix, so I would have bags and bags of brownie mix. I think when I lived there (Costa Rica) I wasn’t sure I appreciated all of Buffalo’s traditions and at that age of 25, I was like what do you mean Buffalo tradition? I mean, sure, we grew up with chicken wings and beef on weck and whatnot but I’m not sure that I appreciated it as much you know as you do when you grow older. I’m not even sure when I was in 20, I appreciated all the architecture that Buffalo has. It wasn’t until I went away and then came back and I was like, wow, we really do have so much to offer here in Buffalo. I remember coming home though and not wanting to see rice and beans for a very long time.

**Describe one of the most comedic things that happened during your service?**

Sure, well this will probably be only funny to me and perhaps the few people who saw me. But, during my service I got a bicycle. At first, I was thinking to myself “Why am I getting or why would I need a bicycle?”
And even more so, I’m either going up the mountain or down the mountain with this bicycle; and the mountain has a fairly steep incline. I decide one day to ride my bicycle and I got up to the top successfully. It was the dry season so there are all these ruts in the road from water running in the road. On the way down the hill, I notice that there is a cow blocking my way in the road. Now, if I was a smart person, I would have gotten off my bike and walk it down the hill. However…I begin to brake, thinking I can stop on this dirt road with a steep decline before I hit the cow. I’m thinking I’m going to crash into this cow since it is directly perpendicular to me, and the road is covered in dust so the brakes aren’t really braking. Right before impact, I’m talking two seconds away, the cow decides to begin walking out of the way and I get by the road-blocking cow. I’m lucky if I rode the bike five times during my entire service. I didn’t understand why they brought me a bike. Why did I need a bike?

Hilarious. That brings us to our last question, what is one thing that you wish Americans knew about Costa Ricans?

This may sound awful, but that they should not be lumped in with the rest of the Central America stigma. Costa Rica has not had an army since 1949. They are also a middle-class country and very unlike Nicaragua or Guatemala or Honduras where you may have it where ten percent are, and the other ninety percent are poor with no middle class. Did we have the rich in my community? Absolutely. Did we have the poor in my community? Absolutely. But most of the people, by Costa Rican standards of living, were absolutely middle class. They’re a very hardworking country that have used their resources wisely. They understand the importance of education in Central America; they have one of the highest literacy rates globally. Many people clump Costa Rica in with other Central American countries like they’re just one giant country, but they are really different, especially Costa Rica – it isn’t known for the strife or instability of some of its neighbors. Civil wars in El Salvador, the police crackdowns in Nicaragua, or Noriega’s militaristic rule in Panama. Yes, Costa Rica’s had their problems. Yes, they have suffered from COVID too, but they have worked very hard on their eco-tourism and are putting the revenue from that back into their infrastructure, and electricity and telecommunication systems. They’ve been able to use their resources wisely. You do not see many Costa Ricans leaving Costa Rica; Costa Rican migrants are few and far between. Costa Rica is doing something right.
Photos during Andy’s Service in Costa Rica and her host family.
Additional $1 million pledged towards new West Side Bazaar

By: Anthony Reyes

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — The Westminster Economic Development Initiative (WEDI) announced an additional $1 million has been pledged towards the new West Side Bazaar location.

The bazaar is run by WEDI and is currently located at 25 Grant Street in Buffalo, plans were announced in August to move and expand it at 1432 Niagara Street. A $7.5 million capital campaign "Building Community, Building Opportunity, Building the New West Side Bazaar" was also announced.

According to WEDI, the additional $1 million has been pledged in recent weeks from three major donors and several additional donors. The John R. Oishei Foundation has pledged $500,000, M&T Bank has pledged $350,000 and the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo has pledged $100,000.

Continue reading article here.

Afghanistan 50 years ago described in autobiographical book by Peace Corps volunteer

“We were idealistic in those days, children of the ’60s, right?” Michael said. “We had long known we were being called to make a difference.”
Let’s help our incoming Afghan evacuees with all that they may need. Join the Western New York Refugee and Asylee Consortium (WNYRAC) in welcoming and assisting our soon-to-be Afghan Neighbors. [Click here to make a contribution today.]

Buffalo United for Afghan Evacuees is a community-wide coalition supported by the Western New York Refugee and Asylee Consortium:

Buffalo United
FOR AFGHAN EVACUEES
WWW.WNYRAC.ORG

Peace Corps 2022
International Calendars & Notecards Now Available!

$15 for Calendars and $10 for a Pack of Notecards! The Notecards come in a pack of 8 and are perfect for any occasion.

Get your Holiday Season shopping started with a 2022 Peace Corps Calendar & Pack of Notecards today.

Contact Jeri Titus (jerititus@yahoo.com) for ordering and payments can be made by check or Venmo to the RPCV of Buffalo & WNY Group.

venmo @Buffalo-RPCV
Developments

**Progress toward Returning Volunteers to Service Overseas.** Following the global evacuation, the Peace Corps developed robust health, safety, and security standards that must be met prior to Volunteers returning to countries of service. A total of eight Peace Corps posts have met these criteria and there are many more approaching this stage. So far, invitations have been sent to prospective Volunteers, both new and returning, to serve in Belize, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Zambia, with more invitations forthcoming. These Volunteers have been invited to serve beginning in late January to March so long as conditions allow. As part of the Peace Corps’ return to service, all Volunteers will be expected to contribute to COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. In addition, Volunteers will be required to accept the additional risks associated with volunteering during a pandemic and comply with agency standards for mitigating these risks, wherever possible. Click here for more information on our return to service.

**Input Requested for Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response Program Roadmap.** From December 2 through December 16, the Peace Corps is seeking public input as staff develop a 2022 roadmap to strengthen the Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response (SARRR) program. Specific suggestions for how the agency can enhance its systems to mitigate the risk of sexual assault and to provide victim-centered and trauma-informed care to survivors can be emailed to SARRRinput@peacecorps.gov. For more information, read the related press release here.

**Staff Contributions to the Global HIV Response.** Globally, staff have made meaningful contributions to advance the Peace Corps mission during this time without Volunteers overseas, including in the area of global HIV response. Staff from the 13 Peace Corps posts with President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) programs provided programming to over 63,000 individuals, including over 40,000 orphans and vulnerable children in fiscal year 2021. For example, in Cameroon, staff have collaborated with a partner to implement health training for youth related to gender and HIV prevention. For more information on the Peace Corps’ PEPFAR programming, click here.

**Additional Employee Resource Group for Peace Corps Staff.** The Peace Corps’ newest Employee Resource Group (ERG), Indigenous Rising, was chartered and approved on November 1, the first day of Native American Heritage Month. This ERG offers a space for honoring and recognizing Peace Corps staff who identify as indigenous as well as allies. Like the Peace Corps’ other eight ERGs, Indigenous Rising provides a platform for developing internal leaders, ensures diverse voices and perspectives are included, valued, and respected in our collective work, and contributes to an organizational culture of equity and inclusion.
Build Day with Peace Corps Partner, SolarSPELL at Arizona State University. Last month, RPCVs, Peace Corps Prep participants, and SolarSPELL of Arizona State University staff collaborated on a build day where participants assembled libraries. SolarSPELL, a strategic partner of the Peace Corps, offers curated digital libraries; solar-powered, offline technology; and training to build information literacy and internet-ready skills. For more than six years, SolarSPELL has worked closely with the Peace Corps to leverage digital content and build information literacy skills through a train-the-trainer model. For more information on this partnership, read here.

Virtual Service

Since October 2020, Host Country Partners from 28 countries and over 230 RPCVs have already engaged in virtual service, showing that collaboration and service can be impactful over digital platforms and across time zones. Peace Corps is now accepting Expressions of Interest from any RPCV who is prepared to spend 5 to 15 hours per week donating their services and engaging with a HC Partner in support of their current projects. Learn more about Peace Corps’ Virtual Service Pilot, read stories, explore the current opportunities and submit your expression of interest here.

Expressions of interest for current opportunities will be accepted through December 23rd. If selected, RPCV Virtual Service Pilot Participants will start virtual engagements in February 2022.

Click here to view current Virtual Service Pilot opportunities.

Additional opportunities will be added throughout the early part of 2022 including about 200 engagements in 35 countries so keep checking our website for new possibilities to engage.

Holiday Gift Ideas that Support the Peace Corps
Community from Three RPCV Entrepreneurs Doing Good

BEYOND GOOD

KULI KULI

SHEA YELEEN
Peace Corps Volunteers Fall Through the Cracks of a Student Loan Fix

A deserving group of dedicated people has been left out of the government’s latest patch for the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.

*New York Times*

By Ron Lieber

When the Education Department announced fixes for its deeply dysfunctional Public Service Loan Forgiveness program last month, hundreds of thousands of long-suffering borrowers were suddenly given a chance at the kind of relief that the federal government had long promised them.

But a small, highly deserving group was left out, even though its volunteers passed through a particularly venerable government service program: the Peace Corps.

Many Peace Corps alumni say they — like others who are now getting help, including members of the armed forces — received bad advice that set back their attempts to wipe away their loans. But the federal government hasn’t seen fit to solve their particular problem.

“We’re supporting war in this country but not peace,” said Bonnie Rico, a former volunteer who said she had gotten bad information from both her loan servicer and Peace Corps staff.

The P.S.L.F. program is one that well-meaning legislators, regulators and bureaucrats bungled badly from the moment it became law in 2007. In short, P.S.L.F. is supposed to erase the remaining federal student loan debts — tax free — of people in a variety of nonprofit and government jobs after they make 120 on-time payments.

The original program, however, excluded people in certain kinds of loans or payment plans. And because of years of poor communication and customer service, many found out too late that they were in those excluded groups. The payments they made — for years, in many cases — did not count.

To make good on what the Education Department itself acknowledged was the program’s “largely unmet” promise, officials decided that many of these borrowers could now get credit for their payments. Officials also said they would count the months of service by members of the military who deferred — that is, didn’t make — payments while on active duty. [Continue reading here.](#)
Vintage Peace Corps Poster of the Month

Want to make the most beautiful fuss in the world?

Talk it over with the Peace Corps.
Do you have an announcement or item of interest to RPCVs?

All area RPCVs, Peace Corps supporters or interested persons are invited to submit event announcements, news items or other items which may be of interest to the Western New York RPCV community.

You may request for the information to be placed in the newsletter or as a separate email. Items submitted may be subject to editing and/or editorial discretion.

Submit to: rpcvofbuffalowny@gmail.com

RPCV Buffalo Board of Directors

Brett Claydon (Namibia), Chairperson

Ryan Ried (Lesotho), Treasurer

Tony Agnello (Afghanistan), Secretary

Brett Claydon (Namibia), Newsletter Editor & Membership Webmaster

Alessandra Santarosa (Kosovo), Social Media Coordinator

Ginna Coon (Ethiopia), Programming

Audrey Seidel (Colombia), Programming

Jeri Titus (Morocco), Member At-Large

Follow Us!

Visit Our Website!
RPCV/Buffalo membership is open to all returned Peace Corps Volunteers, active and friends of Peace Corps. Please complete the following and return with your membership dues (25.00 annually) payable to RPCV/Buffalo:

RPCV/Buffalo

c/o Ryan Ried
105 Donaldson Road
Buffalo, NY 14208

Please check

Renewing Member _____  New Member _____

Are you a member of the National Peace Corps Association?  Yes _____    No _____

I. Personal Information:

Name: (first) ____________________________  (last) ____________________________

Address: _________________________________________________________ (apt) _____

City:_____________________________________________________________________

State: __________________________________________    Zip: ____________________

Telephone: ___________________________ Cell: ____________________________

E-Mail: ______________________________

I. Peace Corps Service Information (if applicable):

Country(ies) of Service:

______________________________________________________________________

Dates of Service:

______________________________________________________________________

Primary Service Role:

______________________________________________________________________