Firstly, thank you all for coming out to the film premiere of the Peace Corps Documentary ‘A Towering Task’ at the North Park Theatre on Saturday, September 11th. We are incredibly grateful to all of those who attended and showed their support. Thank you to the North Park Theatre for hosting us and providing the microphone set up (and delicious popcorn). It was wonderful to have Alana DeJoseph, Director of A Towering Task, come in and share her insight into the production of the film as well as hinting at a potential second one? (We have our fingers crossed.) And of course, thank you to Bob & John’s La Hacienda for hosting us afterward for drinks and food - it is well appreciated.

Inside this newsletter, we have a lengthy and detailed interview with one of board members, Virginia Coon, who served in Ethiopia from 1964-1966. Enjoy and please reach out if you’d like to be interviewed about your service. We’re always looking to share stories from our members.

Additionally, Peace Corps Connect is this weekend. I highly encourage you to sign up as it is virtual (link is below). Also, tomorrow, September 22nd, is Peace Corps Act Day. We will be posting about the significance of the Peace Corps for its 60th anniversary and we encourage you to do the same.

This newsletter is coming out mid-month as we had to prepare for the film premiere and my Sundays have become a football respite that include hop-flavored beverages, snacks, and yelling at the television. My apologies but I do plan on getting this newsletter out within the first week of each month moving forward.

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
Thank you to all who attended the premiere of A Towering Task at North Park Theatre on September 11th!

Attention Buffalo RPCVS!

It’s only $25. Online (fastest and easiest!) or via the membership form found at the end of this newsletter. Payments can be made via check, Venmo, or PayPal.

Venmo: @Buffalo-RPCV
PayPal: buffalorpcv@yahoo.com

Please renew your membership!

Upcoming Events & Save the Dates

Sept 22nd: Peace Corps Act Day

Sept 23rd: Cinema for Safe Haven to Benefit VIVE (Details Below)

Sept 23-25th: 60th Anniversary Peace Corps Connect Conference

September 28th: RPCVs for Environmental Action | RPCV4EA Letters to the Editor to Support Climate Refugees

September 30th: Family Justice Center's Advisory Council Chiavetta’s Chicken BBQ
This interview with one of our Board Members, Virginia Coon, was done via Zoom and it has been transcribed with some editing for clarity purposes. Please enjoy and reach out to RPCVofBuffaloWNY@gmail.com to share your Peace Corps story.

Tell us your name, your country of service, length of service, and the program that you were involved with in Peace Corps.

My real name is Virginia Coon but everybody calls me Ginna. I was in Ethiopia from '64 to '66 and I was in Education and I was a teacher.

During your time in Ethiopia, what was your 'typical' day like?

Well, we were up over 10,000 feet in elevation and what that meant was is that it was chilly - it wasn’t hot. In our village, there was three of us. No one had been there before so we were the first Americans there and the first Americans they ever saw. So, we would get up in the morning and have breakfast and walk to school. We had to walk down this very, very steep hill to the government school. The government school had about eight classrooms, sort of a library, and a director’s office. We’d teach until noon and then walk all the way back up the hill, have lunch, and then go back to school. The walk took about 10-15 minutes each way but when we got back to school, we didn’t resume teaching, we’d have our ‘rest time’ briefly and then go back to teaching until 3:30 or 4 in the afternoon.

Most of time when we got home, we would have our little treat, as many people do but then we spent a lot of our time planning our lessons for the next day. Our place that we lived in, we shared with this Greek gentleman who built this three room apartment with a porch and second floor outhouse. Joyce and I shared one room and he had the other room and in the middle we had a living room, dining room, and kitchen. We no electricity, no running water, but we had a hand crank mimeograph machine and you had to fill it with ink. But yeah, most of the time after school we spent getting ready for the next day and preparing lessons. Sometimes we took a nap but I only made that mistake once because once it’s dark, it’s dark, and then you have to light your kerosene lamp, which we also used for heat.

What was the most rewarding part of your service?

Getting to know the people. I was 22 when I went to Ethiopia so I had some growing up to do too. When I was there, I learned that people are people and people are people all over the world. I think the biggest thing I took away was the kindness of people and how people survive on near nothing compared to us here in the US. Example, when we were there we tried to make our house like we had it back home in the US with a toilet and really having it furnished. I learned about living and life in general and how I became resourceful. Remember we didn’t have communication technologies like you guys did. I guess just growing up and learning about people. I liked figuring problems out - regardless of what kind of problem it was.
What was the most challenging part of your service?

I guess some people would say being away from family but I was never like that. I never really got homesick or anything like that. If you know you have a strong family at home, you don’t get homesick really. I think communication with the people (in Ethiopia) and staying warm. It was colder there but I never really found anything that was too challenging. I didn’t let a challenge affect me. If I knew about the challenge, I would try to overcome it. A quick story - I taught English at night to adults and many of the folks such as the Mayor and the Police Chief sat in the most advanced class, out of the three classes, but they knew limited English while on the other hand, there was a man who was dressed fairly ragged and spoke excellent English but people in the advanced class didn’t want him in their class so that was a challenge of trying to get the right people in the right classes and battling any stigmas that existed. I guess it’s not really a huge challenge but it was something that I had to figure out. Another challenge was not beating the students, which existed at the time, and we tried to explain to them that you shouldn’t do that but who were we to say anything as three little Americans, 22 years old, running around telling people how to discipline their children? But you made an example to others around you by not doing it. Another challenge that we encountered was they typically taught by rote learning and we encouraged students to critically think, to be creative, and to discuss rather than memorize.

Another challenge was the fact that during Haile Selassie’s rule, students has to pass a leaving exam in English to pass high school. So during his time, he made it that every class were taught in English, from 7th grade on. Up until 6th grade, everything was in Amharic. Additionally, the math books that Ethiopia had were British so they were implementing the metric system and pounds (currency) but in. Ethiopia at the time, they used our dollar system and inches, sort of. They used the metric and imperial system back and forth. They had these textbooks that described using the Ethiopian Birr but in reality, most kids were using dollars and cents. They had every coin that we had in the states.

What was your favorite project? And why?

Because we didn’t have the online resources of volunteers today, it was different, we couldn’t access the grants and funding back home. Our town wanted a library so we got a few dollars from the Peace Corps to help construct the library with a cement floor. So we built it and got books and opened it up. We tried to build a playing field and the Peace Corps would sometimes throw us a dollar or two but we weren’t so project-focused as many volunteers are today.

Let’s talk about food, what are some of the staples of the cuisine in Ethiopia?

Well, the big ones are injera and (doro) wat, which is what you can find at Ethiopian restaurants today. Wat is a very, very Berbere flavored dish. Berbere is very spicy and fragrant and I think that they thought the hotter it was, the more germs it could kill. We would have injera and wat once a week. For water, we would pay this student who would sell jerry cans full of water and we’d buy one or two jerry cans and then put it in our tank but we had to boil it to make sure it was safe to drink and it was tough to boil water when you’re that high up so we drank a lot of Coca Cola. The cook, Mogas, used to laugh at us about how much Berbere spice Ethiopians could handle versus how much we could handle. We ate a lot of Duba, which is like a pumpkin or a butternut squash, so we had Duba soup, Duba everything. And we didn’t have butter, we had ghee. The meat we had was so, so tough. We rarely had fresh vegetables except for carrots every now and then.
We also had soda crackers and peanut butter, too. We had a lemon tree near us and we would make lemonade and that was a real treat, especially when we had a refrigerator. I lost a lot of weight because we didn’t eat processed food and there was really no refined sugar. I had a raw sugar and we also didn’t have fatty meat. For breakfast, we typically had toast or oatmeal, sometimes we’d treat ourselves to corn flakes. One time, we caught a mongoose trying to kill our chicken near our house and we ended up beating the mongoose to stay away from our chicken.

And what was the WNY food you wish you could have shared with the people of Ethiopia? And why that food?

Probably beef on weck because I like beef on weck. Not pizza though because they already had pizza. The Italians had been there and pizza was not unusual for city folks - in the village, yes. One time, the US military dropped off rations and we took the rations while they ate the home cooked food by Mogas.

Describe one of the most comedic instances during your service:

So, I was the Physical Education teacher and I was told that every Phys Ed teacher had to start the soccer game in town. So I asked, okay what do I have to do? And out in public, we had to wear skirts or a dress - you couldn’t wear pants. This match would start by rolling out the ball as hard as you could to the middle of the field, to the center circle and then the teams would begin playing and then you’d have to run the hell out of the way. Now, I know that now that’s not how a typical soccer game starts so I think that that was there little inside joke on the American. Also, since I was the phys ed teacher, I showed students the sport of basketball and softball but trying to convince them to not use their head to hit the ball was always something that was comical. The pranks that they would play on us, you know, we were the goat in the joke. The kids used to know when I would wear my wrap around skirt, the students would know when I would wear to class and try to grab it and unwrap it.

Last one, what is one thing that you wish Americans knew about Ethiopia?

The warmthness of the people. They are just like us and they want their children to succeed, they want to succeed - they have the same wishes and aspirations as we do. There’s no big difference. They’re people, they’re not something to be afraid of. They’re hardworking people and they want to get ahead and fit in just like everybody else does.
Photos taken during Ginna’s service in Ethiopia

Ethiopia 1964-66
Let’s help resettle our incoming Afghan evacuees. 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.

Registration is Open for Peace Corps Connect 2021:
September 23–25

Registration is open for **Peace Corps Connect 2021**, a special 60th anniversary conference for the Peace Corps community. The theme: **Mobilizing for a Lifetime of Service and Impact**. This virtual conference will tackle issues important to communities throughout the U.S. and across the globe when it comes to the work of building peace and friendship. And we’ll be looking at the future of what Peace Corps needs to be in a profoundly changed world.

[Register here!]
All proceeds from this event will benefit the work of Vive Shelter, which welcomes and supports over 1,000 asylum seekers from across the world every year.

**Ticket sales are open!**

**Last day to purchase is TOMORROW.** [CLICK HERE.](#)

**Where:** Transit Drive-in, 6655 S. Transit Road, Lockport 14094

**When:** Thursday, September 23 at 6:30 p.m.

**Cost:** $30
Why Does Service Matter?

From Peace Corps to AmeriCorps to envisioning a quantum leap: 1 million people in the U.S. serving every year — and changing the culture and ethos of service. So how do we get there?

A conversation with Mark Gearan and Keri Lowry.

By Steven Boyd Saum

In 2017, the U.S. government undertook the first-ever comprehensive and holistic review of all forms of service to the nation, and Congress wrote into law the creation of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. Over many months, this 11-member bipartisan commission embarked on visits to 42 cities in 22 states, to listen and learn. One area they were charged with examining: military selective service. Then, more broadly: how to expand all kinds of service — domestically and internationally.

The commission issued its final report, including a raft of recommendations, in March 2020 — as a pandemic swept the country. Media attention was minimal — which was both understandable and ironic, given that the crisis underscored the need for service, such as “a Peace Corps for contact tracers.” Even so, recommendations in the report began shaping proposed legislation. And, as this year has shown, there are much bigger changes afoot.

As for selective service: The commission recommended that all citizens, regardless of gender, be registered. That is reflected in next year’s Defense Authorization Act, currently making its way through Congress.

Steven Saum: Let’s start with the big question behind this whole endeavor: If we’re talking about it on a national stage, why does service matter?

MARK GEARAN served as vice chair for the commission. He was director of the Peace Corps 1995–99 and president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges 1999–2017. Since 2018 he has led the Harvard Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics.

KERI LOWRY served as director of government affairs and public engagement for the commission. She served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Burkina Faso 2000–02. She has gone on to serve on the National Security Council; as regional director for the Peace Corps for Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa; and as deputy assistant secretary of state. She is currently in the National Security Segment of Guidehouse.
Mark Gearan: It goes to the very fabric of our life and civil society. The work can make a real and meaningful difference in communities, in terms of actual outcomes, both domestically and globally. It’s also a powerful statement about our society: about people giving back and caring about others, to share skills and work for the public good. There’s an individual and a collective dimension. And at a time when our nation has these deep divisions, service can be a uniter. It can allow people to work across the whole spectrum of differences that may separate us. Common purpose for the public good is vital for our society’s health and well-being, and for our nation’s security.

Saum: Talk about where we were as a country when this project began — your sense of what was at stake. And how has that changed since the report came out last year?

Gearan: What Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Jack Reed (D-RI) did was really unprecedented: bring together military, national, and public service. It offered a different look, because it affected the very structure of the commission; those appointed by congressional leadership and the president reflected a diversity of experience — military backgrounds, congressional staff, people who had held elected office, some of us directly associated with national service. I liken some of the work we did to de Tocqueville’s tour of our country in his great book: We traveled, did extensive listening sessions.

There is so much good work going on around the country — that’s the good news. But the potential is largely untapped. That led to recommendations that, at the beginning, I would not have imagined. Civic education, for instance, came up through the listening. The report gives a comprehensive road map — and it offers an expansive vision that strengthens all forms of service to meet the needs that we have, and in so doing, strengthens our democracy.

Keri Lowry: The listening sessions helped us understand different facets, the actors in various spaces, how much overlap there was, and ways they could work together to start to bridge divides. The report does a great job of helping put those pieces together. The question is, what is the right ignition to get it going?

Gearan: Service is a fundamental part of who we are as Americans, and how we meet our challenges. But we’re a big country, 330 million people. By igniting the extraordinary potential for service, our recommendations will address critical security and domestic needs, expand economic and educational opportunities, strengthen the civic fabric — and establish a robust culture and ethos of service. Legislatively, part of this effort is in the American Rescue Plan, passed in March 2021; there’s $1 billion for AmeriCorps. That doubles AmeriCorps funding. There is growing support for bipartisan efforts, like the CORPS Act, introduced by Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) and Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS). Hopefully, the broader point will extend to Peace Corps and other streams of service.

Finish reading the rest of this interview on NPCA’s website here (Free).
Peace Corps Funding: The House Says It’s Time to Invest in More

*IT HAS BEEN SIX YEARS SINCE THE PEACE CORPS RECEIVED A MEANINGFUL INCREASE IN ITS BASELINE FUNDING. COULD THIS BE THE YEAR THAT CHANGES?*

By Jonathon Pearson

In December 2015, President Obama signed an appropriations bill that provided $410 million for the Peace Corps, an increase of about $30 million. Since then, the agency has received a mere $500,000 bump in annual appropriation — one-tenth of 1 percent. Indeed, the Peace Corps community has spent much time in recent years fending off proposed cuts while some needed reforms languished — due, in part, to lack of funding.

In May, the Biden administration put forth its Fiscal Year 2022 budget recommendation: yet another year of flat funding for the Peace Corps. However, thanks to National Peace Corps Association’s advocacy network and congressional champions, the outlook has brightened. In July, the House of Representatives completed work on the State/Foreign Operations spending package, approving a $20 million jump in Peace Corps funding — about 5 percent. That was half the increase promoted by a bipartisan list of 156 House members who earlier in the year submitted their annual “Dear Colleague” letter to House appropriators.

The $430.5 million House funding proposal aligns with this year’s Senate Peace Corps funding letter, with 39 senators on board. This news is promising. However, the Senate has yet to take formal action on its State/Foreign Operations appropriations bill. When senators resume work in mid-September, there is no guarantee they will follow the House’s lead. Experience shows that hearing from citizen advocates makes a difference. And an assessment of what’s ahead for the Peace Corps — relaunching Volunteer programs in scores of countries, with safety and security paramount — means a heavy lift.

Get Your Peace Corps Gear Here.

The NPCA Store is your one stop shop for Peace Corps gear: classic Peace Corps T-shirts, ball caps, water canteens, and more.

Your purchases help bolster programs to support work by and for the Peace Corps community.
Vintage Peace Corps Poster of the Month
**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
- Jeri Titus (Morocco), Treasurer
- Tony Agnello (Afghanistan), Secretary
- Brett Claydon (Namibia), Newsletter Editor & Membership Webmaster
- Lisa Ried (Lesotho), Social Media Coordinator
- Ginna Coon (Ethiopia), Programming
- Audrey Seidel (Colombia), Programming

---

**Follow Us!**

Facebook
Instagram
Twitter
LinkedIn

---

**Visit Our Website!**

[www]
RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS OF
BUFFALO, NEW YORK

2021 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

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 Jeri Titus
P.O.Box 650
Buffalo, NY 14205

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: ____________________________

II. Peace Corps Service Information (if applicable):

Country(ies) of Service:
________________________________________________________________________
Dates of Service:
________________________________________________________________________
Primary Service Role:
________________________________________________________________________