This newsletter is coming from the home of “David” and many other Renaissance masterpieces including “The Birth of Venus” and “Annunciation”. Yes, folks, I am discussing the capital of Tuscany, the home of the Medici family, and voted by Forbes as ‘Most Beautiful City in the World’ in 2010 - Florence, Italy.

The newsletter is a shortened version but still contains an electric interview with our own Social Media Manager, Alessandra Santarosa, and her time in Kosovo and what is was like being evacuated during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have new opportunities to begin a group to assist the International Institute of Buffalo with migrant support and photos from our recent event, RPCVs at the Ballpark that occurred on July 25th.

The Points of Interest section showcases an essay from ‘Afghan Connections’ written by our Secretary and President of Friends of Afghanistan, Anthony Agnello. The piece encourages those who served in Afghanistan to sign up to join their Celebration of Service in Denver in September.

Additionally, we have news from NPCA and Peace Corps regarding national legislation and the premiere of ‘A Towering Task’ film on PBS stations around the nation. Let’s make sure that it is showing throughout Buffalo and Western New York! Details on how to advocate and ensure that it is broadcasted are in the details below.

I hope you have been enjoying this summer and prepping for the upcoming Bills season. Please enjoy this newsletter and I look forward to receiving essays, articles, musings, and more from our community. 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.

Signing off to go wander about Firenze, snag an aperitivo, and cut into la bistecca alla fiorentino later this evening. Ciao.

- Brett Claydon
Upcoming Events & Save the Dates

Aug 12: Festival of India

Aug 19: Puerto Rican & Hispanic Day Parade

Aug 19: 4th Annual Back to School Giveaway

Aug 24-27: Beau Fleuve Music & Arts Celebration Weekend

Sept 8-9: Peace Corps Connect 2023

Sept 10: RPCV of Buffalo & WNY Annual General Meeting at 5 Loaves (Details TBA)

Sept 28: From Refugee to Comedy: An Evening with Thom Tran

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A Note from the Editor:

Interested in writing an essay or article for the Buffalo RPCV Newsletter? Please send your typed piece with a title and your name to RPCVofBuffaloWNY@gmail.com. The article/essay can be a story during your service, an op-ed, a historical account, etc.

We want to hear from you! Any writing is welcome. This newsletter serves as a platform for RPCVs (and current PCVs) to express themselves fully.

We look forward to your Peace Corps musings, media, and anecdotes.
The RPCV interview section is back up and running. We’d like to extend the invitation to all RPCVs in Buffalo & Western New York to be interviewed for the newsletter. Even if you’re not in the area but from the Buffalo/WNY area, we’d love to hear your story and publish it here along with any media you have. Please email RPCVofBuffaloWNY@gmail.com with a request for an interview.

This month’s interview is with our own Social Media Manager, Alessandra Santarosa. Enjoy!

Tell us your name, your country of service, length of service, and the program that you were involved with in Peace Corps.
I’m Alessandra Santarosa, I served in Kosovo from 2019-2020 as an English Education Volunteer.

During your time in Kosovo, what was your 'typical' day like?
Usually I’d wake up and try and beat my host siblings to the bathroom. Then I’d make coffee and head to school. I’d teach from 8 or 9 until about 12-1 PM depending on the time of year (school is shortened in the winter so no one has to walk home in the dark). I taught mostly 6-9th grade English which was the morning shift. The younger students came to school in the afternoon. I’d walk home for lunch and then usually work on lessons or other projects, then go for a walk and spend time with my host family.

Give us an overview of Kosovo. What's the geography like? A little bit of the history, major industries, and demographics.
Kosovo is a landlocked, very mountainous country. The climate is very similar to here in WNY, with all four seasons. The majority of the population is ethnically Albanian, and then Serbian, Bosniak, and Romani. Their major industries are agriculture and metals. Kosovo was a member of the former Yugoslavia, and declared their independence from Serbia in 2008. This was following a war that took place in the late 1990s. Since declaring their independence, Kosovars still do not have visa liberation, which means traveling to the US, EU, and most parts of the world requires a lengthy and expensive visa process that is inaccessible to most. They have the youngest population in Europe.
This is always a question that I’ve encountered when discussing Kosovo, and that is Serbia and the relations between the two nations. Can you give us a comparison and contrast? Why do folks always couple the two together?

Due to the history of the genocide that took place there are still a lot of tensions between the Serbians and the Kosovar-Albanians. I want to be clear that KOSOVO IS NOT SERBIA. Politically though, they are in a proxy war. The US and most of the EU (with the exception of Greece and Spain) backs Kosovo. Russia backs Serbia. You can kinda see how these two former Yugoslav countries have not really seen an end to the past. I’d recommend the book “Kosovo: A Short History” by Noel Malcom, to get started with understanding the area.

What was the most rewarding part of your service?

Seeing my students succeed. Throughout Kosovo we hosted spelling bees, and to see my students go from practice rounds to winning competitions was amazing.

What was the most challenging part of your service?

Finding the balance of being myself and fitting in to the culture. Physically I look Albanian. So when I am in public, when I’m with my host family, and so on, I appear to be just like everyone else. However, culturally I’m fairly different. I think that Peace Corps helps you learn how to really work with people and meet them where they are at, but we rarely talk about the toll that it takes to consistently do that while almost no one is doing that for you. Knowing that you’re representing yourself and your country is a lot of pressure for someone in their early-to-mid 20s. I wish Peace Corps would be more open and acknowledge the mental health of volunteers and support them more in that regard. I will say, my host family was incredible and taking me in and my host mom really looked at me as one of her own. But when you’re isolated and you feel under pressure because you want to do the best for your community, it can be a lot.

What was your favorite project? And why?

I worked with an organization called DokuFest. DokuFest is a nonprofit, which runs an international film festival in the city of Prizren every year. They wanted to start a film series where they brought films to schools and fostered discussion amongst students. I was able to create a partnership between DokuFest, and we showed a film talking about climate change and our impact as humans. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic and evacuation, the project was cut short.

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

BREAD. Red meat. Cheese. Every day, almost every meal was homemade bread. Rarely would we go to the bakery to buy bread. My host family had turkeys and chickens so we did eat a lot of those, but for winter, families typically slaughter a cow and use the meat throughout. Summertime is full of fresh fruits and vegetables, and in the winter, there’s vegetables - they are just pickled.
And what was the WNY food you wish you could have shared with the people of Kosovo?

And why that food?

WNY style pizza. They love pizza, and you can get it at any restaurant. However, they do come with a side of mayo and ketchup, so I’d like to see them try pizza with blue cheese.

Describe one of the most comedic instances during your service:

This one is tough. It’s either the time I was sick with the flu and my counterpart brought the entire 6th grade class to my house for my birthday (I was MedEvac-ed to Skopje, North Macedonia, the next day. We didn’t have an in country medical team) or any time Gina - who was the other volunteer in my municipality - would speak Albanian to people and they would look at me to translate or just in confusion. Gina is about 5’11 with blonde hair and blue eyes and spoke better Albanian than I did for a while. Again, everyone thought I was Albanian.

What was evacuation like due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

It took a week. Like most, no one knew what was going on. We had been banned from going to Italy, but for context many people travel back and forth from Italy to Albania and from Albania to Kosovo. Kosovo cancelled school for two weeks because Albania began to take precautions. The minute Kosovo confirmed a case of COVID-19 the entire country shut down. No way in, no way out. We began the evacuation process prior to the global evacuation. Day to day things changed. It took us one whole week to evacuate. Two failed trips to the airport, many tears, laughs, and beers drank. The embassy had to negotiate between the governments to open the border between Albania and Kosovo for us to walk across so that we could get on a bus to Tirana and fly from Tirana to Istanbul, Istanbul to either NYC or DC. Our neighboring countries, PC Albania and PC North Macedonia, had already gotten evacuated before us. When we got to Tirana, we were told that they bought any open seat to get us home. And that’s the story how I flew first class for the very first time.

Upon landing in the United States, we learned through the internet that Peace Corps was over. Everyone was granted their completion of service and we would not be returning. We left Kosovo thinking “we will be back in a few weeks or months”. After a week of trying to get us home safe, the world shifting into something no one understood, the one thing we thought was certain was certainly over.

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

I wish Americans KNEW about Kosovo. Explaining where it is, what it is, who the people are is a wonderful aspect of being an RPCV, but there’s this tiny country in the Balkans that loves the US, has a statue of Bill Clinton that is on Bill Klinton (yes with a k) boulevard. There are beautiful mountains, and people, and food, and coffee which only costs €1. I hope that Americans will explore that corner of the world, and that one day more Kosovars will be able to travel here too!
Pictures from Service
Here are a few pictures from the recent RPCVs at the Ballpark outing on Tuesday, July 25th. The Bisons took on the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre RailRiders during Italian Festival Night at Sahlen Field. In addition to Italian Festival Night, it was also $2 Hot Dog night - which, your editor of this newsletter was extremely excited for. The Bisons took down the RailRiders in a 3-1 win with an Addison Barger solo Home Run to center field early in the game.

Thank you all for coming out and getting together. We look forward to having more events like this in the future. Go Bisons!
From Chiara Moscow, Migrant Services Coordinator (CMoslow@iibuff.org):

The primary resource that we need to make this happen is people! The most immediately helpful thing would be if you could reach out to your network about volunteers to staff up our onsite activities. Below is the list of activities we have already started or will begin soon, but we need lots of help!

- Bingo Night
- Arts and Crafts
- English Club (an informal space to learn and practice English)
- Kids’ games and playtime (daytime activities)
- Excursions (we would love to have some volunteers take groups of people via bus downtown to Larkin Square so this community can enjoy some outdoor games and get a bit familiarized with our beautiful city.)

The activities above are just a start, so if anyone has an idea of a fun activity they’d like to run, or a skill they would like to share—scavenger hunts, outdoor games, knitting lessons, you name it—we’re open to all of it!

The activities would take place at a hotel in the Cheektowaga area, and would each be a 1-3 hour time commitment. We hope to have many of these up and running asap. If anyone has a particular language they speak or are learning, that is also helpful to know as there may be an opportunity to practice.

If you are possibly interested in supporting beyond sending out a call for volunteers, I have a couple ideas that would be a huge help, let me know if either of these are of interest:

- Each activity requires a different set of materials. If your network has interest in supporting with materials, perhaps one idea would be to have RPCV "sponsor" one particular weekly event, i.e. art night, and you could run a drive to collect the necessary materials.
- In the past we have had groups sponsor excursions and it is always great fun. The sponsoring group pays for bus passes, and admission or a snack (depending on the activity), and travels with a group of clients to somewhere in the city (Science museum, Canalside, Tiff), etc.

Please contact us (RPCVofBuffaloWNY@gmail.com) to inform us of your interest and we will begin to put together a group to help IIB with these activities!
By Anthony Agnello

It was during the summer of 1973, precisely fifty years ago. We had been recruited a year earlier from around America as "dynamic young educators" for a joint Teacher Corps*/Peace Corps internship program in the Lackawanna, NY Schools. Following a year stateside internship, Peace Corps training in Afghanistan and a year as PCVs working in Kabul and provincial sites around our host nation, members of the first TC/PC group completed the coursework leading to M.S. Ed. Degrees in Math, Science or English. We were also awarded provisional certification as teachers in New York State, which directed many of us toward careers in education.

If you served in PC Afghanistan from July 1972 to the 1979 emergency evacuation, you were probably friends, co-workers, or at least knew my colleagues in the Teacher Corps/Peace Corps program, which was the product of visionary educators at Buffalo State College, now SUNY Buffalo State. The SUNY-Afghanistan team included Teacher Corps Director John Masla, Dean Bob Simpson and program directors Jack Mulhern, Joyce Swartney, Bob Elmes and Bill Licata. Our Persian & Pashtu language instructor, adviser, mentor and friend, Ahad Shabaz, provided the most relevant cross-cultural collaboration in our year-long Teacher Corps internship, which prepared us to serve as teachers in Afghanistan.

Nearly one hundred of our colleagues have already registered. If are interested, please consider signing up for our September Celebration of Service in Denver. Go to https://www.afghanconnections.org/events/denver-reunion to register online or for snail-mail information. You can share your stories of service during our formative youthful years of adventure as PCVs in Afghanistan with Ahad and now almost twenty other TC/PC program participants. And unlike your in-laws, we will listen attentively.

*The Teacher Corps was originally one of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. The hybrid and experimental TC/PC program began in 1971 and lasted only a few years. The Teacher Corps was dissolved and replaced by block grants during the early years of the Reagan Administration under the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981.

To learn more about Friends of Afghanistan and their current projects and upcoming events, please visit their website today.
From July 12th to July 19th, the Peace Corps Lesotho Education Group 85, reunited in sunny Buffalo, New York, for a week of connecting, friendship, the occasional beverage, and night out on the town.

Being the kind spirits that they are, Lisa and Ryan encouraged all WNY and Buffalo RPCVs to stop by, partake in the festivities, and meet their peers from across the country. Good times were had, laughs were laughed, food was devoured, and Miller Lites drank.

PC Lesotho Group 85 is a group that is humble yet confident, easy going but emits a strong work ethic, and most importantly, welcomes newcomers with open arms and acceptance. A huge thank you to Ryan and Lisa for extending the offer to us local RPCVs to attend and a cheers to your fellow volunteers.
Senate Appropriations Committee Advances Fiscal Year 2024 Spending Package with $448 Million for Peace Corps

By Jonathan Pearson

In a strong bipartisan vote on Thursday, July 20th, the Senate Appropriations Committee advanced a Fiscal Year 2024 (FY 2024) spending package for international affairs programs that includes $448 million for the Peace Corps — a four percent, $18 million increase over current funding for the agency.

This vote is in sharp contrast to the recommendation of the House Appropriations Committee, which, just last week, approved its version of the State/Foreign Operations (SFOPS) spending package, which included a $20 million (4.6 percent) decrease in funding for the Peace Corps.

The full House and Senate will next have to consider and vote on their largely different SFOPS bills, and then will have to come together to work out the differences.

NPCA Response

“National Peace Corps Association congratulates SFOPS Subcommittee Chairman Chris Coons (D-DE) and Ranking Member Lindsey Graham (R-SC) for their tremendous leadership and show of support for the Peace Corps,” said NPCA President and CEO Dan Baker. “We also congratulate Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Patty Murray (D-WA) and Ranking Member Susan Collins (R-ME) for this strong, bipartisan recognition of the importance of the Peace Corps and other international affairs programs.

“As we realize Congress still has many steps ahead to finish work on FY 2024 spending bills, we appreciate Senate appropriators for taking this important step in recognizing that the Peace Corps is steadily moving back to pre-pandemic strength, and is a critical component of our national service and foreign policy agenda.”

Take Action

With this recent action, our community has a real opportunity over the coming months to secure a funding increase for the Peace Corps for a second consecutive year. But with sharp divides over federal spending, this won’t be easy. That’s why your ongoing advocacy is so important.
• If you have a Senator who serves on the Appropriations Committee, please write or call them with this message: "Thank you for supporting and advancing a recommendation of $448 million for the Peace Corps in Fiscal Year 2024."

• Make plans to meet with your Senators or Representative during our August/September district office meeting initiative. Learn more here, and then fill out this form so we can add your plans to our tracking map.

• Alternatively, sign up to submit an op-ed or letter-to-the-editor supporting the Peace Corps.

Peace Corps Documentary to be Broadcast Nationwide on PBS Stations

Starting on September 2, the Peace Corps documentary, A Towering Task: The Story of the Peace Corps will be available on PBS stations across the country. But there are still some regions that will need to request that their local stations air the documentary.

There are more than 150 public television license holders that operate more than 350 stations, reaching 97 percent of the American people. You have a role in ensuring that your local station carries A Towering Task: The Story of the Peace Corps and that the Peace Corps story resonates in your community. The first — and most important — thing you can do is contact your local station and ask that they air A Towering Task: The Story of the Peace Corps.

• Their website will have a “contact” link where you can submit your request that they air A Towering Task: The Story of the Peace Corps.

• In addition to requesting that they broadcast A Towering Task: The Story of the Peace Corps, make sure that you include a compelling reason for why it is important that this story is broadcasted. Consider including an anecdote about your service or talk about how Peace Corps service impacted your life.

• If you aren’t sure which station you should contact, visit pbs.org. In the top right corner of your screen, you’ll find what station’s coverage area PBS believes you reside in.

• If you still don’t know where to start, email Will Glasscock for additional assistance.
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

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RPCV/Buffalo

c/o Ryan Ried

105 Donaldson Road

Buffalo, NY 14208

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Dates of Service:

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