Welcome in one and all for a riveting newsletter that contains interviews, event invitations, volunteer opportunities, and much more. We would like to start things off by officially welcoming Brian VanDeBogert (RPCV Kenya) and Michele Goergen (RPCV Togo) to our board. We are incredibly excited to have you and we welcome you to our community here in Western New York. That being said, in this newsletter, we have an interview with Michele about her time as a Volunteer in Gape Nyassive, Togo. A powerful and in-depth interview, it shines a light on the lesser known West African country.

On March 8, in honor of Peace Corps Week & International Women's Day, we are holding an event at the downtown West Side Bazaar location. Please mark your calendars and come celebrate the 63rd Anniversary of Peace Corps and International Women’s Day. Moreover, we have setup a fundraising campaign for our friends over at Journey’s End Refugee Services who have a heavy demand for household items. All donations that are submitted will be matched by the RPCV of Buffalo & WNY group. It is our hope to provide them with a gratuitous amount of supplies that they need to settle incoming refugee families and our new neighbors.

Prior to reading this newsletter, consider joining or renewing your membership to our group. The cost is only $25 annually! That’s the cost of a beer at a Bills game (trust me). If you’re looking to sign up, there is a printable form at the end of this newsletter or click here to sign up online.

I hope you enjoy this newsletter and the long President’s Day weekend. 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 Sabres? Being a Buffalo sports fan isn’t for the faint of heart.

- Brett Claydon
Upcoming Events & Save the Dates

Feb 24: **Coldest Night of the Year Walk**

Feb 24: **Practice Climb for the Fight for Air Climb (Lung Association)**

Feb 25 - Mar 2: **Peace Corps Week**

March 7: **National Day of Peace Corps Advocacy (In DC)**

March 8: **RPCV of Buffalo Peace Corps Week/International Women’s Day Celebration**

March 8: **International Women’s Day**

March 9: **NPCA Quarterly Board Meeting**

March 19: **From the Ground Up: Board Building 101**

April 19: **WEDIFest**

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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.

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**2024 International Calendars and Note Cards on Sale!**

Calendars are on sale for $20 and Note Cards for $10! Please email your order to jerititus@yahoo.com with pick up or delivery instructions. Payments can be made in cash, check (to RPCV of Buffalo & WNY), or via Venmo (@Buffalo-RPCV).
Tell us your name, your country of service, length of service, and the program that you were involved with in the Peace Corps.

My name is Michele Goergen, I was in Gape Nyassive, Togo for 2 years as a volunteer with the Girls Education and Empowerment program.

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

The days started early in my village! As most of the people living there relied on subsistence farming, they would head out to their farms early. So, any meetings with village leaders would often be between 5:30 and 6:00am. They would usually start with a shot of the local moonshine, Sodabe (or ‘so that be!’ as the Ghanian man who spoke English in my village lovingly called it). If I didn’t have a meeting, I would often go for a jog on the quiet dirt road leading into and out of my village. After the meeting or my run, I would head to the school, I taught life skills classes at 3 different schools in the area and organized girls soccer teams at those schools as well. Once I was finished at school I would head home for lunch and depending on the day, I may have had a meeting with the village development association. They managed all the development projects and also solved problems in the village. These discussions would range from how to start a market or sell some of their local weaving to setting up a schedule to ‘watch over’ the village water pump and prevent boys from hanging out there when the girls would go to fetch water. One of the main challenges in my village was access to health care. We only had a midwife who operated out of a room in someone’s home, so we would discuss that. Evenings were usually spent hanging out with the family just outside of my compound, chatting to people as they came back from their fields, and just sitting, which was a very common aspect of village life at the time.
Give us an overview of Togo. What's the geography like? A little bit of the history, major industries, and demographics.

Togo is a long skinny country wedged between Ghana and Benin. The width of Togo along the coast is almost exactly 42km or marathon distance. They actually used to have a border-to-border marathon, but I’m not sure how regular was or if it even exists now. Togo has five different regions and is hot and humid in the south and more arid in the north. French is the official language though there are lots of local languages. I was based in the Maritime region, which is the southernmost region, and Ewe was the predominant ethnic group and language spoken. A majority of the country is Christian, but animism (or voodoo) is still very prominent and practiced. My village would often have different animist ceremonies that would last days. Animism is even sort of integrated into the Christian religion and you see it in funerals and different celebrations.

I don’t know a ton about the industries in Togo, mostly because I don’t think there are that many. Phosphate mining is probably the most prominent followed by agriculture. Cotton is produced there as well as some cocoa and coffee…but not to a major extent. Like many developing countries, the money from these industries doesn’t really go to the people. The people in my village would often talk about how they used to work on the cotton farms but never got paid or didn’t get enough money for the work. Togo sometimes seems overshadowed by its wealthier neighbor, Ghana. We used to say the streets were paved in gold in Accra!

So, if we don’t talk about this stuff, we don’t talk about this stuff and when it comes to Togo, what is going on with the Gnassingbé family? They've been in power since the late 60's and less than a decade ago, anti-government widespread protests erupted. It's essentially one of the last remaining African dynasties. Could you provide a little insight?

Of course. Though I am much more well versed on my own village politics (of which there were many). But with that said, the elder Gnassingbé, Eyadéma actually passed away in early 2005, right before I started my service. His son Faure won a very controversial election in April of 2005 and there was a moment when the Peace Corps put all the volunteers on lockdown. The volunteer I replaced was on vacation in Ghana and had to stay there for a few extra days as she couldn’t cross the border and get back into Togo. I arrived in Togo in September of 2005 and we were all told not to discuss politics as it was still rather contentious. Faure does keep getting re-elected and I recently read that the parliament approved a bill allowing him to stay in power until 2030, which was met with some protests. I also know that the president’s office manages the phosphate sector, so he very much profits off that.

What was the most rewarding part of your service?

I had such a great village, the chief was young and really motivated and the people were so friendly and delightful. When I first arrived, the village leaders came to my door and handed me a proposal and told me they needed a health clinic. I told them a flat no. I didn’t really want to ask friends and family to donate money and had no idea where I could find $12,000. So, over the course of the next year I worked on my usual projects, but also started to spend time with the midwife in her small room.
I was always interested in health and nutrition and was kind of shocked that she would let me help with births and do random things around what passed as a ‘clinic’. I didn’t have electricity, running water or phone service in my village, so I would only speak to my parents on Friday, when I went to the larger market town. One day my mom mentioned that a friend of a friend of hers owned a business and was always looking for little projects to fund. So, I found the proposal my village had written, translated it into English, touched it up a bit and emailed the organization asking if they would be interested. Much to my surprise they were! So, I facilitated the donation though Peace Corps partnership and low and behold, we hand built a health clinic in my village. It was pretty fun to be involved in the process. Brian and I went to visit my village in 2016 and the clinic is still there and is operational and had expanded to include a pump and another building. It was nice to do something that was long lasting.

What was the most challenging part of your service?

It’s funny how memory works as I tend to only remember the positive things, though I do remember sometimes the days seemed like weeks and the weeks like months. There were the typical low days in village, not all my projects worked out and sometimes I just wanted some privacy. In small villages everyone knows everything. Kids would just peep through my gate to see what I was up to. As I would walk to school people would shout ‘where are you going?’ and I would always have to respond. I had a cat and people would even tell me everything the cat did while I was teaching at school or away. So, living in a fishbowl would sometimes be hard. Though it’s interesting as now that I’m back living in the U.S. I kind of miss that.

One of the random things is that my village very much used beating as a form of punishment for the kids. But they knew I didn’t like it. So, if I ever saw a family beating one of their children, I would look at them and they always stop and someone would say: ‘Not in front of the Yovo!’. Yovo is ‘stranger/white person’ in the local language.

What was your favorite project? And why?

A couple volunteers put together this national girl’s bike tour. They got bicycle donations, 10 per region, and the goal was to spend 5 days biking around to small villages and do skits to encourage families to send girls to school. I was the representative in the Maritime region and I had the girls in the three school where I worked write essays as to why they wanted to participate. With the help of the village committee, we picked 10 winners from the maritime region to participate in the bike tour. We spent 2 days preparing the skits and then biked about 75 miles around the region in 5 days visiting 10 different villages to sing songs and perform skits promoting girls’ education. It was really fun. I had to teach some of the girls how to ride a bike and we slept on the floors of schools. At the end of the week the girls got to keep the bikes. For the rest of my service, they would occasionally ride their bikes to visit me. We would hang out and sometimes bake a cake or something like that. It was great. You could see the confidence of the girls grow so much over the course of that week.
Let's talk about food and nutrition, definitely something you have a wealth of knowledge about, what are some of the staples of the cuisine in Togo? What's the nutrition like?

My time in Togo is what inspired me to study nutrition! I LOVED the food there! They eat a lot of maize and do a lot of different things with it. Pate is a maize meal paste. It's usually served with a sauce of slimy greens or okra. We lovingly used to call it ‘snot sauce’. It's an acquired taste, but I loved it. They have pate rouge where they make a flavorful tomato-based broth to make the pate, it's red and delicious. They also have khom, it's sort of like pate, but it's fermented and you eat it with a yummy sort of tomato chili paste or sauce. Fufu is another staple, which is pounded cassava or large African yams. It's often served with peanut sauce or pepper soup. They eat beans with dried cassava called ‘gari’ and red oil and chili. The street food is also amazing, they mix rice and spaghetti and serve it with a couple different really flavorful sauces. My village ate a lot of dried fish in their meals. Chicken on a special occasion and goat on a VERY special occasion.

They use a TON of oil when cooking, like sometimes half a liter! When I would sit and watch my neighbors cook dinner I would always wonder, as they added all the oil to their meals, if they had high cholesterol or if eating so much fat impacted their heart health or if it was ok as they got a lot of physical activity from farming. I never really found out the answer.

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

I actually cooked a lot in my village! I made pancakes regularly and I would also make banana cake or chocolate cake. Of course, cake is sweet and everyone in my village loved it. Once, some friends had sent me a box of kraft macaroni and cheese in the mail. I gave a bite to one of the kids and they made this weird face like it was sour and they HATED it!

Describe one of the most comedic instances during your service:

There were so many. When I was first learning the local language, all the guys that would hang out at the village store taught me to say ‘good night’. So I started saying it in the evenings to people. I said it to the village chief once and he was like ‘who taught you that?’ and told me that it actually meant ‘have a good night in bed with your wife’.

There was one man in my village, Daniel, who had grown up in Ghana and he spoke English. I would often bring him books to read, he liked crime novels. One evening he came over for a new book and the only thing I had that he might be interested in was an old, tattered copy of Lord of the Flies. You probably remember the premise of the book, all those British kids end up on an island struggling to survive before everything turns into debauchery. Well, the next morning, Daniel stopped by on the way to his farm with the book and said ‘I don’t understand this book’. I asked why not and he plainly said ‘Michele, if these kids were African, they would know what to do’. And it's true! Surviving off the land is practically a birth right in Togo, they can build homes out of mud, recognize edible plants and know how to grow food. It was so funny at the time, but still to this day it's an important lesson for me in perspective.
Last one, what is one thing that you wish Americans knew about Togo?

How delightful it is. I don’t mean to romanticize my experience in Togo. I know there are very real challenges and problems for the people living there and sometimes it seems like development will never come and when it does, the money and power just go into the hands of the wrong people. But it’s such a fun eclectic country and the people are overwhelmingly friendly. I wish we could bring more of that small African village sense of community here in the US.
CELEBRATE Peace Corps WEEK & INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

MARCH 8TH 6:00 PM WEST SIDE BAZAAR 617 MAIN ST

ENTRANCE ON WASHINGTON ST PARKING AT M&T PARKING LOT

FOOD INCLUDES ETHIOPIAN, SUDANESE, MEXICAN, BURMESE AND A BAR.
DAY OF CARING PROJECT GUIDELINES

Wondering if your project might be a good fit for Day of Caring? Review the project hosting parameters below to find out! Please note all Day of Caring Project applications must be completed by March 29th, if you need assistance creating a project, have questions, or need help with the application, please send an email to dayofcaring@uwbec.org

**Required:**

- Host organization must be a 501c3 nonprofit.
- Host organization and project site must be located within Erie County.
- The project must take place on June 18, 2024.

**Special emphasis will be given to projects that are:**

- Hosted by organizations whose community impact work includes at least one of the following areas:
  - Healthy birth outcomes
  - Early learning and development
  - Childhood obesity
  - School-age learning
  - Employment and workforce development
  - Financial capability and asset building

- Located in UWBEC’s 16 high priority zip codes, as identified in our 2021-2022 Investments RFP.
  - The zip codes are: 14201, 14202, 14203, 14204, 14206, 14207, 14208, 14209, 14210, 14211, 14212, 14213, 14215, 14216, 14218 and 14220.
Attention All Buffalo RPCVs!

Join RPCV of Buffalo & WNY on our Fundraising Campaign for our friends at Journey’s End Refugee Services.

We are looking to raise funds to purchase Household Items that are urgently needed as they settle incoming refugees.

Our group will MATCH dollar donation amounts to help increase the impact of our fundraiser.

Donate Now

VISIT WWW.BUFFALORPCV.ORG TO LEARN MORE & DONATE

Click here for a full list of all Household Items needed!
PEACE CORPS ANNOUNCES 2025 RETURN TO THE REPUBLIC OF PALAU

Peace Corps Volunteers to strengthen bilateral ties, and support education and community economic development priorities in the Pacific Island Country

(Washington, D.C. | Monday, February 5, 2024) – Peace Corps has announced that the agency will reopen its country program in the Republic of Palau in 2025. This marks a significant milestone in the longstanding partnership and cooperation between the United States and Palau.

“I am thrilled to announce that the Peace Corps will reopen its country program in the Republic of Palau in 2025. I am grateful to President Surangel Whipps, Jr. for the invitation to return to Palau, which highlights the enduring friendship between the United States and Palau and the importance of people-to-people ties and shared development priorities,” said Peace Corps Director Carol Spahn. “The Peace Corps has a long history of partnering with Palau and its people and this is an exciting time.”

From 1966 to 2018, the Peace Corps maintained a one-program, two-country model for Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, during which time more than 4,400 Peace Corps volunteers worked alongside community members in these Pacific Island Countries. The next chapter of the Peace Corps partnership with Palau will focus on community economic development and education, including childhood literacy, math and science skills, and English education.

“The return of the Peace Corps to Palau reflects the strong relationship between our nations,” said Republic of Palau President Surangel S. Whipps, Jr. “Many Palauans were mentored by Peace Corps members, some of whom have returned to become an integral part of our national family. We extend our gratitude to all of them and to the program that has enriched our country in countless ways. To those Peace Corps members preparing to come and contribute to Palau, welcome home.”

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE COUNTRY OF PALAU, CHECK OUT THIS FUN VIDEO BY GEOGRAPHY NOW HERE.
Black History Month: Volunteer Spotlight

By Emmalee Finn
FEB. 1, 2024

My life is the product of people who have sown diverse seeds into me.

My Peace Corps journey started many years ago in Haiti, in the densely populated capital city of Port-Au-Prince, where I was born. I faced extreme poverty but thankfully the local orphanage was a place of refuge. It was also a place of hope, with a chance to pursue a life in the United States of America.

The U.S. offered me an opportunity to prosper. At age three, I was fortunate to adopt a Midwestern American lifestyle in a small Minnesota town along the Mississippi River. It's where I encountered the kindness of people who embraced me as their own. My adoption started me down the path of becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer, where I am able to serve America and my community in Guyana.

In April 2016, I officially became an American citizen in the city of St. Paul, Minnesota, and U.S. citizenship ignited a spark in me. I wanted to use my new privileges as an American citizen to support others. I felt compelled to serve, share my knowledge, and learn from others, and the Peace Corps provided a path to do that, and more.

As a primary literacy promoter, I support students as they advance their literacy skills through group and individualized approaches. I also work with teachers to share techniques and teaching strategies through co-planning, co-teaching, and designing suitable learning materials to meet the needs of learners. Additionally, I work with parents to promote involvement and participation in their children’s educational journey. I am surrounded by the warmth of the community of people I live and work with and it echoes the sense of belonging I found when I was welcomed into a community in America. Continue reading here.

Next Step Travel: Tanzania Safari in the Summer

Kick off your summer with an unforgettable 9-day safari adventure through Tanzania's iconic savanna and wildlife havens — Tarangire National Park, Ngorongoro Crater, and Serengeti National Park Safari — with Access2Tanzania from June 8-16. The registration deadline for this trip is March 8, 2024. Secure your spot!
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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Visit Our Website!
RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS OF
BUFFALO, NEW YORK
2024 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Returned Peace Corps Volunteers of Buffalo, New York membership is open to:
- all RPCVs,
- active Peace Corps Volunteers and
- friends of Peace Corps.

Please complete the following membership application form and return it with your
membership dues ($25.00 annually). Checks should be made out to: RPCV/Buffalo.

Please mail your application to: RPCV/Buffalo
    c/o Ryan Ried
    105 Donaldson Road
    Buffalo, NY 14208

Please check one: New Member □ Renewing Member □

Please check one: Are you a member of the National Peace Corps Association? Yes □ No □

1. Personal Information

   Name

   Address

   Contact Information
   Phone:
   Email:

2. Peace Corps Service Information (if applicable)

   Country(ies) of Service

   Dates of Service

   Primary Service Role