

Cover story for *Metro Magazine*, alumni magazine for Metropolitan State College of Denver. Spring 2004 issue. Copyright 2004 Metropolitan State College of Denver

Julie Lancaster - 303-733-1120 - [julie@julielancaster.com](mailto:julie@julielancaster.com)

---

## Lessons Learned

*Metro grads get as much out of their Peace Corps experience as they give.*

By Julie Lancaster

Gregory Mathes stood in the cookie aisle of the upscale Manila supermarket looking at the 30 different kinds of cookies on the shelf. He felt as if his head would explode. For the past two months he'd been stationed in a remote mountain village where there was no running water, let alone a banquet of cookies. He'd done all his shopping at in a one-room store that offered 100 products at most and no cookies, only a single brand of crackers. The young Peace Corps worker was shocked at the opulence.

Mathes was in for an even bigger shock after his Peace Corps stint when he came home and began working for a dating service in high-rolling Newport Beach, Calif. That's when he realized that those two years in the Philippines had changed his priorities completely.

He had joined the Peace Corps right after college, planning to "serve humanity for two years and then go off and make lots of money," but it turned out that money wasn't what he really cared about. He quit the dating service and went to work as an administrator in a private human services agency, which he's been doing ever since. That was 20 years ago.

A 1981 management graduate, Mathes is one of 91 Metro alumni who have served or are currently serving in the Peace Corps, the U.S. government agency that sends volunteers to work in developing countries worldwide. Metro's cadre of volunteers is small compared to the numbers from some large universities; University of California-Berkeley tops the list with more than 3,000 alumni volunteers. But each volunteer represents a host of stories and lessons learned.

Because of his management degree, Mathes was assigned to a business position with a Philippine national agency. In 1982-84, he consulted with small businesses located throughout the mountainous province of Ifugao.

Like most volunteers, Mathes underwent weeks of intense language training "in country" before moving to his site. Unlike most, he discovered during a pre-visit to his site that he was learning the wrong dialect. Fortunately he was able to switch classes and study the right one before moving in.

Once at his site, Mathes lived briefly with a family, then rented his own little house. There was no running water, but he was able to bring electricity into the house. He traveled throughout the province by "jeepney" (local minivan transportation), helping people at the cooperatives with marketing and business systems.

"I felt very alone sometimes," he says. "Culturally alone -- not so much physically, because my neighbors were there all the time visiting. Also there was a sense of wanting to do more than you could do, either due to your knowledge level, skill level or adaptation level."

Still, Mathes loved the opportunity to live in another country and culture. He says the Peace Corps influenced his current lifestyle choices.

"Yes, I own cars and have acquired stuff," says Mathes, now 47. "But in the Peace Corps I learned how to live with less. If you want your life to be less complicated, don't buy so many things. Simplicity of life was one of the gifts I received."

Since President John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps in 1961, the agency has been pursuing its mission to help the people of interested countries meet their need for trained men and women and to help promote mutual understanding between Americans and people of other countries. Volunteers, who serve two-year terms, are currently stationed in 71 countries.

As of November 2003, 7,533 Americans were serving in the Peace Corps -- the largest number of overseas volunteers in 30 years, according to the agency. And the numbers are on the rise, due partly to Sept. 11 and a slowing economy. In February 2002, President George W. Bush proposed doubling the number of volunteers in the field to 14,000 by 2007. A new recruitment campaign targeting community college graduates is part of that effort.

### **Reevaluating Your Life**

It was 5:30 a.m. and pitch black on a late October morning in 1993 in Redlands, Calif. Terri Sherman walked onto the parking lot of the apartment where she had been living during a consulting assignment at a hospital. She heaved her suitcase and laptop computer into the trunk of the rented Honda Accord, closed the trunk and walked over to the mailboxes before heading to the airport for a weekend back home in Denver.

On her way back to the car, a man with a knife accosted her and demanded her keys. She refused, struggling and yelling for help. Suddenly she said to herself, "What am I doing? It's not even my car," and let him grab the keys. He took off with the car. She ran after him briefly, then watched the car disappear -- along with her jewelry, clothing and the electronic and hard-copy records from her entire consulting project.

"Being carjacked at knifepoint was a pivotal point for me," she says. "It's interesting what that kind of trauma does to a person. I went into post-traumatic stress syndrome and really reevaluated my life."

Sherman had worked for 18 years as a full-time nurse while raising a daughter and earning her bachelor's degree. In 1991 she switched to management consulting in hospitals, where her work often resulted in staff layoffs.

"[As a consultant] I was making the most money I will ever make," she says. "But I grew to hate it. All I was doing was pissing people off."

During a leave of absence, Sherman decided to apply for the Peace Corps. After a few months back on the job, she received her invitation to join and six months later departed for her assignment as a health-care worker in Turkmenistan.

She lived in Turkmenbashi, a city on the Caspian Sea and taught nutrition, mother/child care and sex education. She lived in a concrete block apartment building. The town had phones, automobiles, running water and plumbing, all of which worked only part of the time.

"It was hard getting used to no running water, food of a limited variety and not being able to communicate," she says, adding that winters were very cold and summers scorchingly hot.

From her original group of 48 volunteers, only half completed their service. Of those who didn't, some left for medical reasons but most because they didn't like the environment, the country or the people, Sherman says. According to the Peace Corps, between 10 and 13 percent of volunteers don't finish out their service each year.

"What makes people fulfill an obligation?" muses Sherman, 55. "For me, I guess it's stubbornness. I said I'd commit and I was committed." The bond she shared with other volunteers was invaluable, both over there and adjusting to life back home. She still communicates regularly with some of them.

"Come with no expectations and you won't be disappointed," she says, summing up her experience. "Don't expect that you will make wonderful changes in two years -- if that were the case, Peace Corps wouldn't have been in some of these countries for 30 years. It's a learning experience and not always fun or pleasant."

Upon her return, Sherman earned her master's degree from the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center and now is a family nurse practitioner, living and working on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona.

"I went through some of the most unhappy times of my life before going into the Peace Corps," she says. "I need to be working with and attempting to help other people. That's my purpose. The Peace Corps put me back on track."

## **Challenges**

The Peace Corps has weathered criticism from the outset. Detractors accuse the program of being too idealistic, ambitious or dangerous -- volunteers have gotten sick and died or been molested, raped or even murdered. Some say volunteers don't get enough direction or support. Conjured during the depths of the Cold War, the agency is admittedly an arm of U.S. foreign policy, designed partly to win hearts for democracy. Some believe it has outlived its relevance. Others believe the Peace Corps should be privatized. Still others see it as a nefarious tool of cultural imperialism.

Meanwhile the agency continues to juggle complex issues of funding, recruiting and infrastructure. The geographic, linguistic, cultural and political barriers are daunting. Many countries embrace the offered help, while others reject it. Russia, for example, expelled its Peace Corps volunteers last year, citing "lack of education and training."

Despite the criticism, a large and growing body of volunteers are serving or have served -- approximately 170,000 to date. Judging from the comments on an independent Web site for returned volunteers that posts both criticism and support ([www.peacecorpsonline.com](http://www.peacecorpsonline.com)), most support the organization despite the difficulties they encountered during their service.

Roger Ponds ('87, finance) was the only volunteer at his site and the only "gringo" in Santiago, a town of 4,000 people in southern Paraguay. He worked in 1992-94 as a business adviser to a savings and loan cooperative that functioned like a credit union: People in the community pooled their resources and lent money to people to build a house or start a business. But the cooperative lacked commitment from the community, so there were lots of overdue and uncollectible loans.

"This caused me to wonder what was I doing in Paraguay, since I couldn't really help the cooperative without the vision and commitment from the people in Santiago to support it," Ponds says. The cooperative was open only two days a week, so he developed a secondary project, as volunteers are encouraged to do: teaching English at the local high school.

Besides feeling discouraged and isolated, he had a hard time adjusting to the heat, the intense summer humidity and the slow pace of life. But there were positives, too -- like the friendliness and hospitality of the Paraguayans.

"Living in Paraguay, I felt like I was going back in time to an era when everything was less complicated," Ponds says. "Looking back, I would not trade the experience I had for anything else in the world."

Twenty-eight-year-old January Gevara ('00, psychology), who returned in December from her service in Romania, experienced a "what am I doing here" crisis, too. She lived in Bacau in northeastern Romania, doing nonprofit development for an organization working with HIV/AIDS. Like Sherman, she lived in a Soviet-era concrete block apartment. Apart from cold winters and frequent lack of hot water, life was pretty comfortable physically.

"But it was far more mentally challenging than I had expected," Gevara says. "Besides getting used to the culture and language, dealing with the postcommunist mindset can be infuriating. I didn't know how to communicate with my co-worker and didn't know what she wanted from me. At one point, I just kind of gave up and would sit there."

By the end of her first year, Gevara felt she'd accomplished nothing. But over the next year she built a friendship with another co-worker and they started working as a team. She also volunteered in kindergarten programs and for an organization working with high-risk youth, products of Romania's infamous orphanages.

In addition, with two other volunteers and a Romanian colleague, she developed an art therapy program for kids infected with HIV/AIDS. Using supplies procured through friends and family in the U.S. and a grant from the U.S. Embassy, they took arts and crafts into the county hospital every week.

"I will always remember that first art class," she said. "The kids came down, they were happy and enjoyed our company." Some of the kids were very sick, but others were not, Gevara says. The hospital got money from the state for every occupied bed, so some children would be kept there for months without something to do. She saw how children could be happy even under miserable circumstances.

Gevara now works with kids with emotional disorders at Denver's Mount St. Vincent Home. Eventually she plans to attend graduate school and work in child psychology.

"I was [in Romania] to teach, but I learned more about what I was capable of," she says. Gevara isn't planning any trips abroad in the near future.

"I'm happy being home," she said.

### **Wanting to Go Back**

Unlike Gevara, Tim McHugh ('89, electrical engineering technology) keeps thinking about going back. McHugh, 43, served as a teacher in Botswana from 1990 to 1992. Currently 32 percent of Peace Corps volunteers work in education, with the next largest assignment categories being health and HIV/AIDS, environment and business development.

"The very hardest part of my whole two years was coming back to the U.S.," he says. "Because I had left what I'd loved for two years. When I came back in almost January, it was snowing and cold. I'd just left the tropics, where it was blooming year round. Yes, it's hard going over there and getting set up, but I had 54 [other volunteers] with me. Coming back, you're alone."

McHugh taught math in Selebi-Phikwe, a town on the edge of the Kalahari Desert. Classrooms were individual cinderblock buildings with tin roofs. Instead of walking through hallways between classrooms, you walked across the sand.

"Botswana was a good country to go to by Peace Corps standards," he says. "The malaria risk was low, though you could still get it in the rainy season; I had to sleep under a mosquito net for two years."

McHugh knows he made a difference in the lives of some of his students. His biggest regret, he says, is not staying another year. He tutors math and substitute-teaches for Jefferson County Schools but says he hasn't been able to find his teaching niche here as he did in Botswana.

"It was the highlight of my life," he says of the Peace Corps. "I'm still thinking about going back."

Some volunteers do go back. Shannon Hager ('88, health care management) is one. She completed two rounds of Peace Corps service prior to graduating from Metro: first in Liberia (1978-80) and then in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1985-86).

In Liberia she was a nurse working in rural clinics, running vaccination and family planning programs. In Zaire she did research on viral diseases and their transmission. Both experiences got her hooked on public health and the study of infectious diseases.

After returning to the U.S. and getting her degree from Metro, Hager, now 55, earned a master's in public health from Tulane University. She works as a research nurse in the New Orleans HIV clinic.

"I was never bored," she says of her Peace Corps experience. "There's no way on earth you could begin to imagine some of the stuff I experienced; people think I must be making it up." Liberia underwent a military coup, complete with riots, while she was there. And several Peace Corps volunteers were infected with amoebas or malaria. She herself became ill for a time.

"I gained the ability to deal with all kinds of situations and people," she says. "Now when someone is really upset [about a symptom or diagnosis], I say, 'You know, in Africa, it would be about 1,000 times worse.' I try not to take things too seriously."

### **Learning About Happiness**

Bernice Penney ('74, behavioral science) spent an unforgettable Christmas in the Solomon Islands of the South Pacific, near Papua, New Guinea. She and her husband Millard were undergoing training in a little village with no running water and no electricity.

"The people decorated everything with flowers out of the rain forest and sang Christmas carols all night long on Christmas Eve," she said. No presents, no money -- just celebration.

The Penneys applied to the Peace Corps on Millard's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday and were assigned to teach English in a boarding school in the Solomons' easternmost province. Students came from their islands in small, family canoes or on an inter-island supply ship. Students and staff raised most of their own food in the school garden; picked mangoes, papayas and pineapples from the trees; and scavenged the rain forest for edible greens. Although it was "as close to a tropical paradise as you'd find at the time," Penney says, they experienced equatorial heat, primitive sanitation, devastating storms and, on a few occasions, dangerously low supplies of food and water.

"It was not an easy assignment," said Penney, 71, "but it was a wonderful experience for us. We met people with absolutely nothing but the rain forest to survive on, and a lot happier than most people. We learned that you can do something hard and be happy."

## **SIDEBAR**

### **Applying for the Peace Corps**

- \* Call 1-800-424-8580, or go to [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov)
- \* Fill out and submit the application
- \* Peace Corps contacts you for an interview
- \* Obtain medical and legal clearance (approximately a six-month process)
- \* Qualify based on skills and suitability
- \* Applicants request regional preference by continent
- \* Placement is based on current needs in the countries, applicant's skills and any special medical conditions
- \* Volunteers receive:
  - \* A modest living allowance
  - \* Complete medical and dental care
  - \* Transportation to and from country of service
  - \* About \$6,000 upon return home
  - \* Deferred repayment on certain federal student loan programs
  - \* Career help and other services for returned volunteers

\* \* \* \* \*