



— PHOTO COURTESY OF DIANA KINGSTON, RD

Peace Corps volunteer Diana Kingston, RD, models Uganda's favorite fruit.

PEACE CORPS RD: THE TOUGHEST JOB YOU'LL EVER LOVE

By Katie Clark, MPH, RD

"And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

These words, spoken by John F. Kennedy during his 1961 presidential inaugural address, may have been part of what has inspired more than 190,000 Americans to serve as U.S. Peace Corps volunteers. You have probably heard the Peace Corps' slogans: "Life is calling: How far will you go?" and "The toughest job you'll ever love." But is there work for RDs in today's Peace Corps? You may find the answer surprising—and even a little inspiring.

Ditching the Lab Coat

Have you ever thought about switching gears in your career? Do you find yourself wondering if the world really needs another calorie count? What if you could teach food prep in Swahili? Fear not, for you are not alone. Many RDs have joined the Peace Corps, with some good results.

Why would an RD join the Peace Corps? For some, it's a desire for a more rewarding work environment, others look to

catalyze exotic careers overseas, and some simply crave a two-year adventure. The Peace Corps does not keep statistics on the number of RDs who have served or are currently serving as volunteers; instead, it categorizes volunteers by the sector in which they serve (eg, health, education, business development). All Peace Corps volunteers commit to 27 months of service in their assigned developing country: three months of in-country language, technical, and cultural training followed by two years of volunteer service.

To be accepted into the Peace Corps, an applicant must be a U.S. citizen in good health and possess a college degree and skill set that complements the host country's needs. Gone are the days of the draft-dodging Peace Corps volunteer stereotype; today's volunteers are an increasingly diverse population from every imaginable background. Think you're too old to join the Peace Corps? Almost 6% of volunteers are older than 50, bringing years of invaluable experience to the communities they serve.

Food and Culture Clash

Diana Kingston, RD, is a community health Peace Corps volunteer in Uganda. She works in a local hospital and with organizations that support orphans who are HIV positive. One of the greatest challenges Kingston faces is the lack of nutrition education in Uganda's health system. "When we see malnourished children, it is expected that the family provide medicine and food during the hospital stay. It is heartbreaking to see harmful feeding practices perpetuated because of the lack of nutrition education for patients and healthcare providers," she says. To help remedy the problem, Kingston has started teaching a nutrition course at the nursing school affiliated with her hospital, and she has also incorporated nutrition education into a diabetes clinic that previously did not address people's diets.

Holly Bryant, RD, also serves in Uganda. She works primarily with an organization that trains health education technicians in HIV/AIDS awareness, education, and management. As a dietitian from Grand Haven, Mich., Bryant says she knew the food environment in Uganda would be very different from that in the United States. "Here you see a lot of different foods available, but variety is not emphasized. Almost everyone eats matooke, a green banana similar to a plantain. It is cooked, steamed, and prepared just like mashed potatoes," she says.

Kingston affirms the nation's reliance on matooke and says she has already exhausted every banana recipe known to man.

Walking a Fine Line With Food

While everyone who has traveled and lived abroad has experienced cultural differences, Peace Corps training pays particular attention to cultural sensitivity. Volunteer dietitians see this most clearly when they encounter severe malnutrition for the first time. Bryant recounts her initial reaction to the common Ugandan practice of feeding cow's milk to infants as young as 2 and 3 months of age: "At first, you are appalled because of what you learned in school and what you know about human digestion and infant nutrition. And then you realize there is no alternative. When the mother is HIV positive and there is no infant formula around, you really learn to work around other preconceived ideas."

Jessica Barney-Tilahun, MS, RD, served in the Peace Corps in Moldova from 2002 to 2004, working in a regional hospital. "I remember learning to teach in an entirely new way," she says. "My community was matriarchal, with high rates of iron deficiency anemia and a somewhat problematic reliance on vodka. Many of the older women believed that because drinking vodka brings color to your face, it was also a cure for anemia."

Barney-Tilahun says she learned to use humor to her advantage in these situations and eventually developed an ability to teach evidence-based nutrition within the confines of her adopted culture. She adds, "I thought the food would be repetitive in eastern Europe, and I pictured a lot of meat and potatoes. I was not anticipating that they would be eating chicken Jell-O. My hosts would boil the chicken bones, make Jell-O, leave the beak and the feet in the Jell-O, and offer those parts to the guest ... who was usually me, the vegetarian."

The Gift That Keeps on Giving

The Peace Corps experience has an ability to impact your life long after your service. Volunteers often humbly admit that they got more out of the experience than the more deserving populations with whom they worked. Beverly Herman-Rivera, RD, CDE, volunteered in Honduras from 1978 to 1980. She has returned many times to her former Honduran home and says, "Whenever I go back to Honduras, I do nutrition education. I had the opportunity to start what is now a thriving diabetes support group there. The reality is that my experience working in Honduras as a [volunteer] has had an incredibly positive impact on other areas of my life. I wouldn't take that experience back if you paid me a million bucks."

For many volunteers, the Peace Corps is also an introduction to a lifelong career in foreign service or international development. Barney-Tilahun says her experiences in the Peace Corps generated her interest in graduate school. After the Peace Corps, she obtained her master's degree in food policy and applied nutrition from Tufts University while simultaneously studying humanitarian studies initiatives at Harvard. She is trained in emergency and relief nutrition and has worked in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan.

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Barney-Tilahun is currently employed as a nutrition consultant with The World Bank in Washington, D.C., and she credits the Peace Corps with putting her in a career that she truly loves. "Going into the Peace Corps made my professional life possible. In my experience, if you prove you can be successful in the Peace Corps, it's extremely helpful when applying with international organizations," she says.

Criticisms of the Peace Corps

The Peace Corps is not without its critics. Writing in *The New York Times* earlier this year, a former country director opined, "Too often these young volunteers lack the maturity and professional experience to be effective development workers in the 21st century."

Many RDs disagree with this sentiment and point out that dietetic training uniquely prepares them for development work. "If you already have your RD credential, you're a step ahead of many other volunteers. You are trained to work with sick people, you know how to work with non-English populations, and you know how to organize and work with groups," says Barney-Tilahun.

Kingston agrees and offers this defense: "In the U.S., we are taught analytical thinking. Oftentimes, I see rote memorization as the primary teaching tool here [in Uganda], and the culture



Peace Corps volunteer Holly Bryant, RD, shows off local produce at her site in Uganda.

— PHOTO COURTESY OF HOLLY BRYANT, RD

seems to side with suppression of independent thought. I don't have tens of years of nutrition experience behind me, but I am hopeful that my team-based assessments and critical-thinking activities will help my students and their patients in the long run."

Go Forth and Save the World

The skills, traits, and characteristics that make you a successful dietitian in the States can translate well in the Peace Corps. Steve DeBoer, MPH, RD, LD, served in Ecuador in the 1980s in a rural health program, and he often found himself teaching in grade schools. Armed with his guitar and Spanish language skills, DeBoer composed unique nutrition and health songs to entertain and educate his students. He says that same creativity is what propelled his success throughout his subsequent 20-year career as an outpatient dietitian with the Mayo Clinic.

Peace Corps spokesperson Laura Lartigue also emphasizes the creative role that RDs play in the Peace Corps: "Peace Corps volunteers—registered dietitians included—must always be very creative in coming up with solutions to the problems they find in the communities in which they serve. They need to be able to say, 'What can I do or what knowledge can I convey that will allow people to make constructive, long-term changes that will improve their health?'"

As a dietitian, you may ask yourself this question on a daily basis. The Peace Corps provides an array of opportunities for RDs to extend their nutrition talents in developing countries.

To learn more about becoming a volunteer, visit www.peacecorps.gov or call 800-424-8580 for application information.

— Katie Clark, MPH, RD, is a private practice dietitian in San Diego. She was a reproductive health specialist and Peace Corps volunteer in Ilam, Nepal, from 2001 to 2003.

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