**Peace Corps: A Public Diplomacy Incubator**

***By Bill Wanlund***

As Peace Corps celebrates its 60th anniversary, it is President John Kennedy who usually gets the credit for its conception. But if JFK is considered the father of the Peace Corps, Hubert Humphrey might be its grandfather, for it was he who first floated the idea in 1957 Senate legislation. It gathered little enthusiasm, in part because of opposition by career FSOs horrified at the idea of a ragtag band of largely unsupervised young Americans spread around the world.

But on October 14, 1960, candidate Kennedy brought the idea back to life when he sketched out his notion of a Peace Corps in extemporaneous 2:00 a.m. campaign remarks at the University of Michigan. Kennedy asked whether his audience of 10,000 students would be willing to “contribute part of [their] life to this country.” And, with the United States deeply in the Cold War, JFK couched his idea in competitive rhetoric, saying it would help show the world that “a free society can compete.” This time the idea took hold.

From its inception, the Peace Corps has been an element of America’s “soft power.” The agency’s enabling legislation—introduced in the Senate by Humphrey in 1961 at by then-President JFK’s request—specified that the new agency was not only to provide grass-roots development assistance, but also to “help promote a better understanding of the American people on the part of the peoples served.”

That sounds like public diplomacy, and indeed, a number of former Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) found they liked that dimension of the job. Peace Corps does not keep records of where PCVs go after their service, but PDAA boasts a few members who were inspired to continue their work overseas.

One is **Mike Anderson**, a PCV in Malaysia 1968-71. He and another future PD officer, Charles Silver, were in the same Peace Corps group. Mike tells of “the substantial impact of the PC as a training ground for future FSOs, including PD officers.” He credits the Peace Corps with giving him “a life-defining, career-enhancing experience.” With roots in Minnesota, Mike had never traveled abroad except to nearby Canada until he was selected as a Peace Corps Volunteer to Malaysia. The opportunity to serve overseas and learn about diverse Asian cultures opened his mind and eventually got him interested in the Foreign Service. ([**~~Click here for Mike’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2907&preview=true))

Like Mike, **Charles Silver**also rates his time in PC as “a life-changing experience.” It led him to abandon one career track—in physics – for the Foreign Service. Charles, who’d had no experience outside of the U.S. before his stint as a PC teacher, found a new definition of “foreign.” He writes that he “learned a lot about myself and America from seeing how other people put their lives together.” And, as it happened, he and Mike weren’t the only ones from those Malaysia years who found a career with USIS: On a Southeast Asia Desk Officer visit to the Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, “Mr. Charles” ran into one of his former students—by then, 26 years later, a senior USIS FSN. ([**~~Click here for Charles’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2911&preview=true))

**Joe O’Donnell**heard Kennedy’s 1961 “Ask not…” Inaugural Address in person and was inspired. Six years later, he was headed for a Peace Corps assignment in the mountains of Colombia. His two-plus years there saw “a few modest successes leavened by some predictable setbacks,” including a city boy’s real-life lesson in agronomics.  And, he gained a lovely wife and a new way of looking at America and the world. Still, he admits to “a guilty feeling that I had gotten more out of my experience than I put into it” – a not-uncommon sentiment among RPCVs. ([**~~Click here for Joe’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2915&preview=true))

**Bob Schmidt**also took JFK’s words to heart and, in October 1963, five months after graduating from college, began training in Hawaii for a Peace Corps assignment teaching in North Borneo (now Sabah, Malaysia). A budding historian who’d had an eye toward Europe, Bob found that the Peace Corps “punted me towards Asia for most of the rest of my life.” After teaching stints that included Laos, South Vietnam, and Taiwan, he joined USIA in 1985, where assignments included postings in South America and East and South Asia – but not Europe. ([**~~Click here for Bob’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2918&preview=true))

**Dave Miller**was a PCV in South Korea in the 1970s and says then-Ambassador Philip Habib and other Embassy staffers “encouraged Volunteers to take the Foreign Service exam.” Dave thinks that, “eventually over a dozen of us joined the Department of State and USIA, including Ambassadors Kathleen Stephens and Joseph Donovan.” His first two tours were in, yes, Korea, 1976-80, giving him “over seven very eventful years” in the hermit kingdom. His subsequent overseas assignments were all in East Asia — Hong Kong, Taipei, Phnom Penh, and Shanghai. ([**~~Click here for Dave’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2921&preview=true))

**Tom Hull**is another who traces his Foreign Service career directly to his Peace Corps experiences, in his case as a teacher in Gbinti, Sierra Leone, in 1968-70. More than three decades later, he returned – this time as the U.S. Ambassador. Tom says his Embassy was able to promote peace, democracy, and human rights thanks to his PC service, which afforded him exceptional credibility and cultural context. After retirement, he was instrumental in getting the Peace Corps to return to Sierra Leone, where operations had been suspended during the civil war of the 1990s. “At that point,” he says, “my Peace Corps and diplomatic service came full circle. My debt to those villagers after 40 years was finally repaid.” ([**~~Click here for Tom’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2924&preview=true))

**Joan McKniff**was a PCV in Colombia during a turbulent time in America, beginning in 1963 “when President Kennedy was alive, and [coming] home to Johnson and Vietnam in ’65.” And, she found, her gender was an obstacle to finding employment: In response to Joan’s application to work overseas with CARE, a representative of the organization called and explained that “they did not hire women for those jobs.” Joan pursued other opportunities; it would be another 20 years before she would join USIA. ([**~~Click here for Joan’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2927&preview=true))

**Michael Boyle**graduated from Stanford without a clear idea of what to do next, so in 1967 he followed a friend into the Peace Corps (it also seemed like a good alternative to being drafted). He went to teach English in Leyte Province, the Philippines, where no phones and iffy infrastructure were the order of the day. It was a “seminal experience,” Michael writes, one that inspired his decision to join USIA – after, perhaps inevitably, being drafted after all upon return from the Philippines. Peace Corps “was a huge turning point in my life, and something I have been proud of doing ever since,” he writes. ([**~~Click here for Michael’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2930&preview=true))

**John Dickson’s**Peace Corps tour was as an English teacher in Gabon, 1976-79. His first exposure to the work USIS did was at the American Cultural Center in Libreville, whose resources he drew upon for teaching materials (and baseball scores). John says, “You can draw a direct link from Peace Corps to my interest in working in public diplomacy.” ([**~~Click here for John’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2933&preview=true))

**Steve Telkins**went to Ghana in 1962, which makes him practically part of Peace Corps’ origin story: His was the second group to go to Ghana (the first country to receive PCVs), during a time of turmoil and change — and hope — in Africa. Steve’s Ghana experience led directly to his subsequent career at USIA, VOA, and elsewhere. His account of the conditions, frustrations, and rewards of his time in Ghana is a textbook look at Peace Corps’ early years. ([**~~Click here for Steve’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2935&preview=true))

As for me – **Bill Wanlund**– I’d embarked on an uninspiring career and was taken by the idea of the Peace Corps. I was sent to teach English in Morocco, and it was there that I came to understand that the image most Americans had of their own country – the one I had accepted growing up – wasn’t necessarily shared by the rest of the world. But America had a story to tell, and I wanted to try to help tell it. ([**~~Click here for Bill’s story~~**](https://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?p=2939&preview=true))

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*What’s your Peace Corps story? We would be pleased to add it to our collection on our PDAA website. Send your story to*[***admin@publicdiplomacy.org.***](mailto:admin@publicdiplomacy.org)