

Peace Corps

Volunteers bring 'energy' to others

The first day on the job is almost always tough — especially when an "employer" doesn't know what to do with a new worker.

Ann Trutner's first day as an agricultural extensionist for the Peace Corps was no exception. Her "employers" — 15 Liberian men — had never worked with a woman before, let alone an American woman.

"They didn't know what to do with me," Trutner says. "They didn't know they should tell me to do things. They kept telling me to sit down and rest and not get dirty."

Women weren't supposed to do agricultural work, the men thought, so they sent Trutner to the kitchen for 'women's work.' But Trutner wasn't one to give in easily. She trudged her way back through the bush to find the men, who still tried to make her sit down so she wouldn't work.

That scenario went on for several days.

Then the Peace Corps advised Trutner that she should begin showing the local farmers improved methods of planting casaba, a potato-like tuber. So she left the village to learn everything she could about one of the region's major crops. Her return to the village was a triumphant one.

"When I returned, I had a role, a title — casaba specialist — and therefore the men felt I had a place there, and it was easier for them because they could identify me with an activity."

Trutner's initial work experience was only one of many adjustments she and all Peace Corps volunteers must make when they work in a foreign land with "strange" customs. And this "culture shock" is probably what makes being a Peace Corps volunteer so difficult, she says.

"The pace is different, the sounds are different, the speech is different, the whole climate is different, your time schedules are different. I think that's what people have the hardest time with," Trutner says.

Marsha Swartz' experience as a volunteer in Uganda was similar to Trutner's in that she, too, had some difficulty adjusting to her new life.

"The first six months are the most difficult because you're making so many adjustments. And you learn in (the Peace Corp's six-month) training that this will be a difficult time. You are adjusting to a new job, a new place, a new style of living. A lot of changes are coming about all at once," says Swartz, who now works on campus as a Peace Corps coordinator at the Career Planning and Placement Service.

While in Uganda during 1967-68, Swartz, who volunteered with her husband, helped get the village's first secondary school off the ground.

When they arrived at the small school, there was no blackboard. So she found a can of black paint and made one. But that may have been one of the easier adjustments to make.

Swartz remembers organizing her first meeting in her new community. She told the villagers to come at 7 p.m. They arrived promptly at 9 p.m., and Swartz soon discovered they were consistently one or two hours "late" — by American standards.

"It was a matter of me adjusting my (internal) clock, and once I did that, everything worked fine," Swartz says.

Then about six months after their arrival in Uganda, Swartz and her husband's wrist watches stopped ticking. It was then they realized "the whole idea of rushing to meet deadlines or hustling off to be somewhere on time just didn't matter so much anymore. We could slow down and enjoy the sunset, which always went down at 7 p.m. and came up at 7 a.m., and that was our 'clock.' So we just woke



Photo by Brian Erb

Marsha Swartz, who taught in a secondary school in Uganda while with the Peace Corps, calls the experience "the best" of her life.

up and guess within an hour or two what time it was, and we realized, 'Hey, that's what everybody was doing.'"

Swartz and Trutner are two of about 100,000 Americans who have served as Peace Corps volunteers in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific since 1961. Nearly 1,100 of those volunteers are University graduates, and the Eugene community has about 200 former volunteers. Trutner, a Peace Corps recruiter and Seattle resident, was on campus last week interviewing potential volunteers.

There are probably about as many reasons for joining the Peace Corps as there are volunteers, according to Swartz and Trutner. Yet both women emphasized they did not have grand illusions of changing the world.

Both did want to see the world, though, but not from a tourist's point of view. "I didn't want to be a tourist," Trutner says. "I really rebelled against that. I wanted to live in a community with people."

Like Trutner, Swartz was anxious to glimpse more of the world than her tiny Idaho community afforded her. She and her husband were just graduating from the University of Idaho in Moscow and weren't sure what they wanted to do with their lives. So when the Peace Corps offered the Swartz' a job, they took it.

The Peace Corps is one of many organizations that sends volunteers into Third World nations in the hopes of ultimately bettering those nations' standards of living.

But unlike most of these philanthropic groups, the Peace Corps does not supply its volunteers with modern machinery — or much machinery at all, for that matter. They do not have sophisticated tools, chemicals or money to give their hosts. They do not even have cars, which means they walk a lot — about 10 miles a day for Trutner.

The villagers expected Trutner, who spent much of her day demonstrating new farming techniques, to have expensive American goods. What she had was a hoe and simple planting materials.

The people, however, were conditioned to getting something for nothing by other organizations — and usually ending up with nothing.

"There are so many agencies that come in and promise to bring about self-sufficiency in agriculture. They bring all these tools, supplies and assistances and then never come back. It happened several times while I was there. 'Oh, we're going to bring you rototillers and tractors,'" Trutner says, mimicking those organizations. "Then everyone has a meeting. They cook food and celebrate. And nothing happens."

So because of the villagers' unsuccessful experiences with other foreign organizations, they didn't take Trutner seriously at first. Yet they still expected a "magical truck to

come in with all these supplies."

"People would always come to me and say 'Give me fertilizers, give me rototillers, give me tractors.' And I would say 'I don't have that. I don't work with any of that.' My program didn't need any of that. I was very self-sufficient," she says.

The Peace Corps deliberately doesn't supply its volunteers with expensive equipment, both women say. In fact, "That was one of the prime objectives — not to walk in and supply things that would not last after we were gone," Swartz says.

Instead, the volunteers act as catalysts for bringing about life-enhancing projects, which communities can continue even after the volunteers have left.

Through Trutner's efforts, 60 farmers learned superior planting methods for tubers and other crops, which increased the tuber crop's yield during a year which saw traditionally planted crops washed away by rain. Trutner also initiated the building of the village's first food market. The roof was just being put up when she left Liberia.

Swartz and her husband's efforts put the 3-year-old secondary school in their village on firm ground. And for the first time, the local women were able to attend high school without traveling to the other side of Uganda. The husband-wife team also organized a community project that turned a swamp into a soccer field.

"I hope the people we worked with in the schools realize they themselves can do this, that they have the energy to put into it," Swartz says.

Trutner says she now understands, at least a bit more, why her Liberian friends were living in poverty and doing little about it. "These people have lived with (poverty) for 30, 40, 50 years. I can see why they get tired, I can see why they aren't as active or are not as protesting because they've done it 20 times before and failed. I think the fresh energy we bring into the village is real positive," Trutner says.

When Swartz first returned to the United States, she remembers walking into a grocery store and staring, as though for the first time, at all the different foods to select from on the shelves. Until Americans see it for themselves, most cannot comprehend a lifestyle centered from dawn till dusk on finding enough food to eat, she says.

But Swartz says she remembers the joys, as well as the struggles, of her second home.

"I have images in my mind of Uganda that I will never forget and I want to go back," she says. "It turned out to be the best experience of our lives."

By Joan Herman

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