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Spot in Peace Corps competitive

Although a daily ritual for most graduating seniors is worrying about how long they'll be unemployed, a lucky few find themselves working a minimum of four jobs simultaneously.

With a political science degree and an international relations degree from the University of Northern Illinois, Richard Bremer founded a youth group and a woman's business group. He also taught junior high school and adult English classes, and overhauled a Costa Rica water system — all in a period of two years.

Besides gaining credentials for their careers, Bremer and thousands of other Peace Corps volunteers also learn an unforgettable insight into world diversity, but only after enduring a long competitive application process.

According to Anna Aguilar, the University's former campus representative for the Peace Corps, 97 percent of the volunteers who spend two years helping solve pressing problems of developing countries are college graduates.

"The Peace Corps helps anyone, no matter the field," Aguilar said. "Most employers see 'Peace Corps' on your resume and know if you could spend two years over there, you can definitely last at their job."

The Peace Corps also provides a program in which volunteers are able to incorporate their stay overseas into part of their graduate schooling, Aguilar said.

Though most volunteers intend on going into an international field, Aguilar said, all fields will benefit from people who have learned an understanding of what works in the world.

"There are so many visual constraints that we don't and can't know about as outsiders," Aguilar said.

Beryl Brinkman, who gained a broader perspective of the world by volunteering in 1967, continues to remain involved with people who make the policies.

Brinkman is the president of the West Cascade Return Peace Corps Association; about 180 return volunteers work together to continue to help develop countries through fundraisers in the United States.

The Return Peace Corps Association also acts as a transition stage for returning volunteers.

"We're here if they need us, even just to talk," Brinkman said.

What most volunteers like to talk about are their accomplishments, which have evolved through resourcefulness and self-sufficiency.

Bremer, who returned from Costa Rica in 1993, helped empower women of a small coffee-manufacturing village by founding a woman's business group, which contributed greatly to their families' economies.

"That project was very gratifying for me, even though I didn't know if it would be very appealing to me at first," Bremer said. "But by the end it was my favorite project."

Putting projects into action becomes difficult overseas because of an accessibility problem to tools, transportation and language, Aguilar said.

Aguilar, who spent two years in Niger, West Africa, where only three villagers were literate, said that one can feel isolated and very frustrated at times.

However, there are other Peace Corps volunteers and a captain in near proximity, whom meet regularly. Aguilar stressed the importance of mail as a life-saver.

"The people of the village do look out for you," Bremer said. "It just takes a lot of time to get adjusted because things take longer due to their different priorities and motives."

Current applicant Lauren Glickman would like to come away from her stay with a sense of independence and confidence, which she believes can be done even though she is filled with fear now.

The process of acceptance, which Glickman is in the middle of, is so lengthy that Aguilar suggests the application be turned in nine to 12 months before estimated departure.

Countries with certain program needs request the Peace Corps, which was founded in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy, and eventually have the final say to which college graduates are recruited, Aguilar said.

To apply, one must be a U.S. citizen with good medical and legal backgrounds and must possess required technical skills needed by the host countries.

"It is a really competitive process for the volunteers, especially those with liberal arts degrees," Aguilar said. "However, those with technical backgrounds in biology and chemistry qualify for most requirements and get in easy."

When the application is turned in, the Seattle office conducts a formal interview within the first two weeks of the term, with only a very limited number of spaces available. Legal and medical examinations are then conducted by the Washington, D.C. office, which in turn sends the resumes to the specific countries.

"To show that education counts as much as life experience in choosing applicants," Aguilar said, "out of approximately 150 applicants from the U of O, only 20 or so are accepted."

Aguilar continues to encourage students to come to the Peace Corps office, Room 12A Hendricks Hall, and ask the new campus representative, Laura Taylor, any questions.

However, Bremer offers his own advice, without hesitation, to anyone thinking about joining the Peace Corps.

"Don't think twice about it, you've only got one life."

— Kristin Mihalko

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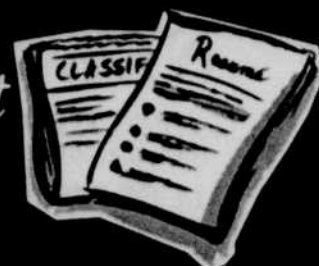
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