

Spirit in Action—Serving in the Peace Corps

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By Shannon Whitney

Shortly after graduating college with a degree in Biology, I entered the Peace Corps. Six months later, I was sent to Tanzania, in East Africa.

I went with the idea that I could really somehow “save” what I thought would be poor starving people. It took about 24 hours before I realized I had no idea what they needed or what I had to offer. The rest of my stay was spent discovering my usefulness.

The Peace Corps is a wonderful organization because of its grass-roots approach. Every volunteer spends six to eight weeks with a family while they attend language and culture classes. We each go to our posts with a better understanding of the people we will work with. This basic show of respect was the key to a successful Peace Corps experience.

I was sent to be a teacher at the forestry training institute in northern Tanzania. Students came to the school from all over Africa to receive a certificate or diploma that would allow them to become foresters.

While I did do the standard teacher duties, which took some of the load off the other teachers, I believe my greatest contribution was on a much smaller or personal scale.

Every day the village kids would teach me more Swahili—often it was slang that got me into some trouble. I taught them English slang, how to make corn husk dolls and play dodge ball. I spent my evenings cleaning rice on my back porch and talking about the day with my neighbors. If the electricity went out—they cooked my dinner for me.

Through these experiences I believe I learned what it truly means to be a Tanzanian and, in turn, I was able to balance their only other experience with Americans—Dynasty and Dallas—with a more realistic view.

I, like most other Peace Corps volunteers, eventually made it home. Many Peace Corps volunteers go into foreign development type jobs. I’m sure all of us share our stories like I’m doing now.

My hope is that the knowledge we’ve gained and share will translate into more organizations giving aid *not* in the form of huge tractors and land rovers that end up rusting in the fields because of the lack of replacement parts or diesel fuel. Instead, we should work to show respect and try to understand the specific needs of individuals and communities.

This is my hope for Tanzania and for aid in all forms.