

Volunteers serving around the world:

Peace Corps is changing, healthy

By PAUL BARTON

Until John Kennedy remembered it in the spring of 1961, the Peace Corps existed only as a forgotten campaign promise.

The corps was a dazzling idea. American volunteers would live in underdeveloped countries, aiding natives in their battle against hunger, poverty and illiteracy. Acclaim rang out from all corners as volunteers, especially the young, rushed to join.

Today, although it no longer receives the publicity it once did, the Peace Corps remains a healthy organization. But it has changed in some important ways. Established as an arm of the State Department, it became a part of Action, the federal volunteer service agency, in 1971. In addition, it no longer accepts volunteers as freely as it once did.

While it once had an enlistment of 15,000, the Peace Corps today numbers approximately 6,000. However, Dwight Linsley, Texas A&M's campus Peace Corps representative, says this number reflects increasingly selective recruiting practices, rather than a decrease in interest.

In contrast to 1961, today's Peace Corps demands more than just the minimum age of 18 and a willingness to serve. Although a college degree isn't mandatory, Linsley says a volunteer has a slim chance of being accepted without one unless he already possesses a skill the Peace Corps can use. Accepted applications now usually come from persons trained in vital areas such as medicine or agriculture.

"We're really looking for skills," said Wayne Snyder, a regional recruitment specialist for Action. "Most of the people who go into the Peace Corps today have their college degrees."

Snyder said at Texas A&M most Peace Corps volunteers come from the College of Agriculture, holding degrees in fields ranging from entomology to range science. The second largest number come from business fields, followed by education.

Linsley said the corps accepts people with degrees in other areas as well, often training them to handle specific jobs. For the future he sees the Peace Corps accepting more bachelor of arts degree holders, a practice that was common before the organization became skill-oriented during the Nixon years.

Snyder said the Peace Corps' changing standards mirror the changed attitudes of college students since 1961. Today's graduates, as opposed to those of previous years, are much more interested in "tangible skills," he said. "The college student of the 77-78 variety is much more grade conscious. They're caring about their future."

Linsley, a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines in 1969-1972, said agriculture remains a "scarce skill area" for the Corps. This largely explains why the Peace Corps put a full-time representative at Texas A&M, he said.

Peace Corps recruiting at Texas A&M was not very successful a few years ago, Linsley said. He added that recruiting has picked up recently, attributing the increase to the university's increased participation in programs dealing with international problems.

Why would a graduate student want to enter the Peace Corps? Graduates feel the corps gives them a chance to travel and to become fluent in a foreign language. Most importantly, it gives them an immediate chance to utilize their newly learned skills in an important way.

Linsley agreed that a person in the Peace Corps with little experience in his field "could be in a position of a lot more responsibility than he would be if he were in a starting level job with a big business concern here."

Tito French, a Texas A&M

graduate student working on his doctorate in horticulture, confirms this view. While serving in El Salvador in 1973-75, he helped establish a multiple cropping system for small farmers, enabling them to grow various vegetables in addition to their base crops of corn and beans. French said the farmers were able to use the vegetables as a money crop.

"It was tremendous practical experience," said French. "I was able to put into practice what I was learning in the classroom. There's no way I could have gotten that experience in the U.S. in that short a period of time."

But what about the humanitarian aspect of the Peace Corps? In 1961 Newsweek magazine called it "the youthful dream of forging a better world." Is this still an attraction?

Linsley said he can't imagine a Peace Corps volunteer who isn't concerned about people. But he added that an interest in learning more about other countries or a desire to have an adventure were also legitimate reasons for volunteering.

He also said most Peace Corps volunteers are well received in a host country.

"They're much better accepted than the average American,"

Linsley said. "They're there saying that they are interested in people and don't want to exploit them."

Carla Shearer, a health education specialist for the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, agreed. She was a Peace Corps volunteer in Panama in 1967-69. "Once they found out you were with the Peace Corps they were very receptive and warm," said Shearer.

During her stay in Panama, she said, she was referred to as "one of Kennedy's children." Shearer said the term symbolized the love and respect Panamanians and Latin Americans in general had for John Kennedy.

Linsley said the program "gives other people a different way of looking at Americans," and added that he once heard a Peace Corps staff director in the Philippines remark, "If that was all the Peace Corps accomplished, it would be worth it."

However, natives have a hard time understanding the motives of Americans. "They have a hard time trying to figure out why an American with all the fantastic things that they think there are in this country would want to come to where they are," Linsley said.

Can a Peace Corps volunteer

become frustrated? "If you go into it with the attitude you'll change the world you're going to be disappointed," Linsley said. "Things don't work as well in an underdeveloped nation as they do here. You've got to learn to put up with that kind of frustration. You need to have small goals and a lot of patience."

He said success or failure in a Peace Corps assignment is up to the individual volunteer. According to Linsley, volunteers have a lot of freedom overseas and can choose whether to work hard or not. "Every situation is unique," he said.

Shearer also thinks a volunteer must guard against frustration.

"I didn't change the community in two years," she said. "I wouldn't say flatly I came back frustrated; I would say I wished I had done more than I did." Among her accomplishments she listed both good public relations work and friends she made for the United States.

One thing that hasn't changed about the Peace Corps is the experience of culture shock faced by volunteers.

"There are a lot of things you take for granted here that are not available there," said Linsley,

mentioning the scarcity of running water and electricity he encountered in the Philippines. "It changes your perspective on life in this country."

The Peace Corps remains a two-year program and volunteers continue to receive both living and readjustment allowances. The living allowance is given to the volunteer while he is abroad. In 1976 it ranged from \$113 to \$470 a month, depending on the country he served in. Snyder said the money is issued in the currency of the host nation and is "geared to be a middle income allowance in that given country."

The readjustment allowance, on the other hand, is given to the volunteer when he returns to the United States.

When Peace Corps members return to the United States they still have to worry about finding a job. French, said the ex-Peace Corps volunteer is at an advantage when it comes to negotiating a starting salary because of his two years of service.

French added that a volunteer can accrue non-financial benefits as well.

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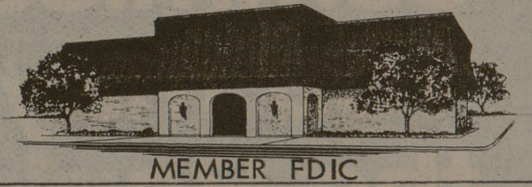
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James E. Scamardo
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