



Oregon State Bar Bulletin — JUNE 2004

Answering the Call

For many, the desire to help others lingers long after Peace Corps service

By Melody Finnemore

When President John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps in 1961, he challenged Americans to share their knowledge and expertise to help developing nations become healthier, better educated and thrive within the global community. Many Oregon attorneys answered the call and learned not only that they had something of value to teach, but also plenty to learn. Whether they served during the 1960s or the '90s, the same commitment to public service that inspired some of these attorneys to join the Peace Corps also guided them toward a career in which they continue to fulfill their commitment to building a better world.

LARRY WOB BROCK

Lawrence Wobbrock Trial Lawyer PC

After graduating with a degree in sociology from the University of Oregon, Larry Wobbrock taught high school for a year in Georgia before he and his wife, Peggy, decided to join the Peace Corps in 1971.

'We were both angry about the Vietnam War - kind of like I'm angry about the Iraq War – and we felt the world had enough soldiers,' he said.

Peace Corps assigned them to Senegal, where they built medical aid and birthing stations for their village. When Larry and Peggy returned to the village in 1994, they were recognized by many of the people they worked with 22 years earlier and found the \$3,000 aid center they built had grown.

'The village had collected donations and I got a match from a Rotary group in Portland, but I never told the people in my village that some of the money came from America. They thought it was all theirs, and that's why the center continues to thrive,' he said.

During his service as a Peace Corps volunteer, Wobbrock also helped reinforce water wells with steel bars so they wouldn't collapse.

'The people there worked so damn hard. They could work 10 times harder than we could, and they were in the hot, African sun all day,' he said. 'And the people were grateful for anything you could do for them.'

Other memories of Senegal include the 'pillboxes' that dotted the landscape. The concrete shelters were built to house soldiers who fought the Americans during World War II, when the French territory was an ally of the Nazis.

'You'd never want to go inside them because they were probably full of snakes, but you could lie on top and see the stars in this intensely black, African sky. You could see all kinds of things in the sky that you can't see here,' he said.

His experience as a Peace Corps volunteer provided a new world view and some invaluable lessons about the overriding importance of relationships, Wobbrock said.

'It made me understand that material things are not all that important. It made me understand that there are many ways of looking at the world and that Americans have a very narrow view,' he said. 'The people I lived with didn't have anything material, but they did have a deep spiritual life and a deep affection for each other.'

When he and Peggy came back to America in 1972, Larry worked for five years as a carpenter and attended law school at Lewis & Clark College.

'When I went to law school, lawyers were in the forefront of the civil rights movement and I was interested in encouraging progressive social change,' Wobbrock said.

He graduated in 1977 and started his own firm in the early '80s, specializing in medical malpractice and personal injury cases. Pro bono work also is an essential part of his practice.

'I've been given a lot and I want to share it. The opportunity to be a lawyer is not something to be taken lightly, and the ability to spread it around to help people is something that should be done whenever possible.'

THERESA DEIBELE

Ater Wynne LLP

Theresa Deibele's interest in other cultures led her to the Peace Corps in the early '90s as she earned a degree in communications and humanities at Stanford University.

'I guess the main motivation was to satisfy my curiosity about the world, and I'd always had an interest in different languages, foods and cultures. I also wanted to challenge myself in ways that I didn't think were possible here,' she said. 'In retrospect my motivations were somewhat selfish and not necessarily to change the world. That was probably good because it kept me going through the hard times, and there were many.'

Deibele went through her share of frustration and isolation as she taught math, helped build a literacy center for women and compiled a Peace Corps cookbook while working in Chad from 1992 to '94. However, there were plenty of positive experiences, too.

'International Women's Day on March 8 is quite a celebration in other parts of the world, especially in Chad,' she said. 'I also taught the girls in my class how to do American dances, and we had a soccer game where the men played the women and the women won.'

Even the difficult times created some positive results over the long term, Deibele said.

'I think I went into Peace Corps as a perfectionist and I really had to let go of that there because it's impossible to do things perfectly in Chad and get anything done. I learned to value adequacy over perfection in order to get things done,' she said. 'It also strengthened my willingness to take risks, like learning another language. I may not speak it perfectly, but I can try something new.'

Deibele carried that commitment to public service with her as she attended law school at the University of Arizona. While earning her law degree she also obtained a master's degree in public administration. She graduated in 1999 and moved back to Portland, her hometown, hoping to work with nonprofit organizations and government agencies. As a public finance lawyer, she deals with government financing for the state's tribal groups.

'Professionally, I think Peace Corps has given me great resourcefulness. I can work without much supervision, and I think I thrive on that. It also developed my sense of humor. There were so many foibles in Chad that I learned to laugh at myself. You sort of learn to roll with the punches a lot more,' Deibele said. 'I never anticipated how much Peace Corps would continue to impact my life. It has been a part of every professional interview I've ever had and it's still really fresh for me.'

Life as a Peace Corps volunteer continues to encourage her sense of adventure as well. Deibele worked for Legal Aid in Cambodia during college, studied Spanish in Bolivia and Peru, and spent her honeymoon in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. She continues to travel with her husband and two daughters, ages 20 months and 2 months.

'My Peace Corps experience, if anything, fueled my interest in other cultures and travel,' she said.

JOHN STEVASON

Lane Powell Spears Lubersky LLP

John Stevason headed to Columbia in 1967 with a degree in physics from Princeton, a shaky grasp of Spanish and a Peace Corps assignment to help high-school teachers in Cali improve the way they taught science.

'That was the theory, but the reality was I ended up in the barrios digging the foundation for a school. I started in education from the ground up, literally,' he said. 'I went there thinking about all the good deeds I was going to do, but far more was done for me than the other way around.'

Stevason, who was born and raised in New York City, said Peace Corps' offer of two years in Colombia was an exciting opportunity for a young man who didn't really know what he wanted to do for a career.

'I thought if all people didn't want to live in New York City there was something wrong with them. It really opened my eyes to a very different way of life,' he said. 'There was so much I had taken for granted that really needed to be challenged, that life was not a progression to a certain point and that you need to enjoy the journey.'

That lesson came alive during 'feria,' a holiday fair that featured bull-fighting, scores of tourists and a non-stop party,

Stevason said.

'For shopkeepers it would seem like an incredible chance to make money, but I noticed they would close by eleven or noon. I asked one of the shopkeepers why and he said, 'Well, I can make enough money to live by eleven and then close and enjoy the feria.'

During his Peace Corps service, Stevason met his wife, Carmenza. He married her seven years after meeting her in Colombia, then brought her to the Northwest when he moved to Portland. Peace Corps also helped define his career path. Stevason earned his law degree at New York University Law School and now practices employment and computer law.

'My father was a lawyer so that's the last thing I wanted to be, but I recognized the value of working within the system,' he said. 'It really did change my life, and it made me want to become a lawyer. Peace Corps immersed me in people and I loved it, and I also felt I could accomplish things within the system.'

STEPHEN GRIFFITH

Stoel Rives LLP

Life in Liberia returns easily in a series of vivid memories for Stephen Griffith, even though it's been some three decades since he served as a Peace Corps volunteer there.

'I remember the sound of a tropical thunderstorm, with the lightening flashing and the rain beating on the tin roof of my house so loud that you couldn't be heard. It was literally deafening,' he said. 'The school where I taught was about a half mile from the village, and I remember the kids walking along the side of the road with their books on their heads.'

Griffith, who taught high school about 125 miles inland from Monrovia, also coached soccer while serving as a volunteer from 1970 to '71. The team would travel for hours in an open-backed bus to compete against youth in other villages.

'We had 30 to 40 kids standing up in the back of the bus like cattle, singing the whole way,' he said.

Griffith graduated from Harvard College in 1967 with a degree in social sciences. He had studied sub-Saharan Africa during a couple of years of graduate work at Oxford University, and was excited to see the culture in real life as a Peace Corps volunteer. He came away with more than he bargained for.

'It unalterably changed how I interact with people. I went into the Peace Corps dangerously close to treating people as means, and I emerged treating them much more as ends,' Griffith said. 'Liberia is very relational, and I was brought up short by people who demanded to be recognized for their value and treated accordingly before you ever conducted business with them.'

When he graduated from Stanford University's law school in 1977, it was with a determination to 'achieve justice and afford change.'

'I think it's always given me perspective on our society, and I'm much more able to assess what's good or less than good, what we should think about changing and also what's very precious about America,' Griffith said.

His former students help remind him of those values. Many of them moved to the United States, and he attended a reunion with them in Atlanta, Ga., last Labor Day weekend.

'I've been very lucky. I've been able to keep in touch with a lot of my students. They're all in their forties and fifties now, and they're like my first family.'

Though his days now are filled with trial law and probate litigation, Griffith still makes time to serve as an educator. He teaches Lincoln High School students about the U.S. Constitution. He served on the Portland School Board for eight years and coached soccer, albeit without the open-backed bus for team transport. He and his wife talk often about joining Peace Corps someday.

'It was an extraordinary experience and the best two years of my life,' he said. 'There's always a need and an opportunity to help.'

ROBERT MOORE

Bullivant Houser Bailey PC

Robert Moore knew he wanted to be an attorney when he graduated with a bachelor's degree in English from the University of California at Berkeley in 1977. Still, he wasn't quite ready to embark upon a legal career.

'My brother really impressed upon me at that point that it would be a huge mistake to go right to law school,' he said. Moore felt he had three options. He already had been accepted to a graduate program in Edinburgh, Scotland, but he also was considering a stint in the military.

'Every male in my family - literally back to the Civil War - had been in the military, so it was a natural thing to think about at the time,' he said.

The Peace Corps also was a possibility and the most attractive of the three for Moore, who had volunteered for the American Civil Liberties Union during college. 'That was kind of an eye-opening experience. I was on the complaint desk where people could walk in off the street and make a complaint, so I dealt with some civil rights issues,' he said.

Less than a week after graduating from college, Moore was on a plane for Atlanta, Ga., where he was to undergo three months of training before heading to Morocco for his Peace Corps service.

'Atlanta was a culture shock for me because I was born and bred in San Francisco. They had red dirt and talked differently. It was more of a culture shock for me than Morocco because I was prepared for Morocco,' he said.

Moore taught English as a second language and enjoyed two years of sightseeing in a land filled with ancient cities, ornate palaces, rich history and romantic mystery for most Americans who saw the movie 'Casablanca.'

'For a kid who had no common sense to go over there and be of some help and make it, it was a lot of fun,' he said. 'I hate to hear that some of the terrorists have come from Morocco, and I was really sorry about the bombing in Casablanca.'

Though he didn't expect to change the world as a Peace Corps volunteer, he was pleasantly surprised to garner the respect teachers are given in other cultures. Moore, who volunteers for his parish, his children's schools and the Little League board of directors, also walked away from the experience with a lifelong appreciation for what it means to be privileged.

'Almost on a daily basis, I look around and think, 'My God, I live like a king.' I don't, by American standards, but we are unbelievably privileged here,' said Moore, a securities lawyer. 'I'm making more than 99.9 percent of the earth's population, I enjoy what I do and I can't ask for more than that.'

A Taste for service: all in the family

Wanderlust, self-sufficiency and the desire to help others are hereditary if the Tauman family is any indication. Portland attorneys Chuck and Nancy Tauman have shared a life-long love of travel. The pair met in Italy as college students in 1964, and Nancy lived in Peru for a time while she taught school.

'I lived with a relatively wealthy family and taught poor kids, and I was fascinated by the juxtaposition between the haves and the have-nots,' she said.

As the Vietnam War escalated and the Taumans watched their friends either get drafted or move to Canada, they decided to join the Peace Corps. They moved to the Dominican Republic in 1968 and trained rural teachers to incorporate Western techniques. Their village of 1,000 people made a lasting impression on them both.

'One of the things that struck me about living in an underdeveloped country is that most Americans, with the exception of the very poor, have security. By and large, we know we have a place to live, and we know we'll have food to eat,' Nancy Tauman said. 'When we lived in the Dominican Republic, we would put a small mound of garbage out each week and by the time people went through it there was virtually nothing left.'

Chuck Tauman said he was amazed by people's ability to make something work out of nothing. 'I was struck by the resourcefulness of the people. It wasn't a society that was primitive - they had electricity and they had some sense of modern conveniences,' he said. 'One of the lessons I learned is the dignity of self-sufficiency.'

Nancy Tauman, an attorney at Ramis Crew Corrigan & Bachrach, and Chuck Tauman, who opened his own office, have carried those lessons throughout their legal careers. 'You learn great problem-solving skills in the Peace Corps, because you have only yourself to rely on,' Nancy Tauman said.

Their international service further inspired their desire to travel and learn about different cultures. They worked as teachers everywhere from inner-city Chicago and a two-room schoolhouse in northern California to Switzerland and Spain. 'It started our family's lifelong romance with Barcelona,' Nancy Tauman said.

In keeping with the family tradition, the Tauman's daughter, Jessica Hamilton, found she also enjoyed traveling and wanted to work in a developing country. She taught English in a Russian village called Naifeld from 1997-98 as a Peace Corps volunteer.

'I had grown up with a pretty privileged lifestyle and I felt like it was my turn to give back,' she said. 'I had also just graduated from college and wasn't quite ready to go to work and deal with middle-class reality.'

Hamilton, an attorney at Ball Janik, said her Peace Corps service taught her to be flexible and adapt to different situations. Her time in the Russian Far East, dubbed the 'Wild, Wild East' because of its lawlessness, actually helped guide her career path.

'I felt fortunate to have the structure we have here, and that got me interested in the law,' she said, noting four other volunteers from her Peace Corps group have become attorneys or are attending law school. 'Peace Corps opens up so much intellectual curiosity and so much curiosity about the world and other cultures. It also opens up so much insight about yourself, what you're good at and what you enjoy.'

—Melody Finnemore

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melody Finnemore is a Portland-area freelance writer and a frequent contributor to the Bulletin. In 2000-02, she and her husband, Barry, served as Peace Corps volunteers in South America.

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