

Panel Discussion: “Leadership Beyond Peace Corps”
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I. Acknowledgements

Thank you Debbie Curley for that lovely introduction and for leading this panel today.

Let me say that it is wonderful to be here. I literally grew up at the University of Arizona because my father was a professor of chemistry and later a dean at this school. My mother was born in Arizona while it was still a territory, not yet a state, and my parents both went to Union High School in Phoenix together – the only high school that the city had at that time.

I understand that most of the people at this discussion today are RPCVs. I also want to thank you for being here and thank you for your service to your country.

A lot of the people here, I understand, are a special brand of RPCVs known as Coverdell Fellows. Coverdell Fellows formally serve their country twice: first in the Peace Corps, and then again when they return to graduate school and participate in service internships in high-need American communities.

Some of you may be surprised to learn that the Coverdell Fellows network has grown, in recent years, into a collective of more than 80 universities throughout the country offering a choice of more than 200 graduate degrees. Within that network, the U of A partnership, since its inception in 2001, continues to stand out as one of our consistently largest and most varied programs, offering returned Peace Corps Volunteers the opportunity to advance their careers with a first-rate education, including master’s degrees and Ph.D.s, in 10 colleges as well as in interdisciplinary studies. In the past 12 years, under Georgia Ehlers’s strong leadership, Coverdell Fellows at U of A has graduated 175 Fellows, and there are currently an additional 52 Fellows enrolled in the program.

II. My leadership story

Georgia has invited me here today to talk about the Peace Corps and leadership. My first thought on this topic is that leadership and service are two sides of the same coin. When we think of some of our most prominent leaders of modern times, bright stars like Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King Jr., there is no doubt that we are talking about people who dedicated their lives, and even gave their lives, to service.

I first felt my call to service here in Tucson where I grew up, attending the local Presbyterian Church. The church was led by a minister who was a great believer in religion’s role in seeking social justice for those who were in poverty and discriminated against. My mother was further a great believer in the Golden Rule and it was the dominant ethical principal of my childhood. The church youth group from time to time would go out of town to some of the surrounding farms to work and play with the children of migrant workers, almost all of whom were of Mexican descent. Their parents worked in the fields and entire families lived in rundown shacks. Few of the kids spoke any English, but we were still able to have a lot of fun together, and we suburban middle-class white kids likely got a lot more out of the experience than the Mexican children did. For my own part, this was the first time I realized how well off I was, and how many opportunities I had that others did not.

When I was still in high school in Tucson, John F. Kennedy was elected president, and he moved quickly to establish the Peace Corps in 1961. My father took me to hear one of the first Peace Corps Volunteers speak at a Rotary Club meeting, and I was fascinated. I then went to Occidental College in Los Angeles and studied philosophy, political science and international relations, trying to increase my understanding of the world out there. President Kennedy's assassination in my sophomore year made a huge impression on me. I decided to join the Peace Corps after obtaining a master's degree in international relations from Johns Hopkins University SAIS.

Undoubtedly, I learned a lot more during my two years in the Bolivian Andes than I did during any two years in college or graduate school. I worked with impoverished Aymara Indians on the Altiplano of Bolivia at 13,000 feet above sea level in the Andes. I was assigned to a community development program which was intended to help the campesinos in the villages to organize and mobilize access to resources.

Their most pressing needs related to getting and keeping their kids in school and earning more income for their families. I was able to initiate several projects with the local school teachers to improve the community primary school, and to develop some longer-term income generating projects such as sheep-shearing to commercialize wool production and chicken-raising for egg and meat production.

While it was sometimes frustrating to continuously adjust my expectations about saving the world to a level that reflected the realities these campesinos faced daily, it was gratifying to feel that at least I was having a positive impact on the lives of a few families, one day at a time. The experience taught me a lot about the virtues of patience and perseverance, and the importance of earning trust. All of these skills, I believe, are important parts of any leader's toolkit.

The Peace Corps experience reinforced the fundamental values I had acquired earlier in my life. I have come to believe firmly that while one individual may only be able to make a modest difference in the lives of others, if you can find a way to make your difference strategically, it can create the ripple that Bobby Kennedy, for example, spoke about in reference to the struggle for equality in South Africa.

Rosa Parks was a member of the NAACP and had participated in nonviolent civil disobedience training before her decision not to give up her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama on December 1, 1955. This historic act, seemingly a small gesture, created a tremendous ripple that would ignite and ultimately forever change a nation for the better. Her leadership opportunity arose out of her preparedness, her thoughtfulness, and her courage to act when the moment was right.

The experience of two years on the Bolivian Altiplano provided me with leadership training and directly influenced the direction of my professional career. I returned to the U.S. determined to become an agent for change and became involved in legal assistance work. Then, after graduating from the School of Law at U.C. Berkeley and working for a law firm in Washington, D.C., I realized that corporate legal work was not what I was meant to do and I left my firm.

I found an opportunity to return to work in international development and became a Foreign Service Officer in the Latin American Bureau of USAID. I knew that I had finally found the right place to serve, in a place where I could make a major contribution to addressing the needs of people affected by poverty and social exclusion.

As I have proposed, service and leadership went hand in hand. From 1978, to 2001, for almost 24 years, I was privileged to both to serve and to lead with USAID. I served as a Project Development Officer in Haiti, as a Program Officer in Morocco, and became a Deputy and Acting Mission Director in Nepal. I also served in USAID headquarters as Director for Central American Affairs, and then as Mission Director in Guatemala and South Africa.

In the middle of my career at USAID, after 12 years of working in Haiti, Morocco and Nepal, and just prior to becoming a senior manager of USAID's large development assistance programs in Central America, I had the good luck to study for one very intensive year at Duke University and receive a master's degree in international development. I was fortunate to have an extremely supportive advisor and teacher, Professor Bill Ascher, and my combination of practical experience and academic studies helped me to return to USAID with both a new level of understanding of the complex issues in Central America and an expanded capacity to help address them in constructive ways.

After 24 years at USAID, I was more than able to segue to the nonprofit sector, and I worked for five years for two NGOs, Save the Children and the Institute of International Education. As director of HIV/AIDS programs at Save the Children, I was in a position to establish and supervise a new program addressing the impacts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on children and youth, especially in Africa. As the Institute of International Education's vice president for global development programs, I directed and monitored development training and professional capacity-building programs.

I then returned to public service at the newly created Millennium Challenge Corporation in 2006. This organization's mission is to act as an independent U.S. foreign aid agency that helps lead the fight against global poverty. So, even as I held leadership positions first as the Managing Director for Latin America and then as the Managing Director for Compact Development, I was helping to serve some of the world's poorest peoples.

In 2009, I was appointed by the White House to be the new Chief of Staff at the Peace Corps, and this brought me full circle as I had the opportunity to come home to the institution that launched my career in international development back in the 1960s. It's been a tremendous ride these past three and a half years, and I've had the opportunity not only to effect change, where needed, within the Peace Corps, but also to meet with leaders on an international scale.

Just last year, I travelled to El Salvador and Guatemala where I spoke to large groups of diplomats, government officials and Peace Corps Volunteers in celebration of the 50th Peace Corps Anniversary. Despite clear setbacks, the positive changes those countries have seen since the late 80s and early 90s is really quite remarkable. While too many people in these countries continue to suffer from poverty and exclusion, as well as the more recent scourges of drug trafficking and associated gang behavior which have caused the Peace Corps to cut back on our operations in some Central American countries, the strength of the civil societies and the capacities of their governments to address these challenges is nevertheless greater today than it was 20 years ago. I am an optimist, and I maintain that progress is possible, and has in fact already been made, even in the difficult context of countries which have suffered long periods of civil violence.

III. Peace Corps leadership stories.

I am not the only one to have found that a stint in the Peace Corps has crystallized my desire both to serve and to lead in my subsequent career, and I am proud to say that a study conducted for the 50th

anniversary of the Peace Corps in 2011 found that RPCVs are overwhelmingly satisfied with their choice to serve and with the role that Peace Corps has played in their lives.

Let me tell you about just a few findings of a 50th anniversary report prepared by Civic Enterprises, the National Peace Corps Association, and Peter D. Hart Research Associates. The report, “A Call to Peace” surveyed more than 200,000 Peace Corps Volunteers who have served since 1961.

First, the respondents felt that the Peace Corps resoundingly lives up to the word “Peace” in its name. 82% said their service was effective in promoting a better understanding of Americans in the communities they served. 93% said the Peace Corps has improved the global perception of the United States, and 79% rated their service as effective in helping promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans. So, as we celebrate Peace Corps Week, we can be pleased to know that so many RPCVs feel we are doing a good job in meeting the Third Goal.

There was more good news in the survey. 90% of respondents rated the Peace Corps experience as excellent or very good, and even more than this, a resounding 98%, said they would recommend the Peace Corps to their child, grandchild, or other close family member.

Finally, 92% said the Peace Corps changed their lives, 89% said it gave them a different perspective on the United States, and 60% said it influenced their choice of careers. If you are a Coverdell Fellow, you have committed to serving a second time, this time in a high-need American community, and in this way you are following a trend that is similar for many RPCVs. The Call to Peace survey found that more than half of RPCVs, to be precise, 55%, regularly volunteer in their local communities in the United States. This is more than double the national rate for volunteering.

So, to lead is to serve and to serve is to lead, and the Peace Corps remains most proud of the way it instills the tools of leadership in its volunteers. But I would like to provide some examples, besides my own, of how volunteering in the Peace Corps has preceded positions of leadership. There are many examples to choose from.

Chris Matthews, host of MSNBC’s “Hardball” volunteered in Swaziland from 1968 to 1970. Matthews has publicly commented that there is nothing more difficult than having to give a presentation in a foreign language and that everything that followed after the Peace Corps was, relatively speaking, easier for him.

Then we have Chris Dodd who served in the US. Senate representing the State of Connecticut from 1981 until 2011. The Peace Corps was fortunate enough to have Senator Dodd speak at our headquarters some time ago, and he expressed that the Peace Corps was as relevant today as when it was conceived at the very beginning of the 1960s. He also emphasized the importance of the third goal and believed that RPCVs are doing great things to help other Americans learn about foreign peoples and foreign cultures. Senator Dodd was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic from 1962 to 1964 where he served with our previous Peace Corps Director, Aaron S. Williams.

Donna Shalala is another stellar example of a Peace Corps Volunteer who has gone on to do great things. Secretary Shalala cut her teeth in the Peace Corps in Iran from 1962 to 1964 where she helped to establish an agricultural college. Since then, she has served as secretary of health and human services under the Clinton administration and is now president of the University of Miami.

Volunteering in the Peace Corps does not mean that you have to go on to a life in journalism or politics or academia. It means that you have the interpersonal skills, and the planning skills and the ethic of service that all make for a true leader. Volunteering in the Peace Corps is a litmus test that says you can move on and do any number of wonderful things.

Those of you who heard me speak yesterday at the campus talk may recall that I brought up the example of Andrea Turkalo. Andrea was a member of the very first cohort of Coverdell Fellows which started at Teachers College, Columbia University twenty-seven years ago. After volunteering in the Central African Republic, Andrea went on to receive her master's degree in teaching and to put in long and difficult hours in a predominantly African-American technical high school in the South Bronx. Our Fellows staff at Peace Corps headquarters caught up with Andrea two years ago because we wanted to know what she was doing now. To our astonishment, Andrea Turkalo has become one of the world's foremost experts on wild elephant behavior and works as a conservation scientist for the Wildlife Conservation Society in the northern Bronx. She spends most of her days living among and carefully observing African elephants.

Georgia has also shared with me some of the success stories of the first Fellows to emerge from the U of A Coverdell Fellows Program. The first four Coverdell Fellows at this school were Andrew Dane, who served from 1997 to 1999 in Guatemala in environmental management, Judy Marcouiller, who served in Liberia from 1977 to 1979 and then served again in Botswana from 1982 to 1984, and Katherine Koehler Raleigh and Ryan Raleigh who both served in Guatemala from 1997 to 1999 as conservation and natural resource specialists.

All of these folks studied planning as Fellows, but they have now seen their careers progress in different directions. Judy Marcouiller is now an instructor for the State Department. Katherine and Ryan Raleigh are both serving as foreign service officers with USAID in Kenya, and Andrew Dane works for Cooperative Extension in Wisconsin.

We have RPCVs, in general, and Fellows alumni, in specific, working in the private sector, the public sector, with NGOs, in health, in urban and regional planning, in education. The fields where RPCVs have decided to exercise their leadership skills are wide and varied:

Justin Transeth, who received his Fellows degree in business from Loyola Marymount University in 2001 says that "after my service in the Peace Corps, I wanted to go to graduate school but I also wanted to build on the skills I acquired as a Volunteer. I wanted to continue work that benefitted my local community." Today Justin is pursuing a career in the medical device industry. He says, "I now manage sales in five states working with medication/infusion delivery systems that are saving lives every day."

After receiving her Fellows degree in public health from the University of Texas at El Paso in 1995, Lynne Moquette went on to teach high school. She says, "I teach a class on human interaction, which I consider to be the best class in the world! We cover everything from eating disorders to death and dying and suicide. We discuss health and public health trends in relation to sexuality, drug and alcohol use, and other related topics. We talk about societal norms for giving and serving and discuss social justice and poverty-related issues." Lynne also went a step further and founded a nonprofit -- Building Homes, Building Hope -- that brokers short-term opportunities for people to volunteer in developing countries and construct housing. Armed with the tools she acquired in Peace Corps and in Fellows, Lynn is serving as a leader in her high school classroom and in the global classroom.

IV. Break your mirrors

Let me add at this point something I haven't mentioned yet, which is that I am one of those lucky people who had the honor and the pleasure of personally getting to know and work with Sargent Shriver. I was able to witness first hand his energy and enthusiasm for pretty much everything he did.

When I finished my Peace Corps service and then decided to go on to law school, I could have never guessed that my first job as a lawyer would be at Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver & Jacobson, a prestigious law firm here in Washington which Sarge joined and led after returning as our Ambassador to France. I really hadn't intended to join a law firm at all, but to work in legal services. But when I had the chance to interview at this firm, I was hopeful that I would have a chance to at least meet this man who had inspired me and so many others of my generation. I guess there weren't yet many RPCVs coming out of law schools in those days, and when I was introduced to Sarge, he quickly 'shooed' the others away and invited me into his office by myself. He actually exhibited very little interest in my legal skills or law school record, or even in telling me about how great the firm was; he just wanted to talk about my experience in Bolivia as a Peace Corps Volunteer! Which we then discussed for more than an hour! For him that was much more important, and the next day I got a job offer from the firm, which I of course accepted! Working with Sarge was quite an experience; he was so energetic and committed that he continued to inspire me to serve, which—somewhat ironically—led me to leave the firm after two years to begin the lengthy career I have already described as a USAID Foreign Service Officer.

I would like to conclude today with a quote from the man I saw as a mentor and a role model, Peace Corps' guiding light and founding Director, Sargent Shriver. In addressing the graduating class of his alma mater, Sarge said:

“Break your mirrors. Yes, indeed — shatter the glass. In our society that is so self-absorbed, begin to look less at yourself and more at each other. Learn more about the face of your neighbor, and less about your own.

I suggest this: when you get to be 30, 40, 50 or even 70 years old, you'll get more happiness and contentment out of counting your friends than counting your dollars. You'll get more satisfaction from having improved your neighborhood, your town, your state, your country and your fellow human beings than you'll ever get from your muscles, your figure, your automobile, your house or your credit ratings.

You'll get more from being a peacemaker than a warrior. I've been both, so I speak from experience. So break the mirrors!”

I think you can tell from this quote that Sargent Shriver, as much as anyone, understood that leadership is about service. If there is one abiding message I can leave you with, with far less eloquence than Sarge, it is simply to seek leadership in the places that most need your service. Follow this simple example, and the road may be rocky at times, but you have the greatest chance of success.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to speak here today, and I am looking forward to having a conversation with those of you here a little later in the program. For now, I will turn it back to Debbie.