

SHERWOOD GUERNSEY

Country of Service: Panama

Assignment: Tropical Agriculture

Service Tour: 1969-71

Contact info: sherwood@sglawoffice.com

Service Description:

I grew up in a very small town in upstate New York. I had a wonderful childhood with a wonderful family. However, the town was extremely claustrophobic feeling. I couldn't wait to go off to college. I wanted to learn about the world. I wanted to see and understand new and different places. At the end of my first year at Dartmouth, a Peace Corps recruiter came to the campus. I went to listen. It sounded exciting and something that I could do positively for this country and whatever country in which I would serve. My motivation was clear: I really wanted to meet people outside of the United States, to see how they lived; understand another culture; do my best to find ways to serve and maybe help them in their lives, and to learn from them ways to improve my own life.

To get a sense of what it might be like, I went to Mexico the summer of my sophomore year. The Dartmouth program included work building a community center in a barrio of Mexico City while staying with a well-to-do family of a lawyer in an entirely different part of town. I saw both sides of life in the City: the rich and the very poor. That experience convinced me to join the Peace Corps.

It was, of course, the time of the Vietnam war. I became a strong activist against the war. But when graduate school deferments were ended in our senior year, I found I could get a deferment from the draft to teach for a year. And near the end of that year, I was able to get a one-year further deferment to join the Peace Corps.

At the same time, I fell in love with my future wife Carol. When I told her I wanted to marry her and join the Peace Corps, and would she join with me, she immediately said yes. Clearly this was my kind of woman.

We were accepted into the Peace Corps as a couple and assigned to Panama. We were posted in a very small village in a rural region six hours from Panama City. After 2 ½ months of training in Puerto Rico and a week in Panama, we were driven to our site. Because we served together, we obviously didn't have the experience of being all alone in our site. But we as a couple were all alone, and had to get out in the village to meet people, strangers whom we didn't know, with whom it was challenging to communicate, and only hoped they understood us. For the first month we lived with a local family, until we found a typical mud and straw house with a tile roof to rent.

Although communicating was challenging, it was also the perfect setting to learn another language. In order to communicate, we had to learn it. And learn it we did. Learning to converse in Spanish was one of the most wonderful results and experiences of our Peace Corps service. Spanish has served me for the rest of my life. It was difficult, but it was so empowering to learn a new language.

In my work, the most challenging part was convincing the men of the community, or group of them, to take the time and the risk to work with me, taking time away from their subsistence agriculture work to ensure feeding their families. In each project I started, I so appreciated the risks the men took. At the same time, fortunately, the men were always pleased and happy with the result.

The first project involved raising pigs in a very different manner than just having them run around the yard. Among many other things, I introduced the men to local Panamanian Ag experts and where to get healthy young pigs to raise. I developed the relationship with them so they continued to raise pigs in the future, using a fenced-in concrete floor, feeding some grain in addition to compost and food scraps, with automatic waterers, and medicine for worms.

However, the most successful project that I ran was raising tomatoes in the rainy season. We needed capital and I secured a loan from a church in the Canal zone. I was able to teach the families involved many new ways to have a successful agricultural project during the rainy season. The work was hard. We dug deep ditches to carry off the water to avoid the roots just rotting in the rain. Then, planting and tying up each plant to a stake or stakes as it grew larger, all over a large 2-3-acre plot! Then, applying herbicides carefully as needed, collecting the huge harvest, and getting the tomatoes to market in Panama City.

Each family in the project made enough money from the sale of the tomatoes to build a concrete block house. To those in the United States who have not experienced such a project, it may seem like a very small benefit. But believe me, for these families it was amazing. And it made them very proud.

Working with women: While I was doing these agricultural projects, Carol was working with other female Peace Corps volunteers and going from one village to another, meeting with as many women as they could gather, to listen to the issues they had with their own health and the health of their family members. As they could, they talked about adding more vegetables to their diets, and pointing out symptoms of diabetes, always present, often caused by chewing on sugar cane stalks; or urging them to see a doctor if necessary for other issues. Child birth and early pediatric care was also key, since many very young children did not survive.

The most important project that she came upon during the whole time we were there though was working to convince the mothers that breast milk was better for their babies than the Nestlé's powdered milk. It was not easy. The Nestlé's marketing machine had convinced so many women that using the powder was better for their children, more modern, and more efficient. We learned an early lesson about the dangers of huge corporations and their marketing programs to take advantage of people who were unable to distinguish corporate propaganda from the truth.

When our two years were completed, we tried to stay a third year, but the Panama Canal negotiations for the turnover of the canal to Panama were at their height. One consequence was that the Peace Corps was told to leave Panama, and we were unable to stay a third year. I will add that my first real organizing and advocacy experience came after we returned home, when I organized as many returned Peace Corps volunteers as I could, to lobby our Senators in favor of passing the Panama Canal Treaty. It meant so very much to the people of Panama. We agreed. Please appreciate that the existence of a 10-mile-wide swath of land owned by the US, cutting the country in two is exactly like another country owning a 10-mile-wide swath of land

up and down the Mississippi River! The Senate approved the Canal Treaty as negotiated by then President Jimmy Carter. My memory is particularly poignant regarding this incredibly important treaty with the present-day incoming president threatening and bullying Panama to try to return the canal to the US.

One additional benefit of being in the Peace Corps in Panama, was that we took a one month vacation in the middle of our service and traveled throughout South America. It was unforgettably beautiful. We traveled by train, plane, bus, and hitching a ride. We stayed where we could find a room, including one night in what turned out to be a whore house. Once we completed our service, we returned home, again with a wonderful trip. I bought a VW van in the Canal Zone, outfitted with a bed and Coleman stove, and we took three months to drive from Panama to New York. Fabulous trip. Central America was then peaceful and we conversed with locals all the way home, seeing sites of incredible beauty. Upon our return, Carol attended the U. of Penn to complete her undergraduate degree, and I began the pursuit of my own career goals, and we started a family.

Our Peace Corps experience convinced us of the value of National Service and of supporting immigrants who choose to come to this country. They come because conditions get so bad in their own countries that, like every immigrant who has ever made the arduous trip to come to this country, they are seeking freedom and a better life. And the fact that they have brown or other colored skin, and have different cultural experiences than ours, should be recognized as a blessing to enrich our country. It certainly has enriched our lives, endlessly. Bravo for those immigrants who risk their lives to come here, and for all those in the US who help them.

Life and Career Impact:

Peace Corps Changed my Career Path. Before I joined the Peace Corps and experienced my two years in Panama, I had planned to go to business school at Wharton, without a clear view of how I would use the degree. And I did attend for a semester, but found that my values were far different than the rest of the student body. Following my Peace Corps experience, I thought I could learn how to run international cooperatives. Unfortunately, that was the furthest thing from the minds of students and professors there. So after being on the Dean's list for the first semester, I told the Dean I was leaving, got a job at a local social service agency where I used my Spanish with the clients, and began to consider the future. I soon realized that a law degree could provide me a way to seek change in the world, and use that as a basis for representing people and organizing.

Not only did the Peace Corps affect my career decision, but also provided me with a focus on values that I have to this day. It formed the basis of my political beliefs, that those who were rich and powerful, who only wanted to advance their own interests, were a danger, and that helping people to have hope and opportunity was my goal. Once again, my Peace Corps experience formed the basis for my decisions.

To best achieve that goal, I soon began to think about getting involved in politics as an elected official and running for office. I did so and was elected to four terms in the Massachusetts legislature, supporting legislation to give people a chance and a fair shot in life, to give them a hand up. To this day, my focus has not wavered.

These values were really formulated in the cauldron of my Peace Corps experience, enriching my life, and directly affecting the life I have led.

The values also drove our actions following our 2010 return to our little villages in Panama. Amazingly, the children who played on our porch, the children of the families that we worked with, greeted us, and actually held a communitywide meeting to see if there were ways in which we could help them again. They were really worried that none of the schools or any of the families had any computers and their kids were going to be very much behind. They also had absolutely no place for young people to play sports. The town was just too poor to buy a piece of land to do so.

As a result, we chose to get involved again, but this time in a very different way. We could not move there to live there because we had three children and seven grandchildren back in the United States. Nonetheless, going back and forth to Panama to work sometimes three times a year, we helped to form computer learning centers in the schools and found land to create a full-size soccer field and softball field, with the regular improvements so they are similar to the sports fields that we are all used to in the United States.

As a further result of our return, we continued our Peace Corps type service, finding ways to work together, to collaborate and create mutually satisfactory ways of improving people's lives and the lives of their children. Our computer learning centers have not only helped hundreds and hundreds of students learn how to use computers, but also to use them to think analytically, and not just in the usual rote learning taught in the classrooms. With the sports fields, the teenagers and adults have formed teams and leagues to have wonderful community activities, which the whole village and neighboring village enjoy! But they also provide a place where teenagers can play constructively, which they sorely needed.

Most Memorable Experiences overall: For both Carol and me, our entire two years of interactions the people in our community were the most memorable experiences in our lives. To say it another way, our two years in the Peace Corps were the best two years of our lives. We fully engaged with the community: we learned from them and they learned from us. It was mutually satisfying and mutually rewarding. We learned patience and persistence. We learned how to get things done when it seemed impossible. We learned respect for how another people lived. We learned that a lot of money and a big house have no necessary relationship whatsoever to living a good life, a fulfilling life, and a very happy life. We learned to listen carefully to what others have to say. We learned to respect and appreciate another way of life. We learned not to try to impose our way of life or our beliefs. We learned collaboration. We learned that by working together, our rewards were doubled.