

outbursts

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In service with others

Peace Corps on the rise at Virginia Tech

By Keith Pierce

Pack light and learn five new words a day. Those are two of the many pieces of advice a hopeful international volunteer might hear from Virginia Tech Peace Corps recruiter Rachael Kennedy.

Raised in a service-minded family, as a child Kennedy sang songs and painted the nails of elderly women in nursing homes. As a college student, she helped build porches in rural Appalachia in Georgia. And right after graduate school, she stuffed her backpack with a large sack of herbal medications, a journal, and “far too many clothes” and set off for rural Uzbekistan to serve in the Peace Corps as a health extension volunteer.

“Like most clothing-obsessed Americans, I packed a lot of clothes, but once I got there I wore very few of them,” Kennedy says. “I learned that it was in my best interest to wear the clothes of the people that I lived around. The women in my village loved making dresses for me and were always excited to see me wear them because they

could see that I was choosing to honor their culture.”

One of the more challenging aspects of deploying for the Peace Corps is learning new languages. For Kennedy, it was particularly demanding. She had to learn not only Uzbek and Russian, but also Tajik, the language spoken by people in the village of Musicha, a small, isolated community of 200 people where she served. Though Uzbek was the main language in Bukhara, a larger city where Kennedy also worked at a maternal hospital and ran a health club out of the university, she had to know enough Russian to get by in the larger cities. She became fluent in Uzbek in just three months.

“The Peace Corps is really great about providing three months of incredibly intense language and culture training, both in a classroom setting and by going out to the bank, to the post office, to the hospital, or wherever, to practice in real-life settings,” Kennedy says. “One of the strategies I used was to commit to learning five new words a day, how to read them, write them, and speak them like a local.”

Though her service was more than a decade ago, the veteran volunteer still becomes passionate when talking about her experiences in Uzbekistan. As a Peace Corps recruiter, in addition to helping students work through the qualification and application process,

Kennedy attends a family birthday celebration in Uzbekistan.



Virginia Tech doctoral student and Peace Corps recruiter Rachael Kennedy (right) with her host family in Uzbekistan.

Kennedy encourages Virginia Tech students to consider what it's really like to step away from the safety and security of everything they know in order to volunteer in a foreign country for two years.

“It's very important for anyone who wants to go abroad to be well informed about their reason for going. If it's just to go abroad, there are a lot of ways to do that,” Kennedy says. “The Peace Corps is not about taking an extended vacation or a visit to an exotic land. It's about truly living in a culture that is different from ours. This understanding shifted my thinking to the idea that it's not just about being of service, it is being in service with others. So in the end you don't say, they benefited, you say, we benefited.”

Kennedy earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Georgia and a master's degree in nutrition education from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. After an 11-year public health career, she came to Virginia Tech to pursue her doctorate in the Department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education.

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— Rachael Kennedy

As a 2014 recipient of a research fellowship, Kennedy conducted preliminary field work for her dissertation in Turkey. Her proposed topic, "Establishing nourishing food networks in an era of global-local tensions: Turkey's Çanakkale Province," pulls from her community viability experiences abroad, her knowledge of food and nutrition, and her focus on community food systems.

"Turkey has many social, economic, and environmental concerns contributing to their poverty and health challenges," Kennedy says. "Sustainability issues in their food systems exacerbate the problem."



Sarah Lyon-Hill, a doctoral student at Virginia Tech and a specialist in the Office of Economic Development, spent two years in the Peace Corps beginning in 2009. In Niger, she worked with local education officials and the traditional town chief in the village where she stayed, Zermou, to found Zermou's first kindergarten. The structure hosting the eager youngsters is made of millet stalks.



Sarah Lyon-Hill

Hokies tops in responding to call to service

Virginia Tech rises in Peace Corps rankings

By Miriam Rich

Virginia Tech has 43 alumni serving as Peace Corps volunteers worldwide, making it No. 11 in the nation among large colleges and universities, according to ratings from the international service organization.

The Peace Corps ranks its top volunteer-producing colleges and universities annually according to the size of the student body. Continuing an upward trend that began in 2014, Virginia Tech's 2015 showing marks a significant jump from its previous rank of No. 22.

Christina Duell graduated from Virginia Tech in 2012 with a degree in biological systems engineering and currently works as an

environmental health volunteer in Panama. Focusing primarily on water and sanitation, she develops sustainable aqueduct systems to provide clean and safe access to water for her community, while also helping out at a local school. Her education at Virginia Tech was instrumental in preparing her for Peace Corps service, she said.

"Ut Prosim, 'That I May Serve,' is a phrase that all Hokies are well acquainted with. From freshman orientation to senior graduation, our motto is engrained in our hearts and minds," said Duell, 26, a native of Oakton, Virginia. "Peace Corps is an excellent opportunity to live this out in your life after graduation."

Alumni from more than 3,000 colleges and universities nationwide have served in the Peace Corps since the agency's founding in 1961, including 651 Virginia Tech alumni. Virginia Tech is currently the top volunteer-producing institution in Virginia and the second-highest all-time producer statewide.

"The Peace Corps provides an indispensable opportunity for young people out of college to put their unique skills to work making a difference for communities around the world," said Peace Corps Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet. "Volunteers make lasting change by living and working at

the grass-roots level in their communities of service and using their talents to tackle some of the most critical challenges in international development."



www.outreach.vt.edu

For information on the Peace Corps at Virginia Tech, contact:

Peace Corps at Virginia Tech
172 Smith Career Center (0128)
Blacksburg, VA 24061
www.peacecorps.vt.edu

■ **Rachael Kennedy**, recruiter
540-231-1950~ peacecorps@vt.edu

Outbursts is a publication of Outreach and International Affairs
Guru Ghosh, vice president

Editorial and graphics staff
Andrea Brunais 540-231-4691
Keith Pierce 540-231-7966
Rich Mathieson 540-231-1419
Miriam Rich 540-231-4153