

## Western Montana Returned Peace Corps Volunteers Activities Report 2019



The Western Montana Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (WMRPCV) had a terrific year in 2019. We held our monthly potlucks at members' houses (including at the homes of some new members!), we participated in community events, held our annual meeting at the Goat Chase retreat on Flathead Lake, and offered support to our outstanding campus Peace Corps Recruiter, Kevin Dietle. For the first time we activated a group of standing committees which allowed us to do far more outreach in our Ambassadors Program (visiting public schools to introduce students to Peace Corps) and communicate with new returned volunteers on social media (we updated our website and now have a presence on Facebook). We head into 2020 with energy and confidence to expand our presence in western Montana.

Once again Bunny Sims led our Ambassadors Program, which sends many of the WMRPCV members into public schools during Peace Corps week in early March. Bunny received strong support from Diann Stewart, who will organize our classroom visits in 2020. In a couple of instances, WMRPCV's were able to give presentations in Spanish because of the Missoula Public Schools' Spanish Immersion Program.

The WMRPCV joined with Kevin, the UM Peace Corps recruiter, during both Peace Corps week and the International Food Fair and Cultural Festival to staff a table encouraging University of Montana students to join the Peace Corps. The tireless work of Kevin as well as the spirit of Montana's people resulted in the University of Montana being in the top five among public universities in the nation welcoming new volunteers to enter Peace Corps service, with Missoula, MT ranking at number two per capita.

*Submitted February 20, 2020 by Jim Burchfield, WMRPCV President*

In June 2019 we again held the Goat Chase Retreat and convened our annual meeting at Flathead Lake. The splendid three days at the camp proved once again that we know how to enjoy life and provide support to each other. We affirmed our new organizational structure and leadership and identified several Peace Corps projects overseas where we could offer financial support to our colleagues in the field. We took some time for an exhilarating hike on Wild Horse Island before dancing the night away and feeling “Hot, hot, hot.”



For the first time the WMRPCV joined some friends and other volunteers in Missoula to help sponsor the Missoula International Soccer Tournament as part of the celebration of World Refugee Day. Although few of us participated in the actual games, we helped cook and provide food for 300 Missoulians, including some of our newest residents, refugees from Syria, Congo, Eritrea, and Iraq, who came out in force with their families to enjoy a summer afternoon in Missoula’s wonderful new Westside Regional Park.

In July, Tony and Michelle Hoyt hosted their traditional summer gathering on the Jocko River to celebrate their many years as leaders and supporters of Peace Corps. Nothing like a dip in the cool waters (O.K., COLD waters) of the Jocko to be refreshed on a hot afternoon. As in previous years, our Secretary/Treasurer, Mary Younger, as well as a member of our new finance committee, Lynne Koester, were able to supply all of us with new calendars from the Wisconsin RPCV group so we would have enough to sell during the Christmas season. We completely sold out with the help of our committed membership, making sure our financial situation stays sound.

In October Kevin Dietle organized two “story-telling” sessions on the University of Montana campus. Utilizing a large conference room in the campus’ University Center, over a dozen students attended each of the story-telling sessions. Several students indicated an interest in joining the Peace Corps. During the story-telling sessions WMRPCV members related the joys, challenges, and life-changing experiences of a Peace Corps assignment. Speakers brought home the message that Peace Corps offers a strong foundation of skills, confidence, and resiliency that serves its members well in future careers.

As the year came to a close the WMRPCV’s held their annual Christmas party, welcomed some additional new members, and reflected on how the group is becoming more diverse with its outreach to recently returned volunteers. As 2020 begins the WMRPCV will examine new opportunities to share their experiences and encourage global solidarity. For example, the Archivist at the UM Mansfield Library has reached out to the group to encourage participation in an oral-history project that focuses on lives of Montanans engaged in public service. As usual, there is a world of things to do.