

Activities Report 2020

Western Montana Returned Peace Corps Volunteers

January 2021

It was a very different year for The Western Montana Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (WMRPCV). Like most people worldwide, our traditional activities were upended by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, even though we could not gather, socialize, and enjoy the solidarity that comes with being Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, we did the best we could to support the goals of Peace Corps.

The WMRPCV's realized when Peace Corps Volunteers were evacuated from their sites worldwide that we could help welcome and support the readjustment of those evacuated Peace Corps Volunteers who returned to Montana. Using social distancing protocols, the WMRPCV's held a series of small group gatherings during the summer and fall months giving special attention to the recently returned volunteers. We held small scale potlucks in Bonner Park and in the back yards of several of our members. We told stories, tried to help connect newcomers to opportunities for employment and additional education, and perhaps most importantly donated some of our financial resources to the overseas projects that the recently evacuated volunteers left behind in their sites. We'd like to acknowledge and thank the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA) for helping facilitate these contributions.

One fascinating new initiative that was spearheaded by one of our long-standing members, Jeff Gritzner (Iran '62-'64), was the acquisition and circulation of Peace Corps bumper stickers that recognize how service in the Peace Corps represents a patriotic act, playing a powerful, under-reported role in our foreign relations. Through help from NPCA, we received a healthy supply of bumper stickers that read: "Peace Corps: Proud to have served my country." Many of our members now display these impressive bumper stickers on their cars for all to see.

WMRPCV's were also able, through the diligent oversight of our Treasurer, Mary Younger (Cameroon, 1974 -76), and RPCV Lynne Koester (Ethiopia, 1968-70), to sell our entire yearly order of Peace Corps calendars to keep our financial house on a solid foundation. These calendar sales again allowed us to make a series of donations to both local and international humanitarian projects.

During Peace Corps week 2020, just before the shutting down of group activities because of the pandemic, WMRPCV's continued our Ambassadors Program to offer presentations to Missoula area schools. Thanks to the coordination efforts of Diann Stewart (Uzbekistan '04-'05) our members were well-received by students and teachers alike. At week's end, Mary Younger hosted a celebratory potluck to cap off Peace Corp's 59th year.

In fall of 2020 the WMRPCV was very happy to welcome the new Peace Corps Recruiter, Emily Lynch (China 2018-19), onto the University of Montana campus. Emily offered all of us a great deal of encouragement about the return of Peace Corps to the field in 2021, and her experience, energy, and enthusiasm will keep Montana near the head of the pack in the number of volunteers recruited per capita among all the states in the Union.

An additional exciting project that took flight in 2020 is the Oral History Project where RPCV's offer stories of their Peace Corps experience via digital, video recordings. The WMRPCV's originally launched the Oral History Project through the assistance of the University of Montana's Mansfield Library Archivist, Hannah Soukup, supported by our own member, Tobie Weist (South Africa, 2001-03). However, Hannah and Tobie, after completing two extensive interviews with two of our members, discovered that NPCA has a well-organized national-level Oral History Project that our interviewees could join. Subsequently, both Tobie and Jim Burchfield (Guatemala, 1973-77) have connected with the NPCA network to be interviewed and begin the training to help all of our members participate in this national effort. The National Peace Corps Oral History Project uses an on-line platform to conduct interviews and has established an agreement with the Nunn Center at the University of Kentucky for permanent archiving of each of the interviews. WMRPCV members should stay tuned for more information about this project in the spring of 2021.

Unfortunately, we could not hold some of our major summer events – like the Goat Chase Retreat on Flathead Lake or the International Soccer Tournament to help celebrate World Refugee Day, but we're already planning on holding these events in 2021. Since COVID protocols will rightly still in place for much of early 2021, we will also be unable to hold our typical Ambassador's Program with public schools to celebrate Peace Corps Day and introduce primary and secondary school students to the opportunities that Peace Corps will afford them in the future.

To close 2020, we decided we couldn't miss our annual Christmas party, but instead of meeting together in person, we held a "Zoom Christmas." Thanks to Emily Lynch for setting up the technical details, which allowed 30 of us to gather around our computers to see each other, extend holiday greetings, and open classic White Elephant gifts on-camera to prime the pump for the 2021 gift exchange. It was wonderful to see so many people, and we all agree that we can hardly wait for a better year in 2021.

With COVID vaccinations finally beginning to roll out in Montana, we are all looking forward to the opportunities in the late spring and summer of 2021 to gather again and continue our work to support each other and Peace Corps activities around the globe. Even in the face of all the challenges of the past year, the WMRPCV's remain strong and committed to a peaceful, just, and sustainable future.

Respectfully submitted,

Jim Burchfield
WMRPCV President

"Social Distancing in 2020,"



"Where we want to be once again in 2021."