

Activities Report 2021

Western Montana Returned Peace Corps Volunteers

January 2022



The second year of the COVID pandemic continued to subdue many of the traditional events of the Western Montana Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (WMRPCV), but even facing these constraints, we had a fairly active year.

Although we couldn't hold our monthly potlucks indoors, we looked for new ways to gather. Reggie and Scott Spaulding (PCVs Fiji) hosted a brave, well-adapted-to-the-cold group on their outdoor patio in February 2021, with everyone excited about the promise of the upcoming vaccine. And then with our spirits lifted and our vaccines providing comfort by early summer, we broke out with an amazing back-together-again picnic at Kiwanis Park in Missoula, that had over 40 participants. The celebration included our usual cornucopia of fabulous food, some new faces, gratitude for summer, and even a game of kickball (well, a rather small game, but it was still great fun).

Because planning for our annual Goat Chase Retreat on Flathead Lake had to occur early in the calendar year, both the managers of the Camp and our WMRPCV leaders decided that we couldn't hold our typical, full retreat because many of the facilities would still be off-limits to large groups. However, willing families were still able to rent individual cabins across the Camp facilities (we couldn't use the group kitchen or dance hall), and to our pleasant surprise, 16 of our members (and 7 children) were able to enjoy a glorious weekend on the shores of Flathead Lake. We took the opportunity to make our reservations for 2022 while we were there: Goat Chase 2022 will be from Friday, June 10, to Sunday, June 12.

Through the summer and fall we tried to stay in touch and hold smaller, outdoor group gatherings in order to stay safe and reduce the potential of COVID transmission. Because one of the local brew pubs, Imagine Nation Brewing, has ample, well-spaced outdoor seating, we held four events there: (1) A gathering to catch up on local events in July; (2) A celebration of our affiliation with the refugee support group Soft Landing (we were unable to hold our usual community feast/soccer tournament/observance of World Refugee Day along with Soft Landing in June 2021 because of COVID constraints); (3) A send-off party for one of our most energetic members, Yathi Yatheepan (PCV Moldova); and (4) A presentation by the leadership of the Missoula Food Bank and Community Center to learn how we can participate as group volunteers in Food Bank activities (thanks to Chris and Jeannie Siegler [PCVs Sierra Leone]), for setting this up). August also had a couple of additional outdoor activities: a group hike up Blue Mountain organized by Allison Segal (PCV Morocco), and a Jamaican celebration on the deck of Steve Torcoletti and Heidi Halverson's house (PCVs Jamaica). Our ever-faithful Treasurer, fundraiser extraordinaire, and tireless community organizer, Mary Younger (PCV Cameroon) hosted a women's group party in September, and in December the WMRPCV President got the idea that a cross-country ski event at Lolo Pass would be fun (the snow was excellent!). Thus, in spite of all the difficulties in making group events feasible, we did our best.

Another new activity for the WMRPCV's that will expand and continue was the participation of Tobie Weist (PCV South Africa) and Jim Burchfield (PCV Guatemala) in the National Peace Corps Association's Oral History Project. After completing their training and trial interviews, Tobie and Jim interviewed four of our members to begin the process of archiving the experiences and stories each of us had in our Volunteer assignments. The interviews will continue in 2022.

The University of Montana (UM) and its Peace Corps Recruiter have always been significant partners of the WMRPCV's, as UM has provided a remarkably high proportion of its students to become future PCV's. However, COVID restrictions in 2021 limited some of our usual story-telling events on campus

and support for recruitment. Thankfully, UM did hire a new campus recruiter, Sarah Poole (PCV Nepal) in the fall of 2021 to help prepare for the re-opening of Peace Corps in 2022, and already Sarah has been able to recruit new volunteers for the staged expansion of volunteers across the globe. Sarah has contacted the WMRPCV's already about Peace Corps week 2022, and if things go well with the slowing of COVID infection rates, we will be able to again participate in campus events to celebrate Peace Corp's history and the opportunities it presents to students in the future.

One sad note for the WMRPCV's this past year was the untimely passing of Jeff Shryer (PCV Botswana), who had been a vibrant, inspirational member of our group. Many of us recall his humor and adventurous spirit, either at our potlucks or canoeing together on Flathead Lake during Goat Chase. Jeff leaves a legacy of service and commitment that we will forever carry with us.

Finally, it is important to note that our members made many contributions in individual ways to advance the Third Goal of Peace Corps. Our members continue to volunteer, masked and vaccinated, at many local community and public service organizations, such as Soft Landing Missoula, Missoula Medical Aid, the Jeannette Rankin Peace Center, the International Rescue Committee, the Missoula Food Bank and Community Center, and many other organizations. We would not have such a welcoming, diverse community in Missoula without the tireless efforts of our WMRPCV membership. We need not be offered a "thank you" for these efforts, as we all have all been previously blessed by the generosity and wisdom of those with whom we worked while serving overseas as Peace Corps Volunteers.

Respectfully submitted,
Jim Burchfield
WMRPCV President

