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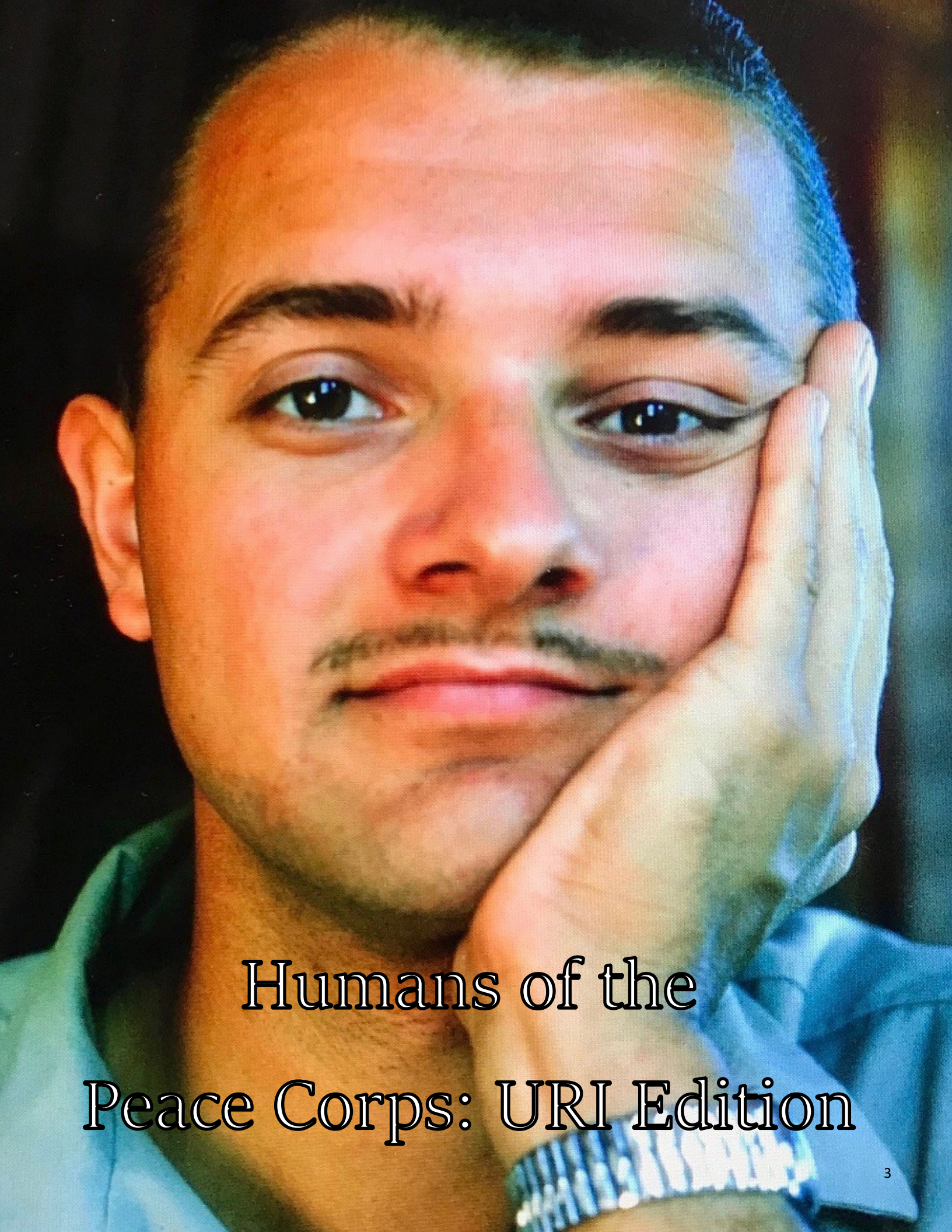


Peace
Corps

Humans of the Peace Corps: URI Edition

Jess Cohen





Humans of the
Peace Corps: URI Edition

Acknowledgments

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All photos provided with permission from each returned Peace Corps volunteer.

Introduction

After college, I intend on applying to the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps is a volunteer and governmental organization that was established in 1961 as a way to promote world peace and friendship by helping and learning from others in different countries. In order to learn more about the Peace Corps, and the commitment it entails, I decided to interview with Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) who are URI-affiliated. Through a series of different questions ranging from why they joined the Peace Corps to what advice they would give to someone applying, I not only learned more about the Peace Corps, but I also heard each RPCV's unique story.

With the *Humans of the Peace Corps: URI Edition*, I wanted to get first-hand accounts of RPCV's experiences, to not only guide me, but to hopefully help other students thinking about joining the Peace Corps in the future, many of whom are members of the URI Peace Corps Prep Program. After interviewing each of the RPCVs, I have never been more sure of the path I want to take in life. Each RPCV has a unique story that is worth sharing and I hope the *Humans of the Peace Corps: URI Edition* reflects this and does each volunteer justice.

Kevin Drumm

Peru 2016-2018, Health Sector

URI 2015, B.S. Mechanical Engineering & B.A. Spanish

“The hardest part of my time volunteering was when I was evacuated from my first site, Piura in 2017. I was then moved to Huancabamba. It was hard for two reasons. One of which was, I may have been doing work there, and I may have been helping with people in the community before the flood, but after the flood was when they most needed me and I had to leave. As a volunteer, you have goals and you want to do your Peace Corps work, but you’re there to help them with anything they needed and I was taken out of the site. It was also really hard to leave my Peace Corps family. Usually when the volunteer leaves after two years, they throw a party or a goodbye celebration, but I had a few hours to get out and say goodbye. On the bright side, I was able to see a different part of Peru. Most volunteers do not get that opportunity to see so much of their host country.”



Brianne Neptin

Moldova 2005-2007, Agricultural Sector

URI 2002, B.S. Environmental Economics and Management

“There is no one memory that is my favorite. I got very lucky with my homestay family at my site. My host family was amazing. They are what made the experience. I had my father, mother, brother, and sister in my host family. They treated me like I was part of the family. I got to experience a lot of Moldovan culture simply because I was with people who were very welcoming. I was brought along to family functions, and even a wedding. Everyone brought me in and treated me as if I was a part of something. At the end of dinner, my host father would always say, ‘Let’s have one more glass of wine! Let’s just sit and chat!’. Doing that with him helped with my language development. A big part of Moldovan culture is wine-making, so they would take me along to clip the grapes and we would make wine together afterwards. They were never shy about taking me places and letting me experience different things.”



Bill Buffum

Nepal 1977-1979, Environmental Sector

URI Research Associate and Adjunct Assistant Professor, College of the Environment and Life Sciences

“I had no idea how much I would enjoy working in a developing country. It was so fascinating, both culturally and technically. Even though I often felt frustrated that I could not achieve as much as I wanted, I always felt positive about my work because we were addressing environmental issues that were critically important to the local people. By the time I completed my two-year Peace Corps assignment, I knew I wanted to keep working internationally. I fully agree with the Peace Corps slogan ‘It’s the toughest job you will ever love’. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in experiencing another culture. However, you have to accept that it’s impossible to know in advance how things will work out. In my case, I had a very supportive supervisor, and I was assigned to a village that was ideal for me (because I loved hiking and being in the mountains). I probably would have been much less happy with a job in an urban location, whereas another volunteer might have found my village far too isolated. When you join the Peace Corps, you have to be willing to take your chances and hope that you end up in a situation that will be right for you.



Kelly Kittel

Jamaica 1985-1987, Environmental Sector

URI 1983 B.A. Geography and Marine Affairs & 1984 Elementary Teaching Certificate

"For the rest of your life, you become the person who is always trying to make things better. You don't look around for others to fix things and you feel a sense of responsibility, which is a good thing. If everyone on the planet felt that way, what a better world this would be. Since our Peace Corps service, two of our children have died and I am so thankful for our PC experience because I know I could sit in any developing country, like Jamaica, and having lost two children would not be unusual. In America, we try to pretend that these things don't happen. We don't talk about death, especially of children, and the result of that is that if it happens to us, we are ill-equipped to deal with it. We wonder why everyone else is having such a perfect life. And sometimes we even feel cursed. In other countries, they don't expect life to be easy. They expect life to be hard. So when it is, they aren't as disappointed. The truth is that many of us will experience sadness, tragedy, and bad things happening in our lives and we'd do well to learn from other cultures to be more realistic about our expectations."



Lesley DeRosa

Cambodia 2016-2018, Education Sector

URI 2009 B.S. Business & 2011 M.A. Spanish Studies

“There are a group on memories that are my favorite. If I had to pick a specific one, it had to do with my education project. My specific job was English Teacher, Teacher Trainer (ETTT). In the school I taught at, we started a Global Citizen’s Club. My students and I painted a world map and ended up getting invited to a celebration for World Women’s Day. We were invited to the capitol of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. The US Ambassador for Cambodia went, along with women from different parts of Cambodia. It was a really proud moment for my students and I. I’ll never forget that feeling.”



Susan Rubinoff

Philippines 1976-1978, Agricultural Sector

URI 1976, B.S. Animal Science and Natural Resources

“When I was growing up, I wanted to be a nun since I was inspired to do service in far away places like they did in the movies. They would often go to Africa to do important and purposeful work. The religious aspect did not even occur to me, and since having a Jewish background, it was not an option. When I was in college, I learned about the Peace Corps and KNEW this was my path. I was placed in the Philippines, but I was surprised since it wasn’t in Africa, the continent that I had dreamed of, and I had never heard of the Philippines. Nevertheless, I quickly accepted the offer, feeling that this was my karma to go wherever I was selected to go. Without any regrets, it was an amazing experience where I helped people and grew in so many ways! I did eventually have the opportunity to go to two countries in Africa in order to teach teachers how to observe children and support them with their various challenges.”



Michael Rice

Philippines 1981-1985, Agricultural Sector

URI Professor of Fisheries and Aquaculture

“The Peace Corps helped to make my career as a professor. After my second extension, I finished my PhD and a job at URI opened up. They already knew who I was and I had all this international experience with fisheries. While in the Philippines, I was assigned to the Bureau of Fisheries and I helped to culture grouper fish for the first time. Now, the Peace Corps still continues to influence my life and my job. Every January, I take a group of 10 to 12 URI students during their J-term to the Philippines to the Bureau of Fisheries laboratory in the very same city where I was a Peace Corps Volunteer. All the students go on a complete Filipino diet and get training from the Filipino people. They tromp around in fish ponds, looking at giant clams and looking at all kinds of different things that they couldn’t possibly do here in Rhode Island. Everything comes full circle and I am paying it forward. All of this led to me receiving a lifetime achievement award from the Philippine Department of Agriculture.”



Caroline Burns

Rwanda 2016-2018, Health Sector

URI 2015, B.S. Nursing

“I had been at my site for about two months and I was still figuring things out. I was starving. I always felt hungry. You were either given a charcoal stove, which is what I had, or gas stove, which was kind of like the stoves you have in America. I didn’t have that though, which was the easier cooking method. I had the harder method. I decided to go to another volunteer’s site about an hour away. He was known as the chef of the region, so I went over to make chicken. Where else would you go to buy a chicken, but in a bar? We went and got a live chicken from a bar. My friend and I were sitting there in the bar, with the chicken sitting next to us alive. The bartender had tied the chicken’s legs up in a thin, straw wrapper and it figured out that it was not tied up. The chicken went and ran away! There was a small alley way that led out to the main road. I was on one side and my friend was on the other side and the chicken was in the middle. All of these Rwandan nationals were watching us and just laughing at the two white people trying to catch a chicken in the alley way. We eventually caught the chicken and were able to prepare it, but I’ll never forget that moment.”



Maria Briones

Panama 2015-2017, Environmental Sector

URI 2014, B.S. Environmental Engineering & B.A. Spanish

“I felt that even the hard things were rewarding. I wouldn’t take back any of them, though. The most difficult thing to cope with was isolation. I was completely surrounded by people, but still felt isolated. I expected to be really social, but that wasn’t always the case and that was hard. At first, I felt I couldn’t talk to my homestay family or anyone about my problems. In a sense, neither of us could relate to the other. I felt that the problems of the people I was surrounded by in the community were bigger than my own. I felt like they couldn’t relate to me being homesick or missing my friends and family back home. There was a voice in the back of my head that told me I would never fully fit in. I just had to embrace that. I still found other ways to be connected in the community though.”



Neil Ross

Dominican Republic 1962-1964, Agricultural Sector

URI 1962, B.S. Agriculture and Horticulture

“This is my favorite story about one 13-year-old boy who lived across the street and became my first, most loyal Dominican friend. On my second day in his mountain valley village, Marco greeted me. He helped improve my Spanish and showed me around. When I was asked to lead the local Scout troop, Marco immediately joined. Since I had use of a four-wheel pickup, I often took the boys swimming in nearby rivers and waterfalls. We all had fun. One week I asked the Scouts if they would like to camp on a North coast beach. All the boys enthusiastically replied ‘YES’ and were so excited. Early the following Saturday morning, we all got into my truck and left the village. On arrival we saw a beautiful tropical beach. This was my first visit there. The water was so blue with small surf, the clean white sand was lined with rows of coconut palm trees, and not a single person was seen along the beach. Since the trip took about three and half hours, all the boys in the back of the truck were hot from the tropical sun. When they saw the beautiful water, they yelled, ‘Let’s go swimming.’ I agreed then challenged them to be the first one into the water. Quickly changing into my bathing suit, I was sure to win. However, Marco was running ahead of me and won the race. Like most boys, I expected him to run in as fast as he could, then dive into the ocean. Instead he stopped, turned back to me with a worried, confused look on his face. ‘What’s wrong Marco?’ I asked. He replied, ‘Neil, somebody put salt into this water.’ I fell into the waves laughing at his worldly discovery. Later I realized that none of the other mountain boys had ever tasted salt water. It was one of those rare moments, like watching a young child discover stars for the first time.”



Advice Before Applying to the Peace Corps

Here are some of the RPCVs' answers when asked "What advice would you give to someone thinking about applying to the Peace Corps?":

- ◇ Gain volunteer and leadership experience.
- ◇ Take relevant courses in college that can relate to the Peace Corps.
- ◇ Strengthen foreign language skills.
- ◇ Talk with Returned Peace Corps Volunteers.
- ◇ Talk with a Peace Corps recruiter.
- ◇ Be flexible and open-minded.
- ◇ Represent yourself professionally in the application and interview.
- ◇ Research about the Peace Corps and potential countries beforehand.
- ◇ If you are thinking about applying, just do it. You won't regret it.



Returned Peace Corps Volunteers Contacts

RPCVs are always willing to help and serve after their time in the PC. Feel free to reach out to any of the contacts below if you have any questions about the Peace Corps. They are more than happy to talk about their experiences!

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