The New Year is upon us and Peace Corps is entering a new era as well. As much good as Peace Corps does - for worldly Americans who desire to build the capacities of others and developing nations who are eager to solidify economic and physical foundations - there is the darker side. Recently, Peace Corps has come across significant, and earned, criticism after a Director of Management & Operations in Tanzania, struck and killed Rabia Issa with his car. Rabia leaves behind three children. Before any charges could be brought upon the Peace Corps worker, Peace Corps and US Embassy staff assisted the individual in fleeing Tanzania before charges could be pursued by Tanzanian authorities. A link to the story on USA Today can be found here.

It is awfully sobering and certainly an indelible mark on Peace Corps’ reputation around the world. It is our duty, as RPCVs and honestly, as the writer of this newsletter, to present this as what it is: a complete SNAFU that Peace Corps must deal with. Peace Corps and its Volunteers are not above any law, regardless of where that law was born and resides. The institution that is Peace Corps is a benevolent notion, however, as we all know, not all persons who have part of institution are benevolent individuals. I find it as part of my responsibility as Chair of this group to inform you all of the good, the bad, and the ugly of the Peace Corps. It would be foolhardy if I only provided the positive while neglecting the real and obvious.

Moving ahead, this newsletter contains a phenomenal interview with recently returned RPCV, Mary McCormick, and her tales of beautiful Ukraine and evacuating among a raging global pandemic. Additionally, there is an article about future Afghans coming to Buffalo, invitations being sent out to future PCVs, and some Peace Corps action items that you can take advantage of.

I hope you enjoy this newsletter despite the somber news coming out of Tanzania. The Bills are on a robust cavalry march into Kansas City and I sense that they’ll be coming out battle-hardened and victorious. Any happenings, updates, social events, recipes or items of interest can be sent to RPCVofBuffaloWNY@gmail.com to be included in the newsletter. Thank you for reading and hope to see you soon. Go Bills.

- Brett Claydon
Upcoming Events & Save the Dates

January 19th: Native Community Services: Overview of Native American Cultural Competency

January 24th: LGBTQIA+ Community Forum

January 24th: Native American Community Services: Introduction to Native American Cultural Competency

January 25th: “At the Intersection of Global Health & Climate Change” WEBINAR

February 8th: Jewish Family Services of Western New York: Incredible Years Interpreter Training Series

VISIT OUR WEBSITE TO SEE FUTURE EVENTS!

Action Items

- Peace Corps Community for Refugees and Friends of Afghanistan
- RPCVs for Environmental Action
- Global Allies Program: Partners Ending Poverty with RESULTS
- Partnering for Peace: Friends of Peace Corps and Rotary
- RPCV Oral History Archive Project
- “Peace Corps Connect to the Future” — Read the full report here and listen to the podcast.
This interview was performed with Mary McCormick, a recently Returned Peace Corps Volunteer from Ukraine. Please enjoy and reach out to RPCVofBuffaloWNY@gmail.com to share your Peace Corps story.

Tell us your name, your country of service, length of service, and the program that you were involved with in Peace Corps.

My name is Mary McCormick and I served in Ukraine from August of 2018 until the COVID-19 evacuation in March of 2020. While in Ukraine, I was a volunteer in the Education sector and my main objective was teaching English as a foreign language in Ukrainian schools.

So, during your time in Ukraine what was your “typical day” like?

While living in Ukraine, I was able to get into a typical daily routine in my community. During most of the week, I would work at the school on lesson plans and projects. Monday through Friday, I would walk to school and begin the day by getting together in the teacher’s lounge with all my colleagues and lesson plan over morning tea. Once the school day began, I’d co-teach about four to six English lessons with my Ukrainian counterparts throughout the day. After school, I’d usually either go to the grocery store to buy ingredients for dinner, visit my old host sister (who was also one of my counterparts), or walk to my old host mom’s house to visit her for dinner. On the weekends, I had more free time. I would take the time to either work on secondary projects I had or I’d take the bus into the city of Kharkiv to see friends.

Give us an overview of Ukraine. What's the geography like? A little bit of the history, major industries, and demographics.

Ukraine is the biggest country in Europe (apart from Russia). The entirety of Ukraine is about the size of Texas. The country can most easily be split into West and East. I lived in East Ukraine, which has a history of more industry and Russian influence. West Ukraine feels a lot more connected to Western Europe, and has some beautiful natural geography such as the Carpathian Mountains.

This is always a question that I've encountered when discussing Ukraine, and that is Russia. Can you give us a comparison and contrast? Why do folks always couple the two together?

It would be short-sighted to say that Russia and Ukraine do not have a long, woven history together. Many Ukrainians feel deeply connected to Russia, while others vehemently do not. Discussing the difference between Russia and Ukraine is painstakingly complex, even for a Ukrainian. Due to centuries of Russian imperialism in the region, it easy for many people to lump the two nations together and look at them the same. But even throughout times of passive and even direct cultural erasure, Ukraine and the Ukrainian people have always been a distinct homeland in Europe. Ukraine has its own language, food, music, poetry, and traditional clothing. Today, Ukraine is a sovereign nation, and one that struggles every single day to keep its sovereignty.
What was the most rewarding part of your service?

The most rewarding part of my service was seeing the genuine enthusiasm and interest from members of my community to learn English as well as connect American and Ukrainian culture together. Seeing Ukrainians of all ages attend English clubs or take part in American holiday celebrations was truly amazing to watch.

What was the most challenging part of your service?

The most challenging part was being away from my home and without a culture I’m most familiar with. I have always been a natural homebody. So entering into a community that speaks a completely different language and follows different customs was a lot for me to work through. Any RPCV will tell you that culture shock is very, very real! Overcoming the shock and having to work through the discomfort was probably the hardest part of service. But, I had a great group of fellow PCVs and host nationals to lean on throughout!

What was your favorite project? And why?

My favorite project was a student advocacy plan that my fellow Ukrainian counterparts and I implemented at our school. It was called “Students Being Heard,” and it involved the creation of a Student Workspace room along with a new student government that would write a constitution and hold town halls for their students. I loved working on building democratic action and advocacy for the students. We were also able to write grants through USAID and it was great practice for my counterparts on grant-writing too!

Let’s talk about food, what are some of the staples of the cuisine in Ukraine?

Borsch is probably the most well known staple of Ukrainian food. But all types of soup are really common! My host mom would make soup probably three times a week for dinner. But it never got old because she had so many different recipes! My favorite food is probably Varenykyy, which is pretty much the Ukrainian equivalent to Pierogis.
And what was the WNY food you wish you could have shared with the people of Ukraine? And why that food?

I really missed good old American pizza and Buffalo style wings! With a side of ranch or blue cheese, of course. I think I would’ve loved to see my host family and friends try Buffalo wings. I feel like it would’ve been a bit of food shock for them, but I would’ve loved to see what they thought of it. They probably would’ve thought they were too spicy or hot!

Describe one of the most comedic instances during your service:

One of the funniest moments I can think of was during the Easter season. My host family were very engaged at our local Orthodox church in town. To celebrate Easter in the Christian Orthodox faith, a person goes to church starting at midnight to stand and pray non-stop until around 4:30 am when you receive a blessing from the priest outside the church. I went with my host sister and host mom and made it through until the very end when we all gathered outside the church to receive a blessing from the priest. My understanding was that the priest would come out on the steps to do a quick group Easter blessing. But, while I looked around waiting for the priest to come out of the church, I was suddenly drenched in water. When I got my bearings, I saw the priest in front of me, holding a massive whip brush and a bucket of water. He smiled, laughed, and said “Christ is Risen” in Ukrainian and then continued down the line whipping everyone with the holy water. My host sister and a few others around us laughed as she apologized for not warning me. After a long night of standing and praying, I guess I should’ve been thankful for the wake up call.

What was evacuation like due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

To be honest, the COVID-19 evacuation was a bit a blur. We truly didn’t believe they would ever fully evacuate us. We saw the news in America about how a lot of places were shutting down and going into quarantine, but we all felt pretty disconnected from it. In Ukraine, schools were closed for a short period, but I was still going to work to help with projects and lesson planning. I was still hanging out with my friends and host family, and I really believed the Peace Corps would have us stay and stick it out. But everything changed when we got news that Ukraine was going to close their borders. After that, everything moved rather quickly. The day after the border news broke, we were put into our Emergency Action Plan and told we had 48 hours to leave the country. That night, I had to pack up whatever I could carry (we were only allowed 1 checked bag), clean out my apartment, and say goodbye to my cat. Then the next morning, my host family and counterpart came to say their goodbyes and I was driven to Kharkiv to get the next train to the capital.

To put it plainly, the rushed goodbyes were some of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do in my life. I felt like I was betraying my community, and abandoning everyone I cared about. Having to hand over my cat and say one last thank you to my host mom for taking care of me are moments that I, for the longest time, tried not to think about.
After getting to the capital, we missed the deadline to evacuate in time, leaving over 300 of us stranded in Kyiv with the Ukrainian borders and airspace closed. That next whole week was all about living minute by minute. We never knew where we’d have to move to for sleep or how much allowance we’d have for food any given day, so all of us PCVs just relied on each other to keep going. The determination of the local Peace Corps staff was nothing short of a miracle. They worked endlessly to ensure we had a roof over our heads every night and a meal to eat each day as we waited for any flight that would be willing to come get us. After about six or seven days, a charter from Europe was allowed to come in. Behind police escort in the middle of the night, buses drove us to the airport as we all sat in silence, quietly saying our goodbyes to the streets of Kyiv.

It has taken a long time of healing, but now when I think back on my service, the evacuation is the last thing I remember. While evacuating, it felt like it was going to be the last time I ever stepped foot in Ukraine. But since then, many of my fellow RPCVs have gone back to visit their communities. I look forward to day I get to be reunited with my friends and family (and cat) in Ukraine once again!

**What is one thing you wish Americans knew about Ukraine?**

The one thing I really wish Americans knew about Ukraine is that it has some of the most genuine people you’ll ever meet. I think because of the Cold War, there is a slightly unfair view that many of us Americans have of Eastern Europe, and especially post-Soviet nations like Ukraine. I have talked to many Americans that mention words like “gray” and “unhappy” when they consider a country like Ukraine. But I can’t describe how vehemently untrue those stereotypes are.

Many Ukrainians have lived through deeply painful periods such as World War II, Stalin’s reign of power, the complete collapse of the Soviet Union, and the now ongoing war in the Donbas. Instability and trauma have made the Ukrainian people tough. But it has also taught them that no matter what happens, two things always remain constant: family and community. From my experience, these two things are the most important parts of life for many Ukrainian people. Ukrainians would do just about anything to help their loved ones or their community. Whether it is ensuring your grandchild has their hat before leaving for school, or sending your friend home with food from your garden so they don’t need to spend extra money at the grocery store. Or if it is getting together with your loved ones to have a laugh when times are difficult, or simply giving a ride to a random community member on your way into town because you see how much they’re struggling in the snow.

I will admit, Ukrainians don’t smile as much as Americans. They can appear distrusting of strangers (a survival trait lingering from the Soviet era). Sometimes, a Ukrainian may come off as slightly “cold” to an average American. But once a Ukrainian has determined that you are a member of their family or community, they will show you companionship and loyalty for life. They will, quite literally, give you the shirt off their back.

And that is something I think we, as Americans, can learn from.
Pictures from Mary’s service in Ukraine
Україна
More Afghans than expected to arrive in Buffalo

Pressed by the federal government to accept more Afghan evacuees, Buffalo’s four immigrant and resettlement agencies say they will receive more than they originally agreed to.

The evacuees began arriving in late November with more on the way in the coming weeks and months. The request from the federal government comes as the Afghan newcomers have become eligible for services and benefits that those who enter the U.S. as refugees receive.

The agencies have increased capacity to serve more Afghans because of the evacuees’ access to those benefits, officials from the agencies say.

"Now that there’s resources available, we’ve increased the numbers," said Molly S. Carr, CEO of Jewish Family Services, one of Buffalo’s resettlement agencies.

Nearly 50,000 evacuees have received assistance from resettlement agencies across the country, including 1,636 who have resettled in New York State as of Dec. 7.

A total of 456 Afghan evacuees have arrived or are scheduled to arrive at Buffalo’s resettlement agencies, according to Rep. Brian Higgins’ office.

The figure is up from 350, estimated before the Afghans became eligible for the public services and benefits last September. Continue reading at The Buffalo News website here.

Journey's End Refugee Services (JERS) WNY Refugee Film Festival is back for its 4th season coming this February!

The fourth season will continue to be virtual and FREE due to the pandemic. This season will highlight the compelling stories and voices of refugees resettled in the U.S.

While the film festival is free this season, you must register ahead of time. You will be emailed Zoom log-In Info before each screening.

Please consider a donation towards the work of Journey's End Refugee Services when registering! Click here to learn more.
Buffalo United for Afghan Evacuees
WWW.WNYRAC.ORG

Let’s help our incoming Afghan evacuees with all that they may need. Join the Western New York Refugee and Asylee Consortium (WNYRAC) in welcoming and assisting our soon-to-be Afghan Neighbors. Click here to make a contribution today.

Buffalo United for Afghan Evacuees is a community-wide coalition supported by the Western New York Refugee and Asylee Consortium:

CATHOLIC CHARITIES
HOPE for all seasons

JERICHO ROAD
COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF BUFFALO

jfs.

JOURNEY’S END
REFUGEE SERVICES

INTERNATIONAL CALENDAR
2022

Peace Corps 2022
International Calendars & Notecards Now Available!

$10 for Calendars and $10 for a Pack of Notecards! The Notecards come in a pack of 8 and are perfect for any occasion.

Get your Holiday Season shopping started with a 2022 Peace Corps Calendar & Pack of Notecards today.

Contact Jeri Titus (jerititus@yahoo.com) for ordering and payments can be made by check or Venmo to the RPCV of Buffalo & WNY Group.

venmo @Buffalo-RPCV
The Peace Corps Has Begun Sending Invitations: Return to Service in 2022

When we went to press, eight posts had met criteria for Volunteers to return — and invitations were out for five.

After the Fall of Afghanistan, We Need the Rise of the Peace Corps

The United States needs to engage with the world — but not with top-down military-first policies.

By Reed Hastings and Glenn Blumhorst

We Can Do It! Again!

The U.S. is profoundly polarized — politically, culturally, socially, and economically. That was true during the Gilded Age, too. Halfway between then and now, John F. Kennedy exhorted his fellow Americans, “Ask not what your country can do for you — but what you can do for your country.” So what happened? And how do we turn things around?

By Shaylyn Romney Garrett

Peace Corps Reauthorization Act Passes Its First Hurdle

In a time of partisan rancor, the House Foreign Affairs Committee passed the bill with ringing bipartisan approval: a vote of 44 to 4.

By Jonathan Pearson
Mark the Moment: September 22, 1961 — the Day that John F. Kennedy Signed the Peace Corps Act

When President John F. Kennedy signed the Peace Corps Act into law, it permanently established the Peace Corps as an independent agency. But forging the legislation and getting it through Congress didn’t happen on their own. We take a look at those beginnings and share some stories few have heard. And we look ahead to what the Peace Corps must become.

A conversation with Bill Josephson, Bill Moyers, Joe Kennedy III, and Marieme Foote

The legislation that established the Peace Corps on a permanent basis, the Peace Corps Act, was signed by President John F. Kennedy in an Oval Office ceremony at 9:45 a.m. on September 22, 1961. On the day JFK signed the act, three groups of Volunteers were already in their countries of service: Colombia, Ghana, and St. Lucia.

To mark the 60th anniversary of the signing, National Peace Corps Association hosted a conversation with two key figures in the establishment of the Peace Corps — and one Volunteer who was evacuated in 2020, and whose commitment to the ideas and ideals of the organization points to the Peace Corps of the future. The conversation was moderated by Joe Kennedy III — JFK’s great-nephew and himself a returned Volunteer who, while he served in Congress, championed the creation of the Peace Corps Commemorative, which will establish a place in the heart of the nation’s capital to symbolize what the Peace Corps represents.

Here are edited excerpts. You can also listen to the conversation on Spotify. Continue reading here.
Snapshots from Six Decades of Service — and the Wider World

A timeline of some events that have defined the Peace Corps from 1960 to today. Plus a year-by-year look at countries where Peace Corps programs began.

Researched by Ellery Pollard, Emi Krishnamurthy, Sarah Steindl, Nathalie Vadnais, and Orrin Luc

Update: Preventing, Reporting, and Responding to Sexual Assault in the Peace Corps

USA Today published a follow-up to an in-depth investigation published in spring 2021. And in December, the Peace Corps invited public commentary on the agency’s Sexual Assault Risk Reduction and Response program.

The Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program Was Supposed to Benefit Returned Volunteers. It Hasn’t.

So returned Volunteers are rallying to try to fix that. And NPCA is working with them to help.

“Terrific Ambassadors” — Peace Corps Community Relationship Building in Kentucky

A tribute from Representative Andy Barr in the House to Returned Peace Corps Volunteers who have helped him understand the value of their service.
Vintage Peace Corps Poster of the Month
Do you have an announcement or item of interest to RPCVs?

All area RPCVs, Peace Corps supporters or interested persons are invited to submit event announcements, news items or other items which may be of interest to the Western New York RPCV community.

You may request for the information to be placed in the newsletter or as a separate email. Items submitted may be subject to editing and/or editorial discretion.

Submit to: rpcvofbuffalowny@gmail.com

RPCV Buffalo Board of Directors

Brett Claydon (Namibia), Chairperson
Ryan Ried (Lesotho), Treasurer
Tony Agnello (Afghanistan), Secretary
Brett Claydon (Namibia), Newsletter Editor & Membership Webmaster
Alessandra Santarosa (Kosovo), Social Media Coordinator
Ginna Coon (Ethiopia), Programming
Audrey Seidel (Colombia), Programming
Jeri Titus (Morocco), Member At-Large

Follow Us!

Visit Our Website!
RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS OF
BUFFALO, NEW YORK
2022 MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

RPCV/Buffalo membership is open to all returned Peace Corps Volunteers, active and friends of Peace Corps. Please complete the following and return with your membership dues (25.00 annually) payable to RPCV/Buffalo:

RPCV/Buffalo
c/o Ryan Ried
105 Donaldson Road
Buffalo, NY 14208

Please check

Renewing Member _____  New Member _____

Are you a member of the National Peace Corps Association? Yes _____  No _____

I. Personal Information:

Name: (first) ____________________________  (last) ____________________________
Address: _________________________________________________________ (apt)
________
City: _____________________________________________________________
State: ____________________________  Zip: ____________________________
Telephone: ____________________________  Cell: ____________________________
E-Mail: ______________________________

I. Peace Corps Service Information (if applicable):

Country(ies) of Service:
____________________________________________________________________
Dates of Service:
____________________________________________________________________
Primary Service Role:
____________________________________________________________________