

What can I say . . . I'm a risk taker--that is, a calculated risk taker! Yes, I was over 50 when I volunteered for the Peace Corps, but I was not retired--just tired of the job that I was doing! I was living and working in Albuquerque, New Mexico when I volunteered. While taking a class at the University of New Mexico, I saw a Peace Corps poster that advertised, "no upper age limit." I thought, "I can do that/I want to do that!" I had the desire to travel and to know about other cultures, so I seized this opportunity. When I met with the recruiter, I said, "I'll go anywhere, do anything." "Anywhere" included countries that I knew nothing about.

When I received the invitation to serve in Kyrgyzstan, I had to go to the world atlas and look for its location. By the time I went for the Peace Corps staging event in Washington D.C., I knew where the small "stan" country was, and I had learned that it was a former Soviet republic, but I knew very little about the Kyrgyz culture. So true to my lifestyle, I took the risk and flew 6,500 miles to serve as a Sustainable Economic Development volunteer.

My assignment as a business volunteer included working at a rural Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in the village where I lived, and in the second (and third year--I extended for a third year), I also worked in the capital city in a women's service NGO. Part of my job in the village was to introduce western business practices and write grants to assist women in starting their own small businesses. The Tickle Up organization in New York was my most reliable source of \$100 grants for families to establish small family businesses. In the capital city of Bishkek, I worked with the women in that NGO to provide support for women in crisis. My favorite project was establishing art therapy sessions at the office of the NGO and in a psychiatric hospital for women.

Like every Peace Corps volunteer who I have talked to, I was also involved with the children who wanted to learn and/or practice the English language. English lessons were available to them in grammar school, starting in the second grade, but none of them (teachers included) had ever had a conversation in English. Six to twelve children came to my apartment in the afternoon for assistance with English. In addition, I also obtained art supplies from the United States and created an after-school art workshop for grammar school children.

Patience is required when working in many other cultures, and this was certainly true in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz people do not have the same standards for promptness and rigid scheduling that Americans have. Promptness was often hampered by the very old transportation system, i.e., buses that broke down frequently, etc. The telephone system was sparse to non-existent so immediate communication was difficult. Their priorities included large family celebrations of all kinds--births, birthdays, weddings, funerals, and many holidays--and very often those took precedence over work. Many times I was left waiting for a scheduled event which never materialized. I overcame a lot of frustration by carrying a paperback book to read to pass the time in a positive way.

Peace Corps volunteers often need to be self-starters and to implement their own ideas. Being an older volunteer with years of personal and business experience, I was

able to initiate projects with ease. When Kyrgyz life was moving too slow for me, I created projects in which I could keep active.

As an older volunteer in Asia, I became a valued member of the Kyrgyz community. The Asian culture believes older people have wisdom; they respect the experience that older people bring to their organizations and to their lives. Wow, what a pleasure to be appreciated! Older females--grandmothers and aunts--are the most respected people in the culture. The Kyrgyz people do not consider asking a person's age to be impolite. During introductions, a person is often asked how old they are in order for everyone to know where the newcomer "fits" into the hierarchy of their society. Everyone was most concerned that my every need was taken care of to the best of their abilities. I was an honored guest in their homes for numerous meals and celebrations and was treated with the greatest admiration.

Questions were asked, such as, "Why would an older woman leave a country that has every convenience to serve in a country where life is a struggle?" My answer, "Because I am learning so much from you."

The older business volunteers had more difficulty in learning the Russian language. (We studied Russian because legal documents were written in Russian.) This challenge was compounded because the people in the village spoke the Kyrgyz language among themselves (it is being revived since the fall of the Soviet Union). Never having studied a foreign language, my brain was extremely challenged! But even though I could not speak nor understand everything, I was able to use gestures and body language for much of my communication, and I was able to acquire everything I needed.

Health issues were on the top of the list for concerns for older volunteers. All of us had to be medically cleared by the Peace Corps medical staff by satisfying the rigid requirements for older volunteers. The only problems I had were an occasional upset stomach (their diet is much different from ours), sinus infections, and environmental asthma which I developed because of the air pollution. Those were minor problems that caused discomfort, but had no lasting effect.

There were four older women in the K-5 group; two of us who had assignments in northern Kyrgyzstan became the best of friends and still keep in touch/visit each other frequently. We always remember and celebrate how much our host communities loved us!

The women and children in Kyrgyzstan became my extended family, and I miss interacting with them. I have returned once to Kyrgyzstan for a two-week visit and I plan to visit again.

The Peace Corps gave me the opportunity to serve after the age of fifty in a respected and challenging position in a foreign country. Those three years were a very significant time in my life. I am grateful for the experiences of sharing, living and learning in Kyrgyzstan. Published: September 2004