

Peace Corps sees an advantage in older volunteers

By SARAH ABRUZZESE THE NEW YORK TIMES



FILE PHOTO: ROSE PALMISANO, THE REGISTER

FINDING PURPOSE: Jan Carmichael of Orange County went to Tanzania with the Peace Corps last year at age 69. "I needed something to be useful," she says.

WASHINGTON The Peace Corps is asking older Americans who might have heard President Kennedy's call to service more than 40 years ago to heed his request.

Though older recruits are nothing new to the Peace Corps, it recently began an initiative to entice people age 50 or older into joining at a time when many of them are stepping away from careers and into the great unknown of retirement.

The focus on the age group has meant new recruitment methods: contacting organizations like AARP and retired teachers' associations, and employing older former volunteers to work in nearly every recruiting office. The Peace Corps has aimed for 15 percent of its volunteers to be at least 50 by 2009.

The director of the Peace Corps, Ronald A. Tschetter, said he was traveling around the country to address groups of older potential volunteers. General recruiting meetings usually draw about 30 people, Tschetter said, but events aimed at retirees have drawn up to 300.

It is too early to tell if the new emphasis is working. However, in October, the Peace Corps nearly doubled – to 93 from 50 the previous year – the number of applicants over 50 years old.

Tschetter, a former volunteer himself, served with President Carter's mother, Lillian, when she was 68. He said that reflecting on his service with eight older recruits made him realize it was "really special to have people like this."

That age group has ideal traits, Tschetter said, who characterized them as givers with years of accumulated skills and knowledge. The Peace Corps has found that older recruits are more than three times as likely to serve another tour than younger recruits.

Francine Connolly, 64, of Warwick, R.I., heard Kennedy's request in 1961 when the corps was founded. However, life intruded and she was unable to join. Like many, she thought that dream was effectively shelved as she raised her children, pursued an advanced education and worked as a social worker. But that changed after she raised

her children and retired. Connolly will begin training in Africa with her husband, who was also a social worker, in April. “We’re finally old enough to go into the Peace Corps,” Connolly said. “For the last 20 years I have been thinking about going in. It was probably at the time my mother went in. It probably resurrected the dream.” Her mother, Susan Connolly, 90, went to Liberia when she was 67.

In the 1970s, older members represented 5 percent of the corps. That grew to a high of 9.7 percent in 1991, but the number slowly fell back to 5 percent last year.

Don Hesse, 63, has been teaching English to the Bedouin in Jordan for a little over a year. This is his second tour in the Peace Corps; he served in Sierra Leone in the late 1960s. “It is a new experience being older,” Hesse said during a visit to Washington. “Having children and, in my case, having grandchildren. It gives you access and credibility you just don’t have when you are 22 and right out of college.” And though maturity has advantages, it also brings complications. “It’s probably harder to be separated from children and grandchildren than when you are separated from your parents at 22, 23,” Hesse said. Hesse took several years getting his life organized legally: figuring out who should have power of attorney and take charge of his rental property, among other issues. Tschetter said the Peace Corps was looking at ways to educate people about the necessary legal work. In addition to age, Hesse said technology had changed the experience as well. All members have access to e-mail and many have telephones. In his last service, it would take up to six weeks to get a response from home to a simple question sent via regular mail.

Jan Carmichael, an Orange County resident, went to Tanzania with the Peace Corps last year at age 69. “I needed something to be useful,” she says. “I didn’t really feel like I had that here.”

For Carol Preston, 76, who is teaching English in Chongqing, China, navigating the health requirements to join was a long and difficult process. Preston said in an e-mail message that for her, “It seemed like every time I completed a part of the health forms, something else was required – seemingly almost endless.” However, though it is a struggle to learn a new language and culture, she said the experience had proved rewarding: “I have never enjoyed teaching as much as I do here.”

Register staff writer Ellyn Pak contributed to this report.