

Peace Corps Volunteer of the Week

Hello! I'm Kristen from California and I am a Community and Youth Development (CYD) Peace Corps Volunteer in Armenia. I am in my 22nd month of service and I am loving every part of it; despite all the challenging days/weeks and even months that has come my way.



Since I've been here, I've had the unique opportunity to live in two different towns both on opposite sides of the country, both four hours away from the capital and despite the obvious distance, surprisingly, the same dialect is spoken in both places! And to top it off, I work with a women's resource center in those two towns, consulting them in the following areas: PR/Marketing, Advertisement, Project Design and Implementation, Management, Sales, Public Speaking, Event Planning, Basic Business skills (Resume, cover page, etc.) Grant Project and Report writing proposals, and Nutrition. I wouldn't be who I am today if it wasn't for my experiences living in both areas of Armenia.

What I love about my job is that it truly is a combination of three things that are ever interesting to me and that I am deeply passionate about: Entrepreneurship, Design and Humanitarianism.

I first joined the Peace Corps for a number of reasons but mainly because I wanted to be a more well-rounded, educated, empathic individual. I never lived outside of California beforehand and I knew that in order for me to grow and become a better individual, I had to put myself in situations that were uncomfortable even if it meant moving across the country, learning an entirely new language, and adjusting to cultural differences.

My intention before the Peace Corps was very similar to those who decided to join in the first place, which is to help those who are less fortunate than themselves. However, 22 months into my service and at arm's reach of closing my time here; I feel that in addition to helping others, I, myself have been deeply humbled and changed for the better.

Peace Corps has been a real life changer for me. My service in Armenia is not even over yet and I can already say that I am different than who I was two years ago. My service has affected me in more ways than I could ever imagine, both in physical and emotional ways. It has humbled me throughout the months and I have learned so many things about myself along the ride.



My biggest physical hardship about my service was having to move to one side of the country to the other, in the middle of my service. During the time, I was upset because I felt that after a year of being in my community, I had to leave my work and the relationships I worked so hard building for an entire year. It wasn't until I later realized that just because I wasn't physically there, doesn't mean that my relationships

with my friends had to stop. It would just be a greater challenge for me to work through. Now, I feel extremely blessed to have the opportunity to experience two sides of the country in my service. Moving to a completely new site my second year gave me the chance and insight to quickly adapt to changes around me. I had to be comfortable in all that discomfort.

An emotional hardship I had to overcome during my service was learning how to be patient with others and most importantly myself. Coming in, I was not a very patient person. I liked things done fast, and my friends use to tease me, saying that I would never be able to tackle a marathon because I like to sprint through things. I also liked to see results almost immediately and I was aggressive/quick to criticize. Because i wasn't able to effectively react immediately due to language barriers, I learned to be still and patient with myself and the situation at hand. As a result, I've learned to see all angles of a situation instead of just mine. Where as in America I would react immediately to something because I could. Here in Armenia, there were many times I couldn't express what I wanted to say at the moment due to the language barrier. This in return, created time and space for me to reflect and respond in a competent way.

If I were to give one message to incoming volunteers that are looking for advice, I would share the following:

Don't come into your service expecting to change the world, or even your community for that matter. Change will happen eventually, in its own time, sometimes in ways that aren't even familiar to you. Everyone's service will be different and that is completely OK. It's all about perspective anyway. Don't compare yourself with other volunteers because depending on what you choose to focus on in your service, your results will also be different. For me, I choose to focus my time on people, because I personally believe that relationships are the fundamentals and building blocks of any successful outcome.



With that said, come into your community and just firstly observe. Notice people and their ways of doing things, their habits, their likes/dislikes, the way they work, the way they talk, even their tone of voice, etc. The list goes on. But observe without passing judgement. After all, who are you, to say what is right or wrong? Then, immerse yourself completely in those relationships and strip yourself from old ways of thinking. Start anew, like a clean sheet of paper. Ignorance is not bliss and neither is arrogance. Be vulnerable and train yourself to be an expert at learning. Acquire new skills from those around you. You are never too old or too young to learn something new. Get to really know others and spend time with them. After all, they will be taking care of you for the next two years. Finally, be open to change and to be changed. It will be scary and sometimes you won't want to change, but nothing is more scarier than staying the same.