



The Peace Corps

International education and the Peace Corps have a long-term relationship not unlike advantageous symbioses found in nature—each benefits and enhances the other.

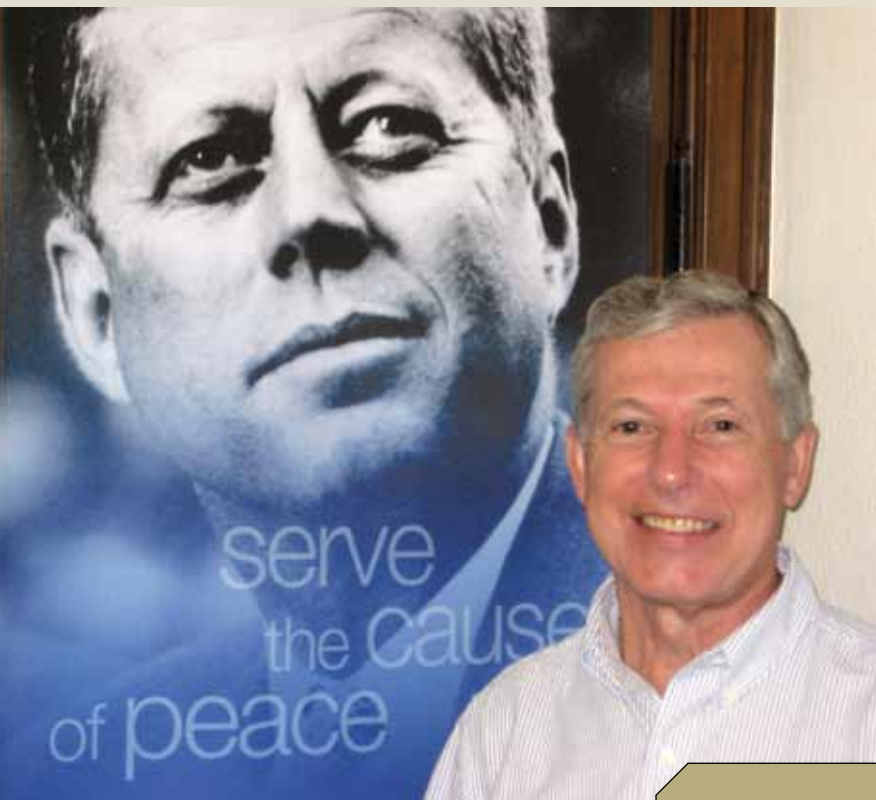
BY DANA WILKIE

SYNC

and International Education

As a young American committed to feminist ideals, Mona Miller learned the importance of suspending judgment about the practice of polygamy in sub-Saharan Africa. Daniel Paracka had never heard of Sierra Leone when the Peace Corps sent him to a village there with no running water or electricity, but that is where he found that “people are the most important thing.” After teaching Afghan children in an abandoned hospital with no doors or windows, John Greisberger could empathize with his students going through culture shock. Laurie Young discovered that—even after a painful centipede bite left her jaw throbbing—she could successfully pull off a fair for Jamaican artisans. After spending a decade in a government job, Margaret Riley realized that financial security was not as important as working in the overseas lands that inspired her when she was in the Peace Corps.

Very often, those who pursue careers in international education were first inspired by an education abroad program during college, or a Peace Corps stint after college, or both. In this fiftieth anniversary year for the Peace Corps, *International Educator* examines the stories of five standouts in the international education community who credit their early overseas experiences with propelling them into the work they do today.



John Greisberger

Director, International Center
University of Michigan

PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER 1973–1975

John Greisberger's first abroad experience was in 1973, as a Peace Corps volunteer in Afghanistan. For two years, he and his wife Peggy taught English in Mehterlam, the provincial capital of Laghman in the eastern part of the country.

The two expected they were coming to a foreign land to help its natives. Instead, the pair left Afghanistan having gained far more than they gave.

"If I hadn't joined the Peace Corps, I know that I would not have become an international educator," Greisberger says with conviction. "It wasn't until I returned to the U.S. that I learned about the field of international education, and international student advising in particular. But once I discovered this field and this profession, I knew it was meant for me."

Today Greisberger is director of the University of Michigan's International Center, which provides services and programs for the school's 6,500 international and domestic students, as well as scholars interested in overseas study, internships, research, and voluntary service.

Mehterlam was built at the confluence of two major rivers to serve as the

central bazaar and business area for the province. When Greisberger stayed there, it had one main street, a couple of short side avenues, a gas station and a small hotel. Though the couple lacked electricity and running water, the two lived comfortably in a four room mud-brick house whose small yard held a deep well and orange and grapefruit trees.

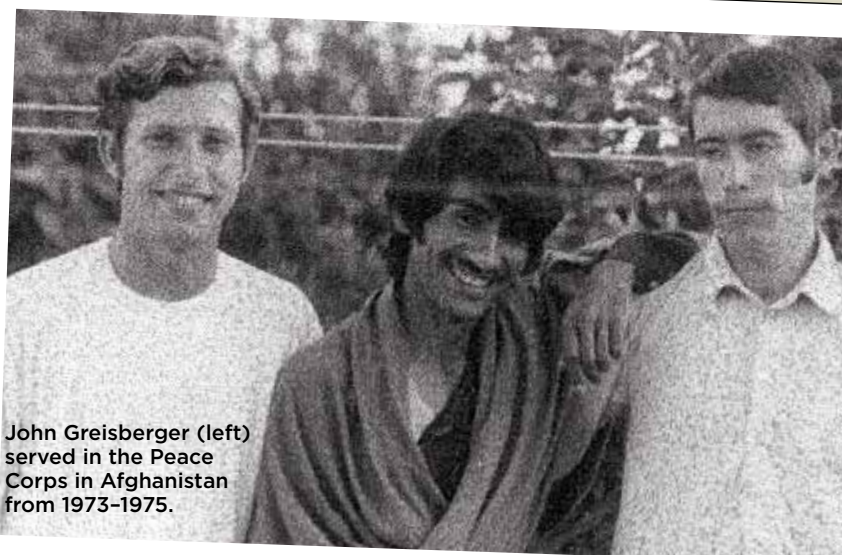
During his two years there, Greisberger taught English to seventh-grade and ninth-grade boys—four classes a day, six days a week. Peggy taught grades 9–12 at the girl's school. The schools were hardly ideal: Greisberger's was an abandoned hospital on a rocky hill outside town. It had no doors, no windows, and few desks or benches. Instead, schoolchildren sat on a concrete floor, taking instruction from black-painted boards propped against the walls. The English books were locked in a storage room because the headmaster feared students would lose them.

"It was a long haul to our one day weekend [on Friday]," Greisberger recalls.

Traveling in Afghanistan was always a memorable experience. The road from Kabul to Laghman passed through the beautiful and treacherous Kabul Gorge. As one descended from the

mile-high city of Kabul to the low desert, the scenery was magnificent—even though the hairpin turns were frightening and the narrow roads were crammed with old buses, taxis, minivans, and trucks.

"I always breathed a sigh of relief when we got through the gorge safely, and I knew the kids and the old folks in the



John Greisberger (left) served in the Peace Corps in Afghanistan from 1973–1975.



van felt the same way because that is when they all stopped praying," Greisberger recalls. "We took a number of road trips: east through the Hindu Kush to Bamiyan to see the tallest standing Buddha in the world; north through the Salang Pass to Mazar-i-Sharif; south through the desert to Kandahar; and from Kandahar, we went west and then north to Herat near the border with Iran."

While in Mehterlam, the couple spent many Fridays drinking tea with Afghan friends.

"The Afghan people are the most hospitable people I ever met," Greisberger says. "They may not have had much, but what they had they shared with us. When we were invited into Afghan homes, I would sit, talk, and eat with the men, and my wife would be in another room doing the same with the women. We wouldn't see each other until hours later when it was time to leave. We saw normal Afghan life through the eyes of Afghans."

When he returned from Afghanistan, Greisberger earned his PhD in higher education from Iowa State University, and then taught English as a second language in New York and Alabama. Later, he was an international student adviser and programmer at Iowa State University, deputy director of Harvard University's International Office, and director of the Office of International Education at Ohio State University.

Greisberger served as president of NAFSA: Association of International Educators in 2004, as well as executive director of the Phi Beta Delta Honor Society for International Scholars from 1991–1996.

"My Peace Corps experience has definitely influenced how I do my job," Greisberger says. "Having crossed cultures, I know what students and scholars experienced when they came to the U.S. I experienced culture shock, the adjustment process, the need to understand my new surroundings, and the joy of feeling at home in the new culture. I could empathize with students as they struggled in the classroom, in the residence halls, and in the community. I could share my experiences and assure them that they would succeed, but that it would take time, patience, and hard work. My experience abroad gave me the credibility needed to be successful as an international student adviser."

When John F. Kennedy created the Peace Corps in March of 1961, he said that the "life of a volunteer will not be easy, but it will be rich and satisfying." Greisberger holds fast to these words, because although he experienced challenging moments while abroad, "the Peace Corps changed the way I saw and thought about things. It gave me a perspective on life and work that influences me every day as a person and as an international educator."

Mona Miller

**Director, New Program Development
GlobalLinks Learning Abroad**

PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER 1981–1983

PEACE CORPS FELLOW, 1984

ASSOCIATE PEACE CORPS DIRECTOR,
1985–1989

Mona Miller has lived in Gabon, Burundi, and Togo; worked in Chad, Benin, and Rwanda; and studied language and culture in Spain and Guatemala. Her international travels have challenged her biases about polygamy and allowed her to play foster mother to an infant gorilla who hung on Miller's back for two solid weeks.

Today Miller is director of EuroLearn Partnerships and Development, a division of Colorado-based GlobalLinks Learning Abroad that manages European host university partnerships in nine countries. Miller often reaches back to her international experiences to encourage students studying abroad to step outside their comfort zones, to make friends from other nations, and to share about those interactions when they return home.

"In my interactions with university administrators from around the world, I strive to be sensitive to their cultural filters and approach situations in different ways dependent on the cultural norms," says Miller, who built the EuroLearn division of GlobalLinks from four students in 2009 to 250 students today. "I also strive to impart to students the value of in-depth observation and learning about the cultures they visit, rather than judging through stereotypes or based on touristic encounters."

Miller was raised by parents who often hosted international students at their home, and she was the niece of a couple who enthralled her with tales of their adventures as agricultural missionaries. So it seemed a given that the Oklahoma-reared Miller would herself venture abroad.

Her first overseas trip was in 1972, when she spent a semester at India's Woodstock International School shortly after finishing her sophomore year at Jefferson City High School in Missouri. Afterwards, while visiting her aunt and uncle in central India's Vikarabad, she experienced what she calls "a classic case of culture shock" as unfam-





miliar sights and smells—not to mention the wretched poverty and leprosy clinics—assaulted her Midwestern senses. She dropped 20 pounds in two weeks and developed dysentery.

“I remember being overwhelmed with all of the people begging in the streets,” says Miller, who directed study abroad programs in Austin, Texas, and at Colorado State University before joining GlobalLinks. “One time I saw a man without any legs chained to a blind child. They shared their sight and mobility to survive with money given to them on the street.”

ba, she cared for an infant gorilla whose mother had been shot by a poacher. For two weeks, she says, “the infant would not leave my back...riding with me to village and farm visits as I rode my moped.”

When Burundi officials threatened to close down the local Peace Corps program following a U.S. decline in aide because of human rights violations, Miller found herself in charge thanks to the travels of the U.S. ambassador and the local Peace Corps director. She took the reins, working with the U.S. embassy’s deputy chief of mission to ensure all her staff stayed in the country.

After her Peace Corps tours, Miller returned to school, earning a master’s in international and intercultural administration in 1993 from the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. She pursued a career in international education, she said, because she wanted to stay involved with people living in other cultures and give Americans opportunities to live abroad.

“To truly understand how others live and think, I believe one needs to experience life in other cultures,” Miller says.

Perhaps the most important perspective that Miller developed after living abroad so many years was the “need to observe and learn about the host culture to be effective.” This often meant questioning her biases.

For instance, she first found it difficult to remain patient with villagers who made decisions by “committee,”

which often took tremendous time. While in Gabon, she befriended two villagers married to the same man. As a young American committed to feminists ideals, Miller found the practice antiquated and unfair. But she learned that her friends appreciated the arrangement, as it gave them freedom when caring for children and allowed them to share the joys and burdens of village life. In fact, Miller says, the wives often expressed sympathy for a woman who was a man’s only wife.

“My own cultural norms were often challenged, forcing me to analyze why I felt the way I did and the impact my own cultural upbringing had on decisionmaking and assessments of right and wrong,” says Miller, whose travels have also taught her how to be sensitive to the cultural filters of the many university administrators she meets. “The U.S. way is one way, but not necessarily the right or best way of doing things.”



Mona Miller was a Peace Corps volunteer from 1981–1983 in Gabon. From 1985–1989, she worked with the Peace Corps as a fellow in Washington, D.C. and as an associate Peace Corps director for both Bujumbura, Burundi and Lomé, Togo.

It took that one education abroad experience in India to convince Miller to sign up with the Peace Corps after earning her bachelor’s in political science from Oklahoma City University. For the next eight years, Miller worked on agricultural and rural development in Lébam-ba, Gabon, in Bujumbura, Burundi, and in Lomé, Togo. She trained as a manager at USAID’s central African desk and boned up on health and sanitation in Colorado.

In fact, Miller says that most Peace Corps workers tell her they signed up after studying abroad on a semester-exchange program.

So many years living in sub-Saharan Africa left Miller with remarkable memories: While in the village of Lébam-

Daniel Paracka

Director, Education Abroad Office
Associate Professor of Education
Kennesaw State University

PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER 1985–1987

Growing up as the son of an accountant father, Daniel Paracka did plenty of moving in his early years—living in five or six U.S. states before settling in Georgia to finish high school.

It was not until he was an undergrad at North Carolina's St. Andrews Presbyterian College, however, that he traveled abroad—for five weeks in India. The experience left such an indelible impression that Paracka would later travel on Peace Corps tours to West Africa and China, marry a Chinese woman, and embark on his life's work directing education abroad programs.

"I tell students all the time: if your first impression of another person or culture on arrival is negative, that's a red flag that you need more information," says Paracka, who is currently director of the education abroad office at Georgia's Kennesaw State University, as well as an associate professor at the school. "You just don't know enough to come to a quick conclusion in a first meeting."

For his first education abroad experience in 1980, Paracka—then a junior in college—spent December and January in India. His study program spent time in Delhi, Varanasi, Agra, Jaipur, Bombay (now Mumbai), Bangalore, Mysore, and Trivandrum. As the U.S. students delved into Indian politics, culture, and society, Paracka's senses were assaulted by all that was new—the intense traffic, the strange food, the congestion of bodies on the streets.

His first day in Delhi, after landing at the city's airport, "there was a press of people," recalls Paracka. "So many people and so crowded and a lot of different accents and languages all around me." There was the day in Trivandrum when he spied fishermen pulling in nets and, when he went to help them, experienced a "sense of being accepted and being part of" their everyday life. There was the afternoon in Agra—home of

the Taj Mahal—when he stumbled on an outdoor wedding party. The groom was astride a horse in traditional celebratory garments with money hanging from his clothes, and after the guests—all strangers—insisted he join them, he ate a wedding meal with his hands while sitting on the ground.

"I'd been so welcomed and supported and helped by people abroad for years," Paracka says "I wanted to do that for people coming to the United States."

After graduating from St. Andrews with a bachelor's in economics and spending a brief stint at a New Jersey Revlon job he disliked, Paracka applied to the Peace Corps and was assigned to Sierra Leone, "which I'd never even heard of." He was there 27 months helping rice farmers build irrigation systems so they could make better profits from their crop. He lived in the home of the local imam—

the head of the mosque there.

"If you ever paid [the locals] a compliment—you liked the shirt someone was wearing—the next thing you know they'd be taking it off and handing it to you," Paracka recalls of those years. "Every day I would walk five to seven miles from the village to the farms to work. There was no TV, no running water, no electricity. It was a bit like camping out for two years. People always had time for each other because people were the most im-

Daniel Paracka served in the Peace Corps from 1985–1987. This past summer, he returned to Sierra Leone for the first time in 24 years to work with a group of former Peace Corps volunteers to offer teacher training workshops.



portant thing. When you walked past someone, you spent 15 or 20 minutes talking to them. You didn't just say 'Hi.' I learned to listen and the art of conversation."

After leaving the Peace Corps, Paracka got a job teaching English in China to oil pipeline workers. He spent two years there, living near Beijing in a city called Langfang, where he met his future wife, Yan. After the couple returned to the United States, Paracka finished graduate school with a master of science in counseling from Pennsylvania's West Chester University. He worked first as a counselor at Peirce College in Philadelphia, then as a foreign student adviser at Georgia State University in Atlanta. In 1997 he signed on with Kennesaw as associate director of the school's international center, where he would later earn his PhD in philosophy education studies.

Eventually, he was running both the education abroad and foreign student advisory offices, but when the jobs got too demanding, he took his current post as director of education abroad. Since 2003, he has coordinated the school's annual country study program and led trips abroad to India, China, Kenya, Brazil, Turkey, South Korea, Romania, and Peru. Proficient in Mandarin Chinese, and Sierra Leonean Krio, Paracka is especially interested in helping students understand today's complex interdependent world and to develop ways to internationalize their college experience. Before traveling abroad with students and faculty, he encourages them to keep an open mind, to be adaptable and above all—to be patient.

"There may be times when there are things about another culture that can be very hard to accept or understand, and a lot of the things that are the most difficult are how women and minorities are treated," Paracka says. But "seeing people live in different parts of the world is empowering, it makes students realize they have lots of choices they can make in their lives."



Margaret Riley in Leticia, Colombia, a few years after her Peace Corps experience. She volunteered in Colombia from 1973–1975.

Margaret Riley

Associate Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education
Duke University

PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER 1973–1975



It was Margaret Riley's mother who first encouraged her in 1968 to study abroad. So between her junior and senior years in a Des Moines, Iowa, high school, Riley signed up for a course in comparative government that took her to Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, and England.

Today, more than three decades later and with several years of Peace Corps experience behind her, Riley is director and associate dean for the Global Education Office for Undergraduates at North Carolina's Duke University.

"I wouldn't be in the job I have today if it hadn't been for my Peace Corps experience," says Riley. "As a returned Peace Corps volunteer, I qualified for special scholarships in graduate school. Those scholarships allowed me to pursue my master's, and, in turn, go on for a PhD in intercultural communications. Those degrees have made all the difference as I've progressed in the field of international education."

Immediately after graduating from the University of Northern Iowa with her bachelor's in junior high education, Riley signed up for a Peace Corps stint that sent her

in 1973 to Colombia, South America. After training in Bogotá for three months, she moved to La Unión, Nariño, and spent a year as an extension home economist working with the wives of coffee growers there.

"The *campesinos* I worked with during my first year in La Unión earned pennies a day, yet they were the most generous and open people I've ever known," Riley recalls. "My experience with them made me grateful for those who accept differences in others, and open to experiencing differences. It also made me more appreciative of the advantages I've enjoyed."

After that, she moved to Pasto, Nariño, Colombia, where she taught home economics and English classes—at one point developing a curriculum for teaching technical English to nursing students. Many years later, she would share with university students "how my exposure to the world changed my life and encouraged them to have a similarly life altering experience."

There was a time during her international travels when Riley questioned whether she could continue with her Peace Corps work. While teaching home economics and English at a vocational agricultural school in Colombia, she struggled to convince locals to attend her meetings. One day, as she slogged through the rain to attend one of those meetings, the thick mud on the ground sucked the shoes off her feet.

"I felt overwhelmed, and really wondered if I was up to this task," Riley recalls. "As we waited for the meeting to convene, the rain subsided, and the sun peeked out, and a double rainbow appeared. That was a sign to me that everything would be OK."

Despite that double-rainbow, it took some time for Riley to realize she wanted to pursue a career in international education. Back in the United States, she took a management job with the Iowa Engraving Company, then spent nearly 10 years as a compliance specialist for the U.S. Labor Department.

"I reached a period when I stood back and assessed the direction my life was heading," Riley says. "I realized that working with migrant workers just a few weeks out of each year wasn't sufficient to provide me with the exposure to diversity and international perspectives I thought would be more fulfilling."

At 34, she left her secure job with the federal government to pursue her graduate degree. In 1987—her master's in international affairs from Ohio University in hand—Riley was ready to pursue "a more internationally focused career." She became Ohio University's Peace Corps coordinator, then took various posts—as cultural coordinator, director of undergraduate international education, education abroad director—at universities in Nebraska, Wisconsin, and Michigan before landing at Duke 11 years ago in her current post.

During that time, Riley earned her PhD in interpersonal communication (with an emphasis on intercultural communication) from Ohio University and made many trips abroad—from site visits for study abroad programs, to an eight-week program to study language and culture in Japan, to a Fulbright-Hays immersion experience in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore.

In her current role, she supervises 15 international semester programs and up to 20 summer programs that serve more than 1,000 students a year.

"My experience as a Peace Corps volunteer solidified my belief that education is the pathway to solve many of the problems of the world," says Riley, who this summer will add a new title to her resume: that of Duke's associate vice provost for undergraduate education. "The third goal of the Peace Corps is to help educate Americans about the rest of the world. I view my job in international education as fulfilling my commitment to [that] goal."



Laurie Young

Senior Program Coordinator
Special Projects and International
Initiatives
The University of Texas at Austin

PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER 2002–2004

It was while walking down a Jamaican street during a Peace Corps stint—and hearing a man call out "Hey, white girl!"—that Laurie Young's cultural assumptions about "right" and "wrong" were deeply challenged.

Only after the recent college graduate wheeled around to demand why the man was pointing out she didn't belong in his country—and after the obviously crushed guy explained he knew no other way to meet her—did Young recognize how ingrained were the differences between a girl reared in upstate New York and the young man who stood so crestfallen before her.

That epiphany, along with others she experienced during two education abroad tours in her college years, ignited in Young a curiosity about foreign lands that would propel her into her current work at the University of Texas at Austin.

"There were countless times in Jamaica where I would feel nervous or threatened by someone's actions or be-





haviors, just to realize when I actually spoke to them, that those were my prejudices and fears I was projecting onto them,” says Young, who is senior program coordinator for the university’s special projects and international initiatives. “This experience helped me keep my own cultural lens in check when I am working with students and partners abroad. It is easy for miscommunications to happen and even easier for them to spiral out of control quickly.”

Hardly well-traveled during her formative years in Plattsburgh, New York, Young’s first experience abroad came in 1999, during her sophomore year at the State University at

“I would have had a much harder time adjusting to life in Jamaica if I had not studied abroad beforehand,” Young concedes. “The experiences I had on my two study abroad programs helped me to prepare myself for the inevitable homesickness, culture shock, and reverse culture shock that I went through in the Peace Corps.”

Yet Young discovered once in Jamaica that her Peace Corps supervisor offered very little direction or oversight. She later learned this was for a good reason.

“She wanted me to experience the communities on my own terms,” Young explains. “This was difficult to work with at first because I was not used to having to create my own job duties and carve my own path.”

After immersing herself in her new home and getting to know the locals, Young landed on a project: helping Jamaican artisans sell their crafts. With a limited background in business and marketing, she leaned on the artisans for ideas. With grants from USAID and Canada Fund for New Initiatives, she helped them create a catalog of their goods. She organized a craft fair to test the popularity and pricing of the artisans’ wares. When fair day came, Young says, “I was a nervous wreck.”

“I had been bitten by a centipede in my sleep the night before so my jaw was throbbing in pain,” she recalls. “When I arrived at the [fair] most of the artists were there. An hour went by. No one was buying anything. Then, it happened; a bus...and it was full of people. They

were from a local hotel and so excited to be seeing the ‘real’ Jamaica. People from other areas starting trickling in—the local hotel owners and their families, European backpackers who heard about it on the radio. The day ended with some of the artists selling all their products and others, who priced their stuff four times as much, realizing why theirs did not sell.”

It was this third experience abroad that convinced Young to pursue a career with an international focus.

Young often leans on the self-motivation, self-reliance, resourcefulness, and adaptability she acquired abroad to meet challenges in her current job. When she started at the University of Texas in 2009, her position was newly created, and she would have to help define it.

“Without my Peace Corps experience to show me how to rely on myself for my own direction and guidance, this position would be very challenging,” Young says. **IE**

DANA WILKIE is a freelance writer in Washington, D.C. Her last article for *IE* was “Lands of Promise” in the May/June 2010 issue.

Laurie Young was a Peace Corps volunteer in Jamaica from 2002–2004.



Oneonta. Practically on a whim, she chose Wollongong, Australia, for her semester abroad. She had flown by air only a handful of times and describes herself back then as young, nervous, and so lacking in confidence that during the semester, she barely ventured beyond the group of U.S. students she met during her orientation in the new country. When she studied abroad again during her senior year—this time at McGill University in Montreal, Canada—Young’s experience was, she said, “the polar opposite.” She forced herself to join organizations where she would meet students from across the globe and dove into French and Canadian culture. By the time she left, she said, Montreal felt like home.

“I use these examples when working with students who are nervous about going abroad,” says Young, who is also a Peace Corps recruitment supervisor. “I share my stories to help them realize that they can break away from the group and have the experience they want.”

It was Young’s Jamaica Peace Corps tour from 2002 to 2004 that changed her perspective on “just about everything in life.”