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For years, I thought about and admired those Americans who volunteered for the Peace Corps, sacrificing two years of their lives to work without pay in some far-flung Third World country.

In the late 1990s, while I was living in Boston, my curiosity reached such a point that, even though I had a high-profile job at a large financial services company, I attended a Peace Corps information session and quietly followed up with recruiters. But I deemed the timing bad and worried that I didn't have the right skills—just a journalism degree and several years as a newspaper reporter and corporate spokesman. What the heck could I do in a developing nation?

More than I could have imagined, it turns out.

I went on to complete Northeastern's executive MBA program, then moved to Los Angeles to work for an entrepreneurial venture. Yet the same curiosity still burned inside me. So I applied to the Peace Corps, waiting months to be accepted and sent abroad. I was ready to go.

Though it's been forty-two years since President John F. Kennedy formed the agency, many Americans still envision the original Peace Corps stereotype: fresh college graduates in Africa, inoculating children, teaching English, or digging ditches.

Today's Peace Corps is much broader—from twentysomethings to midcareer execs, married couples to retirees. Some volunteers, like me, are business consultants. Others work in environmental protection, in nongovernment organizational development, or for social-related causes. Some teach English. The Peace Corps has 7,000 volunteers posted all over the world, including in Africa.

Like other volunteers, I am an ordinary American citizen. I am not a federal employee, nor do I have diplomatic privileges. My job is to help carry out three goals: to train people and transfer skills according to a country's needs, to convey a better understanding of the United States to the host country's citizens, and to promote a better understanding of the host country among Americans.

I'm working in Romania, a former communist country liberated in 1989 from Nicolae Ceausescu's dictatorship. It's a beautiful but poor nation, adjusting slowly to a market economy via democratic reforms. Even though the average worker earns just about \$100 per month, Romania aspires to European Union membership by 2007.

Cable TV, mobile phones, ATMs, life insurance, home mortgages, and supermarkets are becoming part of Romanian life, but mostly for well-heeled urbanites and the slowly emerging middle class. One-third of the country's twenty-two million citizens have never heard of the Internet, and only 12 percent access it regularly.

I've been primarily focused on transferring my business skills to Romanian citizens. Initially, I was a consultant at the local chamber of commerce. Now I work at a university career center; I also lecture in various academic departments and teach high school economics. I try to accomplish the goal of promoting an understanding of Romania among Americans via the periodic journal entries and photos I e-mail to family and friends.

As for promoting an understanding of the United States, I am often the first American a Romanian has met, so my ambassador-like role is critical—especially in these days of accusations of American imperialism and stories about “ugly Americans.” (Interestingly, the TV comedy *Married . . . with Children* is currently popular; I try to explain to my Romanian friends that, really, this is not a normal American family.)

After more than a year here, I feel older, tougher, wiser, and—at times—tired and frustrated. I've learned volumes about Romania, its people, the lasting effects of communism, and the ignorance and anger generated by poverty and lack of education.

And I've finally grown accustomed to some of Romania's oddities: sporadic hot water, stray dogs, ubiquitous dust, hard -staring neighbors, the biggest cockroaches I've ever seen, Romanians' fear of open windows and cross-breezes on trains and buses, boring food, and horrendous customer service.

This latter trait is particularly shocking to me, the MBA-slash-business consultant. I once waited patiently at the post office, behind other customers, while a clerk bought pantyhose and Avon products from a colleague.

A slow-to-change mentality—a lack of a work ethic, compounded by low salaries, suspicion, rudeness, and massive corruption left over from the communist era—plagues Romania like a terrible hangover.

Positive developments are under way, however, including stabilization of the banking system and capital markets, lower inflation, increased foreign investment, and efforts to bolster tourism. I look forward to returning in the future to a better country, knowing that we volunteers made a difference.

That is, after all, what the Peace Corps is about: using knowledge to help people help themselves,

creating sustainability for a brighter future.

Before I left L.A., I had lunch with a returned volunteer, now a successful banker, who advised me not to expect to “change the world” or even Romania, or make an earthshattering impact. The Peace Corps is about the small wins, he said, step-by-step progress at a truly grassroots level. He was right.

I’m not sure what I’ll do next. No doubt this experience will impact me for years to come, perhaps in ways I’ve not thought about yet. But I expect I’ll have a lifetime of stories—and more patience than when I left.

