Serving Time in The Corps

Since its creation nearly half a century ago, the Peace Corps has lured tens of thousands of volunteers to serve others in developing countries around the world. Many Goddard alumni/ae have answered the call to serve, and in doing so, have changed their lives.

BY LAWRENCE GOODMAN (MFAW '08)

Soon after Larson Gunness (MFAIA) arrived in the Dominican Republic in 1989 for his tour with the Peace Corps, a man riding a donkey approached him. "Would you ever consider marrying a Dominican?" the man asked Larson in Spanish. Larson only knew a little Spanish by then. "Sure," he replied, "if she were the right girl." A few weeks later, the man showed up at the town where Larson was working. The man's daughter, dressed in her Sunday best, sat atop his burro. It turned out the man had asked Larson if he would be willing to marry his teenage daughter. Larson, of course, had answered yes. "Hey Americano, here's your wife," the man told him. After the 22-year-old Larson explained to the man that he'd misunderstood him, he walked off with his daughter and donkey, looking dejected.

Welcome to the Peace Corps! Larson and the other Goddard alumni/ae who've participated in the 48-year-old program say their experiences ranged from the whacky to the inspirational to the tragic. In the process, they went through a two-year-long period of profound personal change that they say is only equaled in its transformative power by their time at Goddard.

"You think through your relationships with your parents, siblings and your religion, what you want to do with your life and what's important to you," says Larson, who joined the Peace Corps in his twenties. "I never looked at the United States the same again."

LOUISA MUÑOZ (GV '90) in Paraguay

For Louisa Muñoz, joining the Corps seemed a natural extension of all she had learned at Goddard. "Goddard was the engine that taught me all about risk taking and finding my own voice," she says. "I awakened during my Goddard education and began that long road to getting to know myself and daring to follow my own guidance."

She started in the Corps in 2007, and she's still there, living in a town called Hohenau in the southeastern region of Paraguay. It was by no means the poverty-ridden backwater she imagined. Some folks owned their own homes, ran small businesses and had cars. But urbanization was putting new pressure on the town and its population of 10,000 inhabitants. The labor force "spans a large economic continuum from folks living hand-to-mouth selling nickel-and-dime merchandise to professionals who work in education centers,

A NEW SET OF WHEELS **Louisa Muñoz is currently working in Hohenau, a town in southeastern Paraguay. With the help of a few local groups, she applied to the Wheelchair Foundation and secured a wheelchair for César, a 10-year-old with disabilities who'd spent most his short life crawling in the dirt.**

banks, hospitals," she says. But she adds that poor medical treatment and nutrition, low attendance rates at schools, child labor, and theft make life difficult for some in Hohenau.

Those who have it the worst, says Louisa, are the indigenous groups.

"They live a marginalized existence, with some seasonal exploitative labor arrangements and some intermittent government help," she says. During her stay, she got to know César, a 10-year-old indigenous boy living in the nearby community of Guavirami. César was born with limited use of his limbs and, according to Louisa, "spent the first 10 years of his life rooting in the dirt." Working with the Peace Corps, a local nonprofit and a religious group, Louisa managed to secure a wheelchair for César. "It was a blessing," she says. Though he is still severely learning disabled, César can at least get around.

Louisa's work most days focuses on environmental education at a local school. She helped students set up a trash management plan that she says "is priceless in its simplicity and in its effectiveness." The kids did a campus cleanup for Earth Day last year. Some 200 new trees have been added to the school grounds.

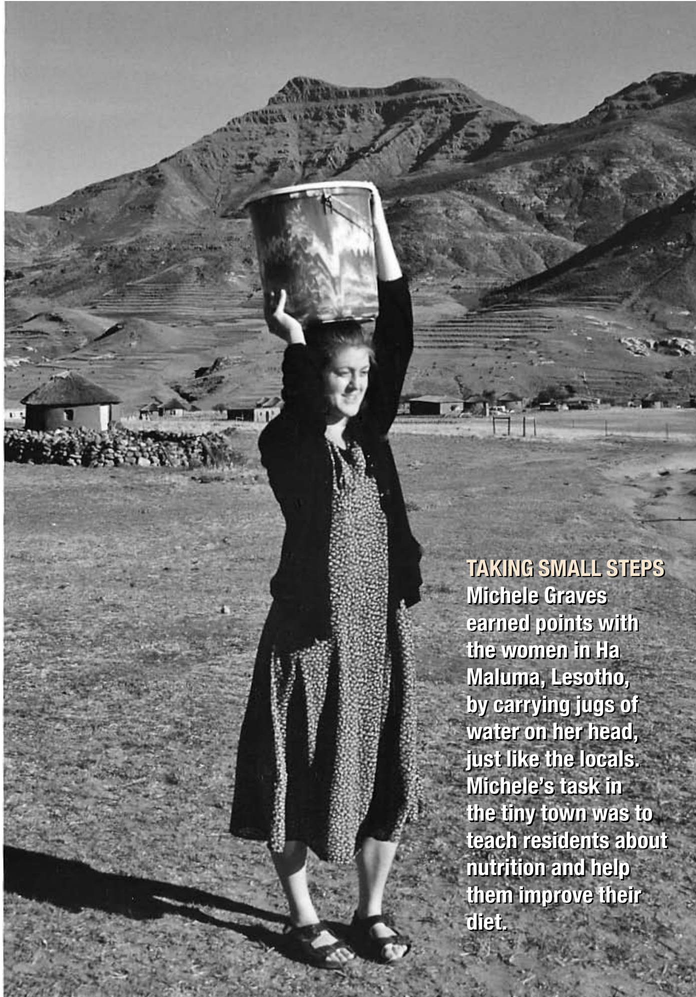
"Next on the agenda is the planting of a small forest with fourth graders, with trees native to our ecoregion," Louisa says, "so that they may have hands-on lessons to go with the map of the ecoregion that we put on the wall."

She finishes her stint with the Corps in December and will return to the States to live in New York City. What has she gotten out of her experience? "How to live with uncertainty. How to survive and thrive in another culture," she wrote in an e-mail. "How to make a way out of no way. How to wait patiently for however the Universe is going to come through for me. How to eat seasonally. The many things I can live without. What a joy it is to just be yourself and offer what help you can to others."

MICHELE GRAVES (MFAW-PT '08) in Lesotho

Michele had done some gardening growing up, and her father had even been an orchardist, managing fruit growing operations and even growing fruit at home. But nothing prepared her to deal with Lesotho's kikuyu grass.

Michele was in the southern African nation between 1995 and 1997; her charge was to teach the people in the town of Ha Maluma about nutrition and help them diversify their diet. The residents there had long relied on corn and cabbage as their staple foods. As a result, Michele says, there was malnutrition, and their diet was lacking in



TAKING SMALL STEPS Michele Graves earned points with the women in Ha Maluma, Lesotho, by carrying jugs of water on her head, just like the locals. Michele's task in the tiny town was to teach residents about nutrition and help them improve their diet.

vitamins A and C. In conjunction with the country's department of agriculture, she set out to create a few small gardens where the villagers could grow onions, spinach, kale and other vegetables they didn't currently have in their diet. And that's when Michele came across the kikuyu grass. She had to clear it away to make room for the gardens.

"It's this terrible grass that runs over everything and clamps it down," says Michele, who is now 36 and lives in Everett, Wash. "The villagers got a kick out of seeing this little girl with her limp arms shoveling away." But she persisted and not only succeeded in removing the grass, but also in winning over the villagers. She also says learning the basics of Sotho, the local language, also earned her enormous amounts of good will. "The language was crucial," she says. "If you could say at least the greeting, that was very important."

Another thing she did was to try and carry large jugs of water on her head like the other women. She never managed to do it without having to use her arms to keep it steady, but again she got a lot of points from the locals for trying.

When her time was done in Lesotho, she had created a cooperative garden to produce vegetable seeds and another garden at a local school. There was now access to other produce than corn and cabbage. She also got something very personal out of the experience, too. With lots of down time, she started writing fiction regularly.

"There were a lot of similarities between my Peace Corps experience and my Goddard experience," she says. "It's that two years where you're doing a lot of intensive writing. You create this little world around you, and it's very special."

KRISTEN L. RINGMAN (MFA '08) in Kenya

Kristen Ringman grew up in Rhode Island in a house full of deaf people. Though she was born with most of her hearing, she knew that someday she might become deaf like her mother and other family members. So she started learning American Sign Language through deaf summer camp as she gradually lost her hearing, because she didn't want to get by as her mother did, by lip reading alone.

"I knew there was this whole world of people who knew sign language out there, but I wasn't sure how to find it," she says. "I didn't really know that much sign myself."

This all changed when Kristen signed up to teach in the Corps' deaf education program in Kenya in 2003. All the other volunteers knew sign language so, she says, "I had to basically get almost fluent in American Sign in the first few weeks of training, just so I could communicate better." This happened during the weeks of training the Corps offers before it sends participants off to the locations where they will be volunteering. In fact, Kristen not only became proficient in American Sign, she also learned Kenyan Sign Language while in training (every country has its own form of sign).

"It really did come naturally to me," says Kristen, now 29 and living in Providence, R.I. "The whole 'not using my voice' thing was special. I realized it made me feel more comfortable."

Kristen was dispatched to Machakos, a town in the southeastern section of Kenya, about 40 miles outside the capital of Nairobi. She worked at an elementary school for deaf children, but she soon discovered that most of the teachers there spoke only Signed Exact English, a form of manual communication based on the English language that's not even considered a sign language. Deaf school teachers in America used it many years ago instead of American Sign.

Kristen says they look up to America and had decided our version was better than theirs. "Even though Kenyan Sign might have some similar signs to Signed Exact English, its grammar is very different," she says. "And the Kenyan Sign was the kids' natural language."

She set about changing this by leading by example. She spoke only Kenyan Sign, showing the teachers how much more comfortable the students were when they got to use a more indigenous language.

"Also, if I only signed, then the kids would see me more as an equal to them," Kristen says, "and see me as a role model and believe that they can learn and do more with their own lives." Kristen can speak, and she had used this to get by for much of her life. But during the Peace Corps, she stopped speaking altogether, relying on sign exclusively.

"I didn't use my voice at all in Kenya, because if I spoke, then the teachers wouldn't try and sign with me and would just expect me to read their lips," she says. "And what we were really doing in Kenya was

trying to get the teachers to do their jobs better."

But this verbal silence had another effect as well. Besides being more comfortable for Kristen, it also gave her a sense for the first time in her life that deaf people had a way of communicating that was as valid as spoken language.

"In a lot of ways, I was similar to the deaf Kenyan kids," she says. "They didn't know they could be proud to be deaf and that being deaf really isn't a disability. It's another culture that prefers and needs to use another language to communicate more clearly."

Four months into her stay, Kristen was assaulted, and the Peace Corps decided it wasn't safe for her to live in Machakos. She returned to the United States. "I really wish it was longer," she says. Though she still sometimes chooses to speak, she has continued using sign. "The whole experience made me realize I am lucky to be deaf and happy to be deaf," she says. "I was really able to help save myself in a sense."

WEAVING INTO THE CULTURE **Kristen L. Ringman (left) and Darcy White, a fellow deaf education volunteer, pose at Lake Naivasha National Park in Naivasha, Kenya. "We both have the traditional fake hair braids," says Kristen. "We did it partially as a really fun way of experiencing their culture, but also because when our hair was in those braids, we kept them in and didn't have to wash our hair for a whole month!"**

LARSON GUNNESS (MFAIA) in the Dominican Republic

Soon after he overcame that small misunderstanding with the man on the donkey, Larson took up residence in El Caerizal, a tiny town in the mountainous northwestern section of the Dominican Republic. There were 200 people in the town, and Larson was the only American. It was 1989, and he was just a year out of college. He had tried to find a job in the United States.

"I put on a tie and looked for jobs and thought, 'You know what, I don't want to do that. I want to do something more exciting,'" he says. One day, he walked into a Peace Corps office and immediately realized, "I wanted to leave the country for a couple of years."

His assigned location of El Caerizal had a water supply problem. The town was located on a ridge on a mountain, and residents went to a nearby stream every day to collect water. "The first thing all the women and children did every day at five in the morning is take these huge five-gallon jugs and load up with water," he recalls. "They'd come up with water with the jugs on their heads." But the problem was that the water they brought back had been contaminated by runoff from roads and fields as it went downstream. Villagers suffered from parasites, diarrhea and a host of other health issues.

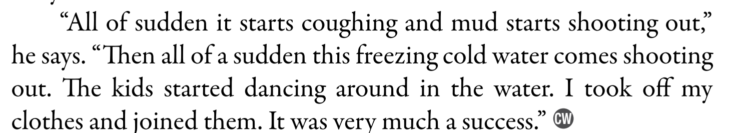
TAPPING CLEAN WATER **Larson Gunness found a way to pipe fresh water to the town of El Caerizal in the Dominican Republic. Before this, women and children had to carry jugs on their heads filled with water, which was often contaminated by run-off from local roads and fields.**

For his first eight months there, Larson and a handful of villagers scouted out the area for another source of water. He found a stream higher up the mountain, above the polluted fields and roads. "It was so much cleaner than what they were drinking," he says. But it was also five miles away. He needed to find a way for it to flow to the village.

Larson set about the painstaking task of finding a route for pipes to run from the stream to El Caerizal. He had to wind it around rocks and trees while at the same time ensuring it was always going downhill. "You go one step, you take a reading. Another step, another reading," he says.

Up to this point, he'd had trouble persuading the residents to help him out. They had seen their share of foreign aid workers come and go over the years; some were suspicious, others just figured the out-of-towners would fix the problem for them. But "the villagers started hearing that this crazy American was walking around in the woods and maybe something was starting to happen," says Larson, who is now 43 and lives in Barrington, R.I. "People started joining up."

It was only toward the end of his two years in the Dominican Republic that the aqueduct was completed. He remembers the first time he stood in the village and turned the spigot to see if water would truly come out.



"All of sudden it starts coughing and mud starts shooting out," he says. "Then all of a sudden this freezing cold water comes shooting out. The kids started dancing around in the water. I took off my clothes and joined them. It was very much a success." CW