

# Links of a Chain

**Waves of Global Volunteers seek high impact in needy communities**  
by Jon Kohl, Conservation Writer

“I was a doubting Thomas. I couldn’t believe I could have any impact,” admitted Dean LaFrenz before setting out on his first of four Global Volunteers assignments in China, Poland, Italy, and Greece. Truly, what could a volunteer contribute to community development in only one or two weeks? I too wondered (as a Costa Rica Peace Corps volunteer in 1993-95) before I began researching this story. Surely many returned peace corp volunteers ask the same question when confronted with Global Volunteers’ community development model. Cofounders Michele Gran and Bud Philbrook, nevertheless, assure that their approach has a track record dating to the 70s. And it’s no tourist trip.

Whether or not one or two weeks actually makes any difference, Global Volunteers, a Minneapolis-based non-profit, sends up to 2,500 volunteers a year, primarily Americans and Canadians, over 22,000 in all, to more than 100 communities in 20 countries since 1984 when the married duo founded the organization.

As baby boomers near retirement, more and more people seek meaningful vacations — working vacations or “voluntourism” — and more and more tour operators crave a piece of this action. “It disturbs me when we are thrust into the broad category of ‘voluntourism,’ nothing about what we do is tourism,” Michele fumes.

What Michele and Bud crave is serious development. That idealism has energized Global Volunteers even before it existed. When the couple married, instead of embarking on the originally programmed cruise ship honeymoon, they split between Disneyworld and service in a rural Guatemalan village. When they returned, a local newspaper reported on how they had melted service into self in their honeymoon. People called the couple about how they might do the same. Then Bud and Michele realized... they weren’t alone.

So they created their own volunteer corps to actively wage peace in the world, since, as Michele says, “people don’t go to war with those they understand and respect.” By placing volunteers side-by-side with local people — building schools, doing surgery, teaching English, digging ditches — mutual understanding is born. With understanding comes respect, with respect peace. Without peace, there is no justice, no human development, and therefore no development at all.

All this may sound a bit like Peace Corps. Bud agrees that “there is a commonality of mission.” And Global Volunteers often finds itself described relative to its big brother. Gonomad.com calls it a “mom and pop Peace Corps.” Media everywhere slap on the label “mini-Peace Corps” and even Global Volunteers’ own website sports a quote from Arthur Frommer’s Budget Travel online: “Join a ‘private’ Peace Corps sponsoring short-

term working vacations, one that has gained my own excited attention to the same extent as the original Peace Corps.”

But they never categorize themselves this way. “I believe strongly in the Peace Corps. I wouldn’t want anyone to think our volunteers, staff, or board assume we have the same stature or recognition. It sounds arrogant to make that comparison,” Michele explains. “The media is so fond of collapsing, condensing, and thereby trivializing things with catchy phrases in a desperate attempt to explain what we are doing.”

So what are they doing with volunteers who may spend only one percent of the time in the field that a Peace Corps Volunteer does?

Bud argues that when volunteers work and sweat shoulder-to-shoulder with locals, friendship forms. Americans and Grecians or Tanzanians discover likenesses far outweigh differences. “Friendship is foundational to peace and justice in the world. We’re trying to build an environment where friendship can occur.”

But it’s not just about volunteers making friends, even though many return time and again to the same communities (37% of volunteers repeat at least once). It is also about forging relationships with Global Volunteers, the organization. While faces flash and fade like shooting stars, Global Volunteers partners for years.

They have been in one Tanzanian community for 20 years, another in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica for 25. It’s partially the work of the permanent local country manager, partially the service learning attitude that places the community in charge of the relationship, partially the extended family tradition that allows many local cultures to assume one group of volunteers knows the next, that local communities greet with open arms upon volunteers’ arrival.

Dean, the doubting Thomas, who served both in the Peace Corps (Philippines 1965-67) and Global Volunteers with his wife, Carol, recalls, “We really went into a very small village in China and the community welcomed us, lined the streets, played music, and danced. They embraced efforts of Global Volunteers. There were 99 groups behind us and a lot of love and deep feeling. People in the Philippines also wanted to show us their appreciation. It really felt like a Peace Corps experience in two weeks.”

Indeed during the 24 months a single Peace Corps Volunteer serves a community, a Global Volunteers community might receive 24 volunteer teams, each averaging 10 people. In Romania, for example, 14 teams arrive per year, which amounts to only 3-4 weeks at a time with no volunteers on site. Wave after wave of these volunteers maintains continuity, each deepening the foundation for those that follow. Since all logistics are seen to, warm relations already established, work defined, volunteers can arrive on Saturday, have orientation Sunday, and begin work Monday morning, weekends off. Think how much time that preparation would save a Peace Corps Volunteer who must worry about catching a bus to the city, wash clothes, wait for counterparts to show, and figure out what the heck they’re supposed to do.

Michele adds, “ We like to say you’re one link in a long chain. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, you’re not the entire chain but you can make a personal mark in a community. If you’re satisfied to be a link, knowing that others have preceded you and others will follow, then you get a great deal of satisfaction. ”

This chain gang of multiple, short-term American volunteers began as an innovation to a proven methodology. In 1975 a young Bud served as a volunteer consultant in a rural village in India with the Institute for Cultural Affairs (ICA), an international development organization that uses multi-year, on-site volunteers and applies community development principles rarely practiced in the hit-and-run project development world. He witnessed how the Institute’s late founder had done the impossible. In just two weeks, he brought to the same table India’s lowest caste with its highest.

“I grew to have tremendous admiration for the methodologies that the leadership of ICA implemented,” Bud’s words dripped with esteem. “The key one is local people being in charge of all development. Human and economic development really occurs at the local level and moves up, it doesn’t start up and trickle down. Outsiders in a community, while catalytic and therefore important to the process, have a very fragile role and need to be very careful about how they engage or hope to be engaged with local people.”

Thus in Global Volunteers’ view, it doesn’t matter that assignments are short, as long as volunteers serve and learn and communities initiate and manage. Many in ICA seriously doubted what good or worse what *bad* would come from airlifting results-oriented, I-know-best, single-language-speaking Americans into rural villages for a mere week or two. But after Bud and Michele began applying ICA’s principles and watched communities develop self-reliance over the years, key players from ICA now sit on Global Volunteers’s board.

Even if some day the model gains wide acceptance, the question about how much each individual can accomplish in such a short window still remains central to signing folks up, especially experience-hardened returned Peace Corp volunteers (RPCVs).

The founders themselves know that their volunteers will not likely experience the fruits of their labor the same way a Peace Corps Volunteer might. It could take four years and dozens of Global Volunteers to build a school, but according to RPCVs who became Global Volunteers, they still felt constructive and forged meaningful relationships with locals.

Suzanne Picard, an RPCV freshwater aquaculturalist (Cameroon 1985-86), spent a week with her husband and three kids at a Blackfeet Reservation in Montana. “Because in Peace Corps you often feel like you’re not accomplishing a lot, I warned my kids about that aspect of volunteering — but we did so much that was productive — we served meals at the nursing home and then painted bleachers, a fence, and a concessions stand at a high school. While we were there, there was a huge fire in nearby Glacier National Park so we planted thousands of Douglas Fir seedlings at the reservation nursery.”

Dean recalls one dinner when a board member, who had come to celebrate the 100 th China team, stood up before the volunteers and announced that the local school needed \$50,000 to be finished. “They passed out pledge cards and in 45 minutes, they had the money... Just seeing the need, experiencing it, and wanting to be a part made me feel the time was well spent.”

Cathy and Don Weber (Malawi 1994-96) took their two teenage granddaughters to Ecuador with Global Volunteers. Cathy reflects, “In the Peace Corps you can’t volunteer time after time, but you kind of miss that service; so when you go, what you’re hoping for is a little connection, and you realize when you’re doing it, it’s not going to be the Peace Corps, but it’s not going to be traveling around and having a five-minute connection either.”

There is even at least one thing that Global Volunteers does that Peace Corps never could. The fastest growing demographic for Global Volunteers are those under 20. This may be because more and more parents and grandparents take their offspring with them. “That’s the beauty of Global Volunteers, it’s so doable. It’s a great way to introduce your kids to volunteering. They made it very easy for a family,” comments Suzanne. “As I felt after Peace Corps, we took away more than we gave, we really had insights into another culture. Where else could we have sat in a pitch black sweat lodge with native Blackfeet, far off the closest paved road, listening to the gurgling stream, feeling the heat searing your lungs as has happened for centuries.”

And the doubting Thomas came around too. Bud, Michele, and their three boys accompanied Dean and Carol for the 100th team celebration in China. Dean eventually shared with Bud, “I wasn’t a believer that Global Volunteers could truly have an impact after having spent two years in the Peace Corps and that had such a little impact, but I had to admit that I really felt I had made a difference with a half dozen teachers in the university.”

Bud, who can be hard to read at times, just smiled. Dean *knew* what that meant

*(Read more of Jon Kohl’s stories at [JonKohl.com](http://JonKohl.com))*