



The Peace Corps in Malawi
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On her first day in Malawi as a Peace Corps volunteer, Jill Bhowmik was warmly welcomed to the community by Gertrude, who vowed right off the bat, “I’ll be a great student!” Which came true. But on that first day, Jill knew there was more to this greeting than just a playful ice-breaker, as Gertrude handed her a basket of seed potatoes. “They looked rotten to me,” Jill says, remembering. “I’d never seen a seed potato before, let alone planted one. There I was, with this degree from a great American university, taking on the role of student my first day.”

Before she knew it, Jill was doing the backbreaking work of digging and planting a small patch of land in her yard, while Gertrude taught her the subtleties of the process. Some months later, Jill would celebrate a successful harvest by eating the potatoes she’d planted. “I’ll never forget what was important to that community,” she says now. “And it’s especially relevant today, during this pandemic.” This is especially true since some of the answers to creating a sustainable world can be found in the agricultural practices of traditional cultures.

Planting seed potatoes was only the first of Gertrude’s lessons for Jill. “When you decide to go halfway around the world with the Peace Corps, you think *you* are going there to teach.” She laughs, then says, “It didn’t take long for me to realize that these amazing people and places involved with the Peace Corps end up teaching *you*.”

Since her days in the Peace Corps, Jill has joined the ranks of many other notable returned Peace Corps volunteers whose lives were changed by their experiences—for example, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings, President Jimmy Carter’s mother Lilian Carter, political news anchor Chris Matthews, writer Paul Theroux, Congresswoman Donna Shalala, television host Bob Vila, Senator Chris Dodd, and film director Taylor Hackford.

“When most people think of the Peace Corps, they tend to think we send over resources to help people in need,” Jill says. “But there are actually three explicit goals of the Peace Corps. The first is to help the people of interested countries meet their need for training men and women, and this always comes from the host country. For example, Malawi had expressed a need for more English teachers, so that’s why I was sent there.” The other two goals are about promoting better understanding among Americans toward the rest of the world, and of other people toward Americans.

Along with her fellow teachers, Jill lived in a row of houses made with bricks that were formed from the dirt and clay underfoot. She taught English classes in Malawi in their developing community day schools. These secondary schools were built by, for, and in the community, with locally sourced material—and astounding ingenuity. “Early on I was told that I could farm the land in front of and behind my house, which I hadn’t thought about doing. I was there to teach English, after all.”

Soon other teachers noticed her empty plot, and asked Jill if they could use her untended land. She was happy to share what was allotted to her with her colleagues. Some had families who relied on these plots for their day-to-day food supply. Jill enjoyed watching them tend the land expertly; and she observed their intimate knowledge of the land, a knowledge she hoped to have one day.

According to the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Vulnerability and Adaptation Assessment Report, Malawi is subject to a unique combination of climate change issues and extreme weather events like intense

rainfall, regional floods, seasonal and multiyear droughts, dry and cold spells, strong winds, landslides, sustained thunderstorms, hailstorms, mudslides and heat waves.

When a nation's environment is suffering, its people suffer too. There are countless downstream effects from these climate events for the people of Malawi. Floods and droughts, which are becoming both more frequent and more erratic, disrupt supply chains and energy grids – and when these are disrupted, medical supplies, food, clean water and other necessary goods and services can't efficiently reach the people. The resulting food insecurity in turn leads to malnutrition. And malnutrition and lack of medical treatment makes a population more vulnerable to epidemics. This happened in Malawi in the 1990s, when HIV/AIDS surfaced, and today it is struggling with COVID-19. "It's heartbreaking that they have to bear the brunt of climate change and droughts, floods and famine, when their carbon footprint is nothing compared to ours," Jill says.

Jill found many novel ways to teach the young people of Malawi how to rise above their trying circumstances. As an English teacher in the making, Jill taught the standard curriculum. But she always felt that she could inspire them in a more profound way with a bit of creativity. "One thing I'd do is take their writing assignments, mail them back to America for my mom to type up, then bind these pages in spiral notebooks and send them back to Malawi, so I could show my kids what their words looked like 'published' in a book. It really gave them a lot of confidence."

Jill also inspired her community outside of the classroom. She created competitive clubs for games like Scrabble – which led to a natural exchange of cultures, when her friends taught *her* the traditional Malawian game of Bawo. "I definitely didn't get any favors or special treatment learning to play Bawo," she says with a laugh. She even started a girls' soccer team, hoping to further empower young women in the community. "I was nominated as a coach, and we ended up organizing a girls soccer game with a neighboring village." When one of the members of the local parliament showed up at the game and seemed to be scowling, Jill thought she might be upset because the girls were wearing pants instead of their usual dresses. Some girls were so concerned about this taboo that they had even worn skirts over their pants. "But when the MP finally spoke up, she wanted to know why the girls were wearing skirts. 'It's slowing them down!' she said. 'We're going to lose!'" Looking back on her time there, Jill says, "I felt great doing what I could to empower youth. I hope I did so successfully."

After her tour of duty in the Peace Corps, Jill returned to her home in San Diego, where she now teaches English and Journalism at her alma mater, Granite Hills High. For the last 19 years she's been advocating for and amplifying the voices of San Diego youth, just as she did in Malawi. She also runs the school newspaper and the literary magazine, where the bravery of her students' writing never ceases to inspire her.

At her high school, Jill uses the AVID program - (Achievement Via Individual Determination) to close the opportunity gap by preparing all of her students for college readiness and success in a global society. Many students in AVID are first-generation college students, and a lot of them are from underrepresented backgrounds. "The AVID framework helps them keep their eyes on the prize," Jill says. "I've seen the benefit of guiding students to the right classes, teaching them organizational skills, time management, leadership, how to be lifelong learners, how to be in control of and advocate for their own learning. If something is going wrong in class, they speak up. It's these skills that inspire confidence, and with confidence, we hope to inspire change."

Jill has been a pillar of the educational community the world over. But what young people and her experiences in the Peace Corps have taught Jill is equally inspiring. "Whether in Malawi or San Diego, they've taught me to be more idealistic," she says. "Being around that youthful energy can really reinvigorate you. Mostly, the students see the offerings of the world as being so great. Over the course of nearly two decades in my teaching career, what I have seen is that they have hope. It's taught me to keep dreaming."

On your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country

I think will depend the answer,

whether a free society can continue. I think it can.

And I think Americans are willing to contribute.

But the effort must be far greater than we've ever made in the past.

President John F. Kennedy, University of Michigan, October 14 1960

'The Founding Moment' of the Peace Corps Speech

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