

TANGIBLE IMPACT

Volunteers pursue medical school post-Peace Corps

by Sarah Kana

Serving in the Peace Corps is undoubtedly a life-changing experience and often greatly impacts Peace Corps Volunteers' career choices. For many Volunteers, the call to join the medical field is strongly felt after service.

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Lauren Arnold got dengue fever while training for her service in Cambodia. Within a few hours of being diagnosed, Peace Corps sent Lauren to the capital for treatment and within a few days she was moved to Bangkok in case she needed a blood transfusion, which fortunately, she did not.

"It was not uncommon for children in my village to die of dengue within that same time frame. I realized I wanted to make a difference in population health, in the system of how diseases are acquired, transmitted and treated. I was drawn to public health. But I didn't want to give up the face to face, direct problem-solving type of work on which I thrive," says Arnold. Largely due to her experiences as a PCV, Lauren decided to pursue her medical doctorate and a masters of public health.

As Director of Career Services at the Peace Corps' National Headquarters, Jodi Hammer has a front row seat as Returned Peace Corps Volunteers sift through their Peace Corps experiences in search of their career path. "I've seen many RPCVs who have come through the doors of the career center who have decided to change their career path based on their Peace Corps service, including many in the public health and even the medical sector," says Hammer. Many rural health Volunteers gain experience working in a clinic or hospital setting with substantial exposure to medical professionals, ranging from doctors to nurses to community health promoters. Even non-health program Volunteers



William Garneau at his school in Namibia.

will almost undoubtedly work in some capacity on health-related projects such as HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention or gardening.

"Many seem to be drawn to the Public Health arena post-service, and I wonder if it doesn't have something to do with the fact that sometimes program accomplishments from that sector are more 'tangible'—how many children were vaccinated; how many newborns gained weight in their first months of life, etc.," says Hammer. "Many Volunteers return to the States determined to continue working in the medical profession, and some even go on to pursue a medical degree..."

Lauren Arnold applied to Bryn-Mawr College's post-baccalaureate program to prepare herself for medical school using her cell phone as a modem from her Cambodian village and interviewed on Skype. Although Arnold worked as a teacher in Cambodia, some of the most significant lessons she taught were health-related. "I realized just how much I was affecting my community as a role model and trainer for youths and women. I knew my efforts to teach public speaking, proposal-writing, and health promotion would live on; my students' new self-confidence would enable them to make their village a better



Lauren Arnold with village children in Cambodia.

place. With community members, I taught, I laughed, and I affected change. I taught them about equality and health; they taught me that anything was possible. In a community in which the disenfranchised felt powerless, I showed them that they, too, had the power to make change," says Arnold, who will attend Columbia Medical School.

Jodi Domsky, Bryn Mawr College's Associate Dean and Director of Health Professions Advising and the Post-baccalaureate Premedical Program, believes that it is never too late to become a physician. "We have had post-baccalaureate students who have returned from their service and started our program immediately, others have come to our program after doing something else for several years. There is no rush, and people who are the most successful are the ones who have thoroughly

Lauren Arnold, RPCV Cambodia

examined their interests in medicine and cannot imagine themselves doing anything else.”

When asked why she thinks that former Peace Corps Volunteers, make successful candidates for medical doctorate degrees, Domsky replied, “Anyone who has completed the Peace Corps has demonstrated a deep commitment to service in the developing world. Returned Peace Corps Volunteers have also shown that they can live in challenging circumstances, learn a new language and culture, and embrace those who are different than they are. These are all valuable skills to have in medicine.”

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer William Garneau majored in English during his undergraduate career before entering the Peace Corps. “When I was a Volunteer in Namibia I got to be friends with a nurse in the village and was impressed with her ability to help others through medicine. I was a teacher in Namibia and, while that was a very fulfilling and difficult job, I liked the way that some of the medical interventions that the nurse performed in the village were so tangible—that she had skills that were very needed and very important,” says Garrneau.

When Garneau returned to the U.S., he enrolled in the post-baccalaureate premedical program at Goucher College in Towson, Md., since he did not have the credits to apply for medical school. Garneau liked the fact that at Goucher College, as opposed to some other post-baccalaureate programs, he was in classes with only other post-baccalaureate students, rather than a large class with normal undergraduate students. “[It was] nice because there were only 30 of us in the class, and actually three of us had [served in the] Peace Corps.”

There were other students, in Garneau’s class, with different post-college experiences (for instance one student was a lawyer, one had done public radio, and another was a jazz drummer). “Goucher was an excellent preparation for medical school and I did well in terms of acceptances when I applied to schools. Peace Corps is an incredibly respected institution and gave me a lot to both talk about in my interviews and in essays that I submitted. But more importantly it was

what helped me better understand the world and helped guide me to medicine as a means of service.”

Garneau is interested in infectious disease and hopes to continue to be involved with work abroad as he progresses through his medical education. “Certainly my time in the Peace Corps is still a part of the decisions I make and my experience going forward as a physician in training.”

Returned Peace Corps Volunteers can make attractive medical school students, not only because of their work in developing countries and in rural health, but also because of their experiences communicating with diverse people and cultures. The *New York Times* recently published an article on how some medical schools are now conducting screening of applicants based on their “people skills.” Medical schools are becoming more concerned with whether or not candidates have the social skills to navigate a health care system in which good communication has become critical. According to Gardiner Harris of the *Times*, “... Medicine is evolving from an individual to a team sport. Solo medical practices are disappearing. In their place, large health systems—encouraged by new government policies—are creating teams to provide care coordinated across disciplines. The strength of such teams often has more to do with communication than the technical competence of any one member.”

In addition to Bryn-Mawr College, there are scores of other post-baccalaureate programs that prepare students for medical school, many of which have educated Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. To find other schools offering such programs, visit the Association of Medical Colleges website at: www.aamc.org/students/.

Sarah Kana is the Communications Intern at NPCA. She recently received her B.A. in Political Science and Art History from Wofford College in Spartanburg, S.C. Her goal is to work for a non-profit organization or public relations agency related to advancing social and health care change in the United States and around the world.

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