

October 08 - SUMMARY – Volunteering Around the Globe by Stone
And
A Life Inspired by The Peace Corps

And the people kept coming! We were missing Keith, our wonderful Tattered Cover staff member who usually looks after us, but we finally got enough chairs for our group of 16. We were blessed with several new members, David, Lorie, Donna, and Kathy. Welcome everyone!

Volunteering Around the Globe by Suzanne Stone tells stories from actual volunteers and their experiences with different agencies. I suggested this book because it was one of the very few that shared stories from the individual volunteers' perspective. Suzanne interviewed me last year about my experience with I to I, a British volunteer placement agency. She also interviewed volunteers from other agencies that I had used. After reading it, I felt it really would give the group a feel and flavor of the work.

I found the second book when I attended a local meeting with recently returned Peace Corps (PC) volunteers. Former PC workers wrote ***A Life Inspired*** and from the information I received at the meeting and the book, I thought it would be a nice complement to the other book on volunteering.

My first question to the group - Were there any unexpected concepts in either of the books? Barb indicated she was surprised to see me mentioned in the first book. Another comment was that most of the stories revealed how meaningful the volunteers found their experiences, even when they were only away from the US for a very short time.

I recently found another book entitled, ***Volunteering the Selfish Benefits*** by Charles Bennett. The bottom line of this book was that even when a person volunteers to help a cause, they usually receive an equal, if not a greater personal benefit for themselves. This allows them to speak passionately about their experience and can be an inspiration to others to considering volunteering.

The question was asked, is there real altruism? From my experience, while some people go into volunteer work wanting to help others, there could be many other reasons why a person chooses to volunteer. (Practice or learn a new language, see new things, experience a culture more deeply, volunteer in order to vacation in a desirable destination, etc.) I guess the bottom line isn't why you are volunteering, just that you are volunteering. A happy byproduct can be that while you help someone else, you feel good as well.

Paula asked if I felt that Suzanne only solicited "happy" volunteers, as none of the stories really described hardships or sacrifices. I felt that she did not go out

of the way to do that but generally, volunteers that like to share are the ones that did have a great time. That is not to say that everything is always fantastic. Most volunteers seem willing to overlook minor problems and see them as part of the experience.

The reason why I think some US or Western volunteers have difficulty in the beginning is that it is hard to leave our own agenda and timelines behind. What I learned was it is more important to do what the volunteer agency really needs rather than fulfilling your own mission. (i.e. If you plan to teach English, but the school floods overnight, you will spend the next day mopping the floors and not teaching English.)

I shared about two experiences that could be seen as less than wonderful. Once when I was on a small team, one very dominant volunteer insisted on his way most of the time. While everyone else performed as a good team member, he was only happy if he got his way. (A clarifying question asked if he was the impetus for his family's trip, or if he was just going along for the ride. He was not the driving force for the trip, his sons were, and that could have been the cause for his behavior.)

I had another experience with a volunteer who had not read her brochure correctly and she was therefore very disappointed at the ages and sexes of her fellow volunteers. She had expected young men of datable age and ended up with all women and one gentlemen in his 60's. From my experience, most of the volunteers I saw were eager and enthusiastic, knew what they were up for and made the best of whatever happened.

Someone asked if you needed special training to volunteer. Generally, I found that most agencies would take anyone and knew that they would have to train the new arrivals on a weekly basis. They knew that the volunteers would be there for a short time and during the first week, they might not be very productive. Nevertheless, they also know that it is beneficial for both for the agency and for you. Once you fill out your application, if there is anything that might not make you a good candidate for the work (recent back surgery, age-either too young or over 70, etc), the agency may contact you and offer other suggestions. The oldest volunteer I heard of was over 80 years and worked at an archaeological dig. While he did not help in the actual digging, he was able to glue pots together.)

There are some agencies that do require special skills, (Dr's without borders, Lawyers without border, Engineers without borders). If special skills are needed, that will be clearly indicated in the brochures.

Volunteer Agencies can be set up under different structures. Some have volunteering as the only goal. Others are more focused on Volu – Tourism, where you may spend an equal amount of time volunteering and touring. There

are others that are mainly touring, but may offer a day or half-day volunteer experience. Depending on your interests, you should be able to find an agency that fits your travel/volunteering goals.

I found some projects have multiple portals. During one project (The Wallabies in Australia which I found through I to I) other volunteers came to the same project through Green Volunteers. For other projects, however such as Earthwatch, you must access the projects through their agency.

Without any more questions on the Volunteering book, we moved on to the Peace Corps book. (Sorry Donna as you missed the first part of the meeting.)

While the PC volunteer is slightly compensated and has a long-term experience, many of the issues that were discussed in *A Life Inspired* applied to both the long-term and short-term volunteers.

Keith brought up his favorite story from the PC book, about the man who helped establish a credit union in Guatemala. (Not a Waste of Time at All on page 56). He went back 40 years later and found his project flourishing. I brought up that this was very different from Paul Theroux's experience in *Dark Star Safari* as he returned as a former PC volunteer to Malawi, he found his project had died without much hope of recovery. Stacie, a recent PC volunteer indicated that today, the presence of AIDS in Africa affects the success and survival of many PC programs.

Phylliss brought up several themes that she felt were relevant in both books.

1. It takes most volunteers time to really understand what is truly needed on a volunteer site.
2. The work can change and morph over time.
3. Volunteers may arrive thinking they are the teacher, but find quickly that they are really the student.
4. In some of the more difficult volunteer jobs (AIDS, developing countries, etc) external volunteers can offer hope to the local people as much as they offer labor or resources.
5. It can be quite a revelation for the Western volunteer to understand the new culture and how to get work done. (Three cups of tea, relax and talk, then finally work). In addition, it can be difficult to come back into the Western work schedule and acclimate back into 40+hour workweek. (Stacie and I both have experience with that phenomenon)

Sam (a former PC state-side educator) and Stacie (a 9 month PC volunteer in Bulgaria) were wonderful in explaining the PC system in the early years and today. In the early years (1960's) most of the training was done in the US and then the volunteer went directly into the two-year work experience. Today, there is minimal training in the US. The new volunteer has a 3-month language

emersion in their new country with intense lessons while living with a host family that generally speaks no English. Then they are placed at their work location for at least two years.

Sam explained that when he was a PC educator/trainer, the PC checked out the fitness for the volunteers and if there was any doubt, they were not placed overseas. Alcohol had been an issue during Sam's experience. Stacie mentioned that she knew of perspective volunteers who had either not passed training (inappropriate behavior) or had been sent back to the US after they had been placed abroad due to drug usage.

While there are still a large number of young people under 30 going into the PC, the PC is graying as more and more retirees take on assignments. In the local PC meeting I attended, one volunteer was in her 20^s the other was over 60.

Stacie indicated that reading the PC book was bittersweet for her. Although there were no stories about Bulgaria specifically, there were many from Eastern Europe that rang true for her. She described the language lessons that PC volunteers have during their first three months and then during the longer phase of the PC work. She said that volunteers placed away from major cities usually developed a better command of the language out of necessity, as there were no English speakers around. In the larger cities, it was more difficult for the PC volunteer to become proficient in the new language. This was because it was easy to find English speakers and so many local people wanted to practice their English skills.

She also clarified that in order to be placed in the PC in a Spanish speaking country, you must have at least 4 years of Spanish to be eligible. There are so many bilingual people that it is better to use of the PC's time to place people who are already comfortable with Spanish.

Rose and David, one of our new members, indicated that REI has PC meetings almost monthly. Check out their calendar on-line for upcoming events.

Lorie, another new member, spoke about her experiences in Kenya visiting AIDS orphanages close to the Ethiopian border. I will update this summary with the name when I receive it.

Thanks to everyone who came and contributed.

UPCOMING BOOKS

The November 10th meeting will be lead by Stacie. We will discuss ***Reading Lolita in Tehran*** by Nafisi. (The book is now available at the reserve desk at the

Colfax Tattered Cover.)

The December 8th meeting will be lead by Keith. We will discuss **Jungle Child** (I originally mistakenly called it Child of the Jungle) by Sabine Kuegler. (The book will be at the reserve desk by the November 10th meeting.)

2009 books through August will be finalized and published at the December meeting.

Paula, who will lead **Travels with Charley** by Steinbeck in January, has asked us to consider the following idea.

Steinbeck asks in the book he wrote during the 1960's – What are American's like today? Paula wants us to consider the same question about our country today when we discuss the book in January. She also suggests that we bring other books to the meeting that discuss American travel habits in 2000, especially trips taken within our country. (For example, the book entitled **Are We There Yet?** by Susan Sessions Rugh, talks about the road trips common in the 1950-1970's in the US.) It should make for a very interesting meeting!

Happy Reading! See you next month!

As always, thank you for your continued interest and enthusiasm.

Jane Stanfield

Where Is She Heading

(Previous book summaries can be found on www.janestanfieldwish.com under the book club link.)

Other Travel Related Meetings to consider

Budget Treasures Travel Club – Last meeting for 2008 will be Thursday, October 23 from 6-7:30 at the Ross UHills Library – 4310 E. Amherst (Behind the Chez Artiste Theatre). Everyone is welcome.

New member, David Van Treuren supplied the next two links for those interested in other groups talking about travel or international cultures and events.

<http://www.travelerscenturyclub.org/> - scroll down the page to see the Colorado group. The coordinator is Bonnie O'Leary - 303 750-9787- tell her you know David

<http://www.foothillsforum.org/> - meets at the Mt. Vernon country club in Genesee.

SORRY I FORGOT TO MENTION THIS LAST NIGHT

DENVER AREA EARTHWATCH EVENING

When: Friday, October 17, 7 - 8:45 p.m.

Where: REI Flagship Store, 2nd Floor Conference Area,
1416 Platte Street, Denver

Who: Earthwatch Volunteers will describe the following projects:

Diving World War II Wrecks of Truk Lagoon
Leatherback Turtle Projects in Costa Rica,
Butterflies of Mt. Fuji, Japan

EWI members, former/future field volunteers, & interested friends are invited!

There is no charge for this event.

Note: After the formal REI event, some of us will be gathering at a nearby pub to further discuss our past & future EW adventures. Please join us!

Directions to REI:

From I-25: Take the 23rd St exit east past Ocean Journey.
Follow road as it continues below Speer Blvd &
REI will be directly in front of you.

From Downtown: Take 15th St. west past RR tracks & the Platte
River. Turn left onto Platte St. REI is on left hand side.

Free Parking is available next to store (preferably below ground) & across the street.

Thanks! Carla Henebry, Colorado EW Field Representative,
Phone 303-394-3842