



# Friends OF COLOMBIA

NEWSLETTER OF THE COLOMBIA RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Friends of Colombia,

The 2014 fund-raising letter should have arrived on your doorstep in December. We received a very good response, just shy of \$9,000, and are very pleased to be able to continue to support the following projects in Colombia: Paso a Paso, which provides educational help to students in Santa Marta; educational leadership in schools provided by the Marina Orth Foundation; help for microfinance projects through The Colombia Project, and support for the American University Peace Corps Archives. In addition, one of our members has come forward to sponsor one of our Paso a Paso students through college. This student would otherwise not be able to attend college. Thank you for your donations. If you have not donated and wish to now, the membership/donation form is on the last page of this newsletter.

We are very interested in contacting PCVs and RPCVs from the new generation of Peace Corps Colombia.

Due to the Peace Corps security policy, we do not have any way of contacting them, which is what I am asking you to do. In reality, in order to keep this organization going, we will need to pass it on to a younger generation at some point. Please help us recruit new members, explaining that this is one way to continue their Peace Corps service to Colombia and maintain contact with their fellow RPCVs.

We have had many exuberant responses to our newsletter. To produce it requires weeks of preparation and the coordination of resources. We can thank Pat Kelly, our editor, who does it all. In addition, she is responsible for our new website, an equally remarkable accomplishment. The address remains the same, [www.friendsofcolombia.org](http://www.friendsofcolombia.org). She would love to hear from you with your ideas. You can reach her at [pkellycom@gmail.com](mailto:pkellycom@gmail.com).

Wishing you a Happy New Year,  
Arleen Stewart Cheston,  
President



WINTER 2015  
ISSUE

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# FROM THE *Field*

*Kerry Davis and Chris Miller, two RPCVs who were colleagues in Colombia, contribute their views on this question often discussed in the Peace Corps. Both teachers, each served in two separate countries — she in Vanuatu and he in Honduras before they started their second service in Colombia. We pair their comments here and invite your additions to the discussion. Kerry Davis began the conversation, then invited Chris Miller to jump in.*

## DEVELOPMENT WORK: A PCV'S JOB?

BY KERRY DAVIS & CHRIS MILLER

**KERRY:** Like many RPCVs, I feel I received more abroad than I was able to give. I left Peace Corps with a huge sense of gratitude, personal growth, and love for my host countries. However, I also left with a sense of worry and dread in regard to “development” work. And I wonder if many other RPCVs share these same feelings.

Half way through my service in Vanuatu, I knew I wanted to serve a second time. So literally the day I “COSed” from Vanuatu, I applied for re-enrollment. Lucky for me, I was offered a second stint in Colombia, which I gladly accepted.

Although Colombia is a very culturally diverse country, I just so happened to be placed in the region of the country (Piojón on the Atlantic Coast) in which the essence of its culture is very similar to that of Vanuatu. Of course, the specifics of each culture are incredibly different and distinct, but the essence — the true heart around which the cultures ebb and flow — sends a similar message:

“Calm down. Slow down. Enjoy life. Look around you. Be grateful for what you have. Spend time with loved ones. Don't worry about human-made time...it's not real anyway and gets in the way of things that really have meaning. Choose joy. Live simply. Create music, dance, talk with neighbors, savor home-cooked food that has been prepared with hours of love. Care for one another. Give freely — the more you give, the more you receive. It's not the other way around. Respect the land that provides your food, water, and shelter. Celebrate life. All of life.”

This is an awe-inspiring cultural “pulse.” It's even more amazing to see it played out by real humans going about their everyday lives in two very different countries.

When I looked at the quality of life and overall well-being of people living according to this cultural pulse as compared to people living according to that of the U.S., I started

(Below) Kerry Davis poses with students from her town who participated in a dance crew that she started.



Credit: Pedro Szekely

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## FROM THE FIELD (CONTINUED)

### DEVELOPMENT WORK (CONTINUED)

to worry deeply about how “development” and Westernization is and will continue to affect this way of life.

I witnessed first-hand the effects of “development” in both countries; another similarity. I was myself a part of the “development” process in both scenarios. The effects of this process included diabetes and a whole host of other new health problems, instability, loss of self, environmental degradation, and a dimming of that essential cultural lifestyle.

In looking back, I am ashamed of my partaking in the slow — but steady — bleeding out of a cultural essence that I respect so much. Really, it’s more than respect...I believe the cultural heartbeat of these so-called “undeveloped” countries is essential for human survival in the long run.

I didn’t truly realize the effect my living in these two countries had on me until months after my homecoming. When I first returned to the U.S., I went straight back into old habits: I got a stressful job, bought a car I couldn’t afford, was too tired and burnt out from work to spend time with friends and family, etc., etc.

And about six months back “at it,” I couldn’t take it anymore. I reflected. I decided I couldn’t — and didn’t want to — sync back up with my own native cultural lifestyle. I was so miserable and, to make the wound even deeper, knew I didn’t have to be living this way. I had seen and experienced lifestyles I resonated with more — lifestyles that made me feel happier, and freer, and more fulfilled.

I decided to make a change and do as much as I could to live according to the cultural essence I saw and experienced in Vanuatu and Colombia. It’s hard, though, to practice one culture while living in another (any PCV can attest to the truth of that one). But I made some real changes. I quit my “regular” job and am now doing contract work for a small handful of people I truly care about and whose success I am personally

invested in....and they in mine. I sold my car and now “bike it” or “bus it” everywhere. I am living simply, with few expenses. I am more conscious about making time for people I care about. I am listening to a new cultural pulse.

In talking with other PCVs and RPCVs who served all around the world, I feel I can safely argue that many volunteers who served in other “undeveloped” countries discovered a similar cultural essence as I felt in Colombia and Vanuatu. It seems to be a common thread and, therefore, I guess it’s not too surprising that I happened to serve in two locations with this in common.

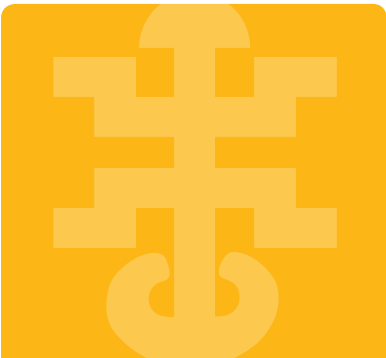
The results of living according to this cultural essence is what makes these countries “undeveloped.” And the process of “development,” as it is defined and practiced today, is the undoing of this cultural lifestyle.

Is this really something we want to undo?

Being able to see and experience a cultural pulse different from my native one was necessary for me to begin working towards creating a life that would have meaning, joy, and fulfillment. But if “development” and Westernization continue, we will be faced with cultural homogenization. In our own ecosystem, lack of diversity is incredibly dangerous and creates instability. Such is true in a cultural context as well.

In this vein, I leave you with a few questions: What if cultural and lifestyle diversity was something we embraced, learned from, respected, and protected instead of negatively labeling it as “underdeveloped” and trying to “fix” it? What would that look like? How might we support this approach instead of an approach that tries to “develop” everyone to be just like us, even if it means destroying a life-saving cultural pulse?

**CHRIS:** Development work in the Peace Corps does not involve fixing “undeveloped” countries’ problems. As a Peace Corps volunteer, you promote a simple motto of mutual understanding and worldwide friendship. The volunteer learns their host



“

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”

## FROM THE FIELD (CONTINUED)

### DEVELOPMENT WORK (CONTINUED)

country nationals' language, eats what their host family eats, lives in a home similar to their neighbors', and partakes in cultural customs and practices. In essence, development work in the Peace Corps is people from various countries, working together and living together to create peace and understanding across cultural boundaries.

Like my friend and colleague, I was fortunate enough to serve two Peace Corps posts, in Honduras and Colombia; however, six months into my first service in Honduras, the Honduran Peace Corps post was suspended for reasons of insecurity and civil unrest within the country. All volunteers were sent home. While I was home, I still felt like a Peace Corps Volunteer. I still had a strong desire for adventure, learning from another culture, and giving back as best as I could. During reenrollment, I was selected to serve in Colombia, where I taught in Juan de Acosta, also on the Atlantic coast. And in both experiences I, too, felt the strong cultural pulse that my friend and colleague mentioned.

If the Peace Corps' intent were for me to compromise my host country's own culture by encouraging the customs of American culture, then I failed miserably. I viewed my job as an opportunity to defy preconceived notions about the United States and exemplify a "different America" than what is seen on most American television shows, Hollywood movies, and news.

I approached the Peace Corps as an apprentice, not as an expert, because development work should not involve encouraging people to adapt to your ways. Proper development work requires offering assistance to community members in order that they find their own solutions. The only way for projects to be sustainable is for them to be initiated and completed by community members. Furthermore, as a Peace Corps volunteer, you are not the expert. You are not in America. You do not have the luxury of genuinely understanding how the society, which you are serving,



(Above) Chris Miller with members of his host family.  
(Left) Fourth graders participating in the TEL program.

functions. Peace Corps service is more like a puzzle of figuring out which community members are the problem solvers that will be best to assist.

Part of the reason why development work may be misinterpreted as fixing "undeveloped" countries' problems is because development organizations need to justify their work to funders. The Peace Corps has attempted to find ways to measure their experience in order to sell and promote it to its funders; consequently, it has affected the way volunteers are trained, and the way programs are organized. Peace Corps volunteers and Peace Corps posts are required to do reports, which they send to Washington D.C. From my understanding, these reports affect Peace Corps funding. The dilemma is that the Peace Corps experience cannot be measured, because it is not really about developing the undeveloped.

In the TEL, Teaching English for Livelihoods, program, which I was a part of in Colombia, my colleagues and I were considered teacher trainers; however, I find it difficult to believe that we were in the position to train teachers. Yes, we were capable of helping them improve their English, but in terms of training teachers on how to manage their classroom, we lacked the cultural knowledge to be considered a trainer. I did not genuinely know how things functioned there, because it was not my culture. Therefore, I viewed my position more as a knowledgeable assistant to the teacher.



Credit: Katie McCarthy, peacecorpskatiem.wordpress.com

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## FROM THE FIELD (CONTINUED)

### DEVELOPMENT WORK (CONTINUED)

Maybe if we change the way we pitch development work to funders, we can modify its definition the way it ought to be defined.

My Peace Corps experience changed my life and the lives of those around me. It made me much more patriotic while humbling me tremendously. Because of my experience in the Peace Corps, I am one more United States citizen invested in making my country a better place and improving our relations abroad; I am one more RPCV with a better understanding of living with people from different cultures; I am one more American that speaks another language; my training and my experience working with host country nationals and other Peace Corps volunteers has developed me professionally, and the people who I lived with and worked with have a better understanding of the United States and have learned and discovered new skills.

Hence, development work is mutual; both countries work together in order to achieve sustainable results. With this final thought, I will leave you with a quote from an aboriginal activists group in 1970:

*"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."*

**Kerry Davis writes:** *"Right now I am teaching dance (11-14 classes a week, depending on the month), doing freelance research and writing projects with a local solar company to help people better understand the pros and cons of 'going solar,' helping a local business with marketing projects. I also work once a month at a Saturday market for an eco-friendly local business."*

**Chris Miller says:** *"I'm living in Madrid and working as an auxiliary de conversacion through the program North American Cultural Ambassadors. I work at a colegio in the city and teach fifth and sixth grades."*

### RPCVs CHECK IN...

**JACK SWENSON**, who served in the Colombia VI Co-op program, shared this story: My wife Cathy (Peru RPCV) and I have lived in Toronto, Canada since 1967. Toronto is a community that welcomes immigrants from all over the world (more than half the population was born in countries other than Canada). Recently Cathy and I went to a new Mexican restaurant in our neighborhood. There was live music and we discovered that the people at the table next to us were from Bogotá. When the band began playing a cumbia, Cathy and I started dancing and we made sure that the table of Bogotáños danced as well. Then the whole restaurant began dancing. Turned out that most of the customers were from Medellín. It was wild! I should add that most of the customers were less than half our age and one of them came to us to tell us how "cute" they thought us 74 year olds were!

**WILLIAM SHARP** (Colombia VIII) shared his favorite story about his colleague Gary Gonya. Gary and his wife Diana were married in Bogotá in 1968 by Pope Paul VI at an International Eucharistic Congress held outdoors. According to William, the Pope said a little something to each couple. "To Gary, the Pope said, 'I am worried about the younger generation,'" William reports. To which, according to William, Gary replied, "Tenga fe, Papa." I wonder, says William, "if anyone has ever told the Pope to have faith."



(Left) Gary and Diana were married in Bogotá on August 24, 1968, by Pope Paul VI.



Peace Corps Week  
is fast approaching—  
**March (1-7)!**

Learn how to get  
involved at  
[peacecorps.gov](http://peacecorps.gov).

Check out our new  
website at  
[friendsofcolombia.org](http://friendsofcolombia.org).

# After PEACE CORPS

## EL PUTA CABALLO A HORSE STORY YOU WILL NOT FORGET

(PART 1 OF 2)

BY MIGUEL LANIGAN, COLOMBIA I

About horses, I knew not much. The few I had ridden back in the States were beaten down robots one finds in rental stables — the giddy-up-go plodders that get you from A to B and back again. The horse the Colombian stable hands were leading up from the stalls below was a trembling, brown, mass of quivering muscle. The beast I was to ride furiously jerked his head from side to side; the whites of his eyes showed he did not want to be ridden—earlier riders had done him too much harm. How, I lamented to myself, had I gotten myself into this unhappy and dangerous situation I was facing.

Back in 1961, I had it made in Washington, D.C.: I was twenty-two, driving a black MGA sports car, was a co-chairman of the debutante committee, had a good paying job in the government procurement office of United States Steel, and had beautiful girlfriends — the full bachelor package. Then, President Kennedy made his “Ask not speech”, and set the wheels of change in motion.

The metamorphosis from being a Washington, D.C. bon vivant to a Peace Corps volunteer

(Below) PCV Miguel Lanigan early in his service in Colombia. (Above right) John F. Kennedy greets volunteers on August 28, 1961.



began one sunny spring afternoon as I walked back to my office on K Street, from a bid opening at Main Navy. As I passed the old ICA (now AID) building I noticed a little temporary blue card taped to the front of the building proclaiming Peace Corps in embossed white lettering. Like a moth to a flame, I was drawn to check out this new program I had heard and read about. That tiny blue sign was to change my whole life's trajectory.

I followed the signs inside to the recruiting office and looked in. There were some packing boxes with piles of papers stacked on top, three chairs, a desk and a young woman sitting behind it. She looked up from what she had been doing and asked if she could help.

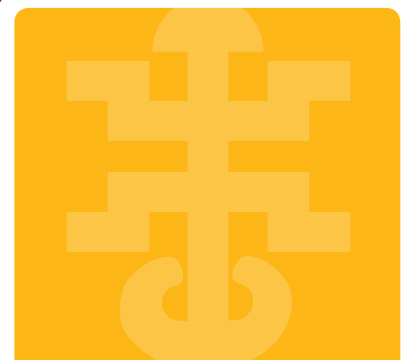
“Yes,” I said, “I’d like an application.”

She looked startled. “Just a minute,” she said, “Have a seat. I’ll be right back.”

I sat, put my briefcase beside me, and watched her scurrying down the hallway poking her head in offices.

She returned and sat behind her desk. The little office began filling with people, all trying to look busy. I was puzzled. It was only years later, when I applied to the same woman to join a Peace Corps recruiting team, that I learned I was the first person to ask for a Peace Corps application and they were all curious to see what one looked like.

One night, three months later, I got a call at my little bachelor pad out in Virginia. It was a man from the personnel office asking if I still wanted to join the Peace Corps for assignment to Colombia. That’s funny I thought, I didn’t think British Columbia needed help. “Yes,” I answered, and thus began the big adventure; I had been accepted to be in the first group in the Peace Corps.



“  
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## FROM THE FIELD (CONTINUED)

### A HORSE STORY, PART 1 (CONTINUED)

My coworkers at the government contracts office were aghast. “You did what?” was the usual response. My father, who had pulled strings to get me the USS job, was puzzled and pissed, but I was 22 and it was my choice.

Being the first group, the Peace Corps training staff wasn't sure what to teach us to prepare us to go into outback Colombia to do our job of organizing rural community-development juntas. So, to err on the side of caution, they shot-gunned us with an amazing training course taught by academic PhDs who lectured us for twelve hours a day in Colombian history, cultural anthropology, Spanish, Colombian government, community development technique and other such academic subjects. Other experts trained us in more practical fields such as medical, first aid, self-defense and horsemanship. It was the latter that came to my aid this particular morning.

Eight hours out of the now infamous city of Medellín was my work site of Andes, Antioquia, a municipio (county) at the 4,000 feet level in the rugged mountains of Colombia, perfect for growing Colombia's world famous coffee. I was assigned to work with the Federation of Coffee Growers that had a small agricultural extension office there already.



(Above) Community members at work on their first social action project: a central plaza structure. CV Lanigan helped develop the plans for the plaza.

This part of Colombia has four annual seasons — two wets and two dry, so for half the year I was riding to the outlying mountain villages on horseback in the rain, on slick, narrow mountain trails. Riding tall in the saddle looks fun and adventurous in movies but six or seven hours lurching up steep mountain trails, soaked and covered with mud splatter, got old very fast. Muscles in my legs and back, I never knew existed, shouted their existence.

Since arriving in Andes, I hadn't found a horse I wanted to buy and had to rent the poor beast rented out at Don Jose's stable.

*(Part 2 of the story to be continued in the Spring 2015 issue)*



“  
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”

# Books, BOOKS, BOOKS

## THE PERUVIAN WHO REVIVED THE REPUTATION OF AN IRISHMAN...IN COLOMBIA

BY JERRY NORRIS, COLOMBIA VI

Nobel Prize winner in literature, Mario Vargas Llosa, recently published *The Dream of the Celt*, a novel based on the life of Sir Roger Casement, a man who denounced the great crimes committed in the days of the rush for rubber on two continents: Africa and South America.

At age 20, armed with a high school education, Casement left Ireland bound for the Dark Continent. In 1874 and 1877, he became part of an expedition headed by the most famous adventurer on African soil, Henry Morton Stanley, where over three years they followed the course of the Congo River from its source to its mouth at the Atlantic.

In 1900, he officially took up office as the Consul of Great Britain in Boma—a misgotten village on Africa's West Coast. He suggested to the British Foreign Office that he prepare a report on the situation of the natives in the Congo Free State by visiting the forests and tribes of the Middle and Upper Congo. Finally, he was authorized to undertake a journey to the villages, stations, missions, posts, encampments, and factories where the extraction of rubber took place, and the black gold avidly coveted now all over the world for tires and bumpers on trucks and cars and countless other industrial and household uses was on going. He had to verify on the ground how much truth there was in the reports of atrocities committed against natives in the Congo of His Majesty Leopold II, king of the Belgians, made by the Aborigines' Protection Society in London, and some Baptist churches and Catholic missions in Europe and the United States.

His reports, which verified the atrocities, forcefully argued to his superiors in London that the Empire, faithful to its tradition of justice and fair play, should lead an international campaign to put an end to this ignominy. And through the power of Casement's reports, the rubber trade in the

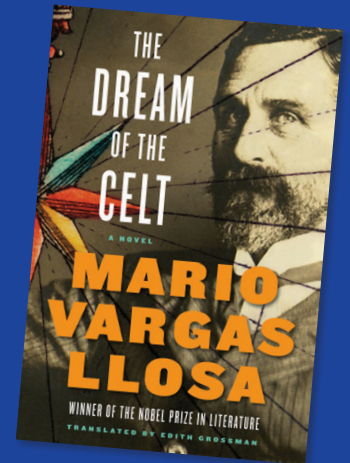
Congo was closed down. For his efforts, Casement was knighted by the Crown.

Along the way, Casement met a young river boat captain and regaled him with tales of King Leopold II's commercial operations. Later, this captain, Joseph Conrad, published *Heart of Darkness*. In an interview, Conrad said: "this is really Roger Casement's book".

He then went to Colombia's Putumayo in 1910, where the rubber trade in all of its grim manifestation against the Indian population was in full spate. Here he found the Congo all over again: mutilations, murders, torture, floggings, summary executions, the buying and selling of young indigenous girls, the seizure of wives and children as an incentive for their fathers to meet harsh production quotas, and imprisonment without due process. Casement's carefully documented reports led to a rapid decline in the stock market prices of commercial companies listed on the New York and London exchanges that were involved in Colombia's rubber trade, forcing them to close operations.

Subsequently, Casement became involved in the 1916 Easter Sunday uprising against the British in Ireland. Captured and tried for treason, he was hanged, his body interred in an unmarked prison grave site in England. In 1965, Harold Wilson's government finally permitted Casement's bones to be repatriated to Ireland. A gathering estimated at several hundred thousand people passed by to pay their respects in a Dublin cemetery.

In executing their former diplomat, the British secret service had hoped to encase in amber a mute and ignominious end to Sir Roger Casement's reputation. But then a Peruvian, Mario Vargo Llosa, revived it to global recognition, vividly showing that Casement was one of the "great anticolonial fighters and defenders of human rights and indigenous cultures of his time, and a sacrificed combatant for the emancipation of Ireland".



### THE DREAM OF THE CELT BY MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

A novel based on the life of Sir Roger Casement, a man who denounced the great crimes committed in the days of the rush for rubber on two continents: Africa and South America.

*Available on amazon.com*



**GEO HINDALL**  
**CO-OPS, 1963-65**



**The Have Yacht Volunteer Among the Have Nots**

BY JERRY NORRIS  
 THE YACHT GROUP

In those days, when the concept of Peace Corps was emerging into public consciousness, volunteers were often perceived as living in lean-to hovels with long-aggrieved *campesinos* as neighbors, Geo defied that image by buying a 36-foot sail boat, docking it in the epicenter of Colombia's tourist industry: Cartagena. He had to get permission from the Peace Corps Director in Bogotá, Chris Sheldon, a blue water sailor himself, having spent his teenage years aboard 'Yankee' a 3-masted sailing ship. Along with other students, Sheldon discovered and brought to surface the anchor of 'HMS Bounty' in Pitcairn's harbor. Chris inspected Geo's intended purchase. Then, standing with Geo on dockside, he said: "Geo, this boat has tight fittings, good riggings, and a solid deck. You can buy it. Still, if you and that boat ever leave this dock ... why, you just keep right on sailing North by Northeast. Eventually, you'll hit the U. S. shores — and be home earlier than anyone else in your Group".

Geo did buy the boat and kept it firmly docked during his remaining 18 months of service, effectively organizing fishing cooperatives. But word quickly got out to other volunteers and it morphed from a modest 36-foot sail boat to a Yacht. Group VI volunteers became known not from their numerical designation but as "oh, you are the Group that has a Yacht in Cartagena."

Geo sailed the boat home, was demasted in the Gulf of Mexico and reported as 'lost at sea' by the U. S. Coast Guard. Once found, boat repaired, he sailed up the east coast. There, caught in a vicious storm off the Carolinas, he battened the hatches, tied down the tiller, and rode it out for some 10 days. After it abated, he sailed ashore and sold the boat to the first person he could find, never once looking back, and headed home to Ohio.

There, and in various locales around the U. S., Geo applied his inexhaustive creative energies to a productive life; flying and building antique airplanes, restoring vintage cars, renovating classic town houses and condos, hiking the back trails of Ireland's Dingle Peninsula, and — generally, provoking the FAA to consume numerous bromides for induced headaches from his incessant applications to obtain experimental air worthiness certificates on beach chairs that he had equipped with 4-cylinder engines, proving they should be approved for low cost transport in seaside communities. Geo died on Thanksgiving eve, November 26, 2014.

At a recent Christmas Party, an RPCV said: remember me, I was in Group 12, and weren't you in the Group that had the Yacht in Cartagena? Yeah, I responded, that's our story, and we're sticking with it. Thanks for that, Geo, and for separating our Group from that pitilessly cold numerical designation which marked our otherwise remarkable — though self-proscribed, presence in Colombia.



“  
 Group VI volunteers became known not from their numerical designation but as 'oh, you are the Group that has a Yacht in Cartagena.'  
 ”



## FRIENDS OF COLOMBIA MEMBERSHIP FORM

Please complete one form for each member.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name in Peace Corps \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_ Fax \_\_\_\_\_

Dates of Peace Corps Service \_\_\_\_\_ Group # \_\_\_\_\_

Site (include city, village, department) \_\_\_\_\_

### MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES

New       Renewal

Annual Individual      \$ 25.00      \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Annual Couple      \$ 40.00      \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Lifetime Individual      \$ 500.00      \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
(payable over a two-year period)

Annual NPCA Individual (optional)      \$ 35.00      \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Donation to FOC for projects in Colombia      \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Donation specifically for *Paso a Paso*      \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**TOTAL ENCLOSED:**      \$ \_\_\_\_\_

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