

# Friends OF COLOMBIA



NEWSLETTER OF THE COLOMBIA RETURNED PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Friends of Colombia,

First of all I would to thank Jim O'Reilly, who has been our webmaster for a number of years, for sticking with us as we work through the kinks of developing a website. At this point, we have decided to put the task into the hands of a professional website developer. This should ease the process of keeping our website current and our membership well informed. Thank you, Jim. We do appreciate your help.

We continue to encourage our readership to become members of Friends of Colombia and to keep us informed of changes in e-mail addresses. We have made donations of \$75,000 over the past six years to projects in Colombia. Your membership dues and donations do make a difference. (See form on last page of this newsletter.)

Ned Chalker, Vice President of our board, and I have met with Luis Carlos Villegas, Ambassador from Colombia to the U.S. (he is at far left in photo at right). We found him to be a very warm, inviting person who would like

to collaborate with Friends of Colombia in some way. He spoke of his ideas to develop a technical training corps which would train Colombians in low-cost software applications. If you have any thoughts on the subject please forward them to me.

I would like to make you aware of a very dire situation in La Guajira. It seems it has not rained in that area for two years. The population is starving, the goats are dying from thirst, and the death rate among children is particularly high. I have been in touch with one of the Wayuu and with an American working in sanitation in that area. You can get further information from the BBC online and El Tiempo. If nothing else, we can help publicize the conditions in La Guajira, thereby encouraging assistance to that area.



As we move into the Fall, I hope you will begin to think about your end-of-year donations and keep Friends of Colombia in mind.

Sincerely yours,  
Arleen Stewart Cheston,  
President



FALL 2014  
ISSUE

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# FROM THE *Field*

John was in the first group of Peace Corps volunteers to go Colombia in 1961 and the first volunteer from the state of Utah. After his service in Colombia, John enjoyed a 35-year career with the Departments of the Army, Air Force and Defense, receiving multiple awards and decorations. John died on April 14, 2014. His Peace Corps colleagues shared with us a story John wrote about his service in Colombia. And we share excerpts here, starting with the trip to his new site, Santa Rita, in January 1963 after having already served in Tenjo and Bonda.

## ONCE UPON A TIME...

BY JOHN O. MONTOYA

The total trip to Andes from Medellín took about six hours since there were stops at Fredonia, Bretana, Bolombolo, etc. I was beat when we got there. What impressed me most were the steep cobblestone streets and houses supported on stilts—they seemed to be ready to fall into the river at any time. Another Andes characteristic was the tango music that could be heard all over town, especially in the cool nights. Men on horseback, wearing their *ruanas*, machetes, hats and *carrieles* or man-purses like the Scots, were common. Their horses would make distinctive sounds when their metal shoes hit the cobblestone surfaces. It was reminiscent of how the Wild West may have been in the U.S. Andes was the largest community where I was assigned, but wait—there I was told I wasn't there

yet! The next morning, Luz Elena Espinal, a *mejoradora de hogar* working for the Federacion Nacional de Cafeteros, took me to Santa Rita, a *corregimiento* of Andes. Other than the business-like Luz Elena, I did not have an American or Colombian co-worker.

Santa Rita was unique in that it showed no visible means of support or existence. When you got to Santa Rita, it was the end of civilization. There were no more roads, no more villages, no more anything except the uncharted wilderness of the Andes mountains that made a spectacular surrounding. Reportedly, some native Colombian tribes were out there somewhere and beyond the horizon, there were impassable, steamy tropical jungles.

(Below) The San Juan River that runs through Andes.  
(Above right) Community member helping to build a new structure in the Santa Rita plaza.



“  
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”



## FROM THE FIELD (CONTINUED)

### ONCE UPON A TIME (CONT'D)

Santa Rita had a church at a corner of the small plaza, four stores or *tiendas*, a school and about 30 houses in the *caserio* or housing area. I stayed in a small, approximately 10 by 10-foot room with crooked walls, peeling plaster, holes large enough for a large cat and ceiling beams for rats to race across at night. My outhouse was off a narrow porch and I had literal running water—cold water fed by gravity down a hollowed-out bamboo trough. My bed was made of coffee tree wood. My room was free of charge and actually belonged to the National Coffee Federation.

The first night I arrived, village children came over to check out the “stranger” or “mister.” Mike Lanigan, who was like a Colombia I poster guy, was a tough act to follow in Santa Rita. Mike was a Marine Corps vet and had some medical training and was in terrific shape. The villagers expected me to follow in a similar role, e.g. an elderly lady came over and asked if I was going to eat at her place as Mike did—I accepted. The evening meal consisted of beans, chocolate and eggs, under candlelight—no electricity. At other times she would make *arepas*, a Colombian bread, and *masamorra*, a type of bland corn porridge. Her open-fire stove was in the corner of her house with the walls blackened with the almost constant smoke.

One of the projects I became involved in was latrines. A Coffee Federation representative and I would go to farmhouses and try to convince the farmers to install them. The Coffee Federation provided all the material and technical advice. Another project was enlarging the school grounds for the children. We worked manually picking, shoveling and moving earth since the terrain was hilly.



(Above) Santa Rita community members at work on their first social action project: A central plaza structure with a fountain at the center. Mike Lanigan, John's predecessor, helped develop the plans for the plaza. (Left) The colorful fruit of a Colombian coffee tree.

There was also a sewer line in progress. We needed technical advice, more pipes and more cement. We organized a bazaar and I made various trips to Medellín to get contributions from Costenita and Bavaria breweries, Pielroja cigarettes, etc. Surprisingly, I got some 20 cases of free beer and about 500 pesos worth of cigarettes! I also obtained a film from the Andes diocese, plus a projector. The movie was a Laurel and Hardy, black and white, a film that the people enjoyed.

I also held classes in first aid, health, civics, English and agriculture, and assisted in getting help for housing and school projects for the community. I became a *tegua* or “witch doctor.” I gave shots, treated machete wounds, rashes, scratches, etc. I also had a small garden and a couple of small pigs, Tom and Jerry, named by my predecessor, Mike Lanigan.

I liked the people a lot and was only sorry I could not help them more. They received me wholeheartedly and the children followed me wherever I went. It was a pleasure to work with all the villagers of Santa Rita. Before I left, the people presented me with mementos and letters of appreciation.

“  
... My bed was made of coffee tree wood. My room was free of charge and actually belonged to the National Coffee Federation.  
”

# After PEACE CORPS

## ... AND AGAIN

BY ROBERT DIETZ,  
COLOMBIA IV, 1964-1966

I arrived in Bogotá on February 4, 2014, a date timed to coincide with the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of my arrival in Colombia as a Volunteer. I wanted to see how things have changed in my former site, La Plata, Huila. I was curious to learn if any of the projects I had worked on were still functioning. Not surprisingly, I recognized very little—a few buildings and a few faces—but nothing really jumped out at me. Prominent buildings that once were icons of my time had disappeared, victims of an earthquake. The house that was once home to us as volunteers had been torn down, and in its place, an Internet Café was erected. Those I had known as children were now in their 60s.

Rural schools once reached only by horseback or on foot were now accessible by roads, with motorbikes replacing all former modes of transport. I was pleased to see that the schools I had worked on were still in operation. None of the current teachers remembered specific volunteers by name, though they all acknowledge how instrumental they were in the construction of their schools.

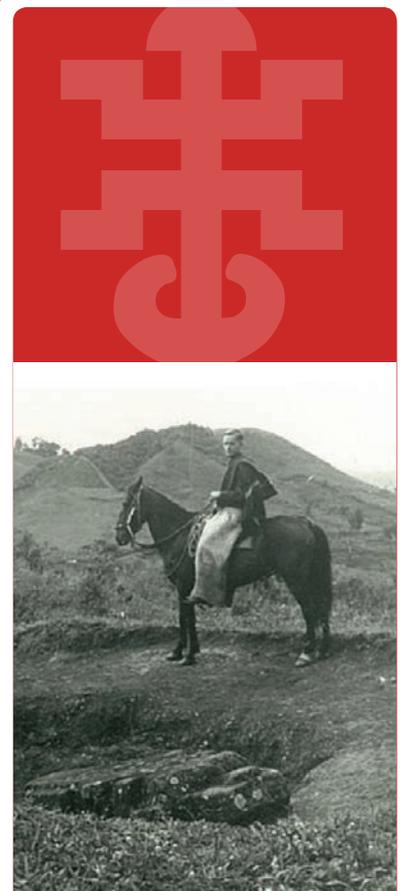
One project I greatly wanted to visit was a Co-op we had initiated in El Congreso. I got there in 40 minutes on a motorbike; in my time, it was a muddy 5-hour slog. Although the Co-op is still there, the weekly arrival of a *chivo* bus has meant that its marketing system for produce could be transferred to Belen. Yet, the leadership of El Congreso is still proud to say that it has 40 members who remain affiliated with the Co-op, converted now to a Community Center.

One of the earliest Co-ops that volunteers had initiated was in San Andres. It was a struggle to get a road built and an electric plant installed in my time. In the intervening 50 years, a second road has been built and the Co-op is thriving, an enduring symbol of cooperation between volunteers and the local community.

One of the most heartening revelations of my return was to see that the house of Doña Lucia Perez and her 15 children was still intact, occupied now by one of her daughters, Olga. This was where we volunteers made an arrangement with the largest family in La Plata for our daily meals, becoming in the process part of Doña Lucia's family. We had a CARE bodega in our house and gave her a key to it. Within a few months, this nutritional access changed the physical appearance of her children. Now well into adulthood, they have become vibrant members of their community: one has a very successful medical practice in Neiva; two others are lawyers; another a well-known journalist; still another a Federal Investigator; one more a local banker; four became teachers; and the last one established a successful vineyard.

I met with as many members of this family as was possible. Either individually or collectively, they were ardent in an open admission that had it not been for the presence of volunteers in their young lives, they never would have ventured beyond the shade of that large tree in La Plata's town square.

(Above right) Robert Dietz, in ruana and on horseback, during his volunteer days.



“ Prominent buildings that once were icons of my time had disappeared, victims of an earthquake... Those I had known as children were now in their 60s. ”

# Project UPDATES

*"From the exhibits by Peace Corps partners and supporters to the wonderful and heart-melting melodies of Emmylou Harris, to the poetic words shared on what it means to be a Peace Corps Volunteer, and a welcoming, heart-filled remark from newly sworn in Peace Corps Director, Carrie Hessler-Radelet, every moment of #PCCNash was more rewarding than expected.*

— National Peace Corps Association

## COLOMBIA COUNTRY UPDATE — NASHVILLE 2014

BY PATRICIA A. WAND

As Peace Corps Connect, an annual gathering of the Peace Corps Community, moves around the country, the Colombia country update sponsored by Friends of Colombia consistently finds outstanding speakers and provides the venue for serendipitous encounters. Peace Corps Connect Nashville — June 20 – 21, 2014 — was no exception. In fact, many of us found it exceptional in the quality of its content and the 'small world' experiences we shared.

First we learned that **J. León Helguera**, who provided classes on the history and culture of Colombia for Colombia I trainees at Rutgers University in summer 1961, is a long-time history professor at Vanderbilt University where the conference was held on June 20. Helguera has been

instrumental in developing a rich, unique special collection of Colombia materials at the Vanderbilt University Libraries. Although we saw a sample of his donations on exhibit, his health unfortunately precluded his attendance and re-acquaintance with Friends of Colombia, including **Ned Chalker** and **Dennis Grubb**, two Colombia I volunteers who were present and remember him well.

Then we learned that **Michael LaRosa**, historian, specialist in Colombian history, and the Friends of Colombia featured speaker, has already used the Friends of Colombia Archive at American University for his research and has searched for

(Below) Peace Corps support groups in a panel discussion. (Above right) From left: FOC board members Ned Chalker and Pat Wand with Dave Wessel, member of Colombia II and the Peace Corps support group from Louisiana.



Peace Corps  
Connect 2015 will be  
in the San Francisco  
Bay area where  
Friends of Colombia  
will organize yet  
another over-the-top  
'Colombia Country  
Update.'



## PROJECT UPDATES (CONTINUED)

### NASHVILLE 2014 (CONT'D)

Peace Corps – related material within Colombia itself. He now teaches at Rhodes College, Memphis, and arrived in Nashville from Bogotá on the day of his speaking engagement. To say his ‘Colombia Update’ was fresh is to state the obvious!

LaRosa impressed us with his grasp of historic facts, their significance to today’s environment, his shared passion for Colombia and his optimistic prediction of the peace negotiations lead by President Santos and now underway. Some of his overview is included and expanded in his recently published *Colombia: A Concise Contemporary History* (Michael LaRosa and Germán Mejía, Roman & Littlefield, 2012), which I can highly recommend as an informative read with just the ‘right amount of detail.’

Then, **Paula Covington**, Latin American and Iberian Bibliographer, Vanderbilt University Libraries, described Vanderbilt’s unique Colombian collections (e.g., extensive 19th c. broadsides, newspapers and pamphlets, early travelers’ accounts, etc.) and highlighted the Peace Corps-related collections that form part of Vanderbilt’s Helguera and Hobbs collections. Nicholas Hobbs was a professor at Peabody College, now part of Vanderbilt. He was the first director of selection for Peace Corps, created the evaluation system for early Peace Corps trainees; that famous system in which we were either ‘selected’ or ‘de-selected’ to advance through training and to service in country.

We topped off the afternoon of fine food and memorable presentations by wandering among the exhibit pieces, touching and examining them to our hearts’ content.

**Paul Gherman**, Colombia RPCV 1966-1968, was University Librarian at Vanderbilt for twelve years and lives in Nashville where he continues to volunteer with



(Top right) Northern California Peace Corps support group members celebrate their selection as the site of the 2015 Peace Corps Connect meeting. (Below) Paula Covington, Latin American and Iberian Bibliographer at Vanderbilt University Libraries, addresses members of FOC.

the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Vanderbilt and with Hospice, among other service organizations. He was extremely helpful in setting up the Colombia Country Update and exhibit. The afternoon began with an ample array of food and beverages and after the intellectual stimulation we moved to Guantanamera, a local restaurant with Colombian cuisine and a Cuban name.

Peace Corps Connect is sponsored each year by the National Peace Corps Association and the local NPCA Member Group who co-hosts the conference. Peace Corps Connect 2015 will be in the San Francisco Bay Area where Friends of Colombia will organize yet another over-the-top ‘Colombia Country Update.’ If you have ideas for speakers or venues, please contact Arleen Cheston at [president@friendsofcolombia.org](mailto:president@friendsofcolombia.org) or me at [patwand@mac.com](mailto:patwand@mac.com). Watch for details in the coming months and above all, plan to attend!

*Pat Wand, a board member of FOC, was a volunteer in Colombia during 1963-65.*

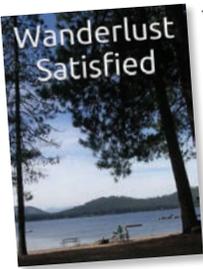
### PEACE CORPS ANNOUNCES HISTORIC CHANGES TO APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

On July 15, Peace Corps Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet announced sweeping changes to the agency’s application process that will make applying to the Peace Corps simpler, faster and more personalized than ever before, according to a Peace Corps news release. Under this new recruitment initiative, applicants will now be able to choose their country of service and apply to specific programs, and do so through a new, shorter application. The changes will include new Apply By and Know By deadlines so applicants can expect to receive an invitation to serve. For more information, click on <http://www.peacecorps.gov/media>

# Books, BOOKS, BOOKS

## WANDERLUST SATISFIED: SELF-PUBLISHING, PEACE CORPS STYLE

BY JERRY NORRIS, COLOMBIA VI



*This isn't a book review in the formal sense, nor is it one specifically about an RPCV's experience. Rather, it is a call for RPCVs and staff to emulate Kay Gillies Dixon's example and publish their stories through The Peace Corps Writers Imprint. With publications like Dixon's, a virtual—and moveable, archive can be established.*

Kay Gillies Dixon, the author of *Wanderlust Satisfied*, was a volunteer in the first Colombian urban development group, arriving in late 1962, assigned to Barrio Antioquia, Medellín. She describes herself as a 21-year-old, single college graduate out of a small town in Pennsylvania ... and her first real job is as a volunteer in Medellín's Red Light District! Peace Corps was in its infancy, both internationally and nationally in Colombia. Kay and her group were the precursors whose experiences and learnings were to shape the Peace Corps. She is refreshingly honest about her time as a volunteer, saying "our efforts in urban CD work had only miserable failures—we accomplished nothing tangible that we could report ... we did not complete any projects." Kay contrasts her experience with that of another volunteer in a physical education program, Kevin. His site assignment was at the University of Antioquia, where as a "university professor" he worked every day in a suit and tie. Kevin had "cushy work, and didn't muck about the community development neighborhoods or projects." After Kay returns home, she and Kevin become soulmates for life.

In *Wanderlust*, Kay doesn't linger over this experience and allow it to define her future. Instead, it revealed the depths of her resiliency, forming the foundation for her subsequent life as a mother of four very young children in an environment more challenging than the Red Light District of

Medellín: the desert of Saudi Arabia. Here, over a five-year period, she and Kevin raised their four girls in a society that is a constant cultural challenge, particularly for females, where the laws of *sharia* determined much of their behavior. Kevin worked for the Royal Commission of Saudi Arabia in a new city out in the desert called Yanbu. They were the first families to settle there. And in this harsh physical environment of a city under construction, they brought a touch of America to enrich the lives of other expatriates' families by introducing them to the Girl Scouts concept, from cookies to camp-outs in the Arabian Western desert.

*Wanderlust* is a memoir, a prototype of how RPCVs and staff can use The Peace Corps Writers Imprint as a venue to publish both their volunteer experiences and post experiences in fulfillment of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Goal. In the 1960s, one of the icons of that period, the sociologist David Riesman (*The Lonely Crowd*), wrote that there were a thousand reasons for joining the Peace Corps: all of them relevant. There should be a multitude of those primal reasons for other RPCVs to share their stories with the public at large. Kay's book can be found on The Peace Corps Writers website <http://peacecorpsworldwide.org/pcw-imprint/>, as well as on Amazon.

(From left) Kay Dixon, Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers and Kay's husband Kevin during the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Capitol Hill Advocacy Day. Kay is the August "featured advocate" of the National Peace Corps Association.



Books published by  
**PEACE CORPS WRITERS**

**MARIAN HALEY BEIL** (ETHIOPIA 1962-64) manages the Peace Corps Writers Imprint launched in 2010 as an outgrowth of the Peace Corps Writers project she co-founded in 1989 with John Coyne. "To date we've published 41 titles," she says, "most of them about the Peace Corps experience." Kay Dixon's book, which Beil designed, is the only Colombia book to date. Writers can choose to have their books edited, designed and prepared for printing by others, but the book must be printed by CreateSpace, a print-on-demand company. Production costs are paid by the author, in addition to a one-time fee of \$150 for other services by Peace Corps Worldwide. For details see <http://peacecorpsworldwide.org/pcw-imprint/about>

Peace Corps Writers maintains a database of books about the Peace Corps experience by Peace Corps writers, currently listing 335 titles including 11 books about Colombia. See the by-country list at <http://peacecorpsworldwide.org/experience-books/experience-books/by-country>.

## RESPONDING AND REMEMBERING

### FRIENDS OF COLOMBIA ON THE SOUND OF THINGS FALLING by Juan Gabriel Vasquez

The core of Vasquez's novel is the drug trade, its emergence in Colombia and its impact on people's lives. And, while this is a work of fiction, the author frames and threads the story with facts of plane crashes, political assassinations, Pablo Escobar's zoo and the Peace Corps.

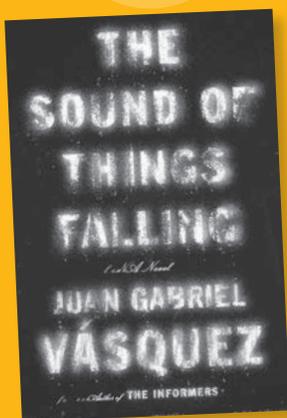
A central character is Elaine (Elena), a Peace Corps Volunteer who as she completes training marries Ricardo Laverde a Colombian pilot. Elaine's site is in Caldas and she and Ricardo become friends with Mike Barbieri, a Regional Peace Corps Coordinator. Barbieri, together with a handful of PCV "veteranos" is involved in the production and marketing of marijuana and cocaine. He hires Ricardo to fly drug-filled planes to the USA. The DEA eventually captures Ricardo and he spends 19 years in prison; Barbieri is assassinated.

As a work of fiction *The Sound of Things Falling* vividly tells an imaginative and emotionally revealing story. In regard to the

factual elements, Vasquez's description of the involvement of Peace Corps staff, volunteers and *veteranos* in the drug business is false and misleading. However, in reviews of the book, it is evident that some view his tale of the origins of the drug trade and the role of the Peace Corps as historical truth.

The facts are:

- Between 1961 and 1981 more than 4,300 volunteers served in Colombia;
- There is no record or research finding that reveals that any volunteer or staff was charged with drug processing and/or trafficking;
- No Peace Corps staff person was ever murdered in Colombia;
- And, perhaps most important, marijuana and coca leaf are indigenous to the cultures of the Andes and cultivated for many, many centuries before JFK signed the Executive Order that created the Peace Corps.



## WE REMEMBER

### PHILIP WOLZ LISTON 1941-2014

Phil Liston passed away on June 30 while walking with his wife, Joan at the Lafayette, California reservoir. Phil was a member of the Colombia Cooperative Group during 1964-66, working in Manizales. Originally from Texas, he moved after Peace Corps to San Francisco, working for Wells Fargo until he retired as an Assistant Vice President. He then worked as a Peace Corps recruiter in the late 1990s.

His Peace Corps connection was long standing. He was involved with the development of the Northern California RPCV organization, serving as a board member through the early 1990s and as President for the national conference at UC Berkeley in 1993. He was defined by his modesty, decency and a lifetime of service. Phil was a volunteer at the Alameda County Food Bank hotline and at the Food Bank during the holidays. He also volunteered at the Newman Center for Loves & Fishes, the Men's Shelter, and Habitat for Humanity. Donations can be made to: Northern California Return Peace Corps, Grants Committee, mailed to: NorCal PCA, P. O. Box 2547, San Francisco, CA 941260.

*Other friends who died this year:*

**CHARLES STANLEY ERICSON**, May 14

**PETER J. MCKAY**, June 28



# Membership FORM

## 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:**      \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**RETURN TO:** FRIENDS OF COLOMBIA  
PO Box 15292  
Chevy Chase, MD 20825

**NOTE:** FOC is a registered 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.  
Consult your tax accountant regarding personal tax deductions.