

Core Values with Corps Program

By Marcia Goodrich



Andrea Telmo, shown above on assignment with the Peace Corps in Mali, will also earn a master's in civil/environmental engineering at Tech. Below: the Niger River in Mali and (below right) children celebrate tea time.

Meghan Housewright found herself at a fork in the highway of life after she graduated from Mount Holyoke. The road more traveled led to six years in a lab and a PhD. The two-track promised Mongolia by way of Michigan Tech. Guess which one she picked.

"I would love to go to Mongolia," Housewright says. "It's the remotest place I can think of, and I've always wanted to see it."

Michigan Tech's nearly new Peace Corps International Program in Civil and Environmental Engineering can probably get Housewright where she wants to go. If not, she can definitely make it to her

second choice, which is just about anywhere in Africa.

Housewright, whose home state is Connecticut, discovered the program while browsing the Peace Corps Web site. Of all the Master's International Peace Corps programs in the U.S., this one is unique.

"There are no other engineering programs, and it seemed to me that you could accomplish the most as an engineer," Housewright said.

"It's getting a little out of control," Jim Mihelcic confides happily. "We have 15 students in the program, and seven more coming in the fall." Mihelcic, a professor of civil and environmental engineering, co-

directs the program, with associate professor Tom Van Dam. Founded three years ago, their program takes college graduates, most with new bachelor's degrees in engineering, gives them two semesters of additional education, and sends them off for three months of Peace Corps training. Then they begin their two years of service.

What kind of service?

"They design and construct water supply and treatment systems," Mihelcic says. "We call them water sanitation engineers." Their work covers a lot of territory, anything from piping and disinfecting water from a spring to digging a latrine that doesn't pollute the local drinking water.

"We have one student in Mali looking at solid waste management for a village where people just dump garbage in the streets," he says. "They're looking at recycling and composting. . . . We have some volunteers doing 10 different projects at once."

At root, the volunteers are public health workers. Many scourges of the developing world are water borne—cholera, hepatitis,

dysentery—so it's not enough for these young engineers to provide water. It has to be clean.

Andrea Telmo is a member of the program's inaugural class. She came to Michigan Tech in August 1999, after completing a BS in Earth Resources Engineering at the University of California at Berkeley.

Then she went to a small village in Mali to fix their well.

"It was a life-changing experience," Telmo says. "The Peace Corps is a great way to learn about another culture, especially nowadays when there is such an emphasis on global community.

"And it's a nice way to kind of step back. I look at things differently now. I appreciate things more. How many people get to sit down every day and be thankful for what they have?"

Such as the latter-day miracle of clean, running water, a rare commodity in Mali.

"People there have hand-dug wells that erode and get dirt in the water, and they dry up during the hot season. So you line it with concrete bricks to keep the dirt out and you dig it deeper.



"Yes, it did work," she says. "We went about 25 feet down." And in the hot season, the villagers had clean water.

"The people were wonderful. They understood development, the concept of helping people help themselves," Telmo recalls. "Despite language and cultural barriers, we connected. It's almost magical."

In Honduras, Peace Corps volunteer John Simpson is struggling intermittently with the local language as he designs water projects for a dozen different communities, not to mention the occasional bridge- or building-construction enterprise.

"My Spanish definitely is improving. However, I still feel there is plenty of room for improvement," he wrote in a recent report. "I say this after one kid sat me down and we worked on properly saying the word for soccer, futbol, as well as my name, Juan, for 10 minutes. The problem is accent (well there are actually many problems), which I figure I never will master."

The Hondurans, however, seem quite willing to overlook his American accent. Simpson received a letter from the president of a local community asked for

help in performing a topographic study needed for a water project.

Already we know of your great humanitarian work, both by you and the institution that you represent. It is for that, that today we express to you our great need of water . . .

[W]e solicit your knowledge to help us in the elaboration of the stated study, and with it the families will benefit, especially the kids.

Simpson, a graduate of the Colorado School of Mines, has also experienced cockfights, a festive New Year's celebration that involved Osama Bin Laden dummies filled with fireworks, and a watermelon-eating contest at an orphanage.

Van Dam, the co-director of the Peace Corps program, says it has brought students to Michigan Tech who otherwise would never have come.

"I love the diversity of the students," he says. "They are drawn from all over the country, and they're highly motivated."

For example, Nate Reents, a Master's International student also volunteering in



Honduras, is pumped about pumps.

“I’ve been doing some new designs for water supply and treatment systems and topographic studies, which I am excited about because it looks like they will be easier to get funds for,” he wrote. “One of the systems will probably use a solar pump, as there is no access by car and no electricity.”

And then there was the two-hour trip up the river to his community, which was accessible only by boat, and the iguanas (they taste like chicken), manatees, alligators and all manner of tropical birds.

“This is an amazing place,” Reents says.

For more information, contact Jim Mihelcic at (906) 487-2324 or see www.civil.mtu.edu/peacecorps/miwelcome.html



Photos, from left to right: Telmo at the festival of the hunters, a latrine which she would replace, carrying goods Mali-style, and Mali residents constructing a well.

Forestry Program Continues to Flourish

Meanwhile, the grandmother of Michigan Tech Peace Corps programs continues to flourish.

Since 1996, the School of Forestry and Wood Products has hosted the Loret Miller Ruppe Peace Corps Master’s International Program in Forestry. Each year, 5-7 students incorporate Peace Corps experience with a master’s degree in forestry.

The program involves nine months of intensive forestry education at Michigan Tech, including eight weeks of fall camp at the Ford Forestry Center in Alberta. That is followed by a three-month Peace Corps training program, then on to a two-year assignment.

“Our students have worked around the world on projects from small community women’s groups to national forestry cooperatives,” said Blair Orr, associate professor of forestry and director of the program. “They have built bridges—physically, socially, and culturally. They have planted thousands of trees, worked on forestry safety projects and farm improvement projects, and started ecotourism projects.”

The program is named for the late Loret Miller Ruppe, who was a resident of Houghton and served as director of the Peace Corps from 1981-1989.

For more information about the forestry/Peace Corps master’s program, contact Blair Orr at (906) 487-2291 or 800-966-3764, or see peacecorps.mtu.edu