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## Experienced, Eager to Serve, Will Travel

By ELIZABETH POPE

WITHIN two days of [President Obama's](#) Inaugural Address, online applications to the [Peace Corps](#) spiked, as many Americans responded to the call to serve.

The president's appeal resonated strongly with many people, including those 55 and older who are flocking to domestic and international volunteer programs. Some are motivated by a desire to do good, others by the weak job market and lagging business. Volunteering is a time-honored way to make contacts, learn skills and burnish a résumé during a career transition.

In the last year, Peace Corps applications from those 50 and older have shot up 40 percent, helped along by a two-year marketing campaign. There are 428 volunteers in that age group now serving, according to the Peace Corps.

Other international volunteer programs also report strong interest from midlife professionals. The Financial Services Volunteer Corps, a nonprofit organization based in New York that recruits financial experts for brief consulting projects in developing countries, has seen an increase in résumés from unemployed midcareer adults. Inquiries are also up at the International Senior Lawyers Project, which recruits volunteers for pro bono projects overseas.

"Some volunteers say business may be down but they want to get involved in something positive in these dark times," said Andra Moss, the project's communications director. "As bad as it is here, it's worse in the world's poorest countries."

The Peace Corps, which requires a 27-month commitment, has long welcomed older adults — the most famous may be President [Jimmy Carter's](#) mother, Lillian, who served in India at age 68. The oldest volunteer currently serving, according to Laura Lartigue, the agency's acting press director, is John Guy LaPlante, 79, an English teacher in Ukraine.

The agency has found that host countries often appreciate older volunteers who come with a career's worth of experience and expertise. Ukraine, South Africa, Mexico, Jamaica and the Philippines draw a larger share of older volunteers, who are posted there because their business

and technical skills are in demand and because more sophisticated medical care is available.

More than half the volunteers age 50 and older surveyed last year by the Peace Corps said they had not retired and planned to work after service, possibly in a new field.

The application process can take six months or longer because time is needed to match an applicant's availability, skills, experience and medical limitations with the host country's needs and ability to provide medical care. About a third of the 12,000 to 13,000 applicants of all ages are accepted each year.

For older adults, the medical screening that all applicants must undergo can be prolonged. "We have to look at the individual's health history, the conditions in the host country and the medical support available," Ms. Lartigue said. "Your apartment in Ukraine may be on the fifth floor with no elevator — can you climb those stairs day in and day out?"

Leslie Michael, 59, of Columbia, S.C., first thought of joining the Peace Corps in college but instead embarked on a 31-year career in elementary education. Seven years ago, she learned that she had breast cancer, and the Peace Corps idea resurfaced. She waited five years after completing her cancer treatment and applied.

"The application process was not difficult, but the medical screening was awful," she said by e-mail. "At first, I was rejected because I have rheumatoid arthritis, but I appealed and was finally accepted."

After four weeks of training in Namibia, including site visits and job shadowing, she lived with a family for several weeks for cultural and language training and is now training preprimary teachers in Swakopmund.

The Peace Corps provides volunteers with comprehensive health coverage; round-trip transportation to the placement destination; a monthly stipend to cover rent, food, clothing and transportation; and an accrued allowance paid at the end of service. Volunteers also receive job-placement support and preferential treatment if they apply for federal jobs.

Older adults whose children have left home and who have completed their primary careers are ripe for what gerontologists call life review and new challenges, said Dr. Carl Eisendorfer, director of the Center on Aging at the [University of Miami](#). "You start asking, 'What have I done with my life?' For some people, life has been good, and there's a tendency towards altruism. What better way to do that than spend time in another culture where your skills have value?"

And in some traditional cultures, gray hair and a few wrinkles can enhance respect. "I'm taken more seriously and can say what I think without anyone getting angry with me," Ms. Michael said.

**JUD DOLPHIN** The kitchen and bathroom in Jud Dolphin's home in Portland, Me., are papered with sticky notes scribbled with Ukrainian phrases. When he was in his 20s, Mr. Dolphin dropped out of training for a Peace Corps placement in Brazil because he had trouble with the Portuguese language. Now 63, he said he did not want that to happen again.

After a long career as an executive director for a nonprofit organization, Mr. Dolphin left for Kiev over the weekend for language and cultural training before working with Ukrainian nonprofit organizations.

In January 2008, he applied through the Peace Corps Web site and was finally accepted in September. His history of skin cancer required that he submit medical reports and prevented a posting to sun-baked Morocco that he had wanted. And with his post-Peace Corps plans unclear, he has given away or sold most of his household goods and put his home on the market.

"I feel like my life has come full circle, and I'm brimming over with a sense of legacy and accomplishment," Mr. Dolphin said. "Now I have the opportunity to take all my experience to a country that needs it."

**RANDALL AND YOLANDA HESS** Seven years ago, Randall and Yolanda Hess, of Texarkana, Tex., took a family vacation in the Philippines. "We wanted to show our kids the beauty of Yolanda's native country, but the beaches were littered with plastic bags and bottles," he said. "It was embarrassing."

Mr. Hess, a former Defense Department chemist, and his wife were determined to find a way to fight pollution, and an Internet search for volunteer environmental projects led them to the Peace Corps.

An agency policy against sending volunteers to the countries where they were born ruled out the Philippines, and minor medical issues prevented a posting to Thailand they had longed for. After more than 18 months of waiting, the Hesses were posted to Jamaica, where Mr. Hess served as a health adviser; Mrs. Hess, a medical technologist, taught about sanitation and the environment at schools, churches and PTA meetings.

"It was very exciting to give a talk and see that what you said had an impact," said Mrs. Hess, who recalled lecturing 700 students sternly on the hundreds of discarded foam food containers in the schoolyard. On a surprise visit a few weeks later, the containers were gone, she said.

When their tour ended in July, they were ready to leave. Overcrowded minibuses, bucket baths and hand-washed laundry did not wear them down. It was the lack of privacy. Peace Corps volunteers can be seen as objects of curiosity, and the couple grew weary of neighborhood children staring into their dining room window.

The Hesses, in their 60s, hope to retire to the Philippines this year and replicate their Peace Corps experience in the schools there.

JACQUELINE KEHL Around her village in northeast Thailand, near the border with Laos, Jacqueline Kehl's nickname in Thai is Old Lotus. Her short gray hair draws attention because most older Thai women wear their hair long and dye it black.

"The fact that I'm still working and ride a bicycle gets lots of comments about how 'strong' I am," said Ms. Kehl, 60, of Lincoln, Neb. She works with grades four through nine, training educators to teach English as a foreign language.

After three decades as a special-education teacher, including two English-teaching stints arranged on her own in Istanbul and Almaty, Kazakhstan, she said she found she was getting restless. She said she wanted a situation that provided language and cultural training, adequate health care, the support of a large organization and a stronger sense of belonging.

"The concept of being alone is foreign here in Thailand," she said by e-mail. "Thais want everyone to be happy." At communal meals the older women bring her extra food, making sure it isn't too spicy. Children cross the street to greet her, and teachers take her on trips or invite her to eat with them.

When she finishes her tour next year, she said she might extend her tenure in the village or reapply for Peace Corps service elsewhere.

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