

# Continuing a Life of Service in Peace Corps Response

When she submitted her initial application to serve in the education sector as a Peace Corps Response volunteer in Belize, Judy Jones knew that this was where she needed to be.



Judy spent most of her 30-year career as an educator focused on literacy. In one particular 10-year position, she provided professional development workshops to teachers on topics such as cooperative learning, working with English language learners, differentiating instruction, student-centered classrooms and the like for the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) Teacher Center. She visited teachers in their classrooms and recommended new ways to reach their students. She worked together with teachers to create and execute their lesson plans. Very important was assessing children's reading levels and working on improving their comprehension, vocabulary, writing, grammar and spelling.

After that career, she was ready for a new challenge, and she believed that Peace Corps, or something like it, would be a great opportunity in her retirement. The goal of many international development organizations is to enhance the quality of education in developing countries, and Judy knew a thing or two about this. While working with the teachers union, she accumulated a great deal of experience in teacher support and child development. She felt that this background would enable her to make a significant contribution as a volunteer with the Peace Corps. Yet, starting her international journey in her mid 50s, she needed to negotiate around her age-related health conditions to share her skills with an international volunteer program.

Since 1961, Peace Corps has been sending American volunteers around the world on service projects lasting two years, focusing

on initiatives in developing countries. Peace Corps Response, the newer segment of the Peace Corps, was originally designed under the Clinton administration as a way to deploy former Peace Corps volunteers (PCVs) back in the field to provide support in countries affected by natural disasters. In time and as partner countries requested more specialized expertise from PCVs, Peace Corps Response's mission expanded to encompass other areas of work such as designing better clean water systems, or providing professional development to teachers. It also dropped the requirement that Peace Corps responders had to be alumni of the two year flagship program, for which Judy had been deemed medically unfit due to her lower back issues.

Peace Corps Response was the perfect opportunity for Judy. She found her chance volunteering with a Belize-based project that is a partnership between Peace Corps Response and the Ministry of Education in Belmopan, the capitol of Belize. For four years, Peace Corps Response had been working to advance a more student-centered model focused on individualized learning, in a system with limited teacher support or resources.

Judy felt that this assignment would fit her very well. Volunteering with Peace Corps Response, she would use her extensive professional experience to support local second-grade educators to expand the reading skills of their students. Since the assignment would only last nine months, her lower back issues would not represent as much of a concern.



Judy found that her services were much needed. She served with 11 second-grade educators in seven different schools. Her teachers' students struggled greatly with their reading. Some children struggled to sound out three-letter words. Others had difficulty spelling their own names.

Meanwhile, most of her teachers had not had the opportunity to complete a thorough teaching credential program. Teacher training especially in literacy was not available in Belize. Most teachers used a curriculum that centered on lecture and recitation, and did not teach based on individual students' proficiency level. Materials including academic texts and storybooks were also in short supply. Students were expected to copy assigned lessons from a textbook to their notebook.

"I definitely felt for my teachers. They had significant challenges. They had large classes, limited materials, and kids who did not always come prepared from home."

Judy's assignment was mostly supporting teachers to develop more individualized literacy lesson plans for their classes. While their counterparts in places like the United States would have much of this curriculum developed for them, the educators in Belize were having to start from scratch, and they depended on the Peace Corps Response to support them in that process.

Judy was especially proud of one project in particular that she developed during her service in Belize. Many of the teachers with whom she was working had never had the opportunity to observe a fellow educator in the classroom. Teacher training in Belize included an in-class component; however, it was more of a practicum. In Judy's inter-visitation program, teachers would spend a day observing a peer. Much of the feedback that Judy received was that it gave teachers the chance to gather new techniques and lessons from each other, and it also increased more interaction with fellow teachers.

Judy first heard about Peace Corps Response from a friend with USAID, after she was found medically unfit to serve in Jamaica with the flagship program. That rejection was due to her lower back spinal stenosis and asthma issues.

Judy reflected that, in retrospect, being rejected for the Peace Corps flagship program in Jamaica was the path that led her to Belize, where it seemed as though the job was created just for her. With her specialty in supporting educators to teach literacy, the Literacy Support Specialist position in Belize was absolutely perfect for her.

There were other fortuitous signs that Judy was in the right place. First, her host's house was purple, Judy's favorite color. She also learned that a friend and former colleague in the New York City education system had grown up in Belize and had even attended one of the schools where Judy would be working! She had even discovered that her friend's aunt owned a bed-and-breakfast in Belmopan, which she stumbled upon during her explorations. The owner and Judy became fast friends. All of these coincidences and more provided further proof to Judy that she belonged in Belize instead of Jamaica.

Her disabilities were not an issue either. Judy had spent the year previous to her departure strengthening her back and core muscles with exercises that she had learned in physical therapy based on the recommendations of her care provider. The warm weather of Belize helped immensely as well. Judy's placement in the metropolitan area of Belmopan next to the medical office for Peace Corps volunteers, made it easier for her to obtain her asthma medications. This was an accommodation that the Peace Corps made for her condition.

Judy felt so positively about her program in Belize that she became the first Peace Corps Response volunteer to request an extension. "I just felt like there was still more work to do." And she looks forward to doing much more in the future. ■