

CORPSAFRICA – SEEKING INSIGHT AND ADVICE FROM SENATOR WOFFORD

Interview with Senator Harris Wofford

by Liz Fanning

CorpsAfrica, founded in 2011, brings the Peace Corps opportunity to Africans. CorpsAfrica volunteers will move to high-poverty communities *within their own developing countries* and implement projects that the communities request and that help them fulfill their priority development needs.

We had the pleasure recently of sitting down with Senator Harris Wofford, one of the founders of the Peace Corps, its Special Representative to Africa, and Country Director in Ethiopia during the 1960s. (You can read his bio on our website at www.corpsafrica.org, along with the text of the full interview). He is a passionate advocate for public service and the benefits that volunteers bring to the world community through their hard work and can-do spirit they embody.

CorpsAfrica: Has the idea of volunteers who are from developing countries serving in their own countries ever been discussed within the Peace Corps? Do you think the founders would be happy that we're taking this step?

Wofford: Sargent Shriver would be delighted and so am I. Indeed there was a lot of talk about encouraging volunteer service in countries all around the world. In 1962, Shriver convened the International Conference on Middle-Level Manpower to promote the idea. Many countries sent delegations, particularly South America responded. After Shriver left and the Vietnam War continued to grow, the Peace Corps was cut back from 15,000 to 10,000 volunteers, and then to 5,000. Money was very scarce,



and as a result, the promotion of home country volunteering never took off on a large scale. More recently, the creation of CityYear in South Africa came along with the Peace Corps going to South Africa. Mandela was personally supportive and participated in its launching.

The most riveting effort was in Ethiopia in the 1960s. Emperor Haile Selassie declared that if people can come from America to towns all over Ethiopia, Ethiopians should be able to do it themselves. He required every university student to spend a year in rural service in order to receive a degree. It continued for several years but their experience working in poor communities made those students prone to support the military coup overthrowing Haile Selassie, so it backfired on him. Life is not always fair. You and CorpsAfrica, like the peaceful revolutionaries in Tunisia and Egypt, are on a great venture. No one can predict where it is going to lead, but education and development in the modern world is in great need.

CorpsAfrica: Have many Returned Peace Corps Volunteers come to you for advice on starting up nonprofits related to their Peace Corps service?

Wofford: The Peace Corps has been close to my heart ever since that extraordinary experience—both in helping Sargent Shriver, but even more, seeing it in action. I've had a chance to talk to many Returned Volunteers, and to hear them tell their stories. Even though the small size of the Peace Corps, compared to the “100,000 a year—a million a decade” that Kennedy imagined, is a great disappointment, the experience of Peace Corps Volunteers is one of the great stories of the last 50 years. It's a proud story.

Many of the Volunteers I know have been engaged in efforts directly connected with their service, here at home or overseas. Former Volunteer and *Vanity Fair* Special Correspondent Maureen Orth created schools in Columbia that today serve as models of how far poor communities can advance with targeted assistance.

It has been a delight talking with RPCVs over the years and learning about what they're doing and trying to be helpful.

CorpsAfrica: CorpsAfrica volunteers will be serving in their own countries. How do you think the benefits will differ from those brought about by American service?

Wofford: Like the Peace Corps, national service at home has an impact on the community and enormous benefits for the participants. It's “education in action.” It enables them to solve problems by doing, not just by studying in a classroom. For AmeriCorps members, the experience of going from a well-to-do suburb to the inner cities is not unlike going into a developing nation. You are crossing

a cultural frontier. It doesn't matter whether the service is far or nearby, if it is important, if it is intense. It's a kind of education that each new generation needs, whether in America or Africa or in other parts of the world.

CorpsAfrica: What advice did you give Peace Corps Volunteers about to start their service? What would you say to CorpsAfrica volunteers?

Wofford: I would tell them we need to be more inventive if we are going to do our duty. I would offer the advice a great teacher of Plato gave me, to remember the rule that Socrates practiced:

to follow the question where it leads. It's important our service not just be remedial—to help people in need of help—but also to ask the fundamental questions of how we change the education system, the public service system, the environmental status of the lands we live and work in. CorpsAfrica volunteers will have all those and other questions ahead of them. The answers will differ in countries, at different times, with the skills of different people. So seek the questions that most challenge you and follow those questions to the best of your ability. You are starting a journey and don't know what stops will be along the way. You don't know what the destination will be like, but you are lucky to have this adventure at an early age and then carry it with you for the rest of your lives.

CorpsAfrica: Do you think the CorpsAfrica model can be applied across Africa as a whole? What do you think will be our greatest challenges and opportunities?



Harris Wofford joins President Kennedy on the White House lawn to send off 610 Peace Corps trainees, August 9, 1962.

Wofford: I think the greatest challenge and greatest opportunity is the same—dealing successfully with the fragile problem of any American initiative in Africa. You must pass the torch to the African young people who will run with it. If CorpsAfrica takes form and works in the countries where you are starting, it can well be a model that will catch fire and spread around the continent of Africa. Africa's problems sometimes seem terrifying but its people are so full of potential. CorpsAfrica can play a part in the creation of a new Africa but it is crucial that it be carefully thought through. You need to make it very clear to the countries where you work that this is a spark that Americans are striking, but it is not going to be an American venture. Your goal should be to work yourself out of a job. But don't worry—as you spread different versions of this idea, the potential for more is going to be even greater. This is going to be the greatest kind of fun in the future—moving this idea. I envy you.

CorpsAfrica: We think that CorpsAfrica can be as big as the Peace Corps, in fact bigger. Do you agree?

Wofford: Yes. There isn't the big overseas transportation problem. Also, in most cases, there would not be a linguistic problem, which requires a lot of investment. Money will of course be a limiting factor, but there is something special about a long journey that is part of one's education. There should be long journeys in your life, whether in your own country or abroad. In the early Peace Corps years, we turned Shriver's name into a verb; to "Shriverize" was to make something bigger and bolder, and do it faster. I wish CorpsAfrica good luck. Be big and bold and do it as fast as you can.

Liz Fanning is Founder and Executive Director of CorpsAfrica, a project that helps Africans to be "Peace Corps Volunteers" in their own countries. Learn more at www.corpsafrica.org.