

A Corps of Their Own

An RPCV brings public service to Africans in Africa

BY LIZ FANNING

I was sitting in a Marrakech café 26 years ago when I struck up a conversation with a lovely young Moroccan woman named Fatima. She had recently graduated from college and was looking for an entry-level job, unsure of what she wanted to do with her life. Over steaming mint tea and sweet biscuits, I told her I was working on environmental projects in a small Amazigh village in the High Atlas Mountains as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

She asked what the people living in rural areas were like and how I was able to live without electricity or running water. She was intrigued and asked if she could join the Peace Corps so that she, too, could help her country. It was like a lightbulb had gone off in her head and she suddenly realized what she wanted to do: be a Peace Corps Volunteer.

Sadly, I had to explain, “It’s only for Americans.”

I didn’t realize it at the time, but Fatima’s question and those of so many other young Moroccans dogged me for 20 years and eventually changed my life. In 2011, I started CorpsAfrica.

STARTING WITH MOROCCO

When young Africans in Morocco, Senegal, Malawi, and Rwanda ask if they can serve like Peace Corps Volunteers, we can now answer, “Yes.” We started CorpsAfrica in Morocco in 2013 with seven volunteers and we now have almost 200 alumni in four countries and 75 more about to start their service. When we expanded beyond Morocco, we began inviting volunteers that had successfully “COsed” to serve again in other CorpsAfrica countries. We call them “Exchange Volunteers,” serving across borders and building a Pan-African community along the lines of our own RPCV network.

It wasn’t easy getting started. I spent many years raising money for CorpsAfrica in my spare time while working full-time as a fundraiser for the America Civil Liberties Union, and it eventually took its toll. There were times I thought about giving up on the CorpsAfrica dream, but realized that wasn’t an option: This idea had to happen, and no one else was doing it. I had heard about



► Morocco: Nadia in Tizi Ousem painted the walls of a village preschool in 2015.

some interesting volunteer programs in Africa but they weren’t capitalizing on Peace Corps’ established successes.

The fact that so many young Africans want to be Peace Corps Volunteers is, I think, the greatest testament to the organization that Sargent Shriver founded so many years ago. It was time for somebody to pass Peace Corps’ baton to our host-country nationals.

We’re so fortunate to have received early support from the biggest company in Morocco, OCP Group. Their commitment at the 2015 Clinton Global Initiative helped us expand to Senegal and Malawi and then to Rwanda last year. OCP’s endorsement provides a great deal of credibility, especially as we seek support from other donors in Africa.

We started in Morocco, Senegal, Malawi and Rwanda because they are geographically diverse, politically stable, and have a long history with the Peace Corps. That was important as we were just getting started; the context was already in place, and the young people in those countries wanted to be volunteers. CorpsAfrica’s long-term goal is to be in all 54 African countries. Unlike Peace

Corps, we can operate in countries with civil unrest because the volunteers are from those countries – they’re not going anywhere and they’re looking for a way to be part of the solution.

A MODEL FOR A CONTINENT

What we’re creating with CorpsAfrica is a model of national service and participatory community development across the continent. We’re engaging young people to promote civil society; to build alliances and understanding between diverse communities; and to develop innovative solutions through communication, education, and, most importantly, friendship. We strive to recruit volunteers

from across socioeconomic classes, regions, and ethnicities. During pre-service training, they learn human-centered design and asset-based community development tools that are grounded in the belief that communities are perfectly capable of addressing their own unique challenges.

The CorpsAfrica Volunteers live in remote, high-poverty areas in their own countries for one year without preconceived agendas. Rather, their goal is to form relationships, identify local needs and assets, and work with local counterparts to facilitate projects that have been identified by the local people. They listen to the people, help them identify what they want for their communities, and then

connect them to the resources to help make it happen. That’s it – they’re the facilitators. Their projects happen *through* them, not by them. And what they get in return is the understanding of poverty that can only come from living it, hands-on professional development experience, and the chance to be part of a community unlike their own. This is the transformative experience.

To be clear, CorpsAfrica isn’t just about creating the Peace Corps opportunity for Africans. It also stems from my deep cynicism of development efforts that



► Senegal (left): Children said goodbye last year to Gorgui Ba Toure the day he closed service in Senegal to become an Exchange Volunteer in Malawi.

Rwanda (below): Four CorpsAfrica volunteers built a mud-brick structure for agricultural cooperatives in a banana tree forest earlier this year.



are led by outside saviors and my desire to create a new paradigm of smart, humble, effective, locally-led development that leads to small-scale, high-impact projects that are appropriate and sustainable. You can't tell people what to do, you have to show them. CorpsAfrica gives young Africans the chance to be agents of change that lead by doing.

What amazes me most about the Volunteers is how much they resemble us in our Peace Corps days. They're eager for adventure and full of questions; they're patient, proud, and idealistic. They're having a blast and making friendships that will last a lifetime. Like Peace Corps Volunteers, CorpsAfrica Volunteers learn the importance of listening, respect, and friendship in development efforts. The new alumni association will provide continued support for these emerging African leaders through job fairs, professional development conferences, scholarship programs, and the "entrepreneurship incubator" fund for alums with job-creating ideas.

BELLE ANGE AND ALPHA

If the Volunteers take just one thing away from this experience, I hope it's humility because that's what will help them change the world.

Belle Ange Niyonshuti, a CorpsAfrica Volunteer in Rwanda, discovered the difference between helping and serving. "Every time I was in my community," she told me, "I had the feeling of gratitude, and I knew that I was just as served as the person I was serving."

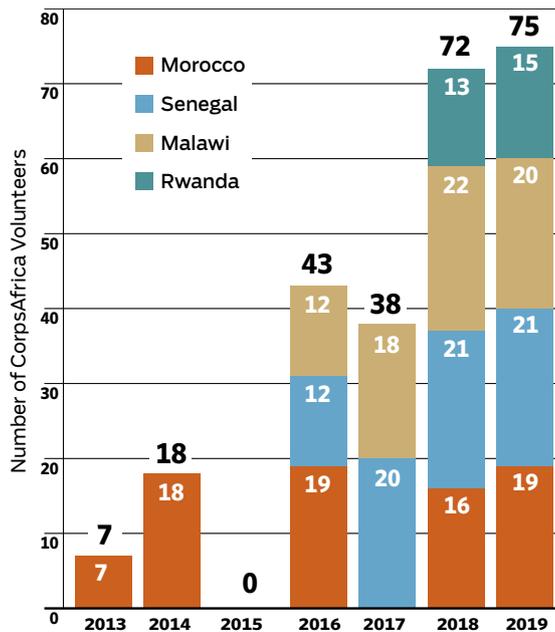
Alpha Ba had studied English and German at the University of Saint Louis in Dakar before joining the first Senegal volunteers and organized a recycling program. As an Exchange Volunteer, he used his French skills at the Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi.

Alpha is extremely tall — maybe that's why the refugees asked him to build a basketball court. Alpha wrote the proposal and we helped him pitch it to the National Basketball Association. To our delight, the NBA funded it and sent some of their legendary players to coach the team of African refugees. It seemed like a dream to all of us, including Alpha, and he extended his service in the camp for another year to implement the project. Alpha has gained greater confidence about his own abilities as a young leader capable of making positive change. I can't wait to see what he'll do next.

Each of the CorpsAfrica countries is staffed by locals who maintain

265 CorpsAfrica Volunteers in Four Countries

More than 400 community-led projects impacted 63,000 people.



their own boards and cultivate local donors and partners. The organization is about Africans for Africa, and that is its greatest strength. As CorpsAfrica expands across the continent, cultural diversity and pan-African experience will create a powerful network for humble, collaborative, and innovative social change.

CORPSAFRICA'S GROWTH

This summer, we received more than 1,600 applications for 75 positions in the four countries. We get daily requests from young people from countries such as Lesotho, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tunisia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ghana who wonder when CorpsAfrica will come to their own countries. Most of these nations are on the short list for expansion, which we hope will happen soon. Our goal is to have 250 volunteers in every African country in ten years. That's 13,500 CorpsAfrica Volunteers annually, a mix of people serving in their

own countries and in other African countries, and funded primarily by new African donors, as local ownership and sustainability remain fundamental to our mission. Then we can start talking about *CorpsAsia*. Ambitious, yes, but I'm driven by the knowledge that this is so doable.

Getting this organization to the place it is now has required me to harness many of the skills I developed during my two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer: resilience in the face of uncertainty, unrelenting dedication to the mission, and, most importantly, an ability to recognize how much I have to learn. I definitely had a transformative experience during my Morocco service and I gained at least as much as I gave. The community-led projects we implemented and the extraordinary cultural exchange that took place made the Peace Corps unique at its inception and remains at the heart of what keeps the organization relevant today. These are life lessons that we learned not in the classroom but at our individual sites.

Now is our chance to pass this baton and promote African-led development, philanthropy, and leadership. Together, we can build on Sargent Shriver's original vision and on Peace Corps' decades-long investment in human development so that young Africans—who also want to learn, grow, and make a difference—can do so too, through service. ●

Liz Fanning received NPCA's 2019 Sargent Shriver Award for Distinguished Humanitarian Service in June.

Liz Fanning served in Morocco from 1993 to 1995 and is the founder and executive director of CorpsAfrica. She hopes all RPCVs will pay the Peace Corps forward by supporting CorpsAfrica with a monthly donation at www.corpsafrica.org/pay-it-forward-campaign.html. Contact Liz at lfanning@corpsafrica.org.