

# The LGBT Community and Peace Corps - 2011

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## **LGBT RPCVs: Who are we?**

We're an organization of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and others who are Peace Corps volunteer alumni, current volunteers, former and current staff members and friends. Founded in Washington D.C. in 1991, we have several hundred members throughout the country and around the world who have served in Peace Corps since its beginning in 1961. We are an active affiliate member of the National Peace Corps Association.

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## **What do we do?**

One of our principal functions is to provide information and support for people from the LGBT community who are Peace Corps applicants, nominees, trainees and volunteers, or those just interested in the Peace Corps.

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## **Find out more about us**

Go to our website [www.lgbrpcv.org](http://www.lgbrpcv.org) . Notice the links to articles in our most current newsletter at the **In the News** section.

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## **How do we help LGBT Peace Corps applicants and nominees?**

Our **Mentor Program** will help connect you with LGBT people who served in the Peace Corps in various countries who can answer some of your questions and concerns. Check out the **Mentor** page on our website.

The **Articles** page on our web site contains dozens of articles written by LGBT Peace Corps volunteers and alumni from countries throughout the world. They are organized by topic and country of service.

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## **How do we work with Peace Corps?**

For many years we have cooperated with Peace Corps at Information and Recruiting events that target the LGBT community. We provide information and access. As part of our outreach efforts with Peace Corps we do not solicit funds or membership in our organization.

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## **The articles that follow**

We've attached four articles from our website. The first two deal with overall issues facing LGBT Peace Corps applicants, nominees, trainees and volunteers.

The other two describe the experiences of a lesbian who served in the Caribbean and a gay man who recently served in Romania.

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## **Gays, Lesbians and the Peace Corps: Should I or Shouldn't I?**

### **- Dick Lipez, Ethiopia**

WHY?, a lesbian or gay man might reasonably ask, should I join the Peace Corps when there's so much important work to be done at home? The gains of the gay movement in recent decades and the larger cause of American social justice are under constant threat from the right, so wouldn't leaving the country for two years be copping out? And on a purely personal level, after surviving the ordeal of coming part or all of the way out of the closet with my faculties more or less intact, would I then perhaps have to go back in again. Might the Peace Corps send me, say, to a country where the penalty for homosexual acts is being flung off a cliff? What's in it for me? What's in it for my country? What's in it for somebody else's country?

One good answer to these fair questions is, gay people should and do join the Peace Corps for the same reasons straight people should and do. All the propaganda about the Peace Corps being the toughest job you'll ever love is true. Plunging into an endeavor so complicated and then discovering that you can survive or even master it is exhilarating. As a liberating experience, it ranks up there with coming out. What's more, a gay person's joining is good for the United States in the way it presents our best face to the world - helpful, caring, democratic - and in making you a wiser citizen when you get home. Almost 200,000 former PCVs are a great national asset. As for the good you'll do overseas, the Peace Corps tries to place volunteers in useful jobs where they can help solve problems in societies that are even in bigger trouble than ours is, and surprisingly often the Peace Corps succeeds at this.

It can be argued that lesbians and gay men especially should join the Peace Corps. Trying not to sound too much like a gay chauvinist, let me nonetheless assert that many gay people possess, in abundance, skills and qualities that the Peace Corps badly needs. Technical and linguistic skills are important in Peace Corps assignments, but adaptability is the essential trait. Are gay people adaptable? Oh yes. Otherwise many of us wouldn't have survived past seventh grade gym class or that painful first high school dance. Oddly - and sadly - one of the satisfactions of Peace Corps life is feeling like a stranger in society because you actually are one. But you can learn to be the best kind of stranger, one who's helpful, appreciative, and appreciated.

The Peace Corps is nondiscriminatory and welcomes lesbian and gay volunteers. But it also respects the mores and values of the societies it works in, so sometimes sacrifices are involved. Just as you might have to give up some physical ease for a larger cause, being lesbian or gay in the Peace Corps can mean living a life of greater discretion than you might be used to. Still in some places, gay volunteers can hook up with fledgling gay groups and serve the cause that way. Or they can serve it more quietly by coming out with their most trusted colleagues in and out of the Peace Corps. We are everywhere, and it's good for people to know this.

Any lesbian or gay man who flies off to remotest Tirana or Dembidollo for two years needn't feel guilty about abandoning the struggle at home. You'll come back with coping skills you never dreamed you had, and with renewed commitment to the cause of human rights. And while the Peace Corps is not primarily a dating service, the chances are you'll meet more like-minded gay people in the Peace Corps than you will through the classifieds or at the local watering hole. Gay men and lesbians who light out for real watering holes for a couple of years are nearly always thankful they did. For gays and straights, the Peace Corps comes as a revelation. So many countries, so little time.

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## A Commonsense Approach to Issues Facing LGBT PCVs

- Jay Davidson, Mauritania

The process of becoming a Peace Corps Volunteer is multi-leveled. I see the transformation from applicant to PCV as similar to the metamorphosis that takes place when a caterpillar magically becomes a butterfly. The caterpillar has a long period of isolation in a cocoon, but it emerges from that solitude as a totally different being altogether. Similarly, many Peace Corps applicants transform from having a solely American cultural perspective to being truly multicultural in their outlook.

The purpose of this article is to help identify some of the issues to consider as an LGBT person making her or his way through the process. For the sake of expedience, I will use the word "queer" to refer to this spectrum of people to which we belong. As much as possible, I will use my personal experiences as a frame of reference for explaining the concepts I explain.

**Applicant:** One of the first questions many applicants ask is, "Should I tell my recruiter that I am queer?" Good question! Many of us define ourselves, at least in part, by our sexuality. It would seem like we were going back into the closet if we hid this aspect of ourselves, especially after many of us have been out to our friends and family.

When I was an applicant, I arrived at the San Francisco Regional Office a few minutes early to meet my recruiter for the interview. That brief extra time allowed me to take a look at some of the literature that was on display. One of the periodicals I saw was this newsletter produced by the LGBT chapter of the Returned Peace Corps Volunteers. "If this newsletter is on display in the Peace Corps office," I reasoned, "then it must be okay to be queer and in the Peace Corps." True enough. In fact, since the Peace Corps is an agency of the United States government, it would be illegal for it to discriminate against queer applicants, volunteers, and employees. Our most recent past director, Gaddi Vasquez, was a supporter of Gay Pride Month that was celebrated throughout the Peace Corps headquarters building every June during his tenure.

Emboldened by having seen that newsletter, I told my recruiter that I am gay. She registered no reaction - positive or negative - that I could discern. It was later in the interview, however, when she asked me, "Are you, by any chance, a vegetarian?" When I answered yes, she responded by getting out of her seat and going to a file cabinet, from which she withdrew a form that I needed to sign as an indication that I would not refuse to eat any animal that had been killed in my honor, for to do so could potentially cause great harm to the image of the Peace Corps in the country where I may be serving. In the eyes of my recruiter, it was evident that my being a vegetarian was much more problematic than my being queer. This was my first indication that I was going to be seeing the world in a totally different perspective for some years to come!

**Nominee to Invitee:** With the ease of finding information on the Internet, it is not uncommon for Nominees to various parts of the world and Invitees to specific programs to find each other and make introductions. Questions abound, from what kinds of mosquito net tents that everyone is purchasing to specific advice being handed down about various counties by everyone who has a cousin's neighbor's girlfriend who has served in Country X and is willing to share information.

A few months before I set out to Mauritania in 2003, I learned about a listserv of Invitees who were going to be in my training group. There were only a couple dozen of us of the 56 Trainees who eventually went together to Mauritania. When somebody suggested that we introduce ourselves, I began with the short statement that I am a gay Jewish vegetarian. It seemed like a simple thing to do: direct, out, and informative. Within a very short time of our arrival in Philadelphia for our staging event, everyone seemed to know who I was. A few people asked me why I had to describe myself that way. I told them simply that I was just saying who I was. By the time I got to know everyone in my group, I found out that there were

fellow trainees with queer sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and friends. I never got the sense that I was being avoided or labeled in any negative way because of my sexuality.

**Trainee:** You'll find very few people who describe their Pre-Service Training as a wonderful experience. It is emotionally draining and culturally disorienting. Fellow Trainees form alliances quickly. They are a finite number of people with a common cultural and linguistic history. In my experience, the group was a safety net for each other - a refuge from the rigors of the daily reminders that we were strangers in a strange land.

In Mauritania, where I served, we had to demonstrate an intermediate level of French in order to be sworn in as Volunteers. In order to determine our incoming level of French achievement and our progress, we were interviewed by Mauritians who served on the training staff. The facilitator who conducted my interview asked me a wide-ranging number of questions in order to engage me in conversation so that he could assess my French. His final question was, "If you were the President of the United States, what is the first thing that you would do once you take office?"

I don't know what possessed me to answer this way, but the first thing I could think of was to tell him that as President of the United States, my first action would be to sign an Executive Order that made it legal for gay people to marry just like everyone else. A bit taken aback, he asked me, "Wouldn't you be concerned about what the church would say about that decision?" I told him that as President, my concern would be to do what is right, not what is popular. As far as I could tell, this reply to him had no long-term negative impact against me in my training. He continued to be jovial in his interaction with me. After all, I was not coming out myself - just showing my open attitude in regard to my outlook on human sexuality.

**Volunteer:** Among PC staff, including Host Country Nationals who have worked for the PC for a long time, many have been to the USA, and have worked with a wide variety of Americans for a long time. They have a different perspective about the USA, its culture, and its values than the typical HCN. In any event, your Country Director will be an American. Remember that you have every right to expect complete support from her or him. One day, one of my fellow Volunteers, a lesbian, came to me rather sheepishly and told me that she had something she had to tell me. She had just been talking to one of our training directors, had come out to him, and had blurted out, rather impulsively, "Jay is gay, too." As far as I could tell, I suffered no adverse effect of having been outed to this person. He continued to relate to me in the same friendly way that he had prior to his having this information.

As you acclimate to the new society in which you are living, be on your guard. First and foremost, you must use your common sense as you deal with people whose culture is likely be totally opposite of your own. Learn the realities of your situation. In Mauritania, for example, under the law, homosexuals are to be put to death if discovered. At the same time, a Mauritanian human rights speaker to Peace Corps Volunteers informed us that this has never been enacted. He told us that the Mauritanian people and government are much more accepting than the law.

One of the aspects of Mauritanian life that threw me off is that same-sex affection in public is standard. This does not necessarily indicate the presence of homosexuality, however. I became friendly with any number of men who expressed their affection for me by holding my hand, both in private and in public. That expression of friendship did not always lead to sexual acts. What I had to do, as a means of protecting myself and testing the waters, was to hold back and let them make the "first move" if there was going to be one. If they did not, then I accepted the fact that they were behaving within their own socially accepted manner.

I learned so much about myself and other people in this process. Most significantly, I see that people in different parts of the world have a different, and more fluid, perspective on sex and sex roles in society. It seems to me that my most valuable asset was my willingness to be open-minded and flexible about life in a place where society's rules are so different and opposite of what they are at home.

## Laughing and Learning in Dominica

- Hanna Dorn

During my last year in the liberal arts playpen of Oberlin College, a drag queen friend tested positive for HIV. He had survived war-time adolescence in the Third World only to have his life change forever from one night with a nice American college student. That Thanksgiving, as we ate soul food and danced meringue, my friend decided to redirect his life towards HIV/AIDS advocacy. I missed my young, exuberant drag queen, but his newfound strength and gravity were inspiring.

Feeling the need to do something about HIV/AIDS, I signed up for the Peace Corps. A friend in PC Peru gleefully reported that lesbians abounded in her training group, understanding that I would need to make concessions in my lifestyle. I left for the West Indies in January of 2004.

On arriving, the other trainees and I were asked to play that delightful get-to-know-you game where you're commanded to raise your hand "if you come from a large family, if you like David Hasselhoff, if you're ugly," etc. I was perversely looking forward to the moment when I was going to have to shoot up my hand and shout, "I'm a big, fat gaylord!" but we weren't asked that.

Anxious to get a feel for these people who didn't look at all like the hippies I was used to, I tested the waters with a public rant about George W. and his "gigantic load of war-mongering hooey." Sixty-some faces looked back at me silently and I concluded that perhaps it was best to keep quiet about my differences for the time being. A few days later, a male trainee came out to the group. His bravery helped me to come out to my colleagues as I got to know them. I discovered that though he and I were the only queer trainees, the majority of staff and volunteers were perfectly supportive (at times clumsy, but supportive).

I was assigned to work on Dominica, a tiny, fiercely beautiful island. As any volunteer will tell you, it is a peculiar sensation to stand with your suitcase and watch the only familiar face you know disappear after you have been dropped off in your village. In that moment, you know everything must change and you feel wonderful and terrible and very small. It was dusk as I watched the Director drive away down the mountain into a monstrous orange and fuchsia sky.

My host family showed me to a private room, a Peace Corps requirement for safety. With the entire family squeezed into the other room, I felt like a chump. My host mom had also relocated the family TV, complete with pirated cable, to my room. For a while, it became a secret lifeline to Americana. I would nostalgically watch "The Simpsons" to recharge after days spent schmoozing and feeling like a ninny who didn't know how to do anything. One night, I stumbled upon the "L-Word" and must have forgotten to keep the volume down. When I returned from work the next afternoon, the TV was simply gone. "It broke," my host mom said flatly. I found this dubious, but recognized it as a convenient time to wean myself.

I quickly became friends with another young woman in the village and rumors began to fly that we were lesbians. Villagers found it suspicious that I did not have a boyfriend and theorized that I was a homosexual/scared virgin/nun/racist. My friend was untroubled. "Bef is a word we use here that means nasty gossip," she said. "It comes from the French boeuf. See the connection?" "Uh, no," I had to answer. "Bef means beef," she said wearily. "When you are careless and let your cow loose in the village, it's going to eat up everything and cause damage. Words are the same way. They have been saying I was a malnomme (lesbian) since I didn't make (have) a child by 16. I'm supposed to care, but I just don't anymore. People will forget in a while."

I admired her assurance, but couldn't help noticing that my village music students were disappearing. A handful of pubescent girls, convinced that my opera training could transform them into American Idol material, begged for voice lessons. For several months, they had been coming by my home to sing.

About the time of the gay rumor, mysterious illnesses and excuses began keeping the girls from coming to lessons. Unclear if the girls had simply lost interest or if bef was responsible, I asked a father why his daughters no longer sang with me.

"You don't seem very friendly with men," he growled. "What?" I said, confused. "I would love to teach boys in the village, but no one's shown any interest yet." "Just stay away from my girls," the father said, taking a step toward me. "They don't need you and your American ways." Up until this point in my life, as a feminine, white-looking lady in America, I had been pretty much exempt from discrimination. It hurt to realize that villagers might consider me a threat to their children, but given the social climate, I should not have been surprised.

Homosexuality began to surface as a hot-button topic in the Caribbean with the formation of gay cruises in the late '90s. In Dominica, the government was eager to promote tourism, but many people opposed allowing gay cruise tours to visit the island. A local singer had released a song for Carnival called "Iron Underpants" which advised local men to craft chastity belts and not drop the soap if "The Gays" came to town. The buzz was reflective of a society that didn't hate gays with the violence of Jamaica, but viewed us as a disappointing, amusing anomaly. Gay Dominicans were spoken of with a kind of patronizing affection. "Ah! There goes the village gay." They were tolerated as long as they conformed to public perception of what gays should be.

I became friends with a gay couple in the village that had been together for many years. In addition to raising a niece and caring for an aging mother, they were advocates for persons living with HIV. From the start, we did our best to take care of each other. When their health was good, they invited me over for lunch and when their health was not, I cooked for them. One good day, when we were all pleasantly full of fresh fish and dasheen, one man revealed that a member of the clergy made a pass at him. "Cripes, that must have been awkward," I said. "Yes, when I turned him down, he told me I would burn in hell. I wish he wasn't right." "Wha-huh?" I gasped. "I don't want to go to hell," he said quietly, "but we can't control this. So we're going to fry." His partner held his hand.

I flew to visit my family in the South and brought my village buddy with me. I was excited to show her my world. We ducked into a club one night that was filled with what appeared to be well-groomed men with mad hip-hop skills. My friend marveled at the dancing before she turned to me and clutched my arm. "These are not men!" she hissed. "No, these would be lesbians. Do you want to leave?" She looked conflicted. For the record, she is not even an ounce gay. "Let's stay," she said. "This is interesting and they're good dancers." I felt really proud of her right then and wished the village could see us.

A few days later, I came back to the village from my visit home and was loved again. By the time I finished in 2006, I had made my peace with Dominica. Was the island homophobic? Wi (yes). But bearable and mostly enjoyable? Wi wi! Even better, I hear that queer volunteer support groups are springing up all over the Peace Corps world. And current and "retired" volunteers like us have this newsletter with which to relive our glory days.

My family tells me regularly that the experience made me a more easy-going, lovable person. My long-suffering mother is particularly relieved that I rarely feel the need to shriek, "It's because I'm gay, isn't it? Your daughter is a dyke!" at her in the supermarket. But much as I used to compulsively assert gayness, I now find myself blurting out long-winded Peace Corps stories.

## Coming Out At Site: Romania

### - Micah Carbonneau

“Peace Corps allows gay volunteers?! And you agree with this?!” asked my surprised host mother. We’d been discussing diversity in Peace Corps and I hoped to feel out her views. From this first talk I’ve tried as a gay man, to talk about diversity and its role in my life. To avoid scandal or harm, volunteers must usually remain in the closet completely or stay very discreet. Our closet compared to those of many host country nationals however, is rather spacious. From the time of our staging, Peace Corps Administration has made clear its support. Other PCVs make ours the most accepting community I’ve ever been part of.

Even a large closet however, becomes claustrophobic. I can go along with jokes from acquaintances about ‘finding a nice Romanian woman,’ but when friendships at site deepen keeping a secret begins to feel like lying. True friends deserve the opportunity to prove themselves. How would this go at my site, I wondered? Worse case scenario, I’d have to leave. But, I reasoned, gay Romanians come out of the closet and have no such choice.

So, five months into site, I told those I was closest to: my tutor, host mother, and counterpart. My trust in them was well placed. With my tutor, our friendship strengthened after the uncertainty of romance was removed. My host mother was shocked, yet remained kind and continued to insist I use their washing machine. My counterpart while personally accepting was afraid of a scandal. I assured her I would remain discreet and had no intentions of dating.

Not long after this, two Romanian friends came out to me. While they knew one another, neither was out to the other. The woman was heartbroken after a breakup with her girlfriend and had no one to speak with. At the time, she lived and worked for her family. They’d told her at one point they considered homosexuality a mental disease. For obvious reasons, she was afraid what rejection would mean and could not tell them the truth.

My other friend, a man, disclosed one night, his past sexual encounters with men. He was so nervous I could see him shake. He does not however, consider himself gay. He longed to find a girlfriend and a have a traditional family. What about his same sex attractions, I asked. He responded that he would most likely seek sex outside the marriage. I shouldn’t have been surprised. When homosexuality is a mark of shame, deceit to self and others is a deep temptation. For my friend, gay people do not have happy endings.

When we are true to ourselves and honest with others, I believe everybody benefits. Sometimes this means taking bold decisions, but more often it means doing what comes naturally. Things I grew up doing, such as cooking, helping with the dishes, and cleaning the house, here stand out and expectations for me as a man are quite low.

When I told some female acquaintances I was moving into an apartment alone, they asked with mournful curiosity: “But who will cook for you?” In their eyes I could see the black clad procession follow my coffin. When moving out of my last apartment, my landlady without a glance surmised I had not kept the place clean. Later, to my co worker, I angrily listed my efforts – rug beating, dusting shelves...plant leaves! And, I told her, I’m a very good cook!

I’d once asked this same co-worker how to can and pickle vegetables. She asked me:

“What are you, a woman?!” I was quite shocked and not a little amused to hear her new take: “Well, you know how to cook and you know how to clean...You don’t have to marry!”

Though I cook, in visits to friends I'm often provided a hot meal despite my polite (and unconvincing) protests. Romania greatly benefits from its women who maintain its traditions of home gardening and cooking. I wonder if gender roles become less strict if Romania won't lose this culture. No more stocked preserves; jarred jams, vegetables, and fruit, cakes and pies! I didn't expect I would ever be so happy to benefit from such a set-up (I ease my conscience by trying to clean the dishes, compliment the cook, and reciprocate with a meal here and there, though the scales forever tilt away from me). Whenever anyone asks me what I appreciate about Romania, I tell them it is this culture which women uphold.

Romanians' desire to set me up with a Romanian wife reflects urgency for people to "settle down" more pronounced than in the United States. The ability of Romanian women to feed their husbands and guests makes a convincing argument! In discussing with my host father the possibility of my doing another term of Peace Corps in Africa, he intimated that at some point I had to have children; that this was the natural order of things, and this is God's expectation for us.

If, as my Romanian co-worker says, I can cook and clean, why shouldn't I remain single? I asked my host father. "The world is drawing from finite resources, now more than ever before. Why further tax these resources by bringing new children into the world when there are abandoned children seeking loving parents, here and in the United States?"

While for my host father, the responsibility to procreate is about God, I think it is more about economics and education. From my observations, it seems that the higher a person's wealth and education, the later a person marries. Without education or middle class status, there are fewer social and travel or employment options, fewer options in general, and settling down at 20 or 25 seems much quite logical.

As volunteers, building relationships with coworkers, friends, and adopted host-country families, we discuss who we are. My sexuality is a big part of who I am and I've been fortunate to have found a small group of friends to be open with. I know my views in many ways differ from theirs, but in giving them someone they know, rather than a character from a movie or in some news article, I've succeeded in making it easier for them down the road to accept others in their lives who are gay or lesbian.

And here a short update on my two friends: the woman has come out to both parents who have accepted her and continue to support her. Also she has found a new girlfriend. The man found a girlfriend who is now pregnant. He is very happy to have the family he'd always wanted.

In talks on trains and with strangers, I hope I've been able draw attention to how much Romania owes women in maintaining this country's deep agricultural roots, stocked kitchens, and set tables. And finally, perhaps I've shown others that there is life beyond this small town; that adventure always calls.