

The LGBT Community and Peace Corps

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.

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.

Find out more about us Go to our website www.lgbrpcv.org . Notice the links to articles in our most current newsletter at the **In the News** section.

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 **Stories by Country** pages on our web site contain 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.

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.

The articles that follow These are articles from our website by former and current LGBT Peace Corps Volunteers. For an archive of additional articles visit www.lgbrpcv.org

*** Names of currently-serving Peace Corps volunteers withheld to protect their privacy**

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 persons 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. More than 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, gay man, transgender person 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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Placing Same Sex Couples as PCVs and Other Advocacy Issues

- Mike Learned, Group Leader, Malawi

May 21, 2013, a very important day at Peace Corps and for the LGBT Peace Corps community. It brought the announcement that Peace Corps would begin placing same sex couples together <http://www.peacecorps.gov/resources/media/press/2238/> This was the latest of many policy changes we have advocated for over the years. Now is a good time to look back and review the advocacy we have championed and how it has influenced policy change at Peace Corps and positively affected our community.

Inclusion of Sexual Orientation in Peace Corps' Non-Discriminatory Statement

Even though Peace Corps had been accepting lesbian, gay and bisexual volunteers for many years, Peace Corps non-discriminatory statement which included the familiar race, nationality, age, gender, and disability language, did not include sexual orientation. In the early 1990s Peace Corps Director, Elaine Chow, visited San Francisco for an event that welcomed applicants, nominees, soon to depart PCVs, and the local RPCV community. A half dozen of us (active LGBT RPCV members) approached Director Chow (perhaps confronted would be a more descriptive verb) and presented her with a letter requesting that sexual orientation be included in Peace Corps non-discriminatory statement. She expressed surprise that it hadn't been already. She took the letter, put it in her purse, and we never heard back.

The next Peace Corps Director we approached was Carol Bellamy. She was the first Peace Corps Director under President Clinton, and also the first RPCV to serve as Peace Corps Director. She had put together a much more progressive senior management team, and we had a couple of key allies among them and much lower level staff support. In 1995 Director Bellamy announced that sexual orientation would be included in the non-discriminatory statement. One down and a few more to go.

Accepting Healthy HIV Positive Applicants as Volunteers

By the late 1990s it became apparent to most in our community that people with HIV who were reacting positively to anti-retroviral therapies could live normal lives and be useful and skilled Peace Corps Volunteers. This was a much longer struggle. Over the years I talked with HIV+ applicants who had been turned down by Peace Corps Medical. One Peace Corps Medical Director I spoke with admitted that some HIV+ applicants could safely serve, but there were just too many questions. Then there was the issue that many countries where Peace Corps Volunteers served required volunteers to show proof they did not have HIV in order to receive work visas.

Although Peace Corps was not accepting HIV+ applicants, it had to deal with current Peace Corps Volunteers who became HIV+ while serving. There were several cases of this. They were brought back home their health evaluated and medically separated. In 2008, a very brave volunteer in the Ukraine, who became HIV+ during service was brought back to Washington, evaluated, and medically separated. He fought back and contacted the ACLU. They contacted Peace Corps and the press; suddenly every one was talking about the case. Shortly after, a volunteer in Zambia became infected. She was returned to DC, evaluated, and was about

to be medically separated when Peace Corps (influenced by the Ukraine case, no doubt) said that since her health was good she could return to Zambia, or be placed for the last year of her tour in Lesotho. Her name is Elizabeth Tunkle, and she wrote a wonderful article for our website about her time in Lesotho actively speaking to high school students about her own HIV status and ways to prevent HIV. So another issue down and a few more to go.

Including LGBT PCV Examples in Recruiting Materials

This occurred during the George W. Bush administration under Peace Corps Director Gaddi Vasquez. I had met Director Vasquez on a couple of occasions, and he assured me that he would never act in any discriminatory way toward LGBT volunteers or staff. He was a religious and political conservative, but I took him at his word. Every so often Peace Corps produces recruiting materials that features the racial, ethnic, gender, age, and disability diversity of Peace Corps volunteers in programs around the world. But they never featured an openly LGBT recent volunteer. Finally, one rather gentle story was added to some recruitment materials written by a gay RPCV who had served in the Philippines. Right before going to press the senior manager in charge ordered a “stop the presses” and “remove that story.” An ally at Peace Corps headquarters called me immediately. I went directly to Vasquez. He overturned his manager’s decision, and the recruiting brochure went to press as designed. One more down, but still some more to go.

Placing Transgender Volunteers

I had never heard of a Peace Corps policy that rejected or accepted transgender volunteers. I’d heard a few stories over the years about a couple of trans volunteers who served very quietly, but never heard more than that. Several years ago an older transwoman contacted us. She had transitioned many years earlier had applied to the Peace Corps and had been nominated as a volunteer. She had had a very successful career. She seemed a perfect fit for the program she had been nominated for. But Medical had questions about her gender transition and turned her down. I wrote a letter to the Medical Director at the time suggesting a review of the case, but got a reply that basically said he couldn’t discuss the health or medical issues of any applicant.

Around 2005 I heard from a transman who applied to the Peace Corps with note worthy skills and experience. He was being questioned by Medical in what he felt was an unfair and discriminatory way. I spoke with a personal contact I had within Peace Corps Medical who explained (as I knew) that the contact was constrained by ethics and policies around medical and health information. I suggested that the situation could be looked at again and more thought given to a decision of whether to accept or reject the applicant. The applicant won over medical staff and was accepted and had a very successful experience as a volunteer, and has since gone on to even more important work in the developing world. One more down and just one more big one to go.

Placing Same Sex Couples Together as Volunteers

We have been actively advocating the placement of same sex couples together as volunteers since the very beginning of the Obama administration. After the legalization of same sex marriage in Massachusetts in 2004, Peace Corps modified its policy for placing married couples together to reflect the provisions of the Defense of Marriage Act’s (passed in 1996). Prior to this Peace Corps identified couples as married according to the state laws in which they presided.

This included the recognition of common law marriage if it was recognized in an applicant couple's state of residence. The revised Peace Corps policy stated that because of DOMA only a married couple who were a man and a woman would be eligible as applicants.

Several recent factors led to our decision to aggressively push this discriminatory policy toward resolution. These included the election of the current administration and the appointment of a more progressive Peace Corps Director and senior staff, and a policy change that allows the same sex partner/spouse of Peace Corps staff serving overseas to have the same rights and privileges of the opposite sex staff couples where all parties are American citizens. It also helped that more states had legalized same sex marriage and domestic partnerships, and polls indicated that there was an increase in the number of Americans, particularly younger Americans, who supported same sex marriage and domestic partnerships.

We started with a letter to Peace Corps Director, Aaron Williams. We got a quick response informing us that a member of Peace Corps headquarters staff would contact us. This began a dialogue about how to prepare and implement a policy that would allow the placement of same sex couples, but this process took longer than I thought. I spoke personally to both Director Williams and his successor Deputy Director Carrie Hessler-Radalet. And there has been much communication between us and Peace Corps staff over the last couple of years about this. And finally the May 21 announcement.

We Did Not Do This Alone

Through all the years of our advocacy on these issues, we did not work alone. Peace Corps staff has included many supportive members of the LGBT community and loads of straight allies. Three years ago or so we offered suggestions for ongoing Medical Officer training to include a discussion of the physical and mental health needs of LGBT PCVs. We have also worked closely with Peace Corps and LGBT PCVs and their straight colleagues to offer several versions of Safe Zone training on our website. We have contributed suggestions for diversity training in initial training programs to include local LGBT topics for PCVs new to their countries of service. Many Peace Corps recruiters and country desk officers refer LGBT applicants, nominees and invitees to our web site.

As recent polls have indicated, there has been a huge increase in support for equal rights for LGBT people among the general population. All of these trends and the support of our allies have worked in our favor, energizing the many steps forward in our search for equality as members of the Peace Corps family and as citizens.

The Life of a Transgender PCV: Are You a Boy or a Girl?

- Bryce Wolfe, PCV, now RPCV

Last year my host mother called the Peace Corps medical officer. She had seen my boxers drying on the line, she said, and had doubts about my gender. She feared I was actually a man, and was now concerned for the safety of her two young daughters. The notion that I would ever harm my host sisters disturbed me; the doubts about my gender did not. I have long hair. I have a deep voice. I have an hourglass figure. I have facial hair. It confuses people. The medical officer assured my host mother that I am, in fact, female, and that she has no cause for concern. Boys and girls both may wear boxers, the medical officer explained, and Westerners frequently wear clothing of the opposite sex. When I learned about this phone conversation, I wasn't upset; instead I was glad that my host mother took the initiative to call the medical officer. This way, rather than harboring fear or spreading rumors, she learned about the fluidity of gender.

"Are you a boy or a girl?" People ask.

Technically, I'm intersex. I identify as transgender. Currently, I'm a Peace Corps volunteer serving in a predominately Muslim country.

In this culture, your sex determines your life. It influences what you do for a living, what you do in your free time, what you absolutely must do and what would be an absolute shame for you to do. Men interact with men differently than women interact with women, and inequalities exist. To speak the language, you must identify yourself as a man or a woman.

I took a good, long look at myself before I joined the Peace Corps. I knew it wouldn't be easy. There would be the constant questioning, the lack of privacy and the need to change my appearance and behavior. There would be the stares and the possibility of even physical violence. All volunteers face this. What I couldn't find, was much information about the unique challenges faced by volunteers who don't fit neatly into "male" or "female". For all I knew, I would be the only one. This was okay. I never let a fear of the unknown hold me back. Still, who would I trust? How would I dress? Would I commit a grievous faux pas and be stoned to death?

I was prepared to live undercover for twenty-seven months. Now, looking back, I'm amused to think I considered hiding who I am, and I'm grateful I didn't have to.

In my first month as a volunteer, I facilitated a diversity training session for staff and found that both Americans and host country nationals wanted to know how they could be allies to LGBTQI volunteers. I met gay and lesbian and otherwise queer volunteers already serving in country. When I walked the office halls, I saw rainbow stickers of support on office doors. Their support has been unwavering and, while I tested the waters in the beginning, I'm now open about my gender identity with all volunteers and staff members.

Still, I'm not open in my community. This is a conservative country, and I don't know who I can and can't trust. I teach English at a secondary school, and I don't want to be accused of "converting" children, as others have been accused. The level of violence and harassment against LGBTQI individuals here is high, and the law enforcement is no help.

Last month two law enforcement officers approached me on the street. I reached for the ID in my bag, expecting them to ask me for identification. Instead, they asked, "Are you a boy or a girl?" and, once satisfied with an answer, they walked away. I'm pretty sure they settled a bet.

You need to have a thick skin. You can't sweat the small things. I knew this before I boarded the plane and, like all volunteers, I'm willing to sacrifice some personal comfort in exchange for the experience of a lifetime. Of course it isn't easy. I can't speak freely. I'm always vigilant. I avoid the public baths, and groups of idle

young men. But I'm fortunate. I'm a foreigner, and therefore I can "get away" with a lot of things that my local friends can't.

Establishing a connection to the LGBTQI community in country tangibly changed my life here. Not only is my work more fulfilling, knowing that I'm supporting NGOs that support people like me, but I've made close friends, who have literally clothed and fed me in times of need. They inspire me with their strength and courage and good humor. I had thought I would spend two years isolated. A local friend, also transgender, reminded me, "We're everywhere. We've always been here, and we'll always be here."

This has been the most uplifting and depressing aspect of my service so far: being welcomed into this community, and seeing first hand the kind of life necessitated by a government whose laws will not protect you and a culture whose norms will not accept you. In America, I can walk down the street knowing I am, in general, safe. I can work where I want. I can love who I want. I can wear boxers without my sex being called into question.

If I make no other impact during the course of my service, I feel I've at least opened the minds of people around me. From high school students who agree that boys can bake and girls can box, to volunteers who confess I'm the first transgender friend they've had, to my counterpart who knows and accepts me for who I am - I feel, more than anything, that my gender identity has been an asset to me as a volunteer. After you've struggled to fit into your own skin, you find you have the flexibility, resilience and open mind to fit just about anywhere.

"Are you a boy or a girl?" This is the chorus of my life. I listen to it in another language now, but the answer is the same. I say, "Yes."

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Open Secrets – Serving Queer in Paraguay

- Compiled and Edited by Manuel Colón and Fiona Martin, Paraguay

Have you ever heard the Hans Christian Anderson tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes”? It’s a story about a vain Emperor who cares for nothing. He hires two swindlers that promise him the finest, best suit of clothes from a fabric invisible to anyone who is unfit for his position or “hopelessly stupid”. The Emperor cannot see the cloth himself, but pretends that he can for fear of appearing unfit for his position; his ministers do the same. When the swindlers report that the suit is finished, they mime dressing him and the Emperor marches in procession before his subjects, who play along with the pretense, until a child in the crowd, too young to understand the desirability of keeping up the pretense, blurts out that the Emperor is wearing nothing at all and the cry is taken up by others. The Emperor cringes, suspecting the assertion is true, but continues the procession anyway.

That story embodies what an open secret is. How many times have those of us in Peace Corps heard about local and national governments that are run by corrupt leaders, yet they continue being elected? Or teachers/adult leaders having inappropriate relations with students yet haven’t lost their job? Or the spouses, who have extramarital relations, yet will not divorce? An open secret is information that is well-known throughout a community, but isn’t spoken aloud because of the power that said information contains. Overt acknowledgement may encourage and sometimes require the knowledge holders to take action of what they already know, but were purposefully ignoring. While open secrets like this, and others, make work and personal life difficult, they actually serve as a positive way for some volunteers to serve safely and productively.

While applying to Peace Corps, I received a call from the Paraguay Country Desk in Washington, D.C. with some follow up questions regarding my interview and application. Near the end of the call, as we were wrapping up, the woman on the line asked me, “You are comfortable staying in the closet for two years, right? The country you are being invited to isn’t that open to homosexuality. You’ll have to keep it a secret.” I sat in the cubicle of my summer job and calmly tried to process this blunt, and rather awkward, turn of the conversation. Hesitantly, not sure who might overhear my response, I said “Well, I suppose. But, I’m *pretty* gay. Like, even if I didn’t tell anyone, it wouldn’t be too hard to guess.” That was the quickest, most professional response I could come up with, as I thought about my voice, speech patterns, hand motions, and general composure that are usually a dead giveaway for my sexual orientation (and had been for many years). She politely quipped back, “Oh, don’t worry about that. Those non-spoken cues are things we pick up from a cultural context, the country you’re going to isn’t exposed to much gay culture, so the cues don’t communicate the same things.”

Reflecting on that phone conversation, I wonder what the desk officer really meant to communicate. I initially understood her to mean that no one will ever suspect I was gay and would just fly under the radar, which is definitely not the case. I’m confident that several of my community members knew that I was gay, without ever having told them. During an *asado* (BBQ) at my house, during a conversation, my Paraguayan housemate said “Yeah and I have a gay cousin. But, not gay like you Manú...” and continued on nonchalantly. I, however, sat there in an utter stupor for about ten seconds, food hanging from my fork, as many things ran through my mind; 1) He knows I’m gay. 2) How did he find out? 3) When did he find out? 4) Who else knows? 5) He dropped that bomb in the conversation and carried on really fucking casually. In that instant, I understand what the desk officer really meant in that call; people will know that I’m gay, will share their suspicions with others, but they’ll simply add that information on their list of other open secrets and carry on about their lives.

One strategy in addressing open secrets is to do so indirectly. During my service, I was requested to be at a meeting to help plan *Día de la Juventud* (Youth Day) events with the *Muni* (our local city hall). However, the conversation got derailed from whom to invite to speak about health and wellness to making sure that we don't get anyone who will come and talk about sexuality. Not that they didn't value a safe-sex and HIV-AIDS *charla* (lectures), but they didn't want a situation where a *puto* (faggot) would come and say that homosexuality is a normal, healthy lifestyle. They began to discuss how lesbians and gays should not have rights; that they shouldn't be allowed to marry or raise children, etc. Once again, I found myself paralyzed by shock, blankly staring at my computer screen, where I was previously taking notes, with my fingers now lying flat on the keyboard. I sat there for ten minutes, listening to people who I considered friends and professional work counterparts dissect and discuss my value and worth as a human being based solely on who I love. I had been curious why I was invited to the meeting in the first place, and began to wonder if my presence was specifically requested for this very exchange. Non-confrontationally discussing my sexual orientation, in such a passive manner, allowed them to air their disapproval without the burden of actually taking action. If they were to openly acknowledge the "secret", they would be expected to do something about it, at the very least shun me, and by doing so, potentially lose a valuable and productive member of the team.

But the real impetus for writing this piece was an exchange I had with a good friend at my site. As I was lying in my hammock, he stumbled over in his mid-afternoon drunken stupor (which was all too common) and asked "Manuel, you're a pacifist, right?" to which I respond "Yeah, I guess so." He followed up with, "Good. So am I. But, can you defend yourself, like if you needed to? In a fight?" I was unsure of where the conversation was going and imagined that shortly he'd slap me in the head and run away giggling. So, I stood up, out of the hammock to exert my clear height advantage and said, "Well, I'm a big guy, I sure think I can defend myself." He let me know that he was glad I could defend myself if needed, but also that I could count on him if I ever find myself in a sticky situation. He went on to recount, teary eyed, having witnessed the hatred, discrimination and even violence, his lesbian sister had received growing up. He assured me that if I ever experienced this in my time here in Paraguay, he would have my back. And to remember that there were good, respectful Paraguayans, like himself. It was after this exchange, I began to ponder the complexity of the open secret.

Open secrets can be great. They allowed me, and other LGBT Volunteers, to safely live and work in Paraguay with minimal burden. Open secrets allowed us to retain our identity and behavior but with the understanding that we must remain silent and never demand public recognition and approval. There is an unspoken agreement: we won't say anything if you don't say anything, which again is the basis of every open secret.

However, open secrets are also damaging. They contribute to the sequestering of positive imagery of gay citizens, a "glass" closet, if you will. I am unable to counteract the pervasive, harmful rhetoric of gay men being pedophiles and sole carriers of HIV because despite being a successful working professional, I am not officially out; my sexual orientation can not be publicly acknowledged. My passion for social justice and diversity advocacy is silenced and squelched where it should matter the most, my personal identity. Not only are we unable to serve as positive counterexamples to the pervasive and damaging stereotypes about gays, we are also unable to serve as positive role models to youth, just now coming to terms with their sexuality. A culture of open secrets allows and encourages passiveness of the status quo, rather than challenging ignorant or bigoted ideology.

Complacency about the status quo creates a complicated environment, not only for members of the LGBT community, but as conveyed in my last anecdote, even for allies. There are situations, where LGBT Volunteers are clearly rendered voiceless and disenfranchised. However, these situations are opportunities for allies to stand up and do what we cannot. There are spaces for our allies (especially other straight PCVs), to say or do something when it is too delicate or dangerous for us to do so. Hearing someone who is a confirmed heterosexual speak up in disagreement to homophobic comments carries much more weight than the comments of someone living an "open secret." It's also safer for an ally to speak up and less likely to result in complications for our communities. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, much of your personal and work safety is, after all, at the whim of your community. There are two very simple choices to be made in situations like these. Similar to the Emperor's ministers, and educated townspeople, we can stay silent and allow an open secret to parade through our society rearing its bigoted self, unchecked into our lives. Or, with the purity and sense of equality as a child, we can actively challenge the status quo and bring attention to what is wrong, and demand it be corrected. So, next time you see a naked man walking down the street...are you going to say something?

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My Experience in Morocco as a Lesbian PCV

– a Current Volunteer

For me, being gay in Morocco is difficult but not unmanageable. Though many people in my small town in the Little Sahara consider themselves more laid-back and open-minded than the Moroccan standard, I would never out myself to anyone here. I don't find being in the closet here all that difficult, though, because it just doesn't come up that much.

Yes, people ask me all the time whether I'm married and if I'd like to have a Moroccan husband. I come up with silly, inaccurate answers to these questions that often leave the impression that I have something against Moroccans. I hate that I give that impression, but straight volunteers probably have that problem as much as queer ones - a lot of the difficulty there can be chalked up to language barriers. I have just as hard a time with the idea of being asked whether I'd like to marry someone I've never met as I do with the idea of marrying a man, but it's a lot easier to say, "No, I don't want to marry a Moroccan," than it is to say, "It creeps me out that you just asked me to marry your barber without any mention of our common interests or a suggestion that we go to dinner."

To be a queer PCV in Morocco (or to be a queer person in most parts of the world), you almost have to come to terms with compartmentalizing, i.e., letting the people in your community get to know the parts of you that they will find acceptable. Having just come out in the U.S. a few years ago, I hate having to disintegrate the parts of myself when I was just beginning to enjoy this newfound whole. I don't see a way around it, though—I've never heard a story of someone being out in their community and still managing to integrate. Homosexuality is illegal. Most (not all) Muslim Moroccans will tell you it's against Islam, and even most (not all) non-Muslim Moroccans still hold that homosexuality is un-Moroccan.

I have a mix of mechanisms that help me handle having to compartmentalize in my community. First, I'm out among fellow PCVs. In fact, being a pretty private person, I'm way more out among PCVs than I am among groups in the States. I've outed myself here more than usual both to create a support network for myself and to let other people, who might feel isolated, know that they're not alone.

Next, Peace Corps Morocco's LGBT support group, Pride Morocco, offers more overt, official support and functions as my queer social group. We meet quarterly to discuss how we can serve as allies for one another. For example, after having identified that several uncomfortable or inappropriate interactions have taken place between LGBT volunteers and PC staff members, we're working now on coordinating a Safe Zone training for Peace Corps staff. We also use our meetings to hang out, bond, and, when need be, commiserate.

Finally, it's important to me to be involved in the LGBT rights and support groups that were important to me before I joined the Peace Corps. Although my involvement in these groups from Morocco is limited by distance and technology, I think it's mentally healthy to offer myself opportunities to face the challenges of being gay positively and constructively. It also gives me perspective to remember that the challenges I face in Morocco aren't Moroccan or Muslim problems. My involvement in a support group at my alma mater regularly reminds that being LGBT in the States can be just as hard as it can be in Morocco (at an inter-personal level, at least; it gets trickier at a legal level). Having this kind of perspective helps me direct my frustrations more appropriately.

So my advice to you if you're queer and you're thinking about whether you should come to Morocco for 27 months is to go ahead and reconcile yourself to the near-fact that you'll have to be mostly closeted while you live here and to be proactive about how you're going to manage your mental health. Focus on creating a strong support network for yourself of people at home and in Morocco, and find ways to face frustrations and challenges through constructive channels.

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