The Peace Corps: It all started here

By Katie Mars Sarver
Public Affairs

Fifty years ago next week, Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy delivered a middle-of-the-night challenge that lit a spark among U-M students by challenging them to commit to international service.

Next week, several of those students and many who would follow their lead will return to Ann Arbor to celebrate the 50th anniversary of that occasion and the subsequent events that led to the formation of the Peace Corps.

Kennedy only planned to grab a few hours of sleep when he stopped at U-M. When he arrived, just before 2 a.m., he found a crowd growing. The university extended the curfew for female students. More than 2,000 U-M graduates have served as Peace Corps volunteers, the fourth largest of any university. They have worked in more than 44 countries, putting their education and experiences to use in areas such as health, business, education, agriculture and the environment.

Next week, the university will serve as host to a Symposium on International Education and Experiences at the Michigan Union to commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the Peace Corps. Volunteers will be sworn in by President Kennedy at the Michigan Union. A follow-up visit to campus three days later, Sept. 16, will include events on the Union steps at the precise anniversary of Kennedy’s comments. The celebration is set to include a screening of the Peace Corps’ documentary “A Passage of the Torch” about the Peace Corps formation; a symposium on international service; performances by Ghanaian drummers; and remarks by Peace Corps director Aaron Williams and promote U-M alumni.

The Peace Corps is a federal government agency established by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Over 300,000 volunteers have served in 141 countries. The Peace Corps represents a unique commitment to international service, education and experiences.

According to 2010 statistics, U-M has for 10 years placed on the Peace Corps’ top 25 list of large universities nationwide producing Peace Corps volunteers.

• U-M ranks fourth as an all time producer of Peace Corps volunteers with 2,331 alumni having served.

• There are 73 U-M alumni now serving in the Peace Corps.

• The state of Michigan ranks eighth in the United States in sending individuals to the Peace Corps.

• Returned volunteers will have the option of earning master’s degrees at the university as Peace Corps Fellows. The Peace Corps and U-M have an agreement making U-M the only Fellows/USA program in Michigan.

• Notable returned Peace Corps volunteers include authors Kent Haruf and Paul Theroux, sculptor Martin Puryear, columnist Chris Matthews, U.S. Sen. Christopher Dodd, former governors Jim Doyle and Robert Taft, and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala.

• As the first director of the Peace Corps (1961-65), R. Sargent Shriver created programs in 55 countries with more than 14,500 volunteers.

• The second director of the Peace Corps, Jack Hood Vaughn, was a U-M graduate (B.A. ’43, M.A. ’47). He served as director from 1966-69, and received an Outstanding Achievement Award from the U-M Board of Regents.

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Ghanaian drums to signal Peace Corps celebration

By Katie Merx Sarver
Public affairs

Ghanaian fontomfrom drums, the musical instruments of Ghanaian state and royal events, will represent the long relationship between the Peace Corps, U-M and the West African nation next week when they sound the call to gather at several of the anniversary events.

Even before John F. Kennedy formally proposed a Peace Corps, he asked U-M students how many were willing to spend their days in Ghana. And Ghana and the nation now known as Tanzania were the destinations of the inaugural Peace Corps volunteers.

Historically, fontomfrom drums have been used by the Akan people of Ghana to mark special events and occasionally are played at the opening of parliament.

So, as a tie to the historic relationship, fontomfrom drums will proclaim the beginning of several events next week on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Kennedy visit to U-M that inspired the formation of the Peace Corps.

Lester Monts, senior vice provost for academic affairs and professor of ethnomusicology, along with the African Studies Center’s Heritage Project and the President’s Initiative on Africa commissioned a set of the drums to be made for U-M in conjunction with the Peace Corps celebration.

Visiting professors and renowned Ghanaian musical specialists from the Center for National Culture in Ghana and elsewhere will travel to Ann Arbor next week to share information about the drum’s use and rituals of the fontomfrom with students in the School of Music, Theatre & Dance.

Screenings of the movie “Alumpan: The Talking Drum of Ghana” are planned to mark special events and occasionally are played at the opening of parliament. So, as a tie to the historic relationship, fontomfrom drums will proclaim the beginning of several events next week on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Kennedy visit to U-M that inspired the formation of the Peace Corps.

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“These drums play a very central role in the Akan society of Ghana,” Monts says. “The permanent addition of these drums to the university’s percussion collection in the School of Music, Theatre & Dance contribute to the global diversity in our academic offerings. Their inclusion in the events surrounding the celebration of the Peace Corps provides a musical nod to the shared histories of American and Ghanaian cultures.”

Now the drums will play a central role in the education of Michigan percussion students, says Joe Gramley, assistant professor of music and coordinator of the percussion program.

“This is a unique opportunity for U-M percussionists to gain access to instruments of real historical significance,” Gramley says. “As 21st-century artists, we are always looking outside our borders in order to absorb new traditions. The chance to accomplish that on authentic musical instruments is an amazing windfall.”

— Joe Gramley
EPILOGUE: What happened to key players after the U-M speech

By Joe Senach
News Service

This month U-M commemorates the 50th anniversary of Sen. John F. Kennedy’s Oct. 14, 1960 speech outside the Michigan Union. Kennedy that night sparked the creation of the Peace Corps when he urged students to work in developing countries to promote peace.

John F. Kennedy went on to become the youngest man elected to the presidency just three weeks after his visit to U-M. He vowed to return to campus but his life and presidency were cut short by an assassin’s bullet on Nov. 22, 1963.

Kennedy’s vice president and successor, Lyndon Johnson, would make good on that promise by delivering a commencement address at U-M where Johnson unveiled the Great Society, the largest package of social legislation ever enacted. What happened to other key players involved with birth of the Peace Corps?

Alan Guskin, one of the student leaders who organized thousands of students for the campaign until Obama’s in 2008.

He was married to actress Jane Fonda, a former NBC news anchor, currently is first lady of the state of California.

Peace Corps 50th Anniversary events calendar

For up-to-date event information go to peacecorps.umich.edu.

Monday, Oct. 11


Exhibit: U-M and the Peace Corps: At Started Here, through Nov. 30. Huron Hatchet Graduate Library, Gallery, Room 100.

Files: “A Passing of the Torch,” 7-9 p.m., Hutch Graduate Library, Library Gallery, Room 100.

Tuesday, Oct. 12

Wednesday, Oct. 13

Symposium: Challenges and Opportunities of International Service: A Student Symposium, 10 a.m. - 1  p.m., Michigan Union.

Lecture/Discussion: Author Paul Theroux: “How the Peace Corps Changed My Life,” 7-9 p.m., Huron Hatchet Graduate Library, Room 100.

Thursday, Oct. 14
Files: “A Passing of the Torch,” 7-9 a.m., Michigan Union stops.

Conference: First Ceremony on Michigan Union stops, 2-3:30 a.m.

Dedication: Historical Marker commemorating JFK’s Ann Arbor Challenge, 10:30-10:45 a.m., on the grounds in front of the U-M Museum of Art.

Conference: Second Ceremony on Michigan Union stops, 11 a.m. – noon.

Symposium: Spanning Your Days in Ghana: Responding to JFK’s Challenge, 1:30-5 p.m, Pendleton Room, Michigan Union.

Reception: Reception for U-M Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs), 4-6:30 p.m., Anderson Room, Michigan Union.

Talk: Peace Corps Director Aaron Williams: Inspiring the Next Generation of Volunteers, 6-7:30 p.m., Hulick Room, Michigan Union.

Talk: Tom Hayden: The Importance of Community Organizing: From the Peace Corps to Barack Obama, 8:30-10 p.m., Hutch Graduate Library, Library Gallery, Room 100.

Friday, Oct. 15
Talk: History of the Peace Corps: From the Michigan Union Steps to the Present, 1-2:30 p.m., Hutch Graduate Library, Library Gallery, Room 100.

Talk: Peace Corps Authors, 3-4:30 p.m., Hutch Graduate Library, Library Gallery, Room 100.

Talk: Engineers in the Peace Corps: A Conversation with College of Engineering Alumni, 3-5 p.m., Chevrolet Auditorium, Chrysler Center, North Campus.

Reception: Happy Hour for RPCVs and Their Families and Friends, 5-7 p.m., Domino’s on Monroe Street.

Exhibit and reception: U-M Alumni Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Exhibition, Shutter Gallery in the Art & Architecture Building on North Campus, with an opening reception, 6-8 p.m. Exhibit through Nov. 12.

Saturday, Oct. 16
Celebration: President’s Tailgate Party for Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, before football game, 12:30-3 p.m., Oosterbeek Fieldhouse.

Recognition: In a halftime program during the Wolverines’ Homecoming football game, Ul-M affiliated RPCVs will be recognized, Michigan Stadium.

Tuesday, Oct. 26

Wednesday, Oct. 27
Discussion: Insights into Peacecorps: Peace Corps Service in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, noon-1:30 p.m., Room 1636 International Institute/School of Social Work Building.

Thursday, Oct. 28
Talk: Sarah Oseh, Penny W. Zhang Distinguished Speaker Series, 5:00 p.m., Michigan Theater.

Tuesday, Nov. 2
Seminar: President’s Seminar on Educating Globally Competent Students (by invitation only), 1-5 p.m., Michigan League.

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Thursday, Nov. 4

Melissa Lea Foster Rietz on assignment in Ecuador.
Peace Corps volunteers reflect upon assignments

By Jillian Bogater

While a student at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business, Andrew Bracken took a brand marketing internship on the west coast. A week after he started the job, Bracken realized the corporate world was not for him, and he filled out an application to join the Peace Corps.

Going to school at U-M challenged Bracken academically, but soon he found that the Peace Corps tested him emotionally.

“After the two experiences, I feel prepared to tackle any challenge,” says Bracken, who served from 2008-2010 in Cape Verde and now has started a second assignment in Mozambique. “Seeing how I successfully adapted to new environments, as well as realizing the myriad opportunities outside the U.S., Peace Corps vastly increased the possibilities I will consider in the future.”

Bracken is featured among nearly 80 returning Peace Corps volunteers who have shared testimonials on the university’s Peace Corps website, peacecorps.umich.edu. U-M ranks fourth as an all-time producer of Peace Corps volunteers with 2,331 alumni having served. There are 73 U-M alumni now serving in the Peace Corps.

Since Bracken will serve in Mozambique until next year, he will miss this month’s events commemorating the 50th anniversary of Sen. John F. Kennedy’s Oct. 14, 1961, speech outside the Michigan Union. Kennedy that night sparked the creation of the Peace Corps when he urged students to work in developing countries to promote peace.

So far, Bracken has developed a wide range of job skills from his volunteering opportunities.

“The six years I lived in Mozambique was an incredible adventure for me,” Bracken says. “It was a challenging experience, but it taught me how to communicate with people who did not speak my language. I learned to be patient and to be open to new experiences.”

Bracken is among 73 U-M alumni now serving in the Peace Corps. Since Bracken will serve in Mozambique until next year, he will miss this month’s events commemorating the 50th anniversary of Sen. John F. Kennedy’s Oct. 14, 1961, speech outside the Michigan Union. Kennedy that night sparked the creation of the Peace Corps when he urged students to work in developing countries to promote peace.

So far, Bracken has developed a wide range of job skills from his volunteering opportunities.

“In my two posts I worked in an array of fields, including business development, wine-making, education, water and sanitation, public health, and agribusiness,” he says. “It would prove extremely difficult to get such diverse experiences in a traditional job in the U.S. I hope to focus on one of these areas while in Mozambique, so I can take advantage of graduate school and job opportunities available to returning Peace Corps Volunteers when I return to the U.S.”

Natalie Wokw, who served from January 2008-December 2009 in Namibia, plans to attend several Peace Corps celebration activities, especially an Oct. 13 talk by novelist and former volunteer Paul Theroux.

There are many reasons Wokw joined the Peace Corps.

“Ultimately I wanted an adventure and a challenge. And that’s exactly what I got,” says Wokw, who served as a math tutor and a physical science teacher.

Wokw’s experience in Namibia deeply changed her.

“It’s difficult to explain in words what value my Peace Corps experience has for me; indeed it’s different for everyone,” says Wokw, who just entered the Masters in Urban Planning program at U-M. “There are many things — the satisfaction at having risen to meet one of the greatest challenges of my life, the opportunity for personal reflection, the joy in my personal relationships with Namibians. Most of all, I never have to look back and wonder ‘what if...?’

“I am definitely interested in working and volunteering abroad again, especially in Africa.”

Melissa Lea Foster Rietz, a registered nurse at the U-M Women’s Birthing Center, served from 2003-05 in Ecuador, South America. While in Ecuador, Foster Rietz was an animal production volunteer and assisted with a women’s cooperative.

“I joined the Peace Corps in order to fulfill a life-long desire to live among and with people in a developing country,” she says. “I was constantly crossing paths with people who had served in the Peace Corps, and while all of their experiences were diverse, the common theme was that Peace Corps changes you — and I wanted to experience that type of change and transformation.”

After returning from her assignment, Foster Rietz was inspired to pursue a nursing degree at U-M. She now works at the university and is enrolled as a master’s student in the School of Nursing.

“Serving in the Peace Corps is what led me into my current career as a nurse,” she says. “I was able to serve as a translator with the medical mission Operation Esperanza and was surrounded by the most incredible staff of nurses. These were women and men who gave so much of themselves for the health and well being of others, who had a tangible way of healing, and who passionately loved what they were doing. I knew right away that I had found my career path and five years later I am in the Family Nurse Practitioner/Occupational Health Certificate program with every intention of using my skills abroad.”

Foster Rietz says she’s looking forward to the Peace Corps 50th anniversary celebration, and plans on attending the Oct. 16 Tailgate Party for U-M’s Homecoming football game, and the game itself, which will honor returning Peace Corps volunteers during the halftime program.

Symposium to explore heritage of global service

By Katie Merx Saver

Public Affairs

Many of the world’s leaders in world service will converge on the Stephen M. Ross School of Business on Oct. 13 for a daylong symposium exploring where the heritage of global service and the next steps on the continuum.

“National Symposium: The Future of International Service” is open to the public and the panels do not require registration. It will begin at 8:30 a.m. in the Ross School’s Blau Auditorium with remarks by Harris L. Wolford, the former U.S. Senator and special assistant to President John F. Kennedy on civil rights, who was a Peace Corps architect and also served as a special representative to Africa.

Morning sessions on the impact and lessons of foreign service will feature such panels as Rupali Shah, executive director of Vinodh, the Indian service volunteer service modeled after the U.S. Peace Corps; and Michelle Nunn, the CEO of the Points of Light Institute and co-founder of the HandsOn Network.

An invitation-only luncheon featuring remarks by former President Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo runs from noon to 1:30 p.m. Quitoan drummers will salute arriving luncheon plenary participants at the U-M Museum of Art.

Afternoon panels resume at 1:30 p.m. to discuss universities’ roles in world service as well as new initiatives and policy proposals regarding such service.

These panels are scheduled to include such speakers as Sonal Shah, director of the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, M. Peter McPherson, president of the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities; and Diane Hurley, dean of the Roger W. Jones College of Law, Nova Southeastern University.

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Peace Corps Director Aaron Williams plans to close the symposium with a presentation on the future of the Peace Corps.

The event is sponsored by the university, the Brookings Institution and the National Peace Corps Association, with support from the Building Bridges Coalition.