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Not Exactly Retired: A Life-Changing Journey on the Road and in the Peace Corps

By David Jarmul

Living on a small salary in a poor country, without a car, much less a boat or a golf cart, isn't how many Americans envision their dream retirement.

Perhaps they should dream differently.



David Jarmul with wife, Champa

A Different Dream

When my wife and I joined the Peace Corps, one in four of the volunteers in our group was like us — 50 or older.

They came from Harlem to California. They'd been professors, attorneys, IT managers, nonprofit leaders, teachers, city administrators, and management consultants. They were single, married, widowed, divorced, gay and straight.

Several of us had children older than our fellow volunteers in their twenties. Champa and I were 63 when we left our North Carolina home in 2016 to serve for two years in Moldova, Europe's poorest country. In turn, the two of us were much younger than the 87-year-old Boston grandmother who was serving then as a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco.

Since President Kennedy created the Peace Corps in 1961, more than 240,000 Americans of all ages have served as volunteers in 142 countries, including about 7,300 in 61 countries today. Worldwide, at the time we served, about 7 percent of the volunteers were 50 or older. That was a lower percentage than we had in Moldova but still added up to hundreds of people annually.

Many older Americans have family obligations, medical problems and other constraints that make service unrealistic, assuming they've even considered joining the Peace Corps. Nonetheless, it is a proven program that can't just be dismissed with, "Oh, I could never do that at *my* age."



David Jarmul teaching a class.

The Toughest Job You'll Ever Love

The Peace Corps recently evacuated volunteers worldwide because of the coronavirus but expects to reactivate its program after the pandemic ends.

When that happens, more older Americans should consider joining. They *can* do it at their age. Peace Corps service can transform how you think about the world and your own place in it.

It isn't easy. You leave your comfortable American life for more than two years to live in modest surroundings. You undergo rigorous training and then work alongside people whose life experiences are very different from your own. You eat their foods, celebrate their holidays and learn their language, which can be harder than it used to be. Many of your fellow volunteers may be younger than your own children.

The old Peace Corps slogan, "the toughest job you'll ever love," remains accurate. Even in today's world, where many foreign villages have access to the internet, you're separated from your familiar life. You struggle. You get lonely. You reexamine your beliefs and life goals.

I worked in the library of the small city where Champa and I were posted near Moldova’s capital. The librarians there were paid less in a year than some American librarians earn in a couple of weeks. They had almost no budget to buy books or materials. Growing up in a former Soviet state, they also had little experience writing grants for outside funding.

I was inspired by how hard they worked for their community, especially its children. They were eager to try new things. Together, we launched a program where kids learned to build and program simple robots. We started a computer coding class and an English conversation club. We designed a new website and used colorful infographics to highlight library programs. We created an inviting family room filled with toys, books and kid-sized furniture.

Champa taught English at a local school. Her big project was to help create a costume and prop wardrobe for its drama program. She and her partners unveiled the beautiful costumes at a big ceremony. The American ambassador, the mayor and other dignitaries joined the school community in cheering for the student actors as they paraded in their new costumes and then performed scenes from Romeo and Juliet and other dramas.

Champa also taught English at the library and volunteered at a center for kids with special needs. My projects outside the library included mentoring young entrepreneurs, assisting the national tourism industry and teaming up with a local singer to produce a music video celebrating our city. The video went viral online and a national television show did a story about it.

Best of all, Champa and I became dear friends with our host family, the Bordeis. We lived on the second floor of their house. As an older married couple, we did our own cooking and lived more independently than some other volunteers. Our “host parents” were a bit younger than us, and we interacted as peers. It was our elderly host grandmother, or bunica, who felt like our “host mother,” especially since the two of us had lost our own mothers. Even now, we still chat and trade messages regularly with the family.



David Jarmul with grandchildren

Older Volunteers Have Their Advantages

There were advantages to being an older volunteer in Moldova, just as there are in other Peace Corps

countries. Moldovans show respect towards people our age. We felt a bond with our older neighbors who had children and grandchildren of their own. Our job experience enhanced our credibility in our workplaces. As older volunteers, we could also share our long-standing hobbies, which included art and gardening for Champa.

The same is true elsewhere. One volunteer in Senegal wrote: “Age has high standing and respect in the culture, thus being older than the life expectancy of sixty-five in Senegal has opened many doors.”

The medical clearance process was tedious. Ours took several months even though we were in good health. Once we began our service, the Peace Corps provided our medical care for free. It covered all of our expenses and set aside a “readjustment allowance” for after we returned home. The local staff was excellent. We did find it difficult, though, to lose a lot of our autonomy, such as by having to report constantly on our whereabouts.

I know from many conversations with older volunteers in Moldova and elsewhere that our experiences varied, even within the same country or group. Champa and I were fortunate to feel so productive.

Debbie, an attorney from Cleveland who was in the group ahead of ours, said, “Peace Corps is a challenging and difficult undertaking, and your image of service is probably very different from the reality of service. ... Having practiced law for thirty-five years and learned to deal with surprises and expect the unexpected, I think it is critically important that volunteers — especially those who are older — approach Peace Corps service with no expectations. Each volunteer’s service is uniquely their own.”

Now that we’re back home in North Carolina, the two of us treasure our Peace Corps memories. We have renewed appreciation for our many blessings as Americans and greater empathy for the billions of people around the world whose lives differ from ours. We know we touched the hearts of our Moldovan friends, just as they touched ours.

We still don’t have a boat or a golf cart, but our lives are richer than ever.

David Jarmul is a writer, blogger and traveler. He was previously the head of news and communications at Duke University for many years. His new book is *Not Exactly Retired: A Life-Changing Journey on the Road and in the Peace Corps*. The book website is notexactlyretiredbook.com *Link:* (<http://notexactlyretiredbook.com/>)

Editor’s note: As of this writing, the [Peace Corps](https://www.peacecorps.gov/coronavirus/) *Link:* (<https://www.peacecorps.gov/coronavirus/>) states on their website: “The Peace Corps is eager for Volunteers to return to service as soon as the health and safety of Volunteers, staff, and host communities can be assured. How we’re preparing our posts, host country communities, and staff to welcome back Peace Corps Volunteers.”

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