

What Happens Next – Sunday March 28, 2021

Nutrition, Political Polling, Interest Rates, Peace Corps, Not Boring, and Non-Traditional Market Research

Carol Spahn QA

Larry Bernstein:

Fantastic. I guess I want to start out by asking, I don't know why, during your speech I started thinking about, the movies: Stripes and Private Benjamin, about the wrong type of people that join the armed forces. And I'm wondering who succeeds and who fails when they take on something like the Peace Corps? Can you describe the type of people that succeed and the type of people that fail?

Carol Spahn:

Oh, that's a great question, and sometimes it's very unexpected. The kinds of people who do well in Peace Corps are those who are ready to suspend themselves, who are ready to invest in relationships and who are really comfortable with that ambiguity and uncertainty. The folks I've seen struggle the most are those who really want to know exactly what success looks like and exactly how to get there and are very rigid in their approaches. And it's interesting, you see some of those folks who might be overachievers in an academic setting because they know exactly what it takes to get an A, and that is not the way things work in Peace Corps, where you have to really immerse yourself in another culture, build those relationships, understand how things work.

And there was a great story of a volunteer who was struggling and couldn't get her head teacher to work with her on various projects. And the program manager told her, "Okay, well, I want you to go and have tea with that head teacher every Sunday." She's like, "What are you talking about? What's that going to do?" And sure enough, she went over every Sunday and had tea, and after a couple of months of doing that, sure enough, she had a great partner for the rest of her service.

Gunny Scarfo:

Hey, Carol, Gunny Scarfo, I was going jump in with a quick question. I just want to say, I've really seen this up close, I spent two summers in Ghana when I was in college, but not in the Peace Corps, but ended up around a bunch of Peace Corps folks. And I wonder, you touched on this in your six minutes, but I wanted to give you a chance to expand on it because it's something I'm curious about is, the specific skills that people pick up in this kind of work and the ways in which those skills are right for the jobs over the next, however many years, if you could dive into that. I think you've mentioned a couple, but you zoomed past it, I wanted to give you a chance to dive into that a little more.

Carol Spahn:

Sure. Thank you. It's a great question. And I think the skills that volunteers learn are absolutely relevant today, especially with calls for racial equity, for inclusion, for awareness of difference, in celebration of difference and really stopping to understand and listen to other's experience and to value that experience. Those soft skills are incredibly important and absolutely required at every level, in every business today. Some of the other things that we see is just that, as I said, tolerance of ambiguity and willingness to fail and that's something that we don't teach in the United States. Everyone is geared up, you succeed, you get your A's and you get into a good college, and then you work a good job. And we create this illusion that life happens in a straight line and that you can control all of these factors, when in fact you're never sure what life might throw at you at any given time.

In volunteers experience, I had someone from a high-tech biotech company, say he looks for Peace Corps volunteers when he's recruiting. And I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, in this industry, you have to fail often and fail fast and you have to be comfortable with that, and in high-tech, that's what we want. We want people to try new things, fail, move on and a lot of people can't handle that." So, I think a lot of these adaptability questions, living with uncertainty, creative problem solving, are all skills that volunteers learn during their Peace Corps service.

Todd Benson:

First, I'm going to thank you for your service, and congratulations to the Peace Corps on its 60th anniversary. I'm curious a little bit about basically how you would say all businesses changed so much over the years and how has the Peace Corps changed? You frame it over the last five, 10 years, the time that you've been involved, how have you seen it change in terms of whether it's mission, it's the types of people involved, the activity, the importance of technology, the day in day out job, just in what ways has it changed?

Carol Spahn:

Wow, that's a big question. I think we're all constantly evolving. What I've seen, if you could go back to the 60's and 70's, you're putting a volunteer out in a village and they were really on their own and quite isolated. We have now WhatsApp, all kinds of technology, volunteers are in contact with each other, they're in contact with home, they're in contact with the office on a regular basis, so that level of isolation is not there. So, I think that has definitely transformed how we work. And we're seeing now with the pandemic, what the possibilities are.

So, we know we can have to the extent that there is bandwidth and connection, options. We can fundamentally change how we train people while they're in service. That's really exciting. This virtual service pilot that we've got going on is also incredibly exciting, where people who have served already can come back to the US and stay engaged in a formal capacity. Many of

them do it informally anyway, but we can do that in a more formal capacity. I will say development in general has moved to a more sort of results-based metrics, data-driven, evidence-based approach and Peace Corps has definitely adopted those approaches as we've moved forward, and we look forward to using this moment to see how we can continue to adapt.

Todd Benson:

Great. And so now that there's the Peace Corps, there's AmeriCorps too, which I guess basically got a big appropriation in the current bill. Tell us a little bit about basically the distinction between the two and then are their other parts within the government or government-like agencies that are out there that do complimentary things to what you are all doing?

Carol Spahn:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, definitely our brother or sister organization is AmeriCorps, which take young people typically of any age and they go out into American communities and serve with nonprofits, or go into sort of centers and help on anything from building trails to helping right now with vaccination. They would be our main sister agency. There are several organizations and entities that are really pushing right now for broader mandate for national service, be that through the military, AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, or other similar type organizations. I think there's just a big push right now given everything that's going on in the world to provide those kinds of opportunities and have people come together to work on these issues.

Larry Bernstein:

I just have a question about a lot of our audience are parents and we have young adult or children in their late teenage years. And we're trying to encourage them whether to do service, and the Peace Corps is obviously a relatively small program with 7,000 people and we've got millions in each cohort here. As we help our young adult choose something to do, which is impactful and interesting and a learning experience, how should we think about finding something local here in the United States that would fit the bill without having to send them all the way to Malawi to make a difference, but also learn to fail and build skills?

Carol Spahn:

Well, I would first of all encourage you to consider sending them to Malawi. It's a beautiful country with wonderful people. And it really changed my world and the world of so many, but there are opportunities all over the place for people to serve. And the thing that I would encourage for it to be a transformative experience is just to get people outside their comfort zones. So, do it locally in the United States, but maybe move somewhere different, live in a community that's different than your own. Pull yourself away from some of those safety nets and luxuries that you enjoy. And with AmeriCorps you also live on a relatively modest stipend. My daughter is serving with AmeriCorps right now and she was trying to decide between

getting her car fixed or going out to dinner for several weeks. And there are different things that you're just forced to live and walk in someone's shoes in a more fundamental way when you're doing something that's more immersive and that allows you to experience life the way someone else experiences it.

Packy McCormick:

Hey, Carol, it's Packy. My sister was actually a Peace Corps volunteer in Guinea and then going back on what Gunny said, now has gone back and runs a FinTech company in Ghana. So, first of all, just an absolute huge fan of the program. It's been transformative for her. How often do you see instead of people coming back and getting jobs in the States, people actually going back to the country or the continent where they served and identifying opportunities in those countries to continue to make a difference?

Carol Spahn:

Great question and send my thanks to her for her service. It happens quite frequently. I wouldn't say it's the majority of volunteers, but there are always a few who choose to stay in any variety of capacities. And so many who come back to the US just are fighting to find a way to get back. They really do fall in love with the people, with a different way of life, and it's just very compelling in my group. I served as a volunteer from 1994 to '96 in Romania at a small business consulting center and I think we had probably four or five people from our group stay there. It was four years after the fall of communism and they stayed there and started businesses and were very successful.

Todd Benson:

I guess one of the things I'm sort of curious about is how do you think about where does the budget come from? The program, I guess you said, basically it seems like it's been pretty constant at 7,000. How does the government think about or how does Congress think about its return on investment versus other priorities and think about sort of expanding the program?

Carol Spahn:

Great question. I always hesitate to try to imagine how other people think, but I will say that we've had really broad bipartisan support for the Peace Corps. I think people really believe in the mission, appreciate what it does, acknowledge the contribution both in the country of service, but also as people come back to the US and go into business or government positions. I think we could certainly expand our reach. The demand is there. We've got a lot of people demand on the countryside. So, we've been invited into more countries than we're able to go into right now. There are some barriers to different people being able to serve in the Peace Corps. As you can imagine, student loan debt is an issue for many people. And there are people who are mid-career or retired that have different sorts of financial obligations. I would love to see Peace Corps itself expanded. I would love to see companies offering similar types of

opportunities to their employees or offering sabbatical kinds of opportunities so they can go out and do this kind of work as well.

Larry Bernstein:

I was wondering about your advertising and what you described before about risk-taking, you had reminded me of Ernest Shackleton's a famous advertisement for going to Antarctica. His advertisement read, "Men wanted for hazardous journey, low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness, safe return doubtful, honor and recognition in event of success." How do you describe in your pamphlets the risk-taking associated with the Peace Corps?

Carol Spahn:

That's interesting. So not like that. Although there were some early on public service announcements, which I just loved for things like we need people with big hearts and strong backs to serve in the Peace Corps. We've gone through a whole iteration of slogans and messaging. The toughest job you'll ever love is the one that I used in my six minutes, and I think those of us who have served, that's what resonates with us the most. And it's just varied over the years.