

A SMALL ENTERPRISE | By Rebecca Perkins '00



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It was never obvious I was going to end up in the Peace Corps—at least not to me. I spent most of my life in New Hampshire: grew up here, worked in my mom's restaurant, spent many wonderful hours at the Harkness table and went to college here. I love the small towns of New England, the windy country roads and the fall foliage.

My family and friends, however, seemed almost unsurprised when I called them shortly after graduating from Dartmouth in 2004 and announced that I was going to West Africa, to spend the next two years working as a small-business volunteer with the Peace Corps. "Oh, Becca," they'd say. "We all knew you'd find some way to save the world."

During my final year of college, I had spent a lot of time trying to find the best way to start my career—without knowing exactly what that career was. Saving my tiny slice of the world came somewhere close. That spring, I was accepted into a few different grad school programs and the Peace Corps. Great choices, ones I felt overwhelmingly lucky to have. In fact, overwhelmed was a good way to describe me in general.

I sat down with my friend, a college administrator who had served in the Peace Corps. In the typical agonized-youth way, I moaned, "What do I do?"

I'll always remember the clarity of his response: "It's a no-brainer," he said. "You will never get another opportunity like the Peace Corps. To live at that level, inside of another culture—it's amazing. And the Peace Corps is the only program of its kind. "But it's your choice."

I arrived in Senegal in September 2004, and my first impression of the country was seeing the coastline of Dakar outlined suddenly against the Atlantic, orange street lamps and charcoal fires piercing the early morning darkness. As our training group rode through the capital city, all the things I had read floated through my mind: a densely populated city of 2 million people in a country of 10 million; the urbanization and squalid living conditions; the lack of clean drinking water; the sewage in the streets. My eyes burned from exhaustion and pollution, yet all I could think was *I'm so glad I came*.

As we passed out of the city and into the surprising green of the late rainy season, I was struck for the first time by Senegal's disparities, which run deep. In Dakar, there are supermarkets and BMW dealers and flat-screen TV stores. But 15 minutes from my house in the north are villages where women still bring water from the river and gather wood for their cooking fires. Senegal lies just below the Sahara on the west coast of Africa. There is the desert in the northwest and rainforest in the south. There are more than 10 different clans and languages; 11 administrative regions; three religions. But the country is predominantly Muslim, village-based and proud to be Senegalese.

The Senegalese economy has as much variety as its geogra-

phy, with everything from exporting factories to a huge informal sector. As Small Enterprise Development Volunteers—our official title—we Peace Corps volunteers were assigned to "transfer" our business skills and knowledge to the Senegalese in this economic context—a dauntingly vague job description, but one that has given us the freedom to really address the various needs on the ground here, working in French or in local, African languages. Our official objectives are to train entrepreneurs to continue to grow their businesses; create linkages of information or markets; help young people and women enter the workforce; and promote ecotourism as part of Senegal's development.

Much of my time has been spent teaching, a trial-and-error process as I've tried to find the most effective way to transfer a lifetime's worth of piggy banks, waitressing jobs and car payments to a place where many people have never even held a \$10 bill. My focus has become money management: setting goals, establishing savings plans, opening bank accounts, and creating capital generation so that the economy can grow.

Recently, I taught a class to high school students, a group that ranged in age from 17 to 24. Senegalese students must pass a yearly exam to advance to the next grade, and they are allowed just two tries. As a result, just over 20 percent advance as far as high school, and only a lucky few will continue on to university. The rest leave school and try to start their lives.

We had just finished playing a training game in which students manage a sum of money to see who can make a larger profit. We had a few minutes left, so I sat down on the table at the front of the room and asked, "So, who won?"

The winners replied with whoops and hollers.

"Well, what did you do?" I asked them. "What was your strategy?"

"We bought as much stuff to sell as we could afford."

"Does anyone know the name for this?"

There was a moment of hesitation, and then a raised finger: "Investment."

"Good!" I hop up and write *investissement* on the board. "Can you explain what that is, more specifically?"

"When you spend a bunch of money on the business."

"Good, but there's one piece missing—anyone have ideas?" I gaze out at 13 thoughtful but silent faces. I try again. "Where does this money you're spending come from? Why do you have money to buy stuff for the business?"

Bing, one kid gets it. "It's your profit. You made a profit, and you spend it on your business."

"Great!" I say. I write this on the board, and give them a minute to copy it down. "What usually happens when someone has some extra money? You go out and buy something to resell?"

They know I know the answer to this. "We buy soda."

"Or clothes."

"Or someone asks us for some."

Suddenly I've tricked them into forgetting this is class. The kids are snapping their fingers in the air, telling me how hard it is here, how the families are so big, how if you

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of letters—can actually prompt genuine attention to an issue or cause. So can a clear purpose, persistence and a face-to-face meeting, says Rachel Mak '06 after her stint in the office of Senator Lincoln Chafee (R-RI). “Advocating for certain policies is not easy, nor does it offer instant gratification,” she says. “However, with a plausible argument and enough determination, your opinion will count.”

Surprisingly few interns sound disillusioned with the political process, and nearly all comment on how hard “their” member of Congress works. After watching Senator Clinton draft legislation, speak on the Senate floor and juggle media events and countless photo opportunities, Sarah Odell left Washington “even more impressed” by the senator, and by her staff, who “are so passionate and very invested in what they do.” Exeter interns even grow to respect the molasses pace of the democratic process. “My internship taught me to appreciate how hard it is for change to happen,” reflects Luke Parsons '06. “People hold government accountable for so much ... yet it’s a complex system in which change doesn’t happen for lack of trying.”

As much as students discover about government, they often learn even more about themselves. “They’re lowest in the pecking order and have to prove themselves through sheer merit,” says Rick Schubart. “They quickly realize the necessity and importance of self-assertion, initiative and independent action.”

And some are so captivated by politics they decide to stick around. Matt Smallcomb '05 continued to work part time with Senator Baucus’ office during his freshman year at Georgetown. Brooke Masters '85 returned for a summer internship as an aide to the press secretary with then-Congressman Tim Wirth '57 (D-CO), and was hired by *The Washington Post* in 1989. Some make politics and policy their permanent careers, including Christopher Donesa '85, the deputy staff director and chief counsel of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and Kristina Pisanelli '92, who worked as a legislative aide to Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) before entering Georgetown law school. Nearly all retain a life-long interest in law, politics, current events and public service, and they cite the Washington Intern Program as the reason. Says intern Taylor Noyes '06 of her just-completed internship in the office Senator John Sununu (R-NH), “I would love to pursue a career in public service. I don’t know if I could find a more fulfilling job.”

As for Qian Qian Tang, she reports that within a few days of beginning her internship with Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA), she had emerged from the Exeter bubble and was “reading any news source I could find every morning, and within a week I could respond to the concerns and opinions voiced by constituents who called the senator’s office.” She returned to Exeter a different person, like many Washington interns before her, including David Clements '76, who 30 years ago wrote that he left Washington less cynical than when he arrived, and “with a greater respect for our Congressmen, for the amount of work they do compared with the number of results they can credit to themselves.” ●

WIP alumna Wendy Vanasselt '87 was an intern for Congressman Bob Smith (R-NH). She now lives and works in Washington, D.C., where, as a staff member of The Wilderness Society, she makes frequent trips to Capitol Hill.

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don’t give money to someone they’ll say you’re evil—a significant consideration in such a community-based place. I ask them how the game—or a real business—would have played out if someone kept asking them for money or if they had bought more soda. They knew these answers as well, but by way of defense, they add, “It’s not the same as it is in your white countries.”

“I know it’s not,” I reply. “We all hoard our money till the end of time, thinking we’ll need it in our grave, right?” Laughter gets us back on solid ground, but I’ve taken away their ace. “Why should it be the same here? You have your own culture. But should we just throw our hands in the air?”

Smiles of acknowledgment, waiting faces.

“You’ve seen successful businesses here. What do you think they do?”

“Well, we don’t know.” A coy smile. “That’s why we’re here.”

I smile as well. “OK, then. Shall we figure it out?”

Lots of nods.

“I’ll see you next week.”

The Peace Corps has not been easy. I’ve been here for close to two years, and have seen my family and friends for a total of three weeks during that time. I had to leave everything I knew and spend months struggling with every minute of every day—learning a new job, two new languages, a new culture. When you agree to the Peace Corps, you don’t know where you’ll be living or what, exactly, you’ll be doing—but as I have come to find out, that is precisely the value of the experience.

My friend was right: there isn’t another opportunity like the Peace Corps. I’ve learned an African language. I’ve

become part of a family that looks nothing like me. I am the first sister my five Senegalese brothers ever had, the first professional woman most women and girls have met. I’ve had discussions on what people know—and after they’ve learned to trust me, what they *don’t* know. I’ve learned what they think of Western charity and development efforts. What they think of America, and how it is and is not different from the rest of the world. What their dreams are; what they dream for their children; how limited their lives are by circumstance.

It’s intense. It can also be depressing. There are a lot of people who will never know the things we were taught so well at Exeter, who will never have the opportunity to grow into all they can be, to see the world, to discover their potential and then to help those around them. They get up every day and do the same thing that generations before them have done, their days mapped out. They can’t understand why I don’t spend the morning cooking lunch, why I can’t do my laundry by hand. (Though I can now, but I don’t tell the men that.)

And yet, at the end of the day, I know my experience has been an important and meaningful one. Our globe will continue to become smaller, and Peace Corps volunteers will continue to dispel myths about “white people” and Americans. In an age of increasing culture clashes and the anger that comes with them, I can’t think of a more powerful tool than personal contact, however it comes about. Those same discussions I learned to love 10 years ago in a very different setting have become the richest source of my fulfillment here. I’ve already started to realize how hard it’s going to be to leave this new family that I’ve found halfway around the world. ●