



Peace Corps Achievements – July 2024

News and updates from the Peace Corps community — across the country, around the world, and spanning generations of returned Volunteers and staff.

By Benjamin DeMarais & Peter V. Deekle



Oliver McCoy (pictured, Turkmenistan 1997–99) is set to receive the Outstanding Alumni Award from Pacific University this October, recognized for his lifelong commitment to international service and humanitarianism. **Gordon Rhea** (Ethiopia 1968–69) has been nominated as the next attorney general of the U.S. Virgin Islands by the territory’s governor, bringing his extensive background in legal expertise to the role. **Christopher King Croft** (Jamaica 2018–20; 2023–24) released his debut novel, *Invasive Species*, a fictional international thriller inspired by his Peace Corps service in Jamaica. We also share more stories of those making significant impacts, including an RPCV named the new CEO at HealthFirst Family Care Center and those celebrating work anniversaries in distinguished positions.

Have news to share with the Peace Corps community? [Let us know](#).

COLUMBIA



Sharon Torkelson (2022–23) was selected by the U.S. Department of State for a 10-month fellowship with English Language Programs, a government-funded organization dedicated to implementing English language programs around the world. Torkelson will be providing professional development and supporting university English teachers in Vientiane, Laos. Prior to this opportunity, she served as director of world languages at Viera Charter Schools, Inc., located in Melbourne, Florida. Torkelson also brings to the role experience serving as an English Education Specialist for Peace Corps Response in Bogotá — collaborating with national and local ministries of education in providing training and support for Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). [Read more](#).

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



Wayne Arendt (1976–78) has been selected for inclusion in “Marquis Who’s Who” for his extensive contributions to ornithology. “Marquis Who’s Who” is a biographical reference publication which celebrates individuals profoundly impacting society across a diverse range of fields. Since November 1978, Dr. Arendt has worked at the USDA Forest Service’s International Institute of Tropical Forestry in San Juan, Puerto Rico. During his tenure, he led several research initiatives, including the Puerto Rican Parrot restoration, studies on at-risk endemic birds across the Caribbean, and investigations into avian biodiversity. His comprehensive research on the Caribbean’s leading passerine predator and nesting site competitor was published as a U.S. Forest Service General Technical Report, earning citations from numerous researchers worldwide. [Read more](#).

ETHIOPIA



Gordon Rhea (1968–69) has been nominated as the next attorney general of the U.S. Virgin Islands by the territory’s governor. To his new role, Rhea brings an extensive background in legal expertise, graduating from Harvard with a Bachelor’s in history and earning his law degree at Stanford Law School. Rhea’s previous positions include Assistant United States Attorney and Executive Assistant United States Attorney, where he managed a range of high-profile prosecutions and oversaw operations at one of the nation’s largest Federal prosecutor’s offices. Rhea is a 40-year member of the Virgin Islands Bar, and was recently recognized with the Winston Hodge Award for his contributions to law and justice in the community. [Read more](#).

JAMAICA



Christopher King Croft (2018–20; 2023–24) released his debut novel, *Invasive Species*, a fictional international thriller inspired by his Peace Corps service in Jamaica. In the 1980s, Croft worked as a high-seas biologist in the Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea before becoming a marine wildlife activist in Washington, D.C. His idea of protecting dolphins and other sea creatures with the power of words led Croft to organize and lead the lobbying effort for the *Dolphin Safe tuna campaign* of 1990—the first and only U.S. labeling law for the benefit of wildlife. While teaching policy as a professor at the University of Baltimore, he learned about the Peace Corps from one of his students before serving as a Volunteer in several Jamaican Blue Mountain villages. Croft has written extensively about the environment and local community-owned businesses and his work has been published in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Cousteau Society’s Calypso Log*, *the Baltimore Sun*, and *U.S. News & World Report*, among other publications. [Read more](#).

PHILIPPINES



Ted Bolognani (1982–84) has been named as the new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) at HealthFirst Family Care Center. Bolognani has amassed extensive experience from his Peace Corps service in the Philippines and his master’s degree in international administration from the World Learning School for International Training. His career includes roles in international business as controller at CARE Emergency Relief Office in Somalia, and deputy country director in Uganda. [Read more](#).

ROMANIA



Kevin Giglinto (1994–96) recently celebrated his one year work anniversary as president and chief executive officer (CEO) at the Marcus Performing Arts Center (MPAC). During his first year, Giglinto headed several initiatives leading to a 32% increase in attendance, the launch of a new series, and an investment in tools to broaden MPAC’s digital reach. Additionally, Giglinto launched a new internship program at MPAC – focused on providing young people a chance to explore a career in the arts. He was interviewed by the Milwaukee County Office of County Executive in April where he discussed how MPAC is expanding racial equity in the performing arts industry. The full interview can be viewed [here](#).

TOGO & BURKINA FASO



Marco Werman (1984–87) is co-host of Great Blue Hill’s (GBH) The World, public radio’s longest-running daily global news program. Approaching his 30 year work anniversary at The World, Werman’s recent reporting on the Middle East has brought him to Israel and the West Bank where he has been covering the progression of the Israel-Hamas war, leaving his audience with a more nuanced picture of how complex and fraught the situation remains today. [Read more](#).

TONGA



Soraya Bilbao (2005–08) celebrated her 10th anniversary teaching as a multilingual educator at Danbury High School. Once an English as a Second Language (ESL) student herself, Bilbao works with multilingual students to empower them to excel academically and succeed in their new environment. In 2020, Bilbao was selected as the school’s Teacher of the Year. She first discovered her passion for teaching during her Peace Corps service in Tonga, where she worked teaching English on the remote island of Atata, despite initially being unfamiliar with the local Tongan language. Her experience not only sparked her desire to become an educator but also deepened her understanding of cultural diversity and educational challenges. [Read more](#).

TURKMENISTAN



Oliver McCoy (1997–99) is set to receive the Outstanding Alumni Award from his alma mater, Pacific University, this October. Recognized for his lifelong commitment to international service and humanitarianism, McCoy has facilitated reconciliation between divergent ethnic communities and supervised the implementation of an international peace plan. Additionally, McCoy guided protection programming for 3,000 individuals from the Middle East during his time with the United Nations Refugee Agency. Inspired by his service with the U.S. Peace Corps in Turkmenistan, McCoy transitioned to a career with the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, focusing on post-conflict development and stability. Over the years, he has navigated complex environments across Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and East Africa, advocating for human rights and fostering peace among diverse communities. Currently serving as the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) chief of party with the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) in Serbia, McCoy continues his dedication to advancing media independence and fostering international peace initiatives. [Read more](#).

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Contact Us

20 F St. NW
7th Fl.
Washington D.C. 20001
USA

(202) 293-7728

npcap@peacecorpsconnect.org

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