Mike Defiglia’s trip to Moldova, Turkey, Hungary and Morocco

Interview conducted by Sociology faculty, Dr. Diane Rodgers

Summary:
Alumni, NIU Sociology major and AKD member, Class of 2007
As a Peace Corps volunteer, Mike was assigned to the country of Moldova beginning in July 2008. His specific role was as a Health in Schools and Community (HESC) volunteer in the small village of Grozeti at a K-12 school. While in Moldova, Mike had an opportunity to travel to Turkey, Hungary and Morocco. He is now currently teaching English to grade school children in South Korea with his fiancé, another Peace Corps volunteer, whom Mike met during his time in Moldova.

Interview:

DR: When did you apply to the Peace Corps?
MD: I applied to the Peace Corps during my senior year at NIU. I then put my application on hold and worked a few odd jobs around Chicago for a year after I graduated from NIU. I re-activated my Peace Corps application in early 2008, I was interviewed by Peace Corps in March, accepted in May, and I left the U.S. to begin my Peace Corps service in Moldova in July of 2008.

DR: What motivated you to apply to the Peace Corps?
MD: I joined the Peace Corps for various reasons. After leaving the U.S. for the first time to backpack Europe in 2005, my eyes were opened to other cultures and the adventure and education that is travelling. I yearned to go overseas again, but wanted it to be in a working or studying capacity rather than just a vacation. Also, there has always been a part of me that wanted to help other people and I saw Peace Corps as a structured way to help others and volunteer for the greater good. Finally, I was inspired by everything I had learned and discussed as a sociology student, talking about societal norms and values, cultural differences, in groups and out groups, I wanted to more fully understand these differences. Being a white middle class male in America, it’s one thing to talk about social classes, minorities and majorities, but I wanted to more fully understand these concepts and in joining the peace corps, I shed all of the social constructs I was born into, I became an outsider, I voluntarily descended in social class and although I shared the same skin color as those I lived and worked amongst in Moldova, I was distinctly an outsider.

DR: Can you explain the process of applying to the Peace Corps?
MD: Applying to Peace Corps consisted of 3 steps. 1) Written questionnaire of about 17 pages and 2 personal essays as well as letters of recommendation (similar to a college application). 2) In person interview at the Peace Corps regional office in downtown Chicago. 3) Formal invitation by Peace Corps, followed by a more detailed description of service, exact location, and exact job. The applicant then has 10 days to officially accept or reject the invitation. Upon acceptance, the volunteer generally has one or two months before service begins overseas.

When applying, the applicant has a choice of location only in a broad geographical region. Africa, Eastern Europe, Middle East, Central Asia, SE Asia and Pacific islands, South America, or Central America. After your interview with the recruiter you are placed in a specific country depending on your
skills and what programs are currently active in the region of your choice. You do not know specifically where you will go or what job you will be doing until Peace Corps issues its official invitation, and then you have only 10 days to decide if you will accept. You can deny the initial invitation if you are unsatisfied with the job offer, but you may have to wait 6 months to a year before receiving another invitation.

**DR: What job did you have and what work did you accomplish while in the Peace Corps?**
MD: While in Peace Corps I was a Health in Schools and Community (HESC) volunteer. I worked in the local/only school in my village. My village, Grozesti, had about 2,000 people and the school I worked in was K-12 with about 400 students. I taught grades 5-11. I taught about various physical health topics including; basic nutrition, food sanitation, how illnesses spread, the human immune system, drugs and alcohol, STD’s and safe sex. I also taught about emotional health topics including; self esteem, setting and achieving goals, stress, happiness, and friendship. I also threw in some Sociology topics for 10th and 11th graders, including; exploring gender roles, and analyzing and comparing social norms.

**DR: Please share your most significant moment(s).**
MD: -Graduating from being a Peace Corps “trainee” to an official “volunteer” after only 3 months in Moldova and being able to speak Romanian nearly fluently. (Having no previous knowledge whatsoever about the Romanian language)

-Teaching Moldovan school children about Halloween. Along with the help of the high school students, we threw a Halloween fundraising party and had an attendance of nearly 300 people. It was an enormous success and it was great to see the smiles on the kid’s faces as they made costumes, carved pumpkins, and played games. A tradition they had never before experienced.

-Watching as my students learned about nutrition and food sanitation and hearing them discuss how it applied to their lives and how they taught their parents about these basic things really made me feel useful.

-Making wine and being involved in all steps of the process from tending to the vines and harvesting the grapes, to pressing the juice and distilling spirits from the remnants. It felt great to be included in a tradition that the local people had been doing for nearly a thousand years.

-Successfully convincing the mayor of my village not to give her personal information and bank account number to one of those spam e-mails. (many Moldovans are just getting internet access for the first time in their lives and are very naïve about many of the common internet scams that Americans instantly recognize as fraud.)

**DR: Were you able to explore surrounding countries?**
MD: Yes, Peace Corps volunteers are allotted a generous number of vacation days, about 2 months worth over the course of 2 years. During my time serving in Moldova I was able to travel to Turkey, Hungary, and Morocco. Since I worked in the school system I was able to take vacations during school holidays and school vacation periods. Other volunteers who did not work in schools or other 9 to 5 organizations were able to take vacations more liberally, pretty much whenever they wanted.

My first vacation was to Turkey with two of my good friends that I had made during the Peace Corps training program. It was Christmas 2008 and I had been living in Moldova for about 6 months. I was surprised at how much reverse-culture shock I experienced when arriving in the enormous, clean and modern city of Istanbul. I had become accustomed to living in the, for lack of a better word, “harsh”
conditions of Moldova, without running water or indoor toilets. Moldovan culture can be very ethnocentric, same food, same music, same wine. Istanbul was so diverse and modern, and I instantly felt so relieved and happy, but at the same time I felt bad in a way I never had before for the permanent residents of Moldova. My experience in Turkey foreshadowed how awkward and angry I felt while standing at the deli in the local Dominick’s in Chicago when I got back to America after returning from Peace Corps.

I love a good sandwich and in the local deli in small town Moldova there is one kind of turkey, one kind of ham and one kind of cheese. While in Moldova, a mediocre sandwich or a can of sardines, maybe a yogurt were often the closest thing to comfort foods I had access to and I ate these regularly. While back at the Dominick’s in Chicago on my first day home, I asked for turkey, and the clerk asked me what kind; honey, smoked, baked, low-fat, I said smoked, and she then asked me what brand, I noticed that there were four brands of just the smoked turkey and I nearly had a meltdown. Do people really need that many choices of turkey breast?

Morocco was magical, something completely different than anywhere I had been before, like another planet, yet warm and inviting. Friendly people, enchanting architecture and extremely cheap, delicious cuisine.

DR: Tell us about the relationships you formed with those you worked with and with other Peace Corps volunteers.

MD: The relationships I formed in the Peace Corps were deep and long lasting. Being completely displaced from everything and everyone you have ever known creates an instant bond with the other volunteers that you are in training with. Also Peace Corps draws together like minded and open minded people. People who are interested in other cultures and open to new ideas. Most importantly, Peace Corps draws together kind hearted people who are interested in helping others.

During the first 3 months of Peace Corps service your full time job is intense language and cultural training in the country you are serving. You are usually training with a small group of 6 or 7 people, everyday for 6-8 hours a day, 6 days a week. These smaller groups are part of a larger 30-40 group which constitutes your Peace Corps “class.” Your peers during this period become everything to you, your friends, counselors, your family. You become dependent on them, and they on you. Over the course of 14 months I developed relationships that are just as important to me as my lifelong friends back from my local school and neighborhood in Chicago.

Also, I met my fiancé in the Peace Corps- Valerie Premore, from Portland Oregon. We began dating about 6 months into my service and after Peace Corps we moved to South Korea together to teach English. Less than a year after being in Korea, we became engaged and are planning on getting married shortly after we return to America. My case is not uncommon either, of the 70 or so volunteers I was in Peace Corps Moldova with, I can think of 4 that have gotten married or engaged to other volunteers and another few who married Moldovan nationals.

DR: How do you feel having a sociology background enhanced your Peace Corps experience?

MD: Being a Sociology major definitely enhanced my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer. During my time in University, many of the concepts discussed in Sociology classes seemed like only abstract theories and ideas. I could relate to certain issues which were pertinent to my life, but others remained as only a conception of thought. After joining the Peace Corps and moving overseas, I felt completely removed from all the social classes and ideological principals which governed my reality as middle class, Christian, American. Many things which once made me part of the in-group in American society, now
clearly made me an outsider in Moldovan society. It became easier to break down different parts of my identity and compare and contrast them with the social norms and social class of the new society I had been cast into. Living in a post soviet society, things like social mobility and class conflict came to the forefront. The gender roles, religious beliefs, social order and ideologies I had been accustomed to had now flipped on their head. I was now the outsider looking in, and my background as a sociology major gave me the ability to identify some of the specific differences; I had the ability to analyze and categorize rather than just be overwhelmed by a giant sea of culture shock. The social structure of my new society became a bit of a puzzle for me to figure out, and in doing this, it gave me greater insight into the construction of the social puzzle which made up my own background.

My Peace Corps experience brought to light many of the concepts I learned in the Sociology classroom. Living in a post Communist society I was able to more fully understand many of the class conflict theories. I had with me the general understanding of the theories of Durkheim, Weber, or Marx and it was as if I was able to shake my head and nod “ah yes” every time I recognized some facet of these theories playing out in real life in each new culture that I encountered.

**DR: Would you recommend international experiences (Peace Corps, Study Abroad, general travel) to other sociology students?**

MD: Short answer: Hell Yes! As a matter of fact I would recommend international experiences to anyone and everyone. You are guaranteed to learn so much more about yourself, than you ever thought possible, no matter what your age. You will explore sides of your personality and bring out emotions that have become dormant and stale in the everyday, routine environment you have become accustomed to. You will begin to see the world in new ways and I would even say that depending on how long you are overseas you eventually are able to look back on your old life, your old culture, and your old norms, as an outsider looking in. When this happens, you begin to see a much clearer and more realistic picture of your personal reality than you ever could when you were still inside the bubble looking out.

**DR: What have you been doing since your Peace Corps experience?**

MD: Since Peace Corps I have been working as an English teacher in South Korea. I teach 3rd through 6th grade children in the public school system in the city of Ulsan. I moved here with my girlfriend whom I met in Peace Corps Moldova. We have been engaged since March 2010. During our time working in South Korea we have also traveled to the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. We plan to finish our contracts this year and return to America at the end of August. Our dream is to continue our education in graduate school and eventually open our own international hotel.