

Canada needs Peace Corps

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What does it mean to serve your country abroad?

For youth in North America, it often means donning a uniform and heading to a war zone. Thousands of young Canadians have followed this noble path and worn the Maple Leaf with pride from Afghanistan

to Haiti as peacekeepers.

But for those who want to serve without a gun strapped to their backs, overseas service can mean something different.

For Dianna English, a 24-year-old from Connecticut, it meant spending two years as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in central Tanzania. Working with the local government, she ran HIV/AIDS prevention workshops for teachers, school inspectors and other members of the community.

In a country where AIDS is still a taboo subject for many, despite the fact more than 1.5 million residents are HIV positive, English's job was no small task.

But she says her stint in Tanzania was one of the best experiences of her life. Living among the locals, cooking traditional meals and learning about the language and culture, English quickly had a home away from home.

And it was there that she learned valuable insights about herself. Like so many university and college students, English wasn't sure what direction to take after graduation. Going abroad helped her gain confidence, realize her personal strengths and weaknesses and guide her along the path to a career in international development.



American teachers pose for a photo after their arrival at Phnom Penh international airport February 2, 2007.

"Everyone learns, everyone contributes, and we all, Tanzanians and Americans, come away with a more developed view of the world," she says.

English keenly recommends the Peace Corps to anyone looking for purpose after they graduate. But young Canadians looking for a similar experience may be out of luck. That's because this country doesn't have its own Peace Corps.

In our work with youth, we often meet new graduates who are interested in practising their skills, experiencing the world and serving others. They aren't looking for money; they are looking for meaning – what Dianna English found in Tanzania.

But with few outlets for these talents and ambitions, many go back to school by default or find a job that leaves them unfulfilled.

According to the Canadian Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating, many young people are eager to volunteer because they want to make a difference. Most of them – nearly 90 per cent – said they are most likely to give their time when someone asks them to.

That's what the U.S. Peace Corps does. Established in 1961 by then president John F. Kennedy, the corps beckons to youth wishing to volunteer in the name of world peace and Third World development. Since then, more than 187,000 Americans have done just that.

The program involves two years' service overseas in fields ranging from environmental protection to information technology. Living and working in local communities allows the recruits to learn new languages and cultures while gaining international work experience.

The corps is open to any U.S. citizen older than 18. Health and dental benefits, living expenses and in some cases, student loan deferments are offered to enhance the program's appeal to new graduates.

Their Peace Corps ties don't have to end when they return home. Alumni can choose among numerous organizations across the U.S. to explore networking and job opportunities, or take part in outreach programs in their communities.

So for most, joining the Peace Corps is a stepping stone to a life of service to others.

That's the kind of experience that many young Canadians are looking for.

In 2004 former prime minister Paul Martin introduced the Canada Corps, which was expected to follow the American pattern. Despite early enthusiasm for the program, which Martin said would "fully harness the idealism of young Canadians," it has since been absorbed by the Office for Democratic Governance set by the Canadian International Development Agency and little has come of it.

There are some non-governmental programs, such as Canadian University Students Overseas. But without the funding and public profile of the U.S. Peace Corps – which is an independent government agency – they do not have the same level of success.

If Canada is going to remain at the forefront of international development and co-operation, it needs a bold and comprehensive vision for youth willing to give back. Not only would this strengthen our reputation abroad, it would foster future generations of global leaders.

Leaders like Dianna English, who has since landed an internship at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. Looking back at her time in Tanzania, she has no doubt of its positive impact on her and says it will continue to motivate her in the future.

"As development workers, we are inspired through our time with the Peace Corps to look life in the eye, dig in our heels, and give all our love back again."

Craig and **Marc Kielburger** are founders of Free the Children and co-authors of *Me to We*.