

# Peace Corps celebrates 60 years of service, and JFK still looms large

By [Lucas Phillips](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated February 28, 2021



Wakefield married couple Liz Freeman and Joe Spear both volunteered in the early days of the Peace Corps and are still involved. Freeman was in Group 24 in The Philippines. Spear was in Group 42 in India

—PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

“How many of you who are going to be doctors, are willing to spend your days in Ghana?” then-presidential candidate John F. Kennedy asked a group of college students during an October 1960 campaign speech. “I think Americans are willing to contribute. But the effort must be far greater than we have ever made in the past.”

Months later — 60 years ago on Monday — President Kennedy signed an executive order creating the Peace Corps, and while the program has been halted by the pandemic, the organization and past volunteers say Kennedy’s charge to engage the world is as important as ever.

“We’re at a moment in time where the mission of the Peace Corps has never been more critical,” said former US representative Joseph P. Kennedy III, Kennedy’s grandnephew and past Peace Corps volunteer. “In the months and years ahead, Peace Corps volunteers will undertake the difficult task of helping to navigate a post-pandemic world, rebuild American’s standing abroad, and tackle some of the globe’s most collective, consequential challenges,” he said in a statement through a spokeswoman.

The director of the Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum also marked the anniversary, although due to the pandemic no in-person events at the library are planned.

Kennedy “sought to promote peace and friendship between Americans and people of other nations and cultures. He saw us not just as citizens of the United States, but as citizens of the world,” director Alan Price said in a statement.

“Today we celebrate the 60th anniversary of that mission and are proud that more than 240,000 Americans have served as volunteers in 142 countries,” he said.

Massachusetts, where Kennedy was born, has been a part of that legacy, and the state had 241 volunteers abroad with the corps when it evacuated its teams from sites around the world a year ago, according to the organization. In 2019, the state ranked 10th overall in the number of volunteers.

“I was a Kennedy kid,” said Liz Freeman, a 73-year-old from Wakefield who joined the Peace Corps when it was still new in 1968. “We heard Kennedy talk about the beginning of the Peace Corps, and we thought that this was an important thing.”

Freeman and other early members of the corps said Kennedy’s call to action deeply imprinted their lives and has resonated for all these years.

Virginia Swain, 77, of Worcester, was part of the fourth group to travel to Liberia in 1964, inspired to join out of grief after Kennedy’s death.

“It changed my life,” she said of the corps in a phone interview. “It was amazing. It was so powerful.”

Neil Ross, 80, of Kingston, R.I., was among the first corps members from New England, having been the first volunteer from the program to go to the Dominican Republic in 1962.

At 21 and armed with only a few months of textbook Spanish, he was suddenly confronted with what it meant to represent the country abroad when Kennedy was assassinated.

“They called us ‘hijos de Kennedy,’ sons of Kennedy,” he remembered in a phone interview. After the news of the president’s assassination was broadcast on the radio, a dozen delegations from Dominican political parties came to Ross’s house to pay respects and he was asked to accompany a military official to lead a mourning parade, he said.

“I had to march at the front of the parade because I represented his family,” Ross said, choking up in a phone interview. “I still get emotional talking about it.”

And even for younger volunteers, Kennedy’s inspiration still looms large.

Michael Black, who volunteered with the corps in Albania from 2017 to 2019, walks past Kennedy’s birthplace in Brookline on the way to the grocery store and said he often thinks of the president.

“This is not something that anybody was out there doing” when Kennedy started the program, said Black, who works as a recruiter for the Peace Corps.

“That sort of innovation for something positive, something altruistic — that’s not something you see very often. And that’s incredible, and I think we could use more of that in our world,” Black said.

Swain said that as much as the program has done important work abroad, engaging with communities, building infrastructure, and offering resources, the legacy may be greatest within the United States.

Swain, Freeman, and Ross said they, like so many volunteers, became committed to a lifetime of service after their time in the corps, developing relationships that have endured for decades.

“Think of all the returned Peace Corps volunteers that have gone through for 60 years,” Swain said. “Global citizenship [has become] part of our culture. . . . If we look at that, there’s that much more hope to heal the divides in this country.”

Although the program has evolved over time and the commitment of its volunteers has made it what it is, they say, Kennedy still looms large.

Freeman recounted listening to the moon landing — one of the president’s other most enduring initiatives — on a transistor radio, staring up at the bright moon from the Filipino village where she was volunteering. She was indignant.

She thought, “How’d they get up there and we’re here using a Coleman lantern and battery radios because there’s no electricity?”

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[https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/03/01/metro/peace-corps-celebrates-60-years-service-jfk-still-looms-large/?fbclid=IwAR0hLBk-Ubl5VWQjwkgdoZ0Lz2E8K\\_OrXyApxGdvyscBldHS0nTnWUBdZpY](https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/03/01/metro/peace-corps-celebrates-60-years-service-jfk-still-looms-large/?fbclid=IwAR0hLBk-Ubl5VWQjwkgdoZ0Lz2E8K_OrXyApxGdvyscBldHS0nTnWUBdZpY)