The countdown has begun! Graduation at Iowa State will be here very soon. It's a time of joy and celebration for many and a time of apprehension for others. But what's to fear outside the walls of Iowa State? Nothing—if you have a plan.

Have you ever considered what it would be like to live and work in another country? How about speaking another language on a daily basis? Well, consider this! The United States Peace Corps has given more than 140,000 Americans the opportunity to serve humankind in more than 100 countries around the world since 1961.

Currently, 6,500 volunteers are working in programs of agriculture, environmental and forestry, health, urban development, education, business and others. As an Iowa State graduate with a degree in any of these programs, or the equivalent of practical experience, you may qualify as the next Peace Corps volunteer from Iowa State.

Think of it. There are volunteers teaching English in Russia and Ukraine, conservation volunteers working in the rain forests of Guatemala and Costa Rica. Forestry volunteers are planting trees in many parts of the African continent, and there are volunteers working in small business development projects in the Far East. The old saying goes, "It's the toughest job you'll ever love!" I can personally attest to that.

Three weeks after my graduation at Dickinson State College in 1985, I was headed for Guatemala. My group consisted of nurses, soil conservationists, 4-H youth workers, appropriate technologists and foresters. There were 46 people in all, and we endured 14 weeks of intensive training in Spanish, cultural and technical content. I didn't know any Spanish before I left North Dakota, but I learned enough to live and work in a remote mountain village for two years.

My work consisted of introducing soil conservation practices to traditional methods of corn and black bean production. Part of that work included intercropping corn fields with orange, lemon, apple, avocado and peach trees. The plan was to prevent soil erosion in future years and each family would be able to harvest and sell the fruit in local markets. I also had the opportunity to work with many school groups.

The students kept me busy with vegetable gardening and raising rabbits and chickens. Also, there were plenty of laughs when we tried to make mango jelly, or when I tried to make tortillas for the first time. We even replaced the school roof in one village and built over 100 outhouses in another.

My Peace Corps experience was much more than fruit trees and chickens. I also had the opportunity to visit Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Belize and Mexico. Words cannot begin to describe the feeling you have when climbing the Mayan ruins of Tikal, Guatemala. Nor can they do justice to the experience of trekking through rain forests in Costa Rica, the central market of Managua or the trepidation of camping in the Jaguar Preserve in Belize.

My country director said at the start of my experience, "You'll receive more than you could ever give in two years." Thinking back, I remember the difficulty and eventual joy from learning Spanish. I also recall the generosity of the people I worked with in the fields, gardens and schools. There may not be a formal method of measuring how much I was able to "teach" or learn, but that country director was right.

So what do you receive? Well, other than acquiring a new language, an appreciation of another culture and extensive travel, many student loans can be deferred for the duration of your assignment. While you're working overseas, you'll receive a monthly stipend that covers your cost of living. Also, you receive $200 for every month of training or working as a volunteer.

That totals up to more than $5,000 for a two-year commitment! Upon returning, there is the Peace Corps Fellows program, which grants fellowships for graduate education and you have one year of noncompetitive eligibility, which means you have preferential status when applying for federal jobs. This is one international experience that pays you!

If you're interested, start the application process now. My office is located in the Study Abroad Center, 5 Hamilton Hall. We have several Peace Corps books and videos in our library. There are also many students on the Iowa State campus who have served in the Peace Corps. I guarantee each one of them will have a different story. Stop by and visit or give me a call at 294-9339. Peace.

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