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Kathleen Mossman Vitale interviews and films a woman in Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala, for a documentary about the declining use of the headdress among Tz'utujil-speaking Maya.

## Totally PC

### Peace Corps experience shaped their entire lives

The Peace Corps celebrated 50 years of service earlier this month. Since President John F. Kennedy signed the executive order creating the Peace Corps on March 1, 1961, more than 200,000 mostly young Americans have gone off as Peace Corps volunteers to live in rural, poor cities and villages in 139 countries on every continent but Antarctica. They have undertaken training to work in a variety of programs, from teaching English to building wells to beekeeping. In 2011, the Peace Corps has 8,675 volunteers serving in 77 countries.

— Editor

By Kathleen Mossman Vitale

**W**e were recently married in 1963 when we applied for the Peace Corps.

I had graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, and worked at the university. Paul had finished his master's there and worked for the San Francisco Planning Department.

Once accepted, we flew to New York City to be sworn in by Sargent Shriver on Nov. 22, 1963, but the ceremony was abruptly canceled because of President Kennedy's assassination. We were sent to Puerto Rico for Outward Bound training (rock climbing, rappelling, drown-proofing with hands and feet tied) and to learn the art of cooking and eating snails and taught endless Spanish.

Classes in history, culture,



In 1965, Paul and Kathleen Vitale pose with Peace Corps volunteer Robert Agro (right) alongside a snakeskin. Agro returned with after a trip to the Amazon. Behind them is a housing project in Quito, Ecuador.

Photos courtesy of Kathleen Mossman Vitale

coastal city of Guayaquil. We worked on recreation and health programs and taught English. In addition, I taught at the Fine Arts School and Paul worked with the city's planning office. We then transferred to Quito, in the mountains, where we lived and worked in a self-help housing project, assisting residents to petition their government for a school, clinic, paved streets and street lighting. I also helped artists export their work and wrote copious articles home on life in the Peace Corps.

The Peace Corps was young then. Volunteers

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more Spanish and athletic challenges followed at the University of Denver.

We were also asked to kill, gut, cook and eat a chicken in front of a psychologist.

Training finished with two weeks of community development work in San Antonio, Texas.

Our first assignment in Ecuador was in the steamy

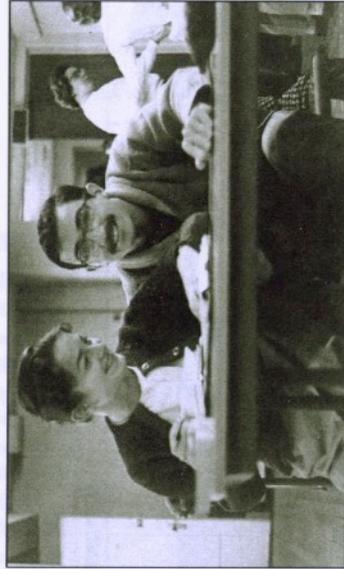


Kathleen and Paul during a visit to South Dakota in 2010.

# PC ...

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 made do and found meaningful activities with minimal direction. While eating snails and killing chickens were not required, finding your own niche definitely was. We became proficient in Spanish and loved the culture, food and people. As Americans, we were warmly received by almost everyone. Many homes in our project had only two framed pictures: Pope John Paul and John F. Kennedy.

After the Peace Corps, Paul became a Foreign Service officer and we were sent back to Ecuador. While Paul was off working on campesino leadership or urban development programs, I was occupied with family matters. We adopted two children and birthed one, all in Quito. I also taught school and helped 15 families make their way through the adoption process. During subsequent years, we revisited the



Paul and Kathleen Vitale attend Peace Corps training in 1964 in Denver (right). The Vitales with their three children in 1974 (far left) during an assignment in Washington, D.C.

Photos courtesy of Kathleen Mossman Vitale

housing project where we had been Peace Corps volunteers and found in place all the amenities the residents had wanted.

We also lived in Brazil and Peru between stints in Washington, D.C. I developed a career in photography and journalism, then in publications. The kids learned English, Spanish and Portuguese, graduated from

universities and moved on. In the mid-1990s, we retired to the West Coast. Paul became adjunct professor at the University of Oregon. I picked up a camcorder to make docent-training tapes for a museum and produced art-related documentaries.

In 2000, we returned to Vallejo, where I was born, to care for my mother at the end of her life. She had been a hand-weaving expert and col-

lector, and left more than 600 textiles, which we donated to the Hearst Museum of Anthropology at Cal. Museum contacts led to our establishing an educational nonprofit called Endangered Threads Documentaries (ETD), dedicated to documenting indigenous art forms.

We are now working on our fifth documentary on Maya weaving. ETD documentaries are used in museums and educational institutions across the

United States, as well as in Guatemala.

Peace Corps gave us the opportunity to know another culture in-depth, understand the plight of indigenous people, see U.S. foreign policy from the eyes of others and try new things.

It helped define our marriage, family, careers and retirement.

Applying for the Peace Corps was the best decision ever.