By its own admission, Belize needed help. Polluted rivers, damaged ecosystem, lessons gone untaught. The country asked for assistance. It arrived in jeans and a bandanna head-wrap.

“Hey, that’s what you look like when you are in the Peace Corps,” said Pamela Newton ‘00. She flipped through pictures on her computer, remembering her time as an environmental volunteer.

“This photo makes me smile,” she said. On the screen was an image of Newton and another 2002-04 Peace Corps volunteer named Jane. Jane is from Austin, Newton said, a graduate of the University of Texas. “See, we can get along,” she joked.

In the photo, the two are standing on the bank of the Macal River, wearing shorts and T-shirts, with mud-smeared legs and ponytails threaded through baseball caps.

“This was during a river cleanup we did with residents of Jane’s village,” she said. “We paddled our way down the river in canoes picking up lots of disgusting trash, which we then hauled to the dump.”
Water testing, quality demos, working with children—Newton said her two-year service included much of everything. But she originally came to Belize’s forested capital, Belmopan, to teach. She used her degree in wildlife and fisheries science to educate locals on how to write grant proposals requesting money for environmental projects.

She’s home now, working as an education specialist for M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, but the grant-writing program continues. The locals she taught now teach others. “That’s the goal of the Peace Corps,” she said. “Hopefully, someday, they won’t need volunteers.”

But now they do need volunteers, and when she was one of them, Newton was deeply involved. She shared in honored customs, connected with locals, stretched herself to the limit and learned more than she believed possible.

“The Peace Corps was really the best decision I could have made,” Newton said. “I can say that, honestly, it was the greatest two years of my life so far.”

“It’s seeing the world from another perspective, that’s really what made it unique—that feeling of making a difference.”

Hers is the type of experience Texas A&M now plans to offer as a degree plan. In July, the Peace Corps approved the university’s application to offer the Master’s International program—a master’s degree earned through service in the Peace Corps. Starting this fall, select students will pack their bags in the joint goal of education and service.

Eileen Conoboy, director of university programs for the Peace Corps, said Texas A&M is one of 55 universities to have a Masters International partnership. Organized through the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, the program is administered by the Norman Borlaug Institute for International Agriculture. It offers degrees in natural resources development, sciences, agriculture, education, fisheries sciences and wildlife sciences.

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Texas A&M was chosen for the distinction because of its academic reputation and the Borlaug Institute, Conoboy said.

But during her first visit to campus in October, her understanding of Aggie service went deeper. She could see the “camaraderie and goodwill that seemed to pervade the campus.” She said she could hear it, and that the A&M campus is “where the common good is a required course.” And she believed it. “What a testament to your students and what a great fit for the Peace Corps,” she said. “We’re confident that Aggies in the Master’s International program will make wonderful contributions overseas.”

The master’s program works much like any other graduate degree, said A&M’s program coordinator, Cathryn Clement. Students apply to both the Peace Corps and graduate school, submit an essay and list of international experience. If accepted, they begin the program. Students complete 24 credit hours at the university followed by 27 months of overseas service in the Peace Corps.

Where students are sent depends on a list of variables, but Newton said a few things are certain: “You empower them to take action and you’re empowered to take action,” she said.

And you bring home your own story. 🌍

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