You pack up all your stuff; tie up all the loose ends. You’re about to leave your life behind for at least two years. As a Peace Corps volunteer, you’ll live modestly in a foreign land, learn a completely new language, and give your time to a community that has asked for your services. As the Peace Corps often says, it’s the toughest job you’ll ever love.

But when you’re a deaf or hard of hearing Peace Corps volunteer, you face an experience unique to a select few: the challenge of learning both the local spoken and signed languages; doubt when you show you’re able to read and write; disbelief that you’re deaf because you possess a college degree; befuddlement when you arrive in a place unaccustomed to the idea that deaf people can teach, work, and live alongside hearing people.

It’s very much an experience to be remembered and shared, say some of the 61 Deaf Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs). And now, thanks to the Gallaudet University Museum, the public can get a glimpse into that experience by viewing artifacts and images collected from the Deaf RPCVs.

On October 25, the Gallaudet University Museum opened an exhibition, “Making a Difference: Deaf Peace Corps Volunteers,” which highlights the work of deaf RPCVs, many of them Gallaudet alumni. The exhibition coincided with the Peace Corps’ 50th anniversary celebration.

In all, 34 deaf volunteers who have served since 1967 contributed photographs, artifacts, stories, historic footage, and documents related to their time in the Peace Corps. The exhibit can be viewed in the Weyerhaeuser Family Gallery and Exhibition Hall of the I. King Jordan Student Academic Center through 2013.

“What started as a plan to display a few photos to recognize the service of Deaf Peace Corps Volunteers exploded into a much larger exhibition concept inspired by the compelling responses of deaf people who served in the Peace Corps,” said Norma Morán, senior advisor to the museum exhibition and a deaf RPCV who served in Kenya from 2000 to 2003. The new archival collection comprises more than 450 photographs and filmed interviews.

“The overwhelming response from deaf volunteers demonstrates how passionate this group is about Peace Corps service,” she explained.

The exhibit opening also presented a unique opportunity for 26 of the deaf RPCVs to meet each other—the first such gathering in the Peace Corps’ 50-year existence and in the 45 years since deaf people began serving. Gallaudet President T. Alan Hurwitz and First Lady Vicki Hurwitz hosted the RPCVs for a dinner at House One; other events during the week of the exhibit opening included a panel discussion and several class visits.

“It was as if we were long-lost friends,” said Erikson Young, ’03, who served in Kenya from 2005 to 2007, of the extraordinary gathering. “It felt like unearthing buried treasure. Compared to the number of hearing Peace Corps volunteers, the number of deaf volunteers is tiny, so getting to meet other people who had similar experiences was wonderful.” Overall, more than 200,000 people have volunteered through the Peace Corps.

Following the opening and reception, there was a “living exhibit” performance, directed by Tabitha Jacques, ’06, in the Black Box Theater. Returned volunteers shared stories of their individual Peace Corps journeys under spotlights in a live theatrical performance. The exhibit opening also fell on the Tuesday immediately following Homecoming weekend. Before the exhibit opened, the RPCVs and Gallaudet alumni were treated to a preview of the exhibition, where they were able to view the artifacts and displays before it was open to the public.


“In 1976, just before leaving the Philippines to go back home, I turned to Pauline [Spanbauer, ’74, a fellow volunteer] and said, ‘You know, we’ve made history. There will be more deaf volunteers,’” Cartwright recalled. “Now, seeing that exhibit and the stories of all the deaf people who have served since us, Pauline actually turned to me again and asked me if I remembered saying that all those years ago. I did. And I was looking at those pictures and looking around at all those other volunteers who’d gone since our time … I couldn’t help it, I teared up. I was emotional after thinking about how many lives have been touched, how many seeds we’ve planted, and how things have grown in so many ways.”

“Deaf volunteers in the early years of Peace Corps were pioneers,” said Peace Corps Director Aaron S. Williams at the exhibit opening. “Since then, many more have continued their legacy of service. Deaf volunteers have strengthened communities by building greenhouses and digging wells, promoting HIV awareness, and advocating for the rights of local deaf communities.”

In 1974, Cartwright and Spanbauer were among the first group of Deaf Peace Corps Volunteers in the Philippines.