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Peace Corps throws a party

Three local veterans celebrate anniversary and each other

By ELLISON G. WEIST Issue date: Tue, Feb 28, 2006
The Tribune

This year marks a milestone for a patriotic challenge and a beloved presidential quote.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy summoned America's youth to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

The Peace Corps was born.

Three decades later, three women took up the summons and devoted two years to serving in Guatemala. Sunday in Portland, they'll participate in a regional celebration to mark the 45th anniversary of the founding of the Corps.

In private, for the last 15 years, the women — all Portland residents — have honored what they feel has had a huge impact on their lives: the solid and lasting friendships they have formed.

As Ellen Urbani Hildebrand puts it, "At this point in my life, the most lingering impact (of my years in the Peace Corps) is the friends."

Growing up in a sheltered, tight-knit family from Philadelphia, Hildebrand moved to Virginia at age 12 and later attended a large Southern university. When she joined the Peace Corps in 1991 and arrived in Guatemala at age 22, "I was totally unprepared for some of the things I saw."

These things, along with the experiences of several of the indigenous women Hildebrand met during her two years, are described in her new memoir, "When I Was Elena." Challenged to teach local children to read and write in one of the country's poorest villages, "Elena" came away with a desire to describe her experiences.

Some of them were "totally different" from what her friend, Erin Marquiss, encountered. Says Marquiss: "I've read most of Ellen's book, and my reaction was 'What country were you in?'"

Marquiss, a native of Portland, joined the Peace Corps a year before Hildebrand, the result of a lifelong fascination. "My best friend's parents were in the Peace Corps, in Iran in the early '60s. Plus my parents instilled a love of traveling."

While Hildebrand fought off bandits, intestinal parasites and mountain guerillas, Marquiss served in a fairly modern town of 25,000. Thanks to the fact that she had married her college sweetheart ("It was the only way they'd let us join up together ... not a terrific reason to get married."), Marquiss found she was protected from most



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of the sexual advances other women had to deal with.

“I felt like I had a bubble around me in that regard,” she says.

It also helped that she was almost fluent in Spanish when she arrived in Guatemala.

Shawn Gentes, on the other hand, barely spoke a word of the language: “I couldn’t even ask what time it was.” She and Marquiss were in the same Peace Corps “class,” but unlike her urbane friend, Gentes had grown up in a town of 400 in Oklahoma.

Her reason for joining up?

“It was an adventure. Certainly there was something of the altruistic in my motives, but I was 21 years old.”

Gentes was thrust into life in a mountainous village of 1,000, where she was “harassed every day of my life.” But she would do it again. “Just the friendships alone made a huge impact on me.”

During training periods, the three women met and became acquainted. Intense friendships among volunteers is a common occurrence, as one woman notes in Hildebrand’s memoir: “Clearly, that doesn’t mean everyone liked each other unconditionally ... but I am 100 percent certain that, if necessary, any one of us would have dropped everything at a moment’s notice to come to the assistance of even the ones we cared for the least.”

Marquiss believes she understands why serving in the Corps produced such a deep camaraderie. “You’re stripped down of all these things than insulate you here. ... It kind of equalizes you.”

Hildebrand agrees. “You’re all in the same boat. There’s a loyalty, a sense of commitment.”

After her service, Marquiss moved back to Portland. Gentes moved to Portland in 1995 after graduate school. A year before, Hildebrand and her husband moved to Oregon so she could work on an advanced degree in art therapy.

Hildebrand struggled to finish her book while raising two small children. But she could count on her friends. Seated with Gentes and Marquiss, she laughs as she gestures to them.

“When the crunch is on, who are you going to call? When things got hairy, I just called Shawn and said, ‘I need help.’ ”

All three women are busy: Marquiss has a baby girl and is on maternity leave from the Oregon City School District; Gentes is employed by Freightliner; and Hildebrand, an art therapist at Good Samaritan Hospital, works with children whose parents have cancer. But they’ll find the time Sunday to join other volunteers and honor the program that brought them together.

Readings, meetings

Peace Corps open house

When: 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday, March 5

Where: Portland State University, Smith Memorial Student Union Multicultural Center, 1825 S.W. Broadway; for information contact Maria Lee, 1-206-239-6603

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Ellen Urbani Hildebrand
When: 7:30 p.m. Monday, March 6
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When: 7 p.m. Tuesday, March 7
Where: Broadway Books, 1714 N.E. Broadway, 503-284-1726

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