

THE STORY BEYOND CAMPUS

BY MICHAEL WOOLSEY

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In stretching herself to the limits, Laura Brinkoetter, '00, finds personal

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I just knew that it was something I had to do, and if I didn't, I'd never forgive myself," says Laura Brinkoetter, '00, of her Peace Corps service. Currently serving north of Dhaka, Bangladesh, as an English teacher, Brinkoetter's journey with the Peace Corps began when she was a UW-River Falls student. She recalls hearing the recollections of an acquaintance who had served in Mali, Africa. But time would pass before she would heed the call.

Graduating with a degree in journalism, she first worked as a general assignment reporter for a daily newspaper in Stillwater. Unfulfilled, she volunteered in 2001 as the press secretary for St. Paul mayoral candidate Bob Kessler. "She did an incredible job. She was so enthusiastic and dedicated," Kessler gratefully remembers. "She may have received a free cup of coffee," says Kessler of Brinkoetter's compensation. She spent more than 20 hours per week on the campaign (which Kessler lost in the primary).

It was not the first time Brinkoetter gave of her time. Prior to college, and along with her mother, she spent time painting senior citizens homes and visiting elderly people in nursing facilities. "I always felt that volunteering was probably the most satisfying kind of work," she says.

And it was that notion that made her restless in her employment following graduation. "I wasn't happy working office jobs. I wanted to open the doors wide, let the air in and find out what I was capable of and what I could withstand," she says, revealing the spirit of perhaps many Peace Corps volunteers.

In a speech to University of Michigan students in 1960, then-Senator John F. Kennedy challenged students to serve their country in the cause of peace by living and working in developing countries. Now more than 40 years later, the Peace Corps program is still sending young (and older) Americans where help is needed.



oul, a noble cause

fulfillment as a Peace Corps volunteer in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of those countries. Thirty percent of its population is comprised of youth between the ages of 15 and 18. Realizing youth will play a major role in the social and economic development of the nation, the Bangladesh government welcomes the services of Peace Corps volunteers to teach English. Schools are overcrowded and skilled English teachers are hard to find. And many good teachers prefer to tutor privately for more money.

With a journalism background, Brinkoetter seemed a good match for the needs in Bangladesh. So today you will find her standing before a small class of 9th and 10th grade boys in Mymensingh, a city of hundreds of thousands in a region of millions. Officially serving as an English teacher, she says her "real job" is to make connections with people, try to understand Bangladeshi culture, and help the people better understand America and Americans.

"But sometimes I feel like my job is just to survive," she admits. Bangladesh cities like Mymensingh are fraught with daily peril. The most immediate risk is traffic. Few practice the rules of the road, and people are often killed in bus or rickshaw accidents. Almost every Peace Corps volunteer in Bangladesh has seen at least one person die on the road, Brinkoetter claims.

She also finds it difficult to understand how so many can live relatively healthy lives considering the unsanitary conditions. Open sewers, lack of refuse pick-up, and poor water sanitation prevail. Gastrointestinal illness and other

ailments have afflicted her on numerous occasions in the 18 months she has served.

What keeps her grounded and fulfilled, however, is interacting with her students. "My little guys are so amazing. They are so full of passion and great ideas," she says, referring to the Muslim teenage boys she teaches. Through her lessons Brinkoetter helps her students understand different views of the world.

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Children in Bangladesh have a deep respect for their teachers. Brinkoetter explains that the reverence for a teacher approaches that of hero, movie star and all-around expert. Teachers must choose their words wisely "because they (the students) will never forget them and they'll take them as utmost authority."

Sharing with her community the great things about American culture is part of what she does. Debunking the stereotypes some Bangladeshis have about Americans is also a necessary task. Americans are involved in numerous concurrent sexual relationships...

Americans are a cold-hearted bunch... all Americans are rich—these are some of the common myths.

Brinkoetter enjoys being an ambassador for her native country but says that Bangladesh is her country too. "I try to live in such a way that sends the message: people are people, no matter where we're from or what our background or religion," she says. The relationships she's made are especially important in an era of instability, fear, and global terrorism, which also affects Bangladesh. In her experience she has found that there are more similarities than differences between Muslims in Bangladesh and Christians in America. "I feel enlightened about Muslims and the Islamic religion," she says, concluding that pretty much everyone wants the same things—love, security and happiness.

Peace Corps volunteers receive a living allowance that enables them to live in a manner similar to the local people where they work. Medical and dental care, and transportation to and from the country, is also covered. Transitioning out of the Peace Corps can be a financial hardship for some; so volunteers are paid \$6,000 to help them reestablish themselves in the states after their service. It doesn't appear that Brinkoetter will need to be concerned about that for a while as she is planning to stay in Bangladesh for the foreseeable future.

Her experience has made her a more tolerant and patient person she says, yet

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Nicaraguan boys pose for the camera outside their cardboard home. Poor housing is one of the problem areas Dr. Brad Martin is addressing through his volunteer activities in that country.

DR. BRAD MARTIN

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interesting to see that once-vacant land now with its trees, electrical service and dirt streets.”

To keep his River Falls connection strong, some years ago Martin helped organize an annual get-together at biology Professor B. H. (Benny) Kettelkamp’s cottage in Trego, Wis., says John Clemons, ’57. “All the doctors who had gone to River Falls for pre-med got together for several years in Trego and later in Eau Claire,” recalls Clemons, a colleague who recently retired from Gundersen Lutheran Whitehall Clinic. “Brad also helped start the Kettelkamp Scholarship Fund for pre-med students at River Falls.”

Martin says his worldview took root while at River Falls from 1962 to 1965 under Kettelkamp’s tutelage. “I had a great time there and was able to get to know my professors as individuals,” said Martin. “I came from a farm near Pepin, and River Falls was a nice size town to live in for a student who’d never even been to the big city before.” ■

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she is not afraid to demand what she needs for herself and her students. “I’ve realized that it’s interacting with people that brings me the most joy.” To her it’s possible to be part of a supportive community anywhere in the world.

In Bangladesh a supportive community means close extended families. According to Brinkoetter, family members support each other their entire lives—grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. This is necessary for survival but it is a value with a great source of pride. She is moved by the



“My little guys are so amazing. They are so full of passion and great ideas,” says Laura Brinkoetter of her 9th and 10th grade English students in Mymensingh, Bangladesh. Brinkoetter is the one female face (top center).

passion of Bangladeshis for their native language and their national independence, which historically has been influenced by Pakistan and Great Britain.

Though occasionally homesick for the old midwest-American life, she tolerates the crowded and noisy city where she lives. She is unwilling to be deterred by civil strife and the national disasters that loom in her adopted country.

“You must be willing to find the edge of your sanity,” she says about adapting to her rich life half a globe away. ■