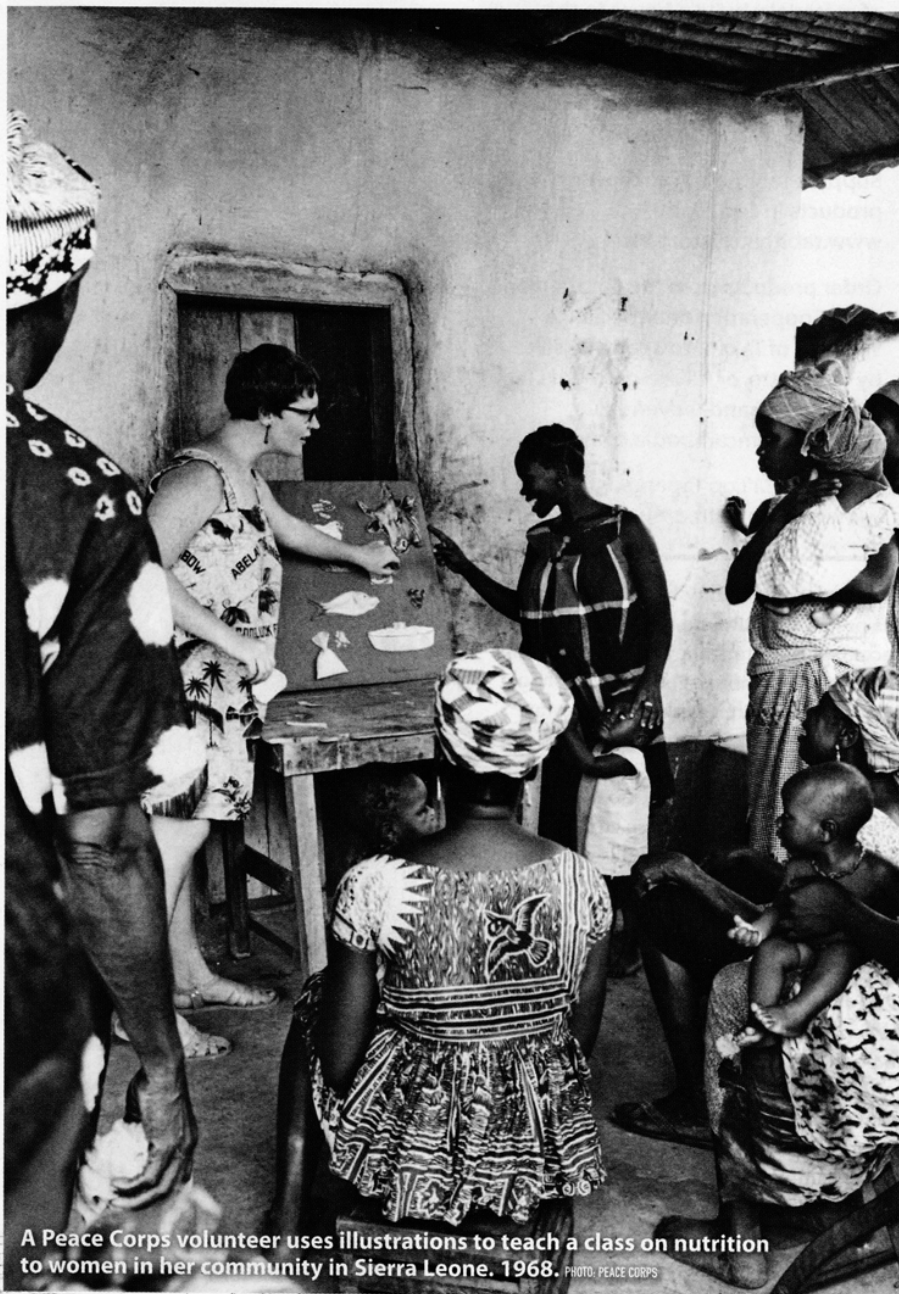


50 YEARS OF CHANGING THE WORLD

HALF A CENTURY AFTER THE LAUNCH OF CUSO AND THE PEACE CORPS, GLOBAL VOLUNTEERING HAS EVOLVED INTO A WORLDWIDE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE TRAVELLING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE. BY ZALINA ALVI



A Peace Corps volunteer uses illustrations to teach a class on nutrition to women in her community in Sierra Leone. 1968. PHOTO: PEACE CORPS

At the end of the 1950s, the idea of volunteering overseas was about as common as a tie-dyed T-shirt. The options for a young Canadian or American who wanted to make a difference rarely extended beyond their own backyard: helping out at their church, a local school or an animal shelter in their neighbourhood, perhaps.

Then, in the early sixties, an overseas volunteering movement exploded at universities across Canada and the United States. It was fuelled, in part, by idealism of students who wanted to make a difference in developing countries just emerging from the shadow of colonialism.

In 1960, Senator John F. Kennedy delivered an impromptu two-in-the-morning campaign speech to a group of students at the University of Michigan. He shared a vision of Americans serving their country by living and working in the developing world. Soon after his inauguration, plans to create the Peace Corps were set in motion and, just ten months after his Michigan speech, Kennedy gave a personal send-off to the first group of Peace Corps volunteers headed for Ghana.

Across the border, a similar movement was afoot at Canadian universities. At the University of British Columbia, undergrads Brian Marson and Michael Clague delivered a letter to the university president proposing a student overseas service. At the same time in Toronto, Lewis Perinbam, Guy Arnold and Keith Spicer were all working independently on their own proposals for a Canadian voluntary service. In 1960, a first group of volunteers left for India with Spicer's fledgling organization, Canadian Overseas Volunteers (COV). A year later, COV and a number of

similar initiatives across Canada were merged under a new national organization, Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO).

Since then, myriad organizations—governmental or independent, small and large, with long-term placements or short-term—have emerged. And lots has changed in the half-century since those first intrepid volunteers set off to places many of them could barely point to on a map.

“Fifty years ago you might have gotten on a boat and had no contact with home and gone to a place you had very little imagery of,” says Steve Rosenthal, founder and executive director of Cross-Cultural Solutions, a New York-based volunteer sending organization. “Today, you’re tweeting home to your family and you’re going to a place you might have seen a virtual tour of before you got there.”

Technology has, without question, altered—some might even say, blunted—the experience of travelling and volunteering overseas. But if access to instant communication has dulled that exhilarating sense of being cut off from the familiar, it has also sharpened criticism directed toward those who dare to arrive in a country ill-informed.

John Wilcox, one of CUSO’s first volunteers in India, recalls proposing that residents of a small village raise chickens as a way of boosting the local economy. In an interview in the Salt Spring News, 40 years later, Wilcox said, “I had no idea of the cultural dimensions of doing that; many of them are vegetarians and they will not even eat a fertilized egg.” Fifty years ago, it may have been an excusable oversight for a 19-year-old farm-boy from southwestern Ontario. But not today.

There have been other changes in the landscape and Ian Smillie has witnessed many of them first-hand. A long-time foreign aid watcher and critic, past executive director of CUSO and a member of the Order of Canada, Smillie first volunteered in Sierra Leone with CUSO in 1967. He identifies a shift toward a demand for volunteers with highly specialized skills and knowledge.

“They need people who know something about agriculture, food technologies and food preservation. And they need health professionals,” says Smillie. “The big numbers in CUSO, in the early years, were BA generalists who went to teach in secondary schools and there’s almost no demand for that anymore.”



“FIFTY YEARS AGO YOU MIGHT HAVE GOTTEN ON A BOAT AND HAD NO CONTACT WITH HOME AND GONE TO A PLACE YOU HAD VERY LITTLE IMAGERY OF. TODAY, YOU’RE TWEETING HOME TO YOUR FAMILY AND YOU’RE GOING TO A PLACE YOU MIGHT HAVE SEEN A VIRTUAL TOUR OF BEFORE YOU GOT THERE.”

A CUSO or Peace Corps volunteer placement is a long-term commitment—a year for CUSO and two for the Peace Corps. Few of us are in a position to spend that amount of time away. But in spite of that, interest in international volunteering and a desire to lend a hand has grown dramatically in recent years. As a result, an entire volunteer industry of sorts has emerged, enabling people to participate on projects for very short periods of time—two weeks or less in many cases.

“We have a more engaged general public and a more aware constituency that really wants to effect positive change,” observes Rosenthal. “International volunteering is the way to turn those ideals into action.”

The idea of short-term volunteering is not without its detractors. They argue that a volunteer can’t possibly begin to make a meaningful contribution in a country they know little about over the course of a couple of weeks, or even a couple of months.

Supporters, on the other hand, point out that the real value is the capacity for these types of volunteer experiences to contribute to an acutely tangible understanding of other cultures and how we affect each other. A volunteer who brings that understanding home with them can become a catalyst for change.

Indeed, it’s hard to deny the positive impact on life back home from sending thousands of citizens around the world to live and work.

“It’s about the kind of experience, knowledge and understanding that Canadians

would bring back to Canada after their experience,” Smillie says. “That we would become a more international kind of country, broader in outlook and wider in experience than we had been.”

As the field matures and grows in popularity, it’s being scrutinized with an increasingly critical eye. Sending organizations, prospective volunteers and, recently, the media are paying attention to the relationship between the volunteer organization and the community. How are overseas communities being involved in projects? Are the goals sustainable? What impacts are volunteers having on the community—good and bad? If volunteers are paying fees, how is the money spent? And who, really, are the experts on a project—the volunteers, or the locals?

As the field continues to evolve, the two organizations that ignited the spark 50 years ago will undoubtedly continue to be at the forefront of international volunteering.

“CUSO gave an opportunity for not hundreds but thousands of young people to go overseas and have a first-hand experience of development,” says Smillie.

For Rosenthal, a past Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya, the impact has been more direct, inspiring him to start his own organization.

“I can never put into words the impact of Peace Corps on Cross-Cultural Solutions because it’s so enormous,” says Rosenthal. “The Peace Corps and CUSO really brought in a new era of service.”

Profile

Dreaming Bigger



FORMER MUCHMUSIC VJ JENNIFER HOLLETT WENT FROM THE WORLD OF A-LIST STARS TO THE DEVELOPING WORLD. HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

Two years after leaving her job as a MuchMusic VJ, Jennifer Hollett found herself sitting in a courtroom in Freetown, Sierra Leone as three military officers were tried for war crimes and sentenced for the use of child soldiers—a worldwide first.

“Those stories, they’re unlike any other story I’ll cover in my career,” Hollett says. “The court told this story of soldiers looking at a pregnant woman, making a bet as to whether the fetus was a boy or a girl and then cutting the woman open and pulling out the fetus to settle the bet. Nothing compares to that. Nothing comes close.”

Barely 24 months earlier, Hollett was in an entirely different world that involved interviewing musicians and A-list stars for Canada’s premiere music channel, MuchMusic. She credits the change to a journey in 2002 to Afghanistan—her first visit to the developing world—where she filmed a documentary on youth issues for the station, as well as another trip to Indonesia in 2005 to cover the tsunami.

Confronted with a first-hand look at life in a developing country, Hollett began to feel a need to see more of the world. So, feeling blessed and wanting to give back, she quit her job in 2005 to pursue humanitarian work abroad. Despite what you may think, however, the decision to leave a lucrative and high-profile job, she says, was an easy one.

“Once you get a dream job—and being a VJ at MuchMusic was a dream job—you start dreaming bigger.”

Hollett then joined up with CARE Canada, an NGO that had partnered with MuchMusic for both those projects. With the goal to inspire Canadian youth to care about world issues, Hollett founded YouthCARE, a year-long project to document the lives of youth in Kenya followed by a cross-Canada speaking tour.

“It was about giving them a voice,” she says. “To put a face on an issue like urban poverty, like HIV, like war.”

As she travelled through Kenya and some of its neighbours – getting hit by a truck along the way – Hollett learned that saving the world isn’t as easy as going to a developing country and doing a story. The experience, she says, forced her to accept that world issues are incredibly complex and without any easy solutions. She also learned about the power and pervasiveness of culture.

“When I say culture, I don’t mean food or art. I mean the way we think. It’s amazing how culture holds us back, and that’s anywhere in the world,” she says. “I think these issues are just so complex, and a big part of the complexity are cultural attitudes.”

Armed with this first-hand look at Kenyan youth, Hollett returned to Canada and toured through Alberta, Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia, showing the documentary and speaking to students about her experience. Using your specific set of skills to make a difference is a large part of Hollett’s approach to volunteering.

“That’s the best thing any volunteer can offer: what they know best,” she explains.

Hollett’s own skills in journalism and videography were developed over years in the industry. As a young person, she had always had an interest in journalism and world issues, as well as music. The daughter of a TV meteorologist, Hollett moved from place to place during her childhood and spent a lot of time hanging out in newsrooms. In her grade eight yearbook, she listed “anchorwoman” as her future aspiration.

Working her way up from radio jockey at Concordia University’s campus station while studying communications and journalism, Hollett landed a managerial role working

with digital media at Sony Music Canada and eventually earned a hosting gig with The Chatroom on CTV’s TalkTV channel. Not long afterwards, she landed her dream job at MuchMusic—that is, until she left it to chase a new dream.

In 2007, Hollett returned to Africa to continue putting her skills to good use. As a journalism trainer with Journalists for Human Rights, she taught the basics of reporting and good storytelling to reporters in Freetown, Sierra Leone who were covering issues that ranged from disabled rights to child labour. In doing so, she was helping other journalists expose the human rights abuses that were keeping Sierra Leone at the bottom of the UN’s Human Development Index.

Looking back, she says it was the best experience of her life thanks in equal part to both the rewards and the challenges it entailed, many of which involved the difficult realities of being a journalist in a place like Sierra Leone.

“There’s a culture of cash envelopes to cover stories, and it’s extremely disorganized,” she says. “The nine o’clock news doesn’t always air at nine o’clock. Sometimes it airs at 9:13.”

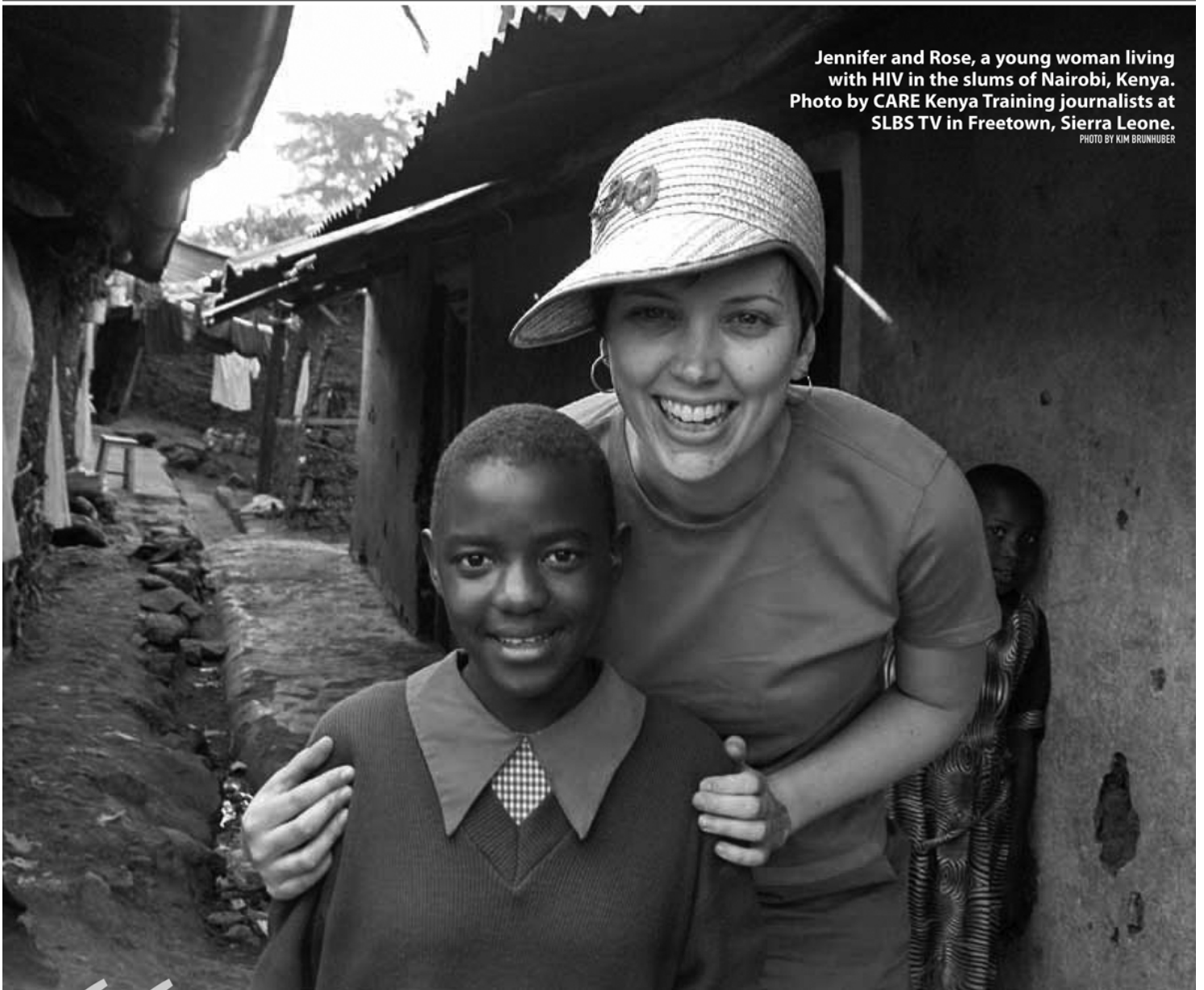
At the same time, a lack of electricity and a TV studio that had been burned down and destroyed during the war—and which was never rebuilt—hampered her efforts.

“Every single thing was a challenge to overcome.”

Despite these obstacles, Hollett continued to encourage her students to keep digging deeper with the belief that their human rights stories needed to be told in order to rebuild the country.

“I just had to have faith in the fact that I was part of something much bigger and that my role as a trainer was part of many efforts to help get the country back to where it was before the war,” she says. “Rebuilding—be it

Jennifer and Rose, a young woman living with HIV in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya. Photo by CARE Kenya Training journalists at SLBS TV in Freetown, Sierra Leone. PHOTO BY KIM BRUNHUBER



“Once you get a dream job—and being a VJ at MuchMusic was a dream job—you start dreaming bigger.

the media, which was our focus, or the whole country—is going to take years.”

Unfazed, Hollett continues to use her skills to bring awareness to issues the issues. At the moment, in addition to covering stories for the CBC show *Connect with Mark Kelley*, she volunteers for organizations like the 411 Initiative for Change, a non-profit that uses music and art to encourage social awareness and civic participation in youth.

In June 2010, she also moderated the first ever G(irls)20Summit, a forum for young, female voices from around the world that ran alongside the official G20 Summit in Toronto. With delegates from the G20 nations as well

as a couple of African union nations, the summit offered an opportunity for young women to come up with solutions to the problems they face at home and abroad.

Inspired by the strength and intelligence of the delegates, Hollett shares a hope that these same women will make their way to the official G20 Summit someday in the future.

“I think it’s imperative to foster leadership at a young age, especially with young women,” she says. “A lot of girls, especially in developing nations, aren’t encouraged to be leaders. That, I think, is part of the solution for so many of the issues that girls and women face.”

A firm believer in the power of girls, Hollett will also be hosting the 2011 G(irls)20Summit in France. Aside from that, however, she hasn’t decided on any other future plans—and that’s just fine with her.

“The media landscape is changing every day,” she says. “I have no idea where I’ll be—where the media will be—in five years. I know that it’s morphing and I want to morph with it. So, I’m excited to continue exploring cross-platform opportunities and reporting on stories that matter.”



You May Be Home, But the Journey Isn't Over

Returning sojourners are often surprised to find that the process of reintegration is ripe with challenges—and opportunities.

BY ZALINA ALVI

“I was expecting to have some culture shock,” says Melanie Lindayen, but the culture shock she describes wasn’t experienced after arriving in Thailand—it was when she returned home to Toronto.

Lindayen, a fourth-year international studies student at York University’s Glendon Campus recently completed a one-year exchange at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

“When I came back there was an initial shock with the amount of space and the quality of air, and the general wealth and waste,” she says.

This is a common sentiment expressed by people returning from living abroad, especially from locales in developing countries. It’s one of the many symptoms of reverse culture shock.

Most people know what “culture shock” means—it’s the state of anxiety or disorientation that results from being in a foreign culture, usually

following an initial period of giddy excitement from being somewhere new. The experience of “re-entry shock” or “reverse culture shock,” however, is much less talked about or understood, though it affects thousands of people who work, study and volunteer abroad.

Dr. Bruce LaBrack, a professor of anthropology at the University of the Pacific in California and author of the online resource ‘What’s Up With Culture?’ specializes in cross-cultural training and re-entry. He describes re-entry shock as “coming home to find that you have become very comfortable overseas, and what was once foreign is now familiar and what was once familiar is now foreign.”

Lindayen had also been teaching English to Thai sex workers, and was living in the midst of a challenging, and often unsafe, political situation. In addition to defending her choice to work in a somewhat dangerous area,

she also had to combat her friends’ and family’s sensationalized perceptions of the situation.

“I did feel perhaps a little bit of alienation from certain perspectives about ‘dirty’ sex workers,” Lindayen says. At these times, she tries to share the philosophy that “our way is not better; it’s different. And that their way is not strange; it’s different.”

Finding a way to share your experience with friends and family is a common challenge for returning sojourners. Overcoming that, however, can help ease the transition of coming home.

“Reverse culture shock is focused around a difficulty in having people understand what the experience was all about,” explains Alan Webb, training and development advisor with CUSO-VSO.

“Our volunteers are away typically for one or two years, and when they get back people will ask ‘what was it like?’ and it’s very difficult to answer that question in simple short phrases.”

Webb explains that many people feel out of place and unsure of where they fit in their old lifestyles, in addition to feeling isolated because no one around them understands their experiences or their resistance to “return to normal.”

Dr. LaBrack, in an online cultural training resource he developed for study abroad students, suggests several approaches, including remaining patient while you readjust and trying to reserve the judgement that can accompany comparisons between different cultures, especially differences that involve issues of power and privilege in your home country.

Just finding a way to reintegrate, however, is not the end of the journey.

“People have come to realize recently that when you come home from your overseas experience, that’s not the end of the experience,” explains Dr. LaBrack. “Re-entry, in my opinion, is a very necessary part of cross-cultural training. What did you learn? What skills? What knowledge? How are you going to apply it?”

CUSO-VSO offers returning volunteers a chance to attend weekend-long reintegration workshops, where they can talk with other people who have had similar experiences. The objective is to learn how to effectively share your experience with others while maintaining a network with similarly minded individuals.

“People have come to realize recently that when you come home from your overseas experience, that’s not the end of the experience.”

“We try to help people identify what stories they have to tell, and how to practice telling their stories; ‘what is my two-minute message that is a summary of my experience?’” explains Webb.

CUSO-VSO also encourages returning volunteers to stay involved with volunteer or development work in their own community. At CUSO-VSO, that can include participating in public engagement, fundraising or recruitment.

For returning exchange students, York University, Ryerson University and the University of Toronto hold an annual conference in September. In addition to information sharing, the workshops focus on skill building as it relates to graduate school or identifying skills from your overseas experience to market to employers.

One such session, ‘Marketing Your International Experience’, is run by Marlene Bernholtz, founder of Dynamic Communication Skills. She shows returning exchange students how to reframe their study abroad experience for potential employers.

“You need to think about everything that you’re now able to do and who you now are, and consider what value that has for an employer,” she explains. “You have gained a great deal of adaptability, flexibility, cultural understanding and strong communication skills—these are all things employers are looking for.”

Bernholtz stresses the need to communicate not just what you did while you were abroad, but the positive outcomes that resulted from those experiences.

“What makes you a stronger, more effective person also makes you a stronger more effective employee,” she says.

If nothing else, returning home after working, studying or volunteering abroad means making a space in your new life for who you now are, whoever that may be, and putting your newfound knowledge and skills to good use.

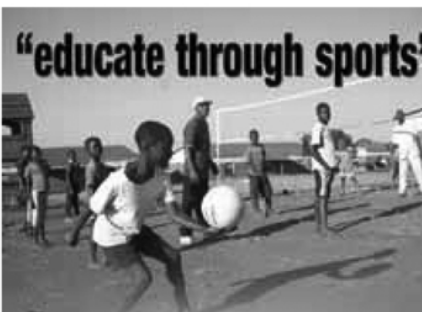
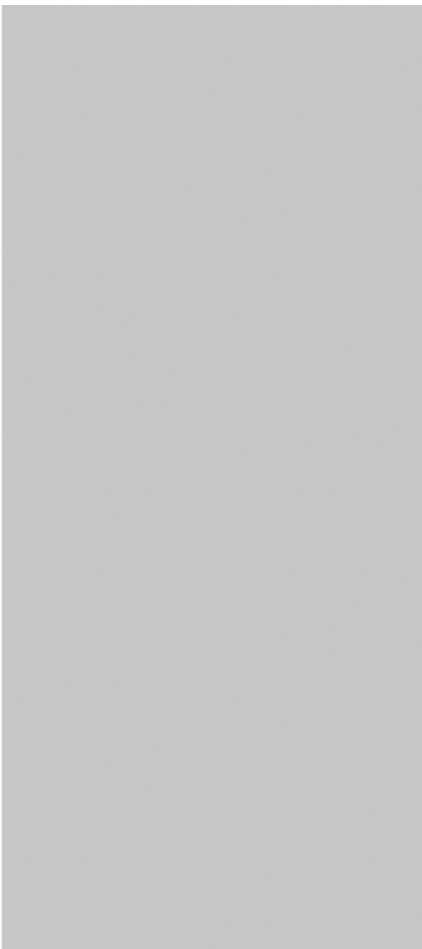
“Assuming that things must return to normal is one of the things that contributes to reverse culture shock,” Webb says. “You need to understand that you’re a different person than the person who left, and you need to find a place for that person.”

10 Things You Can Do to Minimize Re-entry Shock:

1. Mentally prepare for the adjustment process.
2. Allow yourself time to relax, reflect and ease into the transition.
3. Understand that the familiar will seem different.
4. Acknowledge that you will probably need to do some “cultural catching up” on what’s been going on at home.
5. Reserve judgements about people and behaviours in your home country.
6. Respond thoughtfully and carefully when asked about your time abroad.
7. Cultivate sensitivity by showing an interest in what others have been doing while you were away.
8. Beware of comparisons; try not to put down your home culture while lavishing praise on foreign cultures.
9. Remain flexible. Balance reconnecting to old networks with cultivating new ones.
10. Seek support networks.

—Courtesy of Dr. LaBrack’s *What’s Up With Culture?*

www.pacific.edu/sis/culture/



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