

The Peace *and* LOVE in Honoka'a

Peace Parade to Honor Peace Corps Couples and Volunteers

On October 14, 1960, at 2:00 in the morning, Senator John F. Kennedy addressed students on the steps of the University of Michigan Union.

"How many of you who are going to be doctors, are willing to spend your days in Ghana? Technicians or engineers, how many of you are willing to work in the Foreign Service and spend your lives traveling around the world? On your willingness to do that, not merely to serve one year or two years in the service, but on your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country, I think will depend the answer whether a free society can compete. I think it can!"

Three weeks later he was elected President, and on March 1, 1961, JFK signed Executive Order 10924, first establishing the Peace Corps on a pilot basis.

"I was in Miss Hasegawa's history class in Honoka'a High School," said Romel Delacruz, who retired as Executive Director of Hale Ho'ola. "I remember thinking that was something I'd like to do, and go back to the land of my birth."

On the other side of the planet, Romel's future wife Jodean, former Vice Principal of Honoka'a High School, was inspired by JFK's speech on the stairs.

"I'm from Michigan," she said. "Growing up in a small town... I wanted to see the world." Her older sister was already a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ecuador, so between Jodean's junior and senior year, she went through an advanced training program, and after graduation in 1967, left for the Philippines.

"I was reading *Hawaii* by James Michener," she said, "because we had stopped to refuel in Hawaii, so when I met Romel, I asked a lot of questions and he was very knowledgeable on history. He was a very fascinating person to me."

Born in the Philippines, Romel grew up in Pa'auilo and worked hard to become a science teacher. His Peace Corps training took place in North Kohala, at the old Bond Estate Girls School, along with about 40 others, of a total 150 Big Islanders in training for the Philippines. "The greatest number of volunteer requests from a host country came from the Philippines," said Romel. "I think it is because of the American occupation and the relationship with America."

"I could immerse myself into the culture very easily," said Romel, "which my counterparts couldn't do. But I had some of the older teachers accuse me of not being Filipino enough!"

"Once a year we would go into Sabu for our medical exam," said Jodean, "We'd meet up with other volunteers for a movie or something. When Romel and I walked around together, they thought I'd hired a guide!"

Pa'auilo residents David and Gloria Myklebust also met in the Peace Corps.

"President Kennedy told us we were supposed to join, so we did," said Gloria, educator and quilter. "The generation of people who joined in the 60's did so because he asked us to. I wish more presidents would ask young people to serve their country in a way that allows them to contribute."

At Long Beach State College, her future husband David had a similar inspiration. The Jersey girl and the California beach boy met in New York in 1965, training with the group "Cameroon 4," bound for west central Africa.

"She was the only one I saw," said David, West Hawaii Resources Teacher, (aka Data Dave). "We were told we were the first Peace Corps couple to get married within the Peace Corps," he said.

"You had to ask permission to get married while you were serving," said Gloria, "and they generally said 'wait till you go home.'" The Peace Corps encouraged volunteers to take time, meet families, and be cautious about impulsive decisions. In their case, the Myklebust's just celebrated their 45th wedding anniversary.

They moved to Hawaii in 2000, serendipitously ending up next door to Walter Mosch, a teacher at Honoka'a High School who was also a Peace Corps volunteer, also in Cameroon. From 1982-85, he taught math and physics in a small town, not far from where they served years earlier.

"The biggest thing for me was the cross-cultural training," said Walter. After his Peace Corps service and a year travelling in Africa, he went to graduate school in international studies at Columbia University, where he met his future wife, Janet Goh. They lived and worked in her home country of Singapore for about six years, attended the Vermont School of International Training and came to Hawaii 12 years ago.

"We originally came here because we felt, geographically and culturally, that Hawaii was about half way between the East Coast and Singapore," said Walter. "We joked that this was like Malaysia with internet access," he said. "And, being mixed races, you don't have to deal with the kind of racism here that you do in other places."

Steve and Jacinta Hanks also call Hamakua home, via the Peace Corps. In 1990, Steve finished up a football scholarship at North Dakota State and waited for his assignment as a Peace Corps volunteer math teacher. In November, he got the call: a program was going to Papua New Guinea on December third.

"When I left, it was minus-30 degrees," said Steve. "When we landed in Honolulu, it was 84, and I was in absolute heaven." A few years later, on his third tour, he met future wife Jacinta, both teaching school in the province of Bougainville.

They were married in 1996, including a traditional ceremony and feast in Jacinta's home village in the Carteret Islands. And after another year of immigration processing, she was able to join Steve in Honoka'a, where he teaches Math and she Special Education.

Steve and Jacinta work tirelessly with Carteret Islands community leaders to support programs for children's education and basic necessities. Sometimes called "earth's first climate-change refugees," the Carteret Islanders are struggling to cope with rising oceans, and the fact that their home island will be underwater by 2015. In January, following a 3-year immigration process, the Hanks' adopted Jacinta's two nieces, Carolee, 8, and Aloysia, 10. Finally home on the Big Island, the girls enjoy school, playing AYSO soccer and making new friends.

"Joining the Peace Corps was the #1 decision that changed my whole life," said Steve.

None of these remarkable people joined the Peace Corps to find love, to create a family, take on a life mission—or to end up living on the Big Island's Hamakua Coast—but they did, along with numerous other Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCV's). Some trained in Waipi'o Valley, where a full-scale hamlet was constructed to replicate a Southeast Asian village.

In celebration of the Peace Corps 50th Anniversary, an island-wide reunion is planned for November 14-21, with events in Kona, Hilo and Waipi'o Valley. According to Romel, of the 200,000 total RPCV's, over the last 50 years, 200 are from Hawaii. For more information, visit www.rpcvhi.org.

Hawaii's RPCV's will be honored in the 2011 Peace Day Parade & Festival on Sunday, September 18 at 11 a.m., in Honoka'a. (www.peacedayparade.org). In preparation, Peace Committee Chairman Miles Okumura gathered a group for "photo op" at Honoka'a High School, where many have attended and/or worked.

"At first, we considered highlighting the Peace Corps in the Peace Day Parade because it is their 50th Anniversary," said Okumura, "Then, as we examined the story closer, we realized that our community has a rich history of connection with the Peace Corps," he said. "I just love the life stories of so many of our friends and neighbors who, because of the path of service they chose, were able to meet the love of their life, are still married after all these years and have chosen to live right here on the Big Island, in Honoka'a town! I hope everyone turns out for the parade, and gives them the rousing reception they deserve as real peace heroes."

For the Peace Day Parade, the RPCV group will work with Honoka'a Intermediate 8th-Graders to create a float, and bring out as many Peace Corps "alumni" as possible. They will also have an information booth at the Peace Day Festival at Honoka'a Sports Complex, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

Do the RPCV's believe world peace is possible?

Walter, "The optimist in me says yes, but history doesn't seem to bear out that optimism."

Romel, "I think we can have peace. Those were idealistic days; the world has totally changed and the computer has shrunk the world. But we have to realize America is no longer 'king of the world.' We are so interdependent. We have to learn to live together or how will this world survive?"

Gloria, “When we were in the Peace Corps my response would have been, ‘Absolutely.’ I guess in my old age, I recognize *men* will always have warfare. Looking back historically there’s always been war. Can we live in a world without fear of annihilation? I think so.”

The Peace Corps presently has 8,000 volunteers in 132 countries. For more information, visit www.peacecorps.gov.