

A Towering Task: The Story of the Peace Corps

A film by Alana DeJoseph

111 minutes, color, 2023, Documentary



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Synopsis

Narrated by Annette Benning, *A Towering Task* tells the remarkable story of the Peace Corps and takes viewers on a journey of global citizenship.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy gave young Americans the opportunity to become "global citizens" by creating the Peace Corps as an independent volunteer program in countries around the world. Since then, more than 200,000 Americans have traveled to over 140 countries to carry out the organization's mission of international cooperation.

Today, Americans—young and old alike—still want to serve their country; current volunteers work at the forefront of some of the most pressing issues facing the global community.

Among the notable people who have either served as volunteers or worked as staff for the Peace Corps are: journalists Bill Moyers, Marco Werman, Maureen Orth, Peter Hessler, George Packer and Chris Matthews, Senators Jay Rockefeller and Chris Dodd, Representatives Donna Shalala, Joe Kennedy, and Christopher Shays, State Senator Jason Carter and his grandmother Lillian Carter, Ambassadors Vicki Huddleston and J. Christopher Stevens, Netflix founder Reed Hastings, novelist Paul Theroux, home improvement specialist Bob Vila, Hollywood director Taylor Hackford, and many more.

Directed by Alana DeJoseph, the documentary features indelible interviews of current and Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, current and former staff, scholars and journalists, community members and leaders around the world (including Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf). Remarkable archival materials and stunning footage from around the globe by cinematographer Vanessa Carr bring to life an agency that represents to the world the American idea. By expertly weaving together personal volunteer experiences with the political machinations of the time, screenwriter Shana Kelly provides viewers with a visceral experience of Kennedy's call to the "citizens of the world:" "what together we can do for the freedom of man."

In response to the COVID pandemic, in the first time in its history the Peace Corps evacuated all Volunteers, and rebuilding the agency will take years. At a time when America is reevaluating its role in the world, the story of this uniquely American government agency takes viewers on a journey of what it means to be a global citizen.

Director's Statement

When I was a Peace Corps volunteer in the early 90s, the experience of my two years in Mali, West Africa was deeply personal. I was not sure how much good I did, but I knew that my friends Bintu, Sali, and Mariatu would leave an imprint on my heart and a profound depth of understanding about a culture drastically different from the one I grew up in. I knew little about the Peace Corps' history and upon my return quickly got used to people not being able to relate to the stories of my own service.

My path took me into documentary video production, but it wasn't until I was in my 40s that I returned to pondering the Peace Corps as an agency. Americans were forgetting what it was or that the agency still existed. Voices of nationalism and American exceptionalism were growing stronger and while the concept of a global citizen or global citizenship was being bandied about like a marketing term, what that truly could mean seemed foggy to most.

I was fortunate to be part of the team that produced *The Greatest Good*, the definitive documentary about the history of the U.S. Forest Service. And so it became clear, that just such a documentary was needed about the Peace Corps. Not merely as a civics lesson about the agency's and with it America's history, but as an opportunity to use the Peace Corps as a lens on how America can show up in the world.

Never has it been more important for us to understand the rest of the world. And the story of the Peace Corps as an example of America as a true global citizen can help us forge a path forward when the world has to work together as a global community to solve global problems.

Praise for *A Towering Task*

"*A Towering Task* puts a human face on the Peace Corps - and makes sense of its history of idealism, improvisation, politics, and at times its failings. It is the most coherent and satisfying documentary I know of the Peace Corps, and I can't imagine a better one. For its truth and its scope, its arc is complete - from the germ of an idea to help the world, spoken late at night by JFK on his presidential campaign, to its execution later, an Act signed into law and carried out - thousands of young women and men leaving for remote places, to teach, to advise, to inspire - and to be inspired themselves by their work. The film is enlightening, too, for being in large part the portrait of a period when America was outward looking and uncynical and generous. It is impossible to imagine any politician - anyone at all - saying that today. But this film shows the roots of such idealism, which is why it is so enlightening and uplifting." - Paul Theroux, Travel Writer & Novelist

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

The idea:

- When the team first started discussing the development of a historical documentary about the Peace Corps, the agency was nearly forgotten by the American public. "Oh is that still around?" was a common question. As production commenced nationalistic tendencies around the globe were on the rise and why and how America engages with the rest of the world became more and more of an urgent discussion. Seeing the U.S.'s history of diplomacy and peaceful global engagement through the lens of the Peace Corps, allows viewers a chance to re-conceptualize what America's relationship with the global community can be.

Interviews & resources:

- The documentary team has interviewed current and Returned Peace Corps Volunteers, current and former staff, scholars and journalists, community members and leaders around the world. Rare archival materials from the personal collections of Peace Corps Volunteers and from archives around the country and the globe visually transport viewers to the various eras and give them that first person experience
- Voices of the Peace Corps: <https://www.peacecorpsdocumentary.com/>

The goals:

- To reintroduce America to one of its most overlooked and yet most internationally impactful government agencies when the U.S. truly needs to understand the world.
- To catalyze dialogue about what it means to be an American, both in the U.S. and as part of a broader global community.

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Official Website: <https://www.peacecorpsdocumentary.com/>

Email list sign-up (MailChimp): <http://eepurl.com/b3Y0W5>

Social Media -

- Twitter: [@ToweringTask](https://twitter.com/ToweringTask)
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AToweringTask/>
- Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/atoweringtask/>

Filmmaker & Crew Biographies

Alana DeJoseph, Director

Alana DeJoseph has worked in video and film production for over 30 years. She has worn many hats as producer, director, videographer, and editor, but her heart has always been in documen-

taries. Between 2003 and 2005, she was associate producer of the PBS documentaries *The Greatest Good* (about the U.S. Forest Service) and *Green Fire* (about conservationist Aldo Leopold). *The Greatest Good* appeared at 15 film festivals with screenings in 35 states, winning numerous awards, including the CINE Golden Eagle Award and finalist designation for the Annual Telly Awards. *Green Fire* appeared in 29 festivals from Colorado to India and New Zealand. Still airing on public television, it was awarded an EMMY, Telly Awards Bronze and a CINE Golden Eagle Award, among others.

Being a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer herself, she couldn't help but think that just such an in-depth, comprehensive documentary was needed for the Peace Corps. Alana says: "In a time when the American public either has a very antiquated notion of the Peace Corps, informed by an almost mythological awe of the 60s, or is not even aware that the agency still exists, it is high time to bring this unique organization back into the public discourse, to raise the level of the discussion from quaint to crucial."

Dave Steinke, Associate Producer

Associate Producer Dave Steinke has worked for ABC, as well as NBC and ABC television affiliates in Colorado and Texas. He ran the Creative Services department of the US Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Region directing all aspects of the department. He co-produced the two-hour documentary film, *The Greatest Good*, which has been broadcast the past eleven years more than 8,000 times on Public Television across the country. The international version of the show was released in eight languages. In 2011 he co-produced *Green Fire: Aldo Leopold and a Land Ethic for our Time*.

Shana Kelly, Screenwriter

Shana Kelly began her career as a literary agent at the William Morris Agency in New York and London for ten years. She currently works as a documentary screenwriter, book editor, and publishing consultant. She is the screenwriter and associate producer of *A Towering Task: The Story of the Peace Corps*, a historical documentary which aired on PBS in September 2023. She wrote the documentary *Just the Beginning: A Century of Political Power and the League of Women Voters*, currently in post-production.

Annette Bening, Narrator

Annette Bening is a celebrated actor across the stage and screen. She will next star in *GEORGETOWN*, *HOPE GAP* and *THE REPORT*. Past film credits include *CAPTAIN MARVEL*, *THE SEAGULL*, *FILM STARS DON'T DIE IN LIVERPOOL*, *20TH CENTURY WOMEN*, *THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT*, *MOTHER AND CHILD*, *BEING JULIA*, *AMERICAN BEAUTY*, *THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT*, *MARS ATTACKS!*, *RICHARD III*, *LOVE AFFAIR*, *BUGSY*, *THE GRIFTERS*, *VALMONT*, *POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE*, and *THE GREAT OUTDOORS*. On stage, Bening will next star in the Broadway revival *ALL MY SONS*. Past theater credits include *HAVE A NICE DAY*; *KING LEAR*; *RUTH DRAPER MONOLOGUES*; *THE CHERRY ORCHARD*; *TALKING HEADS*; *HEDDA GABLER*; and *MEDEA*. Bening received a Tony Award nomination and won the Clarence Derwent Award for Outstanding Debut Performance of the Season for her role in *COASTAL DISTURBANCES*.

Vanessa Carr, Director of Photography

As documentary director and cinematographer specializing in vérité style shooting Vanessa has shot for Al Jazeera, Frontline, HBO, New York Times Op-Docs, Showtime and PBS. From supermax prisons to drag bars, with extensive experience in international videography, she has a passion for outsider stories and complex subject matters.

Joe Shaffner, Publicity

Joe served in the Peace Corps from 2005-2008 in Uzbekistan and Suriname. He was a health education volunteer in Uzbekistan before that program closed early. He went on to Suriname, where he served for two years as a community economic development volunteer, followed by a year as Volunteer Leader. He spent his final year also supporting UNICEF in developing an education pilot program.

Joe currently serves as the Interim Director of Communications at the Population Council, previously serving as Director of Global Communications for the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). Prior to Joe's role at ICRW, he served as Marketing Manager for Sheladia Associates, Inc., an architectural and engineering firm located in Rockville, MD

and Account Director at Ogilvy PR. As a consultant, Joe has worked with organizations like Pathfinder International, WomenStrong International, Mina's List, the Peace Corps, IREX, and ThoughtWorks. Joe serves on the Board of the National Peace Corps Association.

"Before I joined the team for *A Towering Task*, I spoke with Alana [DeJoseph] on the phone. What impressed me the most was that Alana is not looking to glorify the Peace Corps, nor aiming to criticize it. Rather, she wants to tell the story of the Peace Corps honestly - to capture its deep history of successes, challenges, and growth and to do so by gathering together decades of perspectives so that we can hear what those collective voices have to say."