



Giving Back: At Home and Abroad
By Abbie Hantgan, RPCV Mali (1998-2001)

For two of the three and a half years I served as a United States Peace Corps Volunteer in Mali (from 1998 to 2001), I lived in Kolebi, an approximately 500-person Dogon village. In addition to my projects as a Natural Resources Management volunteer, at the village's request, I collaborated with a local nongovernmental organization to establish an adult literacy program in a Dogon language. The program was highly successful: 20 women and 10 men from the village where I lived were taught to read and write in a Dogon dialect very similar to their own, Najamba. Surrounding villages also took interest, and the program spread throughout the Dogon community. The people of the community who took part in the program continue to use their skills in writing, reading, and arithmetic to this day.

Though not the dialect of Kolebi, Najamba was used for the literacy project because the village's dialect, Kindige, is not documented, so no literacy materials exist. The villagers who learned to write and read were disappointed to find that they could not engage with literature in their own dialect, because, even though the two dialects are very similar and belong to one language (Bonduso) the villagers take great pride in the idiosyncrasies particular to Kindige and wish to have these documented as well. I returned to graduate school to become a linguist so that I could return to Mali to document the entire Bonduso language and eventually provide the community of Kolebi with written materials in their own dialect in appreciation for all that my Dogon family had done for me during my time in the Peace Corps.

Though I knew that I wanted to pursue a career in linguistics, when I came home from Mali in 2001 after my one and a half year extension, because of a family emergency, I was not quite ready to become an academic. I needed a transition period to assist my family and to readjust to the fast-paced lifestyle of the United States. In my hometown in North Carolina, I tried out jobs that seemed to reflect the experience I had gained in Peace Corps, such as gardening and teaching environmental education to students. But I did not feel as though I was contributing to the third goal of Peace Corps, to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

After I completed the lengthy process of applying to graduate school, I decided to attend Indiana University's world-renowned program in African Studies and African Linguistics. Still, I felt as though I had something to contribute to my own country before returning to Africa to continue to serve abroad. During my time in the Peace Corps, Malians taught me the importance of helping others in the community. Since I would be becoming a new resident in Indiana, I wanted to have the opportunity to interact and possibly assist the community there before entering the isolation the higher education can become.



So, I easily found the website for AmeriCorps*VISTA and completed the application prior to moving to Indiana. Soon after submitting the application, I was interviewed at the Indiana state headquarters for the Corporation for National and Community Service; I felt back at home again. I knew that the experience with AmeriCorps*VISTA would provide me with the sense of community that I so missed from Peace Corps, in addition to an opportunity to assist those in need, right in my own neighborhood and backyard. For one year prior to beginning graduate school, I collaborated with the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, RSVP, to recruit volunteers and assist with fundraising events. In addition, because of my prior experience in the Peace Corps, I was promoted to the level of Team Leader, in which I provided leadership for eight VISTA members of the RSVP team across Indiana. My leadership duties included documentation, recruitment of new VISTAs, and providing training and support to the current VISTA members stationed throughout Indiana. As with the Peace Corps, the AmeriCorps experience taught me as much as, if not more than, the people I taught or assisted through the program. Through VISTA in particular, I learned professionalism, speaking and writing skills, and computer skills, things that I might have otherwise missed because of my extended time in a remote areas of Mali during the “Internet revolution.” I also became intimately aware of both the problems and the solutions to poverty in a town in middle America. The poverty that exists particularly in a college town is often silenced, hidden, unlike in Africa, where poverty could not be concealed; in the U.S., many students are completely immune to the problems of town-residents. Fortunately, I was also able to collaborate with many local organizations fighting the problems of poverty, and through the work of the volunteers in the organization in which I worked, RSVP, I was able to witness a difference, even within such a short period of time.

Because of my experience working in Africa and with national service, and because of gained ability in grant writing, I have received three academic Foreign Language Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships to study languages and areas in Mali. In the summer of 2008, thanks to National Science Foundation (NSF) support of the Dogon Languages of Mali and an Indiana University International Enhancement Grant, I was able to return to the village where I worked as a Peace Corps volunteer to begin a preliminary grammar sketch, dictionary, and some literacy materials for the people to which I owe so much. Just as former U.S. President John F. Kennedy said, "Life in the Peace Corps will not be easy. There will be no salary and allowances will be at a level sufficient only to maintain health and meet basic needs. But if the life will not be easy, it will be rich and satisfying." The same can be equally stated of both AmeriCorps*VISTA and Peace Corps, both once-in-a-lifetime chances for those of us whom have been born to more privileged circumstances to not only learn first-hand what it means to live in poverty, but also how to improve our country, our world, and ourselves in the process.