

# THE VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

## Breaking Stereotypes/Building Communities

By Chris Doege

As Peace Corps Volunteers in Azerbaijan, we are assigned to one of three service sectors. Youth Development (YD) volunteers are responsible for introducing youth to a cavalcade of new experiences. Whether it's through the Azerbaijani Interregional Softball League, boys and girls leadership camps, or playing frisbee in a nearby school yard, YD volunteers are teaching youth valuable life lessons. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) volunteers spend hours each week not only teaching English to students in Azerbaijani schools, but they also are responsible for teaching their counterparts new and effective teaching methods that will have a positive impact on their students long after the volunteer has finished his or her service. Community Economic Development (CED) volunteers are responsible for providing business training and advice to companies ranging from carpet factories to furniture stores.

Despite the different roles that YD, TEFL, and CED volunteers play, an important similarity is that we are all American representatives abroad. Many Azerbaijanis have never met an American before a volunteer comes to their village or city. Despite never before meeting an American, Azerbaijanis typically have a preconceived notion derived from American media of what an American is or looks like. These preconceived notions can be difficult to overcome for minority volunteers serving in Azerbaijan. I had the opportunity to interview three minority volunteers and one minority English teacher working and living in Azerbaijan to get a better understanding of their interactions with Azerbaijanis over the course of the past year. Although they appear differently than most Azerbaijanis expect, these Americans have been tasked with breaking the stereotype of what it means to be an American.

### Chhun Sun



Chhun Sun is a 32-year old Cambodian-American who was born in a Thai refugee camp in 1981. Upon moving to America at the age of 5, Chhun and his family moved into a poverty-stricken neighborhood in San Francisco. In 1989, Chhun and his family moved to Modesto, CA where he attended elementary, middle and high school, as well as junior college. After

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finishing junior college he went on to earn his degree in print journalism from Fresno State. Prior to joining the US Peace Corps, Chhun worked as a writer for newspapers in Washington, California and Utah. After a friend of his was accepted into the Peace Corps in 2007, Chhun became interested in serving as well. He started the application process in 2008 and was nominated to serve in Azerbaijan. Like many other volunteers assigned to Azerbaijan, Chhun knew very little about the country and had to look up how to pronounce his soon-to-be home.

Chhun came to Azerbaijan in September 2012. After finishing pre-service training, he was sworn in as a TEFL volunteer in December 2012. Chhun was then assigned to a village in Balakan. Located 9 hours away by bus from Azerbaijan's capital city, Chhun has interacted with many Azerbaijanis who had never met an American prior to meeting him. His early interactions with Azerbaijanis were sometimes strained because they were apprehensive to believe he is an American. Due to Chhun's Asian features, he is often mistaken for Japanese, Korean or Chinese. He has had a number of negative interactions where Azerbaijanis made fun of his eyes, spoke to him in a pretend Chinese sounding language, asked him if he eats cats and dogs and had people perform karate moves in front of him. Chhun has remained very positive about his experience in Azerbaijan telling me, "Despite the special unwanted attention I received, I couldn't have asked for a better Peace Corps experience."

Chhun often attributes his positive experience to his placement in a small village consisting of predominantly Avar people. The Avar people are an ethnic minority inside Azerbaijan, who themselves are discriminated against by Azerbaijanis. Because Chhun and the people in his village share this commonality, he has been able to integrate more successfully than he would have had he been placed in other parts of Azerbaijan.

Chhun's Peace Corps experience has not been negatively impacted by his appearance. He has been shown the hospitality that Azerbaijanis are known for on many occasions. He has been invited over for meals and tea, given fruit and offered free rides. Furthermore, his ability as an English teacher has never been questioned. He and his counterpart have worked in tandem to bring about positive changes at his school. Upon being asked if he would tell other minorities to join Peace Corps, Chhun explained:

*"I think it's important to continue showing the different faces of America. But at the same time, they should know that it's not going to be easy and that they'll feel like no one, even fellow volunteers, can understand them. Just by being themselves, American minorities are going to open so many eyes and break down so many stereotypes. In the end, people will have a better understanding of what an American is."*

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## David Gibson

David Gibson is a 26-year-old African-American from Macon, GA. After graduating from Central High School in 2006, David went to Valdosta State University where he earned his Bachelor's degree in History. Following Valdosta State, David then attended Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville, GA earning a Master in Public Administration degree in 2012. While David was in college, he traveled extensively, visiting seven different countries. Of his extensive travel David said, "I believe that studying abroad raised the expectations I had for myself. It changed my perspective on life completely." This expectation served as the catalyst for David's decision to apply for the Peace Corps.



David came to Azerbaijan in April 2013. Upon completing pre-service training, David was sworn in as a TEFL volunteer in June 2013. David's site, Saatli, is located approximately 3 hours by bus from Baku. When David first arrived at his site, many Azerbaijanis mistook him as being of Arabic decent. After introducing himself in Azerbaijani, many Azeris are shocked that he knows their language and are surprised to hear that an American is living in their city. David believes that one of the positive outcomes of being a minority volunteer is "having the chance to interact with host country nationals, on a daily basis, and broadening their perspective of what an American is." However, being a minority in Saatli has also been a bit of a burden for David. He often receives more attention than other Peace Corps Volunteers and has had to adjust to Azerbaijanis staring at him. When asked about how the staring affects him, David said "I finally realize how celebrities must feel every time they walk out in public. At times it can be challenging to cope with."

While dealing with added attention could be difficult for a volunteer, David has excelled in his city. Outside of his primary role as a TEFL volunteer, David has made an impact on his city by introducing softball to its youth. With the help of fellow Peace Corps volunteer Kim Lesnau, he has assembled a team, held practices and competed in a softball game in Baku on May 24. While the team struggled in its first game, it was remarkable to see the progress his players have made in a short amount of time. David has been in Azerbaijan for a year and has a positive outlook on his service so far saying:

*"The Peace Corps has provided me with the platform to not only learn a new language, eat new food, and visit new foreign counties, but it has provided the opportunity to uncover a new me."*

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## Jennie Risard

Jennie Risard is an Asian American from California who joined the Peace Corps with her husband Dave in 2012. Growing up during the Vietnam War, Jennie was inspired by organizations like the Red Cross and Peace Corps saying, “Their volunteerism inspired me and touched my spirit. I told myself that someday I would be one of their volunteers to help other people in need.” In 2005, Jennie and Dave joined the Red Cross and responded to many local emergencies and 15 national deployments for disaster service.

After completing Peace Corps pre-service training in December 2012, Jennie was assigned to a village in Agsu as a TEFL volunteer. She has been able to integrate into her community after living there for over a year. She said that, “Generally people are friendly and hospitable. It has been one and a half years now since I am living in this little town. Most of the merchants and residents know



that I am an English teacher. Their children or relatives or friends' children are my students. Therefore, I have gained their respect.” But things in her village haven't always been smooth. Due to her appearance, Azerbaijanis would approach her and call her “Chin” – the Azerbaijani word for China. While she is

offended when people use derogatory language towards her, she continues to stay positive saying that, “It definitely has not affected my service, and it has not prevented me from doing my work. I have Chinese heritage, but I am proud to present myself as a US citizen (serving) in Azerbaijan – also showing that California, like the rest of the US, is a diverse state and being an Asian American carries the equal right to participate in any (American) activity. I am trying my best to work with a positive attitude and not letting being a minority take away from the purpose of my calling. I have been well received at my school site and community, which has helped me succeed in my work.”

## Angeline Bickner

Angeline Bickner is a 24-year old Asian American from Verona, WI. Her father, Robert Bickner, is of Irish decent, and her mother, Patcharin Peyasantiwong, is a Thai-American. After graduating from Verona Area High School in 2007,

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Angeline attended the University of Wisconsin. Following her graduation from the University of Wisconsin, she served as an AmeriCorps volunteer in St. Paul, MN. As an AmeriCorps volunteer, Angeline worked at an inner-city charter school and with Outward Bound. In her capacity as an Outward Bound volunteer she took students with diverse backgrounds on camping and canoeing trips aimed at improving their leadership skills. Following her year as an AmeriCorps volunteer, she decided to go abroad and teach English in Istanbul, Turkey. After one year of living and teaching in Turkey, Angeline took a job at the Baku Oxford School in Shamkir, Azerbaijan.

Shamkir is Azerbaijan's sixth largest city and sits approximately one hour by bus from the Georgian border. Because Shamkir has the Baku Oxford School, it is not uncommon for foreigners to live in her city. However, due to her appearance, she has received palpable amounts of unwanted attention. On a number of occasions cars have followed her while she runs errands. Consistently when Angeline is in public she notices the blank or bewildered stares she receives from Azerbaijanis. She often feels disconnected from the Azerbaijanis in her city due to her inexperience with the language. Upon telling new Azerbaijani acquaintances that she is an American, she is unflinching asked again about her nationality due to her race.



The predominant issue that Angeline has faced during her time in Azerbaijan has not been related to her race; rather it is the lack of gender equality that is most frustrating to her. In addition to teaching young students, Angeline also worked as an English conversation club coordinator for staff members at a youth center in Shamkir. The youth center's staff consists of some of the most highly educated people in Shamkir, many of whom have studied at universities in America or Baku. While being impressed by their ability to learn a new language, she was disheartened to hear how the women viewed their roles in Azerbaijani society. During one of her conversation clubs, a female student told Angeline that in Azerbaijan "gender equality (has not yet arrived) – men have their place and women have theirs. Men carry bags for women, so how are women expected to be equal?" The frankness of the women's understanding of their limited role in society weighed heavily on Angeline thereafter.

Despite the difficulties that Angeline has faced, she has continued to make a positive impact on her students. "Little by little I can see new ideas being

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formulated in their minds. It's not going to happen overnight, but I'm confident that I've provided a start."

## **Conclusion**

US Peace Corps volunteers are tasked with showing their communities a comprehensive view of what it means to be an American. Dedicating 27 months in a place like Azerbaijan can be trying for anyone. Peace Corps volunteers like Chhun, David and Jennie, as well as English teachers like Angeline are often faced with adversities, but have overcome them. Despite the stares, misunderstandings and hardships they've endured during their service, they have continued to better the lives of the people with whom they've come into contact. Ultimately, their time in Azerbaijan will come to an end, but undoubtedly they have all left a lasting legacy in their communities of what it truly means to be an American.

**Chris Doege** is a US Peace Corps Volunteer serving in Azerbaijan. As a Youth Development Volunteer, he primarily teaches English, coaches sports and works closely with counterparts to improve his host NGO's capacity. Chris can be reached at: [cdoege01@gmail.com](mailto:cdoege01@gmail.com).