

**Q&A with Peace Corps Volunteers and Middlebury Alumni
Benjamin Wagner '13 and Hillary Chutter-Ames '13**

February 2015

Benjamin Wagner '13

Health Extension Volunteer, Nepal

Hometown: Pound Ridge, NY

Where are you living and working?

"I live in a rural village in the midwestern part of Nepal, about a 15-hour bus ride from Kathmandu. I'm posted in a primary health center but I spend most of my time in the community, working with groups of women and farmers."

What is your main project? Do you have a secondary project?

"Food security concerns the availability, access and use of nutritious foods. In practice, it encompasses agriculture, nutrition, income generation, and more. Working with local mothers groups, farmers groups, and the nearby health center, I've dabbled in a lot of different aspects of food security, including building improved, smokeless cook stoves, delivering nutrition trainings to mothers and pregnant women, and building plastic greenhouses for off-season vegetable production. At the moment, my focus has been on female collective mushroom farming. Through a Small Projects Assistance USAID grant, the women's development committee and I received funding to establish six mushroom collectives, deliver a mushroom training, and construct two mushroom cultivation houses. The women have been cranking out mushrooms these past few months, which will improve the nutrition and increase the income of their families. A Nepali women's rights NGO provided a technical trainer, and they're beginning to work with the government agricultural development office for future funding and materials."

What college did you attend and what year did you graduate? How did your college education and experience prepare you for Peace Corps service?

"I graduated in 2013 from Middlebury College in Vermont, where I majored in neuroscience and minored in global health. I knew I wanted to study medicine, but also that I could use a break from school. Studying global health in particular increased my interest in development and health, which in turn spurred me to apply to the Peace Corps."

"What really made up my mind to join the Peace Corps was the winter I spent at Middlebury shadowing an internist in the local hospital. He was a returned Peace Corps volunteer and his manner with patients really inspired me to develop my humanistic side so that I, someday, could practice medicine like him."

What is your favorite part of your service or location?

"It's hard to say what my favorite part of service has been so far. I've had some unforgettable experiences in my community: Celebrating the Hindu holiday Holi with a

bunch of local guys, dancing with my training host family and many instances of working alongside some remarkable Nepalis. I've also really enjoyed serving as a mentor to new groups of volunteers as they adjust to work and life in Nepal."

February 2015

Hillary Chutter-Ames

Agricultural Extension Volunteer, Togo

Hometown: South Hero, VT

Where are you living and working?

"My first post was as an Environmental Action and Food Security Extension Agent in a medium-sized village in Togo that included nearly 15,000 people, among which nearly all of the ethnic groups of Togo are represented. I worked primarily with LYDAT, the local middle and high school, as well as with a volunteer community environmental association, AVPE (Association des Volontaires pour la Protection de l'Environnement). I currently work in another village as the Peace Corps Volunteer Leader for Food Security, managing USAID's West African Food Security Partnership (WAFSP) projects for Peace Corps Togo."

What is your main project? Do you have a secondary project?

"Within my primary project of environmental action and food security, my work focused on gardening to improve household food security, particularly with youth and women. Along with two other volunteers, I organized the Femmes Contre la Faim (Women Against Hunger) Conference, which brought together female leaders in the region for food security and nutrition training. The 12 women returned to their villages to implement gardening and food transformation projects, to share their new knowledge and skills with other women, and to improve food security in their communities. I also worked with students at my local middle/high school to establish and maintain a school garden. With two other volunteers I am organizing the national youth environmental camp, Camp ECO-Action, which trains 30 girls in environmental stewardship and improving food security."

"My secondary project extended my work with girls and women, including girls' soccer clinics and a girls' soccer team, as well as a women's savings and loan group. I am coordinating programming, and monitoring and evaluation, for the national Women's Wellness and Empowerment Conference (WWEC), which trains 30 women in women's health, rights, and leadership."

"As the Peace Corps Volunteer Leader for Food Security, I manage USAID's West African Food Security Partnership (WAFSP) projects for Peace Corps Togo. This involves support of food security trainings, technical exchanges, and volunteer small grants."

What college did you attend and what year did you graduate? How did your college education and experience prepare you for Peace Corps service?

“I graduated from Middlebury College in 2013, 10 days before leaving for service in Togo, in fact. While I haven't used my Russian so far, the skills I developed at Middlebury have proved invaluable to service in Togo. Classes within my Russian major, summer language school and study abroad in Moscow prepared me to learn new languages in Togo – including French and Ewe – by helping me develop language learning strategies and be confident in my ability to live and work in another culture.

“My work managing budgets and planning workshops for service groups on campus has certainly prepared me for the facilitation and training work that comprises the majority of my Peace Corps work. Middlebury emphasizes strong writing and research skills, as well as public speaking and presentation – all have helped my work in Togo.”

What is your favorite part of your service or location?

“Besides piment and fried soja, my favorite – and also the most difficult – part of my service in Togo has been adjusting to a ‘culture of sitting.’ My community in Togo values highly personal relationships with time spent just “being” together. A stereotypically American emphasis on productivity and results has been a challenge to reconcile with this way of work and life – but has also been the most rewarding.”

How are you making a difference for your Peace Corps host community?

“Together we are teaching students gardening skills to improve their food security and nutrition. We are creating village savings and loan groups for women to save their money and take out loans to improve their income-generating activities. We are raising awareness about environmental issues, from pollution to deforestation. We are building skills in community based organizations to conduct monitoring and evaluation, manage projects and develop strategic plans. We are giving girls the opportunity to play soccer and develop leadership skills.

“I often feel that my community is making more of a difference for me than I am for them or with them – like any relationship, it is a two-way street. We cook together, eat tofu at the market together, play soccer, work in the fields, learn, share, and dance. The difference we have made in the community may be small, or perhaps less visible in the short-term. I may not fully comprehend the difference that Togo has made for me for many years to come, but the impact, I think, is anything but small.”