

Winter Newsletter Marhabtain 2023-2024

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Country Director Spotlight

Jack Seeger: A journey of service

By: Allison Freedman

J1 (1997-1998)

I recently met Jack Seeger (virtually) from his home where he is currently a Peace Corps Volunteer in Thailand. Jack served as the 2nd Country Director in Jordan, from 1999 to 2001.

I have been lucky to meet many different people through my Peace Corps Jordan and Friends of Jordan service, but meeting Jack I was struck by his authentic commitment to service.

I think that when people hear of the Peace Corps, they may think first of the 'exotic' locations where volunteers live and work and often travel. But the core of the Peace Corps is truly about service. And while I personally have a strong connection to the country of Jordan, the truth is that I initially joined the Peace Corps for the opportunity to be of service and my love for Jordan evolved from my time there. Jack's commitment is a refreshing reminder of service, to the country and to the world.

Jack's life of service and connection to the Peace Corps began back when he was a volunteer in Morocco in the early 70s, from 1975 to 1978. After completing his service and extending for an extra year, Jack returned to the US where he pursued his education, ultimately earning a PhD in International Education and Public Administration. Jack married a fellow PC Morocco volunteer and later they returned with children to Morocco where Jack continued to serve as the Peace Corps Country Director (PCD) from 1995-1999.

Jack first met Larry Bartlett, the first PC Jordan Director, as Larry was wrapping up his time in Jordan. Jack had gone to Jordan for a workshop and spent time with Larry and in the country without realizing that he was being considered for the role. Shortly after he returned to Morocco, Jack was asked if he was interested in taking over the role of PCD in Jordan. In the summer of 1999, Jack moved to Jordan as the Country Director (CD) until just before 9/11 in August of 2001.

When Jack maxed out his time working with Peace Corps (since employees can only work for the agency for up to five years), he began working for an organization where he was able to set up, evaluate, and advise on various international projects (such as anti-child labor and anti-trafficking) called Juarez & Associates. Through this work he had the opportunity to continue to travel to Africa, Asia and the Middle East again, which allowed him to get back to Jordan (and Lebanon, Iraq, and the West Bank). One summer when he was in Iraq, he was thrilled to be able to connect with family members of some of his friends from Jordan (who were refugees). He had promised to look them up if he ever got there, and so as soon as he made it there, he looked them up! Jack also had the opportunity to work occasionally with Peace Corps again over the years, leading the first pre-service training (PST) in Turkmenistan, and later helping to reopen Indonesia. He had become more drawn to Asia during this time which, in retrospect, didn't surprise him much, since he had studied Indonesian in school.

In 2012, Jack retired and moved to Florida to care for his mother. Several years

later, he joined the Peace Corps again as a volunteer in East Timor. But he was there for only 20 months before all of the volunteers had to return home because of Covid.

In fact, while he was serving in East Timor, his son also became a Peace Corps volunteer, serving in Morocco at the same time. (His son was also sent home as a result of the pandemic.)

But Jack was committed to a life of service, and he wanted to go back and continue his. He waited patiently for some time, applying for various programs to find the best fit. Eventually, there was an opportunity to serve in Thailand. Jack has been serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand since Jan 2023. He was sworn in in April after completing PST and moved to his site several hours from the closest city.

In Jack's words, it's been interesting to go from being a Country Director to being a volunteer. Jack said that when he was in East Timor, he did not tell anyone of his previous experience. Of course it was on his resume, so the staff knew that he was previously a Peace Corps Director, but he did not initially tell the other volunteers. Yet they found out anyway. Jack was reluctant to share this information because he didn't want to be treated differently and because he didn't want to find himself being critical of the PC staff.

But these concerns did not materialize for Jack. He got along well with the other volunteers and they treated him like any other, though they did occasionally come to him for advice. In his new environment, Jack found that he was too focused on challenging himself and adapting to his new role, so he never found himself being critical of the PC staff. He knows well that being a CD is not easy. He knew about the difficulties they faced, and he often had the opportunity to share this perspective with the other volunteers. He actually thinks that it may have ultimately helped the East Timor CD that the volunteers had heard this, especially from a fellow volunteer.

Jack recalled some of the different types of challenges that he has encountered in the countries where he has served. For example, food was not as plentiful in East Timor (rice, leaves, bark) but he currently eats very well in Thailand. Jack has been an English teacher both in East Timor and in Thailand, but in East Timor he worked with high school age students whereas in Thailand he teaches much younger kids in the 1st - 6th grades. He works long, hard hours as a teacher now, with classes of 30 students, but he's formed a good team with his counterpart and is proud of his work there so far. Another difference is the connectivity afforded by cell phones, which were not yet prevalent during his time in Jordan. Although this makes many things easier, it also creates challenges such as high expectations of the volunteers. Jack compares this to his time as a volunteer in Morocco when he didn't call home once in 2 years! He recalls that, although it was challenging to not be able to call home during his first term of service, he did write letters regularly to his mom and dad. In fact, just before leaving for his service in East Timor not too long ago, he found and re-read all of those letters that he had written back when he was 25.

Jack thinks back so fondly of his experiences in Jordan. For example, It was there that he made one of his closest friends! But also the desert impacted him more in Jordan than it had in Morocco, and the dry climate of Jordan felt different from that of Africa. Jack loved spending time in Wadi Rum, the Dead Sea, etc., recalling that there was something completely unique about being in that part of the Middle East. He recalls the resilience of the Jordanian people, along with the down-to-earth nature of the Jordanian royal family, who would

even drive their own cars.

When Jack visited Jordan years after his time there as Country Director, he barely recognized anything in Amman and even had trouble finding the house where he had lived. He would love to see Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) return to Jordan at some point. He believes that Peace Corps Volunteers could add value there contributing where there are so many refugees. He feels strongly that the Peace Corps continues to be important, not only in the work that volunteers do during their service but also the contributions that Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) make throughout the world following their service. Jack believes that this truly makes a difference at a humanitarian level. That's part of the foundation of the life of service that Jack has devoted himself to.

Everywhere he goes, Jack finds a connection with other PCVs and opportunities to share stories about his time in Jordan. Jack will always be grateful for his experiences as the Peace Corps Country Director in Jordan, and what it's allowed him to do in his life. He would do any or all of it again, though he admits that taking on the role of Country Director might be a lot for him now. He really enjoys the volunteer life: It's quiet, he is learning to speak Thai, and he lives with a wonderful family. However, for just a moment, he allowed himself to pause and concluded that he would consider being a Country Director again, but only if he could live with a family this time!



Save the Date!

FOJ Annual Meeting

Saturday, February 24, 2024 @ 2pm ET

Zoom link to be provided

Contact us to RSVP or with any questions: president@friendsofjordan.org

Statement on the Conflict in Gaza and Israel

January 2024

The Officers of Friends of Jordan deeply mourn the devastation, suffering, and loss of life in Gaza, Israel, and the surrounding region. We condemn the brutal attacks on Israel on October 7. We join those who call for an end to violence and war in Gaza, an improved security environment and access to economic opportunity that will benefit all sides, along with full access to humanitarian aid for those in need and an immediate release of all hostages. Innocent civilians should never be used as pawns or human shields by warring parties on either side of a conflict. All people are entitled to a safe place to live.

Back to Tafilah

By Karina O'Meara

J3 (1999-2001) Special Education Volunteer Amman and Tafilah

The last seven years of teaching in Kuwait allowed me occasional visits to Jordan. Last summer after saying goodbye to Kuwait, I made my assumed last trip to Jordan (at least for a while). In August, I returned to my site to visit my Tafilah friends, Kefah and Rana.

Arriving in Amman's southern bus station I noticed new restaurants, mostly empty, lining the station where 2 JDs bought a complete breakfast with tea. I felt a familiar annoyance waiting an hour for the bus to fill and leave. The drive South was 5 JD, and the bus stopped at the same rest-stop. Children begging at the rest-stop was new and heart-breaking: evidence of the desperation of not only 1.3 million estimated registered and unregistered refugees in Jordan, but also of Jordanians struggling to survive. If demographics is destiny, then with 11 million citizens today – more than double the population of 1999 – the needs are exponentially greater.

The turn off from the King's Highway to Tafilah is where my disorientation began; we entered on a new road and went first to the Tafilah Technical University (opened in 2005) where the bus mostly emptied out. Ten minutes later I hopped off and walked toward my old neighborhood. Another new road, an enormous new municipal building, and I was clueless. Where was Madrassah Al Amal School for Deaf Children? I found the school, then wandered up to my Tafilah home. Really, I climbed the steep hill with the olive tree to reach my old door. I sought out my friend Kefah.

The night I left Tafilah in October of 2001, Kefah climbed that path with a newborn girl and two sons. This time when I found Kefah, she called her daughter so that I could see the now university graduate on FaceTime. Kefah cooked a meal while we talked. They had lost family members during Covid but considered themselves lucky because their yard with olive and fruit trees

allowed young grandchildren a place to run and play. Sadly, lockdown had not spared them the death of loved ones. We spent the rest of the afternoon catching up with her kids and now grandkids. I connected on WhatsApp with her family. Her grandson walked me to the amazingly- improved bus station where I waited another hour for the bus to fill up. I kept thinking, how is it possible that no schedule exists? How can students plan to attend classes when they never know when the bus will leave or arrive in Tafilah or Amman?

When I served as a special education teacher in Tafilah, by my local director's request, I befriended a young woman from Hessa who had been hired as an interpreter for a European/Jordanian development project. Rana stayed 3 nights a week in Tafilah. We worked during the day and spent evenings chatting with the (9!) neighbor girls and their mother, Um Ayman, while sitting under the olive tree by our door. After her project ended and I left Jordan we stayed sporadically in touch.

As I left Tafilah, Rana texted me, she was in Madaba and would pick me up at the "Madaba Bridge." We had decades of life to catch up on and talked non-stop for hours. We wandered through Madaba, and she showed me the multi-storied Madaba City Mall. I could not even orient myself in my favorite little city whose every street I had walked when I had lived in Jordan. The development of this once very sleepy town where PCVs trained for years was startling and impressive though a bit disconcerting.

That night Rana drove me to my Bedouin host family. She spent hours chatting with my host parents, sisters, brothers, and their spouses. Rana had been elected mayor of Hessa roughly ten years ago. Remarkably, she managed to convince the surrounding towns to consolidate municipalities and reduce administrative costs, leveraging the savings and efficiencies to fund development. Of course, she did this while being married and raising four children. While Rana is an outlier for tribal women's participation in politics, the trajectory of how education for women is influencing changes in Jordanian society has been fascinating to observe.

Today, I see how university education has made the trajectory of Kefah's daughter's life so different from her mother's life. I also notice how my host family's 7 sisters' and 5 brothers' lives have unfolded. Kefah and my practical Bedouin host mother, Sara, were of a generation where many girls were not educated. Yet all their daughters finished high school, and many have gone beyond it. All my married brothers have wives with bachelor's degrees who work outside the home. All their children are expected to excel in school and with educated mothers they all do extra homework.

I cannot wait to see in ten years what my other nieces and nephews will have decided to do in their lives. While there have been many changes, traditions and family bonds remain the guiding principle of Jordan. And that's what struck me the most about my last visit to Jordan for a while, but who knows? :)



Our FOJ Website is 'Moving'

The National Peace Corps Association is in the process of migrating [our website](#) to a new platform. We are working with the NPCA so that this is a smooth transition but if you see something on the website that doesn't look quite right, please reach out and let us know!

Email communication@friendsofjordan.org.

2024 Officer Nominations

It is time for our annual call for Officers for Friends of Jordan. Terms begin March 1, 2024 for one year.

Officer positions include **President, Vice President, Treasurer, Program Coordinator, Secretary, Membership Coordinator, Communications Officer, and Fundraising Coordinator**. Officer position descriptions can be found here <https://www.friendsofjordan.org/cpages/who-we-are>.

Our current officers are returning for another term, and we are open to training new officers into positions we've held. Each requires only a few hours a month at most. We have a great group, but we could do even more with more people involved. Please consider joining us and enabling Friends of Jordan to reach further!

To express interest or learn more, please email secretary@friendsofjordan.org

-Karina O'Meara, Ken Finley, Rose Kyprianou, and Allison Freedman

News from Jordan

In Jordan a Sprawling Palestinian Diaspora Looks Towards Gaza

https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/20/magazine/jordan-palestinian-refugees.html?mwgrp=c-dbar&unlocked_article_code=1.JE0.mWOv.vTiaEK3B3TPI&smid=url-share

Jordanian entrepreneur secures second spot on Forbes 30 Under 30 list, shares key insights for youth

<https://jordantimes.com/news/local/jordanian-entrepreneur-secures-second-spot-forbes-30-under-30-list-shares-key-insights>

Coming Soon

Member Stories! Accepting all ideas and articles!
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