

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: HAYLEY PARENTI '18

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Sworn into the Peace Corps shortly after graduation, **Hayley Parenti '18** works to improve regional health, safety, and welfare through community outreach and education.



Living her childhood dream, Hayley now serves as a Peace Corps volunteer. She works in the remote Adamawa region of Cameroon, West Africa, focusing on maternal and child health.

From New Hampshire to West Africa ... how did your service evolve?

Hayley: When I was 12 years old, I started getting into Amnesty International and human rights, and then discovered the Peace Corps. I kept that in my mind all the way through my schooling and when senior year at Riv finally arrived, I could apply. I was accepted and have been in-country since September 2018. Following three months as a trainee, I was sworn in as a volunteer for two years of service. My current post is in Cameroon, West Africa.

What are your mission and goals?

Hayley: I serve in the health sector, which means that my project under the Peace Corps is maternal and child health. My main goals are working on malnutrition, HIV/AIDS testing and education, and encouraging women to come to the health center, especially to give birth. Another focus is malaria. I've given presentations and counseled women individually on the disease, why breastfeeding is important, and why

they should sleep under insecticide treated bed-nets. My village's 'high school' no longer has an English teacher, so I will most likely start teaching English classes there. A new goal will be to get an Education Volunteer placed in my village.

What are the most significant challenges in the community you're serving?

Hayley: There are a lot of challenges in my community, but one of the biggest is lack of education. This is especially prevalent for women, as they are even less likely to receive education than the men. Another big challenge involves food. Malnutrition is a big issue. There really aren't any vegetables and few fruits in the village. The most common, easiest, and cheapest food made here is fufu. Often times, it's a staple in every meal; people think that it's part of a good meal nutrition-wise. In reality, there's really no nutritional value, but because it's filling and can feed big families, it's the most common thing made.

What are your biggest challenges—personal and professional?

Hayley: Language is a challenge. The main languages in Cameroon are mostly French and some English, but there are more than 250 different dialects spoken. In my region, Fulfulde is the main language. I don't speak that much of it, so I can't do anything work-wise by myself. This also makes it difficult to make friends, since the majority of women only speak Fulfulde. Going along with language, there are feelings of isolation and loneliness, since I can't communicate with others as much as I would like to. The culture here is very different, and that's one of my biggest challenges. I live in a very conservative, Muslim village. There's polygamy, child marriage, young girls giving birth, and women not being able to even leave their homes without their husband's permission; these women can't even go to the health center to give birth without their husband's permission. It's different and very difficult.

What impact has your service had on the community and on you?

Hayley: The impact volunteers have on the community they serve isn't always seen during our time here. Change takes a lot of time, and while two years seems like a lot, it's often not enough time for us to see those changes, but the volunteers who come after us will. Peace Corps has had a big impact on me. While this has always been my dream, it is so far out of my comfort zone it's a shock to many (including me), that I'm able to do it. I've learned I'm capable of a lot more than I thought I was, and I'm a lot more resilient.

What are your plans after the Peace Corps?

Hayley: Right now, I'm leaning towards law school. I'm interested in international and comparative law or law and social change so that I can do something with human rights. I've also thought about going back to school for a double major in global health and international affairs.

Any advice for others considering the Peace Corps?

Hayley: Something I heard a lot before coming here was, "Oh, I wanted to do that when I was younger," and "I wish I knew about that when I was your age." There's no age limit to the Peace Corps. To anyone who might have wanted to do it when they were younger, you still can! ■

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