Tony Gasbarro's work with villagers in La Montañona, El Salvador, included helping them develop sustainable forestry practices.
Mastering the Peace Corps
The toughest job you’ll ever love.

By LJ Evans

Tony Gasbarro is a double-dipper. He got so much satisfaction out of being a Peace Corps volunteer, he decided to do it again.

“My first Peace Corps experience was positive, but the second time, with 35 years behind me, my assignment fit me like a glove,” Gasbarro said.

His first stint was in the Dominican Republic as a forestry advisor in 1962 – 1964, right after graduating from college. He went on to a lengthy career and ended up with the Cooperative Extension Service in Fairbanks as associate professor of forestry extension. When he retired in 1996 after 23 years at UAF, he signed up for Peace Corps service again.

His second tour of duty was in La Montañona, a village high in the mountains of El Salvador. Gasbarro worked with villagers to put a forest management plan into action and harvest trees to generate income without destroying the forest. He also assisted in the local school and helped community members encourage tourism in the area.

That was just the start

Gasbarro’s Peace Corps service officially ended in 1998, but that’s when his unofficial service began. He goes back to El Salvador twice a year to help with development and humanitarian projects and to visit the people of La Montañona. He worked...
within Denver-based nonprofit Project Salvador to help develop a scholarship program to enable needy rural Salvadoran youth to realize their dreams of an education. Gasbarro has also helped coordinate several visits of educators to deliver workshops in English-instruction skills for Salvadoran high school teachers.

In 2002, Gasbarro and fellow returned Peace Corps volunteer Kristy Long, a foods specialist with Cooperative Extension, helped bring a Peace Corps master's international program to UAF. PCMI programs allow students to earn a master’s degree at universities throughout the U.S. in conjunction with 27 months of Peace Corps service.

“The Peace Corps service adds a step above the degree,” said Long, who served in Tonga from 1973 – 1975. “It's the opportunity to apply their academic training to a real-life situation.”

After two years of planning, two programs were launched at UAF — Peace Corps service is added as an option to already existing master’s degrees in natural resources in the School of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences and rural development in the College of Rural and Community Development.

Students typically spend one year on course work, then go overseas for two years of Peace Corps service, ending with another semester on campus. The student gains an advanced degree plus two years of substantive international experience, Gasbarro said.

He now serves as the coordinator for the UAF program, an official but unpaid position. He is a liaison between the university and the Peace Corps, deals with the students' needs and generally keeps things moving along.

Eric Goldman, Peace Corps' national manager for the master's programs, said the Peace Corps started collaborating with universities to develop graduate programs in 1987.

“We needed to cultivate volunteers who brought enhanced levels of education and skill to their assignments, particularly in targeted or scarce areas of expertise,” Goldman said.

Ninety-eight master's international programs are offered at 62 universities; as of April 2009, 230 master's students are serving overseas, with about the same number completing courses, Goldman said.

“Tony is a dedicated soul. He's very committed to this program, the Peace Corps and his students, and he's a wonderful person to work with,” Goldman said.

UAF's PCMI students

Erin Kelly, the first UAF student to finish the program, received her master's degree in natural resources management last spring. (See sidebar on page 15.) Three other UAF students are completing their Peace Corps service: Jessica Mayer in Macedonia and Loki Tobin in Azerbaijan, both CRCD; and Matthew Helt in Paraguay, SNRAS. Gasbarro expects five students to enter the program this fall.

A unique aspect of the CRCD program is that all the courses are available online, so Fairbanks residency isn’t required.

“At first some of the Peace Corps staff told me ‘That just can’t work!’” Gasbarro said. “But with the support of Eric Goldman in fact it has worked, and Jessica Mayer has proved that it can.” Mayer came to Fairbanks to complete the courses, but she could have completed the degree from anywhere, Gasbarro said.
What does UAF get out of it?
The master’s international program adds a lot of value, both for the student and the university, Gasbarro said.

“When we proposed this program there was some resistance because people said we are Alaska, an arctic university — why would we want to expend time, energy and funds on the rest of the world? But we owe it to our students to give them the opportunity to gain a global perspective,” Gasbarro says.

His view is shared by UAF’s administration.

“The ability to see and be involved in the global community is important for our students,” said Larry Duffy, dean of the Graduate School. “Even more important, the experience shows them how their Alaska and arctic research skills can have relevance to the rest of the world.”

UAF is also working toward offering graduate fellowships through the Fellows/USA Peace Corps program, Duffy said. The fellowships offer financial assistance to returned Peace Corps volunteers who want to pursue graduate studies. In return, students serve an internship in a community in need of help.

Bringing it all back home
“When I heard Erin report on her experiences I knew it was all worth it,” Long said. “She saw the real-life impact her knowledge could have on people’s lives.”

Gasbarro sees an even more profound transformation.

“Erin is a changed person,” Gasbarro said. “She has an empathy for people in the Third World that’s very hard to get any other way.”

The experience will also have a profound effect on her professional life, he said.

“A high-level official in a state resource management agency recently told me, ‘All other things being equal, I would hire a returned Peace Corps volunteer at the drop of a hat, because I know that person knows how to cope with adversity, how to deal with different cultures and won’t get discouraged,’” Gasbarro said.

Kelly herself knows she has only begun to understand the transformation she’s undergone the last few years. “Tony said he didn’t identify his real passion in life until his second Peace Corps service, after he’d retired. I feel really grateful that I’ve done it so young. My life will definitely take a different direction than it would have otherwise.”

Erin’s Story
as told to LJ Evans

It had been in the back of my mind to join the Peace Corps ever since a returned volunteer talked to our class in high school. I majored in environmental science in college, but really wasn’t sure if I could handle Peace Corps. I did a couple years of AmeriCorps and loved it, so I thought I could take it to the next level.

I probably found out about the Peace Corps master’s international programs on the Peace Corps website. When I found the UAF program, which was just starting up, I thought it might be neat to help shape the program. The response I got was great. I heard back from Steve Sparrow, Pete Fix and Susan Todd, and then Tony.

Tony has been such a big support. I don’t know what I’d do without that guy. He understands because he’s been there. More than anything else he’s there to listen, about the challenges of being a volunteer and also to advise about the academic program.

He came to visit my site in El Salvador several times. Once we hiked through my park for a whole day, and another time I visited his old site at La Montañona. Ten years later, people are still running up to him with big smiles on their faces, it’s like he never left. He always comes back with piles of pictures from the last visit. They live in such a remote place, they have nothing, certainly no cameras, so this is a really special gift.

“The Peace Corps opened my eyes to so many things I had never considered before.”

For my master’s project I assessed the potential for ecotourism development in El Imposible National Park. Allowing me to live in the community for a year and a half before I even started my research was a fabulously opportunity. The relationships I had already established in the community meant I knew the key people and they already knew and trusted me.

My project gave me access to people in government agencies that just being a Peace Corps volunteer would never have given me. I have a whole new understanding of international development that I wouldn’t have had otherwise.

LJ Evans is a writer and editor for UAF Marketing and Communications. She served in the Peace Corps in the Philippines from 2001 – 2003.

View a map showing Peace Corps volunteers affiliated with UAF, submit your own information or comment at www.uaf.edu/aurora/.