

PLANS INTERRUPTED: HOW AN SJP GRAD FOUND OPPORTUNITY AMID COVID

“I said goodbye, I cried, and then I walked into a room of strangers, my new 54-person support system and family for the next three months and beyond.”

Every year, a small group of people from across America experience a moment similar to this one. They are headed in disparate directions and most will never cross paths with each other. But they all share an important path and identity; they are all members of the Peace Corps.

For SJP graduate **Sarah Smith '15**, her Peace Corps journey landed her in Mozambique. She arrived in late August of 2019 and began her 27-month stint just months removed from walking across the graduation stage at NYU and after traveling nearly 6,500 miles from home on a 15-hour flight.

But Sarah's journey actually began well before she took that long flight. Her family raised her in a culture of service where it became second nature to join in any endeavor dedicated to serving others. As a student at SJP, Sarah was heavily involved in all offerings of outreach in the School community, including traveling to the Dominican Republic for an international service immersion during April break of her senior year. She carried this tendency into her college career, where she eventually traveled on a similar service immersion trip to Belize, as well as served at Jumpstart NYU, an organization that trains college students to help preschoolers in low-income communities build the literacy and social skills they need for lifelong learning.

As Sarah approached her senior year, she knew that serving in the Peace Corps was where she felt called. It took a year of applications and interviews, visas and clearances to complete a process that whittles down a pool of applicants around 20,000 to fill fewer than 4,000 positions. Sarah was thrilled to learn of her eventual acceptance and placement within the program, and had just a short period of time to prepare for her departure a mere three months after graduating from college.

Since the Peace Corps' inception in 1961, 235,000 Americans have served in 141 countries. Throughout these postings in the developing world, the Peace Corps aims to reduce the influence of deadly disease, introduce modern agricultural techniques, preserve natural environments, and improve access to education—with an emphasis on equal education for girls. Volunteers in Mozambique, Sarah among them, were focused on projects in education and health.

Over the course of her first few months in-country, Sarah worked on her Portuguese, settled in with her host family, and learned about local life and Mozambican culture. This training time lasted until the end of November, at which point Sarah received her permanent site placement. While

most of her cohort were excited to be placed in far reaches of the vast expanse of this large country, Sarah was less enthused when she discovered that her site would be only a few hours away within the same province. Her host family reassured her that this was good because it would permit them to stay in relatively close contact, and that brought comfort to Sarah, who felt a strong bond with her adoptive family.

By January, Sarah began her role as English teacher in the school of her new town, and within her first two months she had settled into a routine of enjoyable work, exploration, and building relationships. By early March, however, her situation changed dramatically. On March 11, 2020, the worldwide spread of the COVID-19 virus and its impact had finally reached their part of the world, and Sarah was informed that her program was to abruptly end. Where she had been expecting to spend two or more years in service, her total engagement lasted a mere seven months.

Sarah returned to the United States a week after that shocking announcement and was faced with the striking prospect of “what to do next?”. A friend from the Peace Corps reached out to her and convinced her to return to New York, which followed with her applying to, and being accepted into, a graduate program in Education at the University of Arizona. Moving to Arizona ended up being the crucial pivot Sarah needed in order to maintain her consistent life journey of service to others.

While Sarah pursues her Masters in Education, with a focus on equity literacy, she is required to actively teach—and she is flourishing. She teaches at a secondary charter school populated by students who hail from challenged environments and consequently have difficulty learning. What Sarah values most about her experience is that all faculty members are enjoined to prioritize each student's health and well-being before diving into the curriculum. The concept of equity is met by ensuring that students are getting the resources they need in order to succeed, without a focus on meeting testing standards.

Her transitions have been extreme over the past few months, requiring the resiliency that got her into the Peace Corps in the first place. “I was teaching in Mozambique, 80 students in a classroom with a chalkboard and nothing else,” she said. “Now I am teaching five students in a classroom with a few more connected remotely and nothing else. I feel really good about where I have landed.”

If you are interested in reading about Sarah's Peace Corps experience in more detail, she has posted an excellent blog documenting it at: <https://sarahinmoz.blogspot.com> or simply scan the QR Code.

