

Time in Peace Corps 'rewarding'

■ A UNL professor encourages his students to follow in his footsteps.

By Cara Pesek
Staff writer

Peace Corps proves to be life-changing, say some Nebraskans.

When he was young, Dave Wilson kept a scrapbook of the Kennedy presidency.

Among the newspaper clippings and other mementos of the Kennedys' years in the White House, was information about the Peace Corps, a program started by the Kennedy administration in 1961.

Wilson, now an associate professor of curriculum and instruction at UNL, decided he wanted to eventually join the organization.

Then he went to college and forgot all about it.

Years later, Wilson said, a conversation with a friend in a bar changed that. They talked about future plans, and the friend mentioned he was joining the Peace Corps.

Wilson said he remembered his childhood goal and decided he also wanted to join.

"Something just clicked," Wilson said, "and I remember thinking, 'Yeah, that's what I want to do.'"

In January 1977, Wilson left the United States and began his Peace Corps assignment in Afghanistan.

Although his family had expressed concerns about Wilson's leaving,

Wilson said he didn't realize what he was getting himself into until he was on the plane that took him to the Peace Corps assignment.

Wilson said he remembered sitting between two businessmen on the flight. Eventually, one of the men asked Wilson where he was going. When Wilson explained he had joined the Peace Corps, the man asked Wilson to stand up.

"He announced where I was going and what I was going to do to everyone on the plane, and everyone stood up and applauded me," Wilson said, "and I was appalled."

Wilson said it was at that moment he realized he would be spending two full years away from home in a completely foreign place.

After two months of training and a short period of teaching English in the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul, a Peace Corps teaching position opened in a province. Wilson applied for the position and got the job.

He taught English at a boys' high school. Although he was respected by the students and other teachers, Wilson said he was often lonely.

He decided he needed to take action.

"I was sitting in the teacher's office one day, and I decided I was literally going to pick a friend," Wilson said.

So he did.

He began to bicycle home with another teacher after school each day. Eventually, Wilson said, he and that teacher became good friends. Later, Wilson became close to that teacher's entire family.

Then, communists took over Afghanistan in 1979, and Wilson's life, as well as the lives of everyone around him, changed completely.

Because he was an American, Wilson was looked at suspiciously as an outsider.

"I was pulled off my bike and questioned with a gun to my head or my stomach," Wilson said.

Worse, Wilson said, was that his new friends were tortured because of their association with him.

Still, they remained his friends.

"They always took me in as one of their own," Wilson said.

Despite the danger and violence all around him, Wilson was able to find beauty in his surroundings.

He said the time he was able to spend on his own helped him realize who he wanted to be.

And of course, there were the friendships he formed.

"The coolest things were the relationships and a totally different sense of self," Wilson said. "I sort of grew up there, I think. I was one of those people who always thought I was weak. If I was captured by the enemy, I would be the first to give away the secrets. But I'm not. I'm strong."

When Wilson's time as a Peace Corps volunteer was up, he didn't want to go home. However, he made the difficult decision to leave.

"At the end, I knew I needed to leave because I was hurting the people I loved," Wilson said. "I knew I would never see them again, so I didn't want to go."

And because of the chaos caused

by the political turmoil in Afghanistan, Wilson said he never did see most of the people he met through the Peace Corps.

"Almost everyone I taught with is dead now," Wilson said. "The school where I taught was bombed."

When he returned to the United States, Wilson said he found it difficult to relate to Americans, and he had a hard time talking about all the things he experienced.

"For years, I didn't talk about it. I couldn't. It was just too powerful," Wilson said. "I just sort of spoke in general terms that it was a great experience."

Then Wilson encouraged his brother to join the Peace Corps. His brother was accepted and also loved the challenge the Peace Corps provided him.

Now, Wilson invites Peace Corps recruiters to talk to his classes each semester, in hopes that a few of his students will make the same decision he did. And several have.

Courtney Wickham, a 1999 graduate of the Teacher's College decided to join the Peace Corps after Wilson and others encouraged her to do so.

Wickham teaches English as a Foreign Language in Ternopil, Ukraine. She is one of 64 Nebraskans currently serving in the Peace Corps.

Wickham said she is glad that Wilson and others encouraged her to join before she got tied down with other things.

"I'm loving it," Wickham said of her Peace Corps assignment. "It's hard, but I'm learning so much. I have no doubt that this is the right time for me to be here."

Peace Corps volunteers spend two years in another country doing jobs, such as teaching English or helping residents start businesses.

A Powerful Experience
October 14, 1960

John F. Kennedy persuades University of Michigan students to petition for Peace Corps.

March 1, 1961

Kennedy issues executive order creating the Peace Corps.

December 1961

First Peace Corps programs set up in South America and India.

June 30, 1980

First Peace Corps fellow program is established at Columbia University to recruit, prepare and place volunteers in New York City public schools.

March 1, 1996

35th Anniversary - 3,500 projects in 80 countries.

Melanie Falk/DN

She said the most rewarding thing about her experience is the feeling that she is making a difference in many students' lives.

"My students know that I believe in them or else I wouldn't have traveled so far, leaving behind my friends and family who I love and miss so much," she said.

Wilson and Wickham agree that their decisions to join the Peace Corps were among the best decisions they ever made.

"It was the coolest thing I've ever done," Wilson said. "It completely changed my life."

Cancun becoming top spot for college students on break

CANCUN, Mexico (AP) - His hand gripped a Corona longneck, and his wrist was bedecked with fluorescent plastic bar passes, including one that said "Extreme Party Package." On one side, the turquoise waters of the Caribbean. On the other, a beachfront bikini contest.

Chris Viveiros, a 22-year-old senior at the less-than-tropical Roger Williams University in Bristol, R.I., opened up in a broad grin.

"This is unreal, dude," he said.

Not really. It was just another day of spring break in Cancun, a resort that has steadily grown into a world capital of the mid-March binge of sea, sand, spirits and sex that is a rite of passage for American college students.

Leaving behind traditional spring break spots like Daytona Beach, Fla., and South Padre Island, Texas, a record number of U.S. college students have descended on Cancun this year, turning the resort into the hottest party spot there is.

MTV films kids wriggling in their bikinis. E! Entertainment Television scours the beach for lurid footage. Jose Cuervo and Corona sponsor events at discos that compete for the word-of-mouth title of the least-inhibited party.

"There's no place to party like this, in America or anywhere else," said Kate Roberts, a 21-year-old junior at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

Cancun has been building 1,000 new hotel rooms a year for years, but still hit a record 100 percent occupancy a week ago. That means many students showing up with confirmed reservations had to be bused off to nearby resorts.

"We've had 70,000 spring breakers in the last four weeks. We have 26,000 rooms, but we need at least 33,000."

Laura Fernandez de Gordoia
Cancun's municipal tourism director

As spring break begins to wind down, Cancun is at 85 percent capacity - extraordinary for late March, tourism officials say. And by any estimates, next year will only be busier.

"We've had 70,000 spring breakers in the last four weeks," said Laura Fernandez de Gordoia, Cancun's municipal tourism director. "We have 26,000 rooms, but we need at least 33,000."

Florida is still the top spring break destination in terms of sheer numbers, travel agents say. But that's because it's easy to pile into a car and hit the beach. In terms of spring breaks that require planning and a little more money, Cancun is now king.

The routine is pretty standard: Wake up by 1 p.m., hang out on the beach, shower, eat and hit the discos until 5 a.m. After that, there's the obligatory after-hours party at the hotel, sunrise on the beach and bedtime at 7 or 8 a.m.

"I've been to many spring breaks - Florida, Jamaica - and they ain't nothing compared to Cancun," said Victor Garcia, a 21-year-old junior at the University of Illinois. "Without a doubt."

Some of the revels can get out of hand, but Cancun officials said more police, education campaigns and an agreement by discos to make last call

at 4 a.m. have reduced the number of problems this year.

"We've made about 60 arrests this spring break. That's less than last year," said Angel Lopez, spokesman for the state police office in Cancun. "Even so, the kids drink alcohol in industrial quantities, and they go crazy."

Most of those arrested are fined and let go.

But the great majority of students don't get into trouble. With a drinking age of 18 and an anything-goes attitude, it's pretty hard to. Besides, most of the students are just here to have fun.

"Ninety-nine out of 100 students don't pee in public places or dance in front of MTV cameras with a string bikini on," said Kirk Riley, president of hotspringbreaks.com. "Most hang out by the beach, buy little brother a T-shirt and buy Mom a hammock. They're here to dance and lie out in the sun."

The best part of it all, said Nick Doerr, a 19-year-old from Chicago saving up for college, is that "no one's in a bad mood here."

No one, that is, except him. He checked his watch to make sure he didn't miss his bus to the airport after a week of revelry. "I'm going to go home," he said, "and cry."

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