

Everyday Humanitarians

with Travis Hellstrom

Featuring



Awesome National and International Service

with Bonnie Nelson

Bonnie Nelson has been an AmeriCorps Volunteer and Team Leader, a Peace Corps Volunteer and now works with the Girl Scouts of Western Washington. She has her Masters in Education from the University of Washington, taught [Peace Corps 101](#) and [Everyday Service](#) and much more.

Travis: Hello, everybody. Welcome back to our *Everyday Humanitarians* conference. I'm very honored to introduce you to a wonderful friend, a wonderful person. Bonnie Nelson is someone that I met in the Peace Corps. Before that she was in AmeriCorps. Now she's working with Girl Scouts. She's all over the place, and she's done all kinds of great things.

We're going to be talking to her today about AmeriCorps, about Peace Corps, about Girl Scouts, working in a non-profit world. She's also taught with me on Peace Corps 101, which was a lot of fun, and Everyday Service, which is in the academy at en*theos. She organized the first TEDx event in our province in Mongolia. She helped create the Good Father Project. We're going to have a lot of fun things to talk about today.

Bonnie, it's a pleasure to have you with us. Thank you so much for joining us

on this conference.

Bonnie: Absolutely. I'm happy to be here. This interview has been a long time coming, so I'm glad we finally are doing this.

Travis: Nice. First let's talk a little bit about national/international service. We can start with national, because you did AmeriCorps. I know volunteering was a big part of your life for a long time. Can you talk a little bit about what inspired you to go into service and volunteer work, and how far back it goes in your life?

Bonnie: Yeah. I think for me service was something that my family was a big part of, just working with the local school through the local church. It's what my grandparents did. I didn't really know that there was an alternative not to do that.

But as far as doing really organized community service and service learning, when I look now at high school students and their requirements that high schools have for students I didn't do merely what they are doing these days.

So for me my real entry, I think, into real service came in college. I participated in a service learning course at Pacific Lutheran University where I attended, and working at a Boys & Girls Club that really introduced me into the idea of working with youth, doing different service, different youth development kind of work.

Then from that point that really accelerated into wanting to do more community service, and so I joined AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps, one of the several different AmeriCorps branches that exist. It's something that my sister had done, and so that's kind of how I knew about it. I didn't ever meet a recruiter or do anything like that that I probably should have, but it seemed like it would be fun. It was a good way to travel the country and to meet other people, and so I jumped right into that.

Travis: Nice. Before we jump into AmeriCorps, I want to ask you a little bit about that. Can you explain what service learning is for anybody that might not be familiar with that term?

Bonnie: Yeah. Service learning is a way to – a lot of classes, different high schools now or colleges will use that as a way for students to kind of go beyond the classroom walls. So maybe you're learning in your class about food security, and so you can go volunteer at a local food bank and see that firsthand. It's really a way to break down walls.

A lot of universities have kind of a bubble. I know that at PLU we called it the loop dome because that was our campus mascot, and we really didn't leave campus very often. Universities have really identified that as not something we should be doing. We need to be getting out into the communities, and it's such a good experience for students. It really builds strong communities.

So that really, service learning, is getting the educational component with the service. So you're not out just doing service and then going home and forgetting about it. You're learning the root causes of why these services are needed, and then doing what you can to – doing your own part to help solve any problems as best you can.

Travis: Nice. Let's jump into AmeriCorps then. You went into AmeriCorps right after college?

Bonnie: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So that following fall I joined AmeriCorps N-triple-C. As I mentioned – I'll talk a little bit about AmeriCorps – there are several different components. AmeriCorps VISTA, for example, is volunteers in service to America. They have – it's kind of a separate mission than AmeriCorps N-triple-C, the National Civilian Community Core that I participated in. Then there's AmeriCorps state and national.

You'll see AmeriCorps volunteers at universities. You'll see them tutoring students. You'll see them in different healthcare centers. AmeriCorps volunteers do a ton. There's a senior core and people, retirees, can go donate time.

One of the main components that all these have in common, though, is it's all funded through the AmeriCorps program. Then you get an educational award to help either pay for student loans or help pay for college afterwards.

The one that I did, AmeriCorps N-triple-C, is a program for 18 to 24 year olds. It's a 10 to 11 month program where you'll do different service projects over the course of the time, whereas VISTA you might go and stay somewhere and work somewhere for a year and be part of that office. We were part of a 10-person team that got to travel around and do different projects.

There are several different campuses of N-triple-C right now. There's one in Denver. I think there's one in Mississippi, Maryland, Sacramento. I think Iowa is the other one now. I'm not quite sure. It wasn't there when I was there.

I was based out of the Denver campus. My team of ten people and I, we got to travel to Mobile, Alabama and work with Habitat for Humanity for eight weeks. We went to Houston and helped with hurricane recovery for eight weeks. We went to Durango, and also worked with Habitat for Humanity there. It was kind of unusual that we had Habitat both times.

Other teams were doing environmental projects, tutoring projects, working with schools, working with taxes, all sorts of different projects you can really do through N-triple-C. Those are just the ones that we ended up doing.

It was a really great experience to be – I was the team leader of the group. So to be a 22-year-old who had just graduated college that was suddenly a supervisor for people my age, people older than me, it was terrifying. I didn't know what to do as a supervisor.

Luckily, we have good training, and a wonderful staff there that really helped me to grow. I knew that I wasn't ready for graduate school, and it was a wonderful gap year for me. To provide service to the country was just a really incredible feeling.

It was while in AmeriCorps that I really discovered my desire to learn more about service learning and how I could continue to empower students to serve, just as I had done.

Travis: Yeah. I want to ask you a little bit about the kind of people that you've seen in AmeriCorps that really thrive in it and the kind of people you'd recommend

going to AmeriCorps.

I also see that you're talking a little bit about not being ready for grad school, and then jumping into grad school afterward which is really neat, and connecting service learning into your grad school experience. There are a lot of fun things that we can touch on in a second.

I guess I'll jump into that question. For AmeriCorps in general, what kind of people have you seen that really thrive in it and what kind of people would you recommend pursue AmeriCorps as an option?

Bonnie: One of the sayings that we had that my unit leader had was in AmeriCorps you have to be flexible from F to the E. That was the main thing. I wouldn't say there's definitely a type. We're a really different group of people.

My team of ten alone we had people from both sides of the country. We had people who had finished college, people who had just finished high school, people who were taking a break from college, we had men, we had women. It was really a crazily diverse group. Hey, go live together for ten months and see how it works. We had our challenges and we definitely – sometimes we got along. Sometimes we didn't.

The key, though, was that all of us learned how to be flexible and dependable for each other. We really began to grow in our understanding and our patience with one another. I remember fights about who was doing the dishes, and I remember coming together and working really well on the site and building houses together. So we really had a full range of experiences together, but the flexibility was probably the number one component. They say that going in.

We were at places for eight weeks at a time. Just about the time we started to feel comfortable there, it was time to leave. So you have to be able to be prepared for that. We built really great relationships with some of the community members in those places. That was really important, to be able to want to except and to learn about other people.

We'll talk about Peace Corps later, and that's definitely – oh, you should go

into Peace Corps with this desire to understand other cultures. Well, in our own country that's so applicable. You need to be able to understand that life in Mobile, Alabama is going to be very different than life in Durango, Colorado, and how can we adapt and how can we still support the communities that are adopting us and taking care of us for those short periods of time?

Travis: I think that's wonderful. You're right. It reminds me of Peace Corps, and the ideas around flexibility and expectations and things. It will be fun to talk about that too.

Let's step into grad school then for you. You then went into grad school and you kept learning about service learning. How did that tie into your degree? How did you decide what you went from AmeriCorps into grad school to study and to continue learning?

Bonnie: It was actually while I was in AmeriCorps I had applied to a few different programs. Actually, I only ended up applying to one program but I was looking at other ones.

I went to the University of Washington and studied – entered the College of Education to study educational policy and leadership, which in my very first class I remember we had to kind of introduce ourselves and talk about what our interest was going to be. I was really nervous because everybody else seemed way more aware of what they were doing. I was the youngest person in the room too, which I was very aware of.

There were these teachers and principals and administrators, and they're all going back to get their degree. I'm like, am I in the right program? I'm having this terrible feeling that I've made this horrible mistake. Then another woman stands up and she's like, I work on campus with service learning. I'm like, oh, okay. I need to know you.

A year later she hired me as an intern, which was really great for me. So I really found a good group there on campus with the Service Learning Center. That experience really informed my whole graduate experience, more than even some of the classes did.

The ability to start working with students there and really learn in person what it was like to build community partnerships, what needs do volunteers have, what needs do community organizations have from the volunteers, what happens when those needs aren't met and how to help people have clear expectations of what needs to be done in order to provide these services that the volunteers are wanting to provide and that the organizations want to provide.

That was really a huge part of my experience was working with the University of Washington Carlson Center that does a lot of the – all of the service learning placement for students. I really got to know the Seattle community and all the different non-profits there as well. Then that really – just the different skills there, the project implementation and looking at evaluation and developing partnerships, all really helped my Peace Corps experience as well, not just my graduate school experience.

Travis: Yeah. Can you describe that a little bit more? You helped students who were in undergrad, and even in graduate school too, find placement? Or is this just for undergraduate students looking to help in the community and work with volunteer organizations? What was that like? How did you meet those partners?

Bonnie: Yeah, just for undergraduate students. The way that it works with the Carlson Center, and it's probably different at every campus but this is just one model, one way that it works, is different professors and faculty members would express an interest in having a service learning course. They would be having a topic, say they're doing a women's studies class, and so they want their students to have a little bit more of an understanding of some of the issues facing women.

So they can come to us and we'll say, well, we know of these different non-profits that are looking for service students. We've already talked to them. They'll take one volunteer or they'll take three volunteers for this ten-week quarter. They know that the student will only be there for ten weeks. Here's a position description.

Then the students that are enrolled in the class, we have an enrollment period, and they can go look at our menu of volunteer options. They could go on there and say I'd really love to work for this organization, or that job sounds perfect for me.

Then we have – they have a backend. It's not we anymore. I don't work there anymore. But the University of Washington Carlson Center has a backend registration system where the students can choose their descriptions.

We really facilitate the conversations with the faculty to make sure that they know how to incorporate service learning, because it isn't just as easy as saying, okay, now go volunteer. There's really what did you learn during your volunteer experience. How does that relate to this issue facing women or facing the environment, or all these different topics?

I think that now they're – the last I heard, they're registering about a thousand students a quarter through this program, different students that are going out into Seattle every quarter, into King County every quarter, doing volunteer opportunities. So it's a really great growing program and really a great service that they provide to the community.

Travis: Yeah. That is so cool. It does remind me of Peace Corps. I'm glad that we can jump into that, because I think you had this great opportunity to work with so many organizations, see the impact that volunteers have. You had your own experience with AmeriCorps, and throughout your life seeing what volunteerism is.

But what made you jump into Peace Corps? That's something that is a huge commitment. It's 27 months. It's going around the world. What made you think that that was possibly a good fit, and how did you decide to apply and start the journey of Peace Corps?

Bonnie: A couple different things. I was working at the University of Washington Carlson Center and I was working with all these students doing these awesome service projects, doing great things for the community. I really realized that my one year of AmeriCorps service, that was really great, but I really had a desire to do more. Especially seeing it day after day I realized,

well, I want to do something. I don't really know what.

Then I was working at the YMCA at the time, and they offered a trip to Thailand to do a young adult service trip. So while I was in Thailand, the group was actually led by a former Peace Corps volunteer. On the trip every time she'd have a memory about Peace Corps, I'd have a memory about AmeriCorps. By the end, I don't know if she was trying intentionally to do this, but she had referred me for Peace Corps.

That really was the right fit for me to get more service experience. I kind of felt if I want to be working full-time as a career eventually empowering students to serve, I needed to have more direct service experience.

I also thought with a future in education, if I'm going to be really working in schools I wanted to have more experience within the educational system. I knew that Peace Corps, with the different sectors that they work in, but specifically trying to work in the education sector, I would have an opportunity to explore education systems, feel what it's like to be in a classroom.

I learned very quickly that I don't want to be a teacher, and I kind of knew that going in. But to have to stick out being a teacher for two years and working in an educational setting that I didn't always agree with the policy, especially coming out of graduate school thinking I know everything about educational policy, which I obviously didn't and still never will, but getting that opportunity to work within a system, that really appealed to me to be able to put some of what I learned in school to use.

Wanting to be in an education system and have more service experience, and then it all just kind of timed together really well as I was thinking about all these things, to meet a Peace Corps volunteer and throw my hat in and realize, okay, I'm going to apply. Actually, the night that I landed back in Washington from Thailand I started that Peace Corps application that night, and then didn't turn back.

Travis: That's a wonderful story. I love how your story builds, though. Your whole life you've been doing volunteer work. AmeriCorps was a big step. Then graduate

school with service learning and working with the Carlson Center was a big step. But it all kind of built up to Peace Corps.

I know you've said before that doing your AmeriCorps experience helped you prepare for Peace Corps, which I think is really special. Can you talk a little bit about how AmeriCorps helped prepare you for your Peace Corps experience?

Bonnie: Yeah. I think, I talked about it a little bit before, but that flexibility. The flexibility of being a volunteer and knowing that each day is going to have a different challenge and a different reward, that was a huge lesson that I learned in AmeriCorps that I could easily apply to Peace Corps, because I'd love to say that every day in Peace Corps was wonderful, and most of them were, but there were some challenges.

I think at one point I got teased for being so damn happy while I was there. Like, no, you're faking it. You're not really this genuinely happy with everything you're doing. But because I didn't have any real expectations, and I really went into it with an open mind and really celebrated the small successes, I really began to see the bigger successes accumulate.

Where some people were really struggling daily with just getting their teachers to come to their classes, I was able to go beyond that. I think I – I know I was really blessed with wonderful counterparts that were really willing to learn, and sought me out for different opportunities that I could provide.

I think that so much of what makes the AmeriCorps experience and the Peace Corps experience depends on the people that you get surrounded with and is luck of the draw, but I also think that with a positive attitude I was able to attract some positive feelings back for me. That really ultimately ended in success I think for all of us.

Travis: Yeah. Something that I know we talked about a little bit in the *Unofficial Handbook*, but I know that you did really well, is control the things that you can control. It's also why your resume is full of a lot of different projects, that don't necessarily make sense at first when you think about how different they all are. Can you talk about how you pursued different things and how you tried to control what you could control?

Bonnie: Yeah. I think it's something that I learned from you before I really even knew you like I know you now. But reading the *Unofficial Handbook*, one thing that really stuck out for me was if you can work out every day, or whatever your fitness goal is, if you can make that and achieve that.

So I made it a goal. I wanted to work out 100 days in a row. I didn't care what qualified as a workout. I didn't say I wanted to run five miles every day. I just wanted to do something physical for 100 days.

When I got into 30 days and realized all those successes that I was having taking care of myself, it just grew outward from that. I felt better, I had more energy and all these personal benefits and that's great, but it really reflected on the professional level too.

I remember one class when I had been working out for a little bit. Suddenly the class topic turned into, well, Bonnie looks better. How can we be healthy? I was really uncomfortable to have all these college students that I was supposed to be teaching talking about my physique suddenly, but it turned into a learning opportunity.

I realized that those small successes really grow outwards. Then suddenly other teachers at the school are interested in health and I can use that as an opportunity to connect with them. By connecting with them on that personal level then suddenly, oh, and I can help you teach this class.

It really just grew from that. By making those small connections. The women who I really became friends with were the ones that I also worked the most with. I think it's because I knew them first personally, and then asked them what do you want to do. I didn't go in there with the expectation that, well – I thought about it. I thought about learning. What if I got them to do service learning? That wasn't going to work there.

If I had forced it and really gone in with my goal of promoting community service, it would have failed. But by asking them what they were interested in, we really ended up creating some wonderful projects and things that they didn't necessarily envision or even think possible. We were able to just come

up with things together that we had never dreamed of.

Travis: Yeah. I think that's wonderful. Can you talk a little bit about some of your favorite things, some of your favorite projects, some of the things that kind of came out of nowhere that maybe other people, or you, couldn't have predicted that really made your Peace Corps experience special?

Bonnie: Well, I think a lot of that starts with you and our plotting that we would do in the afternoons in your apartment. The opportunity to just start from scratch and do anything.

One of the big parts of my service was actually the stuff that I did outside of Mongolia. So being able to pull together a Volunteer Advisory Council for the National Peace Corps Association and connecting worldwide with volunteers.

To see that a year later still having meetings, that's really a satisfying feeling to see that we were able to pull our resources and our knowledge of technology to allow other volunteers to connect and benefit from that. That didn't even happen in Mongolia, but that's really a rewarding thing when I think back on it.

For me, honestly, we had great projects. We did – and I say we, I mean Travis, I mean the women that we worked with, Travis's wife, the women we were working with in the community, other Peace Corps volunteers. We did a project to promote fatherhood that's still going strong. We did some Awesome Foundation work. You're going to interview Tim, right, with Awesome Foundation?

Travis: Yeah, absolutely.

Bonnie: Getting that idea set up of giving in the community and crowdfunding, different projects, those are all things I'm really proud of. But what I really noticed is that in the last year the things that I'm most excited about is what's happened since I've been gone.

Seeing some of the counterparts that I worked with and my closest friends, they had a ten-year dream of opening up an English center, and they finally

did that. I was long gone, but they said that working with Travis and working with me, they really understood more about business practices and advertising and learning how to really put together a business plan to be able to suddenly run an English school.

They had the English skills all along. They were the best English speakers in the province, in my opinion. But now they had the confidence, and I think their interpersonal skills and really their own belief in themselves to be able to do things. That was wonderful to watch.

One of them recently got accepted to come to America to participate in a library conference. She's a librarian. The day that I got that news, it was better than most of the days in Peace Corps.

It was such a rewarding feeling of a job well done because she's done it all herself. I was just there to support her and I gave her whatever skills I could. Then I see her – I taught her how to use Facebook. Now I see pictures of her on Facebook teaching everyone else how to use Facebook in the capital city. I'm like, what? How are you doing that suddenly? I'm so proud to see the growth that they've had.

Another teacher, I don't even know if you know this, Travis, but [Soyo 24:15], another woman I worked with, is going to be a Peace Corps trainer next year, because her skills have improved so much that even Peace Corps Mongolia recognized that and asked her if she would be a trainer.

So seeing those little things and how much they changed over the two years. We as volunteers, we come in and out of their lives. I was definitely not the first and I won't be the last volunteer they see, but to be able to see the impact and the growth that they had in that two year span that they might not even recognize, it's really rewarding. To continue seeing that and to continue having the relationships with them, that's better than any single day that I had there.

Travis: I love how you're saying that that was a ten-year dream for them. What, it's been two years or less that it took. Also it reminds me – there's something that I wrote in *Enough*, and I'd like to write it in the new edition of the

Unofficial Handbook, that I think people don't need help. They need friends. I think there's a big difference between thinking that you're coming in to make a huge difference and you're going to do what you want, and thinking that you're coming in to make friends.

Even though that sounds kind of soft at the first, in reality what you're saying here is instead of thinking about all the big things I did, now looking back on it a year later it's the people that I care about and that I want to talk to and see how they're doing on Facebook and check in with them and be excited about what's happening. It's because the people are what's so special. It's not the things we build or the things we make. So I think that's really wonderful.

That's a very, very powerful message to share with anybody. AmeriCorps volunteers, Peace Corps volunteers, Girl Scouts, just everyday people you're running into on the street, that's a very powerful and I think a tough thing to stay mindful of on a daily basis.

Bonnie: So, so hard to remember that. I mean projects come and go, but it really is the relationships. When you have the dreams of maybe you've received a grant and you want to finish out that project and you aren't able to get from point A to point Z somehow, it's so hard. You get caught up so much in that. Then you might even ruin some relationships because you're so frustrated with it. It's really easy to look at that retrospectively, but when you're in it and you're so frustrated.

Peace Corps has frustration. That's really hard to remember. But yeah, the projects they were important to me. They still are important to me. I love to see what's happening with them now. But it's amazing the difference that a year makes and how far removed I feel from some of that work, now that I have a different career and moving in a different direction. But I still talk to my Mongolian friends on a regular basis, and that's what matters is the personal side.

Travis: Yeah, absolutely. Let's talk a little bit about coming back from Peace Corps and the job you have now with Girl Scouts. What kind of an impact has your Peace Corps experience had on the work that you do, and even getting the job and working with Girl Scouts of Western Washington?

Bonnie: It's funny that on my hiring – or my interview committee was another return Peace Corps volunteer. So I think that we're everywhere. Especially I think in the non-profit world, and in Seattle too, it's just hard not to run into other Peace Corps volunteers or people that know someone who's done Peace Corps and know what it's about, I think way more than AmeriCorps.

When I say I did AmeriCorps people say, "You did what now?" "Oh, it's like the domestic Peace Corps." "Oh, okay." I say I did Peace Corps and AmeriCorps and they don't really know what the difference is always. AmeriCorps just doesn't have the name recognition that Peace Corps does.

But I think people have a certain expectation of what a Peace Corps volunteer is like, a certain idea of what they do, even if that's not true. I think that people might envision me on the Mongolian step killing cows for my own food and heating little fires.

Some people have much harder living situations. I had a toilet, a shower, hot water, electricity. I had Internet access. I had a pretty nice setup. So I didn't have to rough it. I think that people don't recognize that always.

But when you are going in for a job interview and people are asking about your Peace Corps experience, I was really able to draw on the relationships I built and on the projects I developed, like we were just talking about. I think the tools of project design, project implementation, evaluation methods, all these things that you need to do in order to have successful projects, translate really nicely into what employers are looking for.

So I think that all of those things are great, but again it gets down to the social skills and the personality that you have, being flexible, being dependable, being understanding of others.

In my work now I work with a lot of different volunteers and understanding the volunteer mindset having been a volunteer for two years of, hey, wait a minute, I'm not even getting paid for this. Why are you treating me this way? I hear volunteers saying that to me. I'm like, oh, I get it. I get it. No, this is your time. My priority is to support you. Not to just push the Girl Scouts on

everybody in all 24 hours of your day. So really being able to keep that in mind.

Like I said, I get teased for talking about Peace Corps so much. I draw on it continually and everything that I learned there. The fending for yourself a little bit in Peace Corps, like I said, I wasn't out in the wild, but I really did have to think creatively about how I was going to do things, whether it was how am I going to creatively cook this meal or how am I going to creatively convince this class of teenagers that this is an interesting topic. All of that really comes into play later on.

Travis: Yeah, absolutely. I think one fun question, and I know we talked a little bit before about what does an ideal AmeriCorps volunteer look like and that there are all kinds. It's as diverse as America is. But what kind of people would you recommend go into the Peace Corps? What kind of people do you recommend Peace Corps to?

Bonnie: Without giving the same answer again, and I feel like I've talked about flexibility a lot, I think that anybody can do Peace Corps. I think the important part is knowing why you're doing it. More than who you are is why you're doing it.

I think that the people who went in there with the romantic notion of Peace Corps were sorely disappointed at times because it's not that glamorous. A lot of the things you do are really not glamorous. If you're going in there – there's a story.

I remember I met a faculty member at the University of Washington who was much older, had done a much earlier class. Peace Corps is over 50 years old. He had been in a much earlier group with, I think it was Peace Corps Brazil possibly. It was somewhere in South America.

He said that he got off the bus and he exclaimed, he used this very – gesturing, he's like, I'm here to see you. He was joking. He said there was a nun walking by who said, "Save me from what, you?" She totally gave this, "I don't need to be saved. Why are you here?"

I think that some of us do enter Peace Corps with that thought that these developing countries need to be saved by us, and that's not the case. A lot of times we have a lot more to learn from the individuals there.

If that's the motivation, to go save others, I don't think that Peace Corps is a very good fit because I think that a little bit of change in perspective, it might help that person if that is what they're going in with, but changing the perspective to I'm going to learn from you creates a very different experience suddenly.

I say this. I don't know what my motivations completely were. It was to gain experience. There's definitely the this will help me get a job in the future. That's part of why you do these experiences. But really I wanted to learn. I wanted to learn about myself. I was ready to leave the country for awhile and just being tired and frustrated with some things here. It was just a good motivation, and learning from others, though, and keeping that mindset the entire time.

I think that there are all sorts of volunteers and everyone has a different experience. Every Peace Corps volunteer will tell you that. But the people that I know that had that kind of intention seemed to have a much more enjoyable – and they defined it as successful. It might not look successful to everyone, but their definition of success might be different than everyone else's too.

Travis: Yeah. I had a conversation with someone recently, and they said I think it's arrogant for someone to come into a country and say I can help you. Their opinion of Peace Corps was that that was the way – they had seen one volunteer several decades back that kind of came at it that way. I said, yeah, I think if you look at it as I can help you that is kind of arrogant. But if you change it a little bit, the same words but say how can I help you, it's a very different situation.

If, like you said, you're coming in trying to learn, trying to understand. One thing I loved that they taught in our training and that I wrote in the book is don't spend your first year trying to do anything productive necessarily. Try in your first year just to understand, just to listen, just to gain friends, to try to

understand the community you're in. Then in your second year you can start thinking maybe about projects and stuff like that.

But actually what ends up happening if you take that approach is you make great friends, you get to know your community better. They bring you ideas. They come to you and say, okay, here's what we're thinking. Or this is something we've always wondered about.

But like you said, about your counterparts and your friends, they start bringing you things that are ten-year plans or big dreams that they have. Then when you hear them, and you start talking to them, are very doable. A lot of times it is the confidence that's the issue. It's not necessarily the resources.

When you explain that, like you said, it doesn't seem that big of a deal. It's like it's not that glamorous. It's simple stuff. It's English lessons that – and no matter what language you're learning, it's a tedious process and it's not glamorous. Those are the things that build on one another and you end up being able to truly help when you come from that perspective, I think. I love what you're saying.

Bonnie: I think we've been talking a lot about the projects and kind of the big picture stuff, but one of the most important things I did there was play basketball, especially from my school's perspective. I was taller than everyone else and I had some previous experience. I'm an average player here, but I was an all star there. They liked that I won tournaments with them, but really it was the accessibility and the fact that they saw me as someone they could talk to then.

Teachers who didn't speak a word of English and I became really good friends because of basketball. That impact, the students then saw me as someone approachable. I would play with my students every now and then.

It's those little things that are so important. I think that if you get caught up in trying to save people or save the world, you miss the fun things too. If you're going into Peace Corps and you're not looking for those kinds of little experiences, you're really missing out I think.

Travis: Yeah. If you are so set, and this is maybe an American mindset, we're so set on straight lines between personal and professional. If you're willing to blur that a little bit and say, look, Peace Corps says I'm a Peace Corps volunteer 24/7 so if I'm playing basketball, if I'm teaching English class, if I'm walking down the street, I have equal chance in all these opportunities to interact with people, to understand people better, to help in the community. I think that's a really hard message.

It's hard in America too to say, when do you turn off? Can you go and be a crazy person some nights or some weekends or whatever, or do I need to have this harmony between who I say I am, who I am, what I think, what I believe in, which is a very personal thing.

But it also reminds me a little bit of Vinh. I think we can brag on him a little bit. My wife loves watching *Universe Best Song*, which is the hit show in Mongolia, the most popular show by far for several years running now. It's like *American Idol*. Someone comes on. They sing. They've had a couple Peace Corps volunteers. I think Vinh might be the second one, but everyone loves him and loves watching him.

I was talking to my wife about it, and a lot of people in the audience, you can watch them, especially the older people in the audience just love it when he's up there singing. I was asking her how accurate is he, how good is he at singing? She's like, well, he's okay. He's not super or whatever, but he's good.

She said what it is, what everyone loves so much about him is how much heart he has, how much he loves everybody, how much he always brags on his students. He brings pictures of his students and his teachers. He's just going crazy with how much he loves being with everyone and being part of the culture, and respecting them and honoring them. Those kinds of things are very, very deep.

It seems to me that he's figured out too how to have a very blurry line between person and professional. He's not saying I'm professional these hours, I'm personal these hours. He's willing to say I love these people and I love my students and I love my community, and I'm willing to get on a national stage,

scream out loud and sing about them and sing to them. It's a very special thing. It reminds me of that. I think it's really wonderful to see.

Bonnie: Yeah. Vinh is just an exceptional volunteer for his ability to do that. When he came my second year, he was a good reminder of that's what's important. I swear, he lived about two hours from me, he would come visit me in my town, and more people knew him in my town than knew me. He just made friends instantly. It's something with his personality. He's a big extrovert. That worked for him.

It didn't work for me necessarily to be that outgoing, but I could connect with people as an introvert on a different level. Everybody has their own approach and what's going to work for them. For Vinh it's getting on an actual TV stage. For me, that would terrify me.

Again, every Peace Corps volunteer is going to have a different approach and a different way to connect with people, but it's the connection that's important. For me, one of the things that I really did a lot was going to people's houses and having them cook for me, which really worked out well for me. I got fed. That one-on-one time is a better experience for me to be able to connect with people.

Travis: To be fair, you say you weren't on a national stage, but I'd like to talk a little bit about you and Aldarmaa going on the TEDx UB stage. I think that was a wonderful thing.

Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with Aldarmaa, how that developed over time? Maybe the larger lessons that other Peace Corps volunteers can gain from that and your perspective over time when it came to that project, speaking about it on the TED stage, seeing her now years later continuing to develop the project. Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with her?

Bonnie: Yeah. I would love to. Aldarmaa is the first counterpart that I met. On the day I met her I had food poisoning. So I was just embarrassed that this woman was never going to like me because I just couldn't even form sentences the day I met her.

It turns out she was really nervous to meet me, but we didn't know that because we were both really shy at first. So I was told by one of the Peace Corps trainers who had been there, [Byer 40:21], like 20 years. What is Byer's position? I can't think of it right now.

Travis: He's a director of all the English programs. Yeah, I think he's cool.

Bonnie: So he's a man that knows all the teachers across the country. He pulls me aside and he says, "Aldarmaa is one of the best in the country." I'm like, whoa, okay. He's like, "We put you there for a reason, so you need to support her." I'm like, okay.

I had high expectations for what I needed to do with her I guess, and that she deserved my best. About three weeks after I started she quit with some school controversies that she didn't stand for going on at the school. She ended up finding a new job.

I kind of thought that that was it, and I was really sad because I'd heard such great things about her. I wouldn't say I was devastated, but it really made me shift. Okay, well, I don't have that path. I'm going to have to find a new one.

A few months later probably I got an idea of a TV show. I wanted to do an English TV show, and I thought of her. I've never met somebody who was so willing to just go for it. I went and met with her, had lunch. By the next day we had a TV agreement with a local TV station, because she was just so on top of things.

I don't know if it's a cultural thing, and it's also part of her personality, but she didn't ever believe that she could do it. Watching her over those two years and watching her still, that's really changed. The more that she's seen these accomplishments she knows that she can do bigger and better things, and she's one of the ones that opened up that English center.

I like to think that a big step in both her growth and mine was that TEDx event. Neither of us like public speaking. I knew I was terrified. I was practicing, practicing, practicing. I knew I couldn't let on to that because she

was more terrified. So it was a funny case of fake it until you make it, because I had to be strong and then in turn she could be stronger.

For how much teamwork she and I did over the course of the two-year period, it's really nice to have that actual video record of us working together because I think that the talk went really well.

She was able to make a lot of connections and get a lot of recognition for the work that she's done, including a trip sponsored by the state department to America. She's a really incredible human. Has a big future ahead of her still, and I can't wait to see what she does.

Travis: And it inspired both of you to pursue – I think after that event they said, okay, let's do one in our province.

Bonnie: That was the best part is after the event we're sitting – this was a city event and we lived in a small town.

Travis: A capital event, yeah. That was in the capital, the biggest city in the whole country.

Bonnie: So we're sitting there like, huh, we could probably do this. Like, okay, sure. Let's put on a TEDx event. They were just so – such a can-do positive attitude. All I ever had to do was find – I could do the Internet research to find out what do we need to do this. That's kind of where my work stopped because they just are great project implementers, she and [NA 43:38], another really great woman there in our town.

It made my life really easy when I had people willing to do so much work and so many great things for their community. I think that that's why we really connected is that I really like the idea of service to the community.

Service and volunteerism as we look at it here, that idea doesn't really happen in the same form. Nobody's logging hours in Mongolia like we do here, but their desire to create a better community for their kids and for the entire region is so strong that I think we were really able to identify with each other on that.

Travis: Yeah. That's true. It's actually kind of hard to – when you get into learning a new language and you are able to look at the idea of translating something, it's hard to translate volunteer. It's hard to translate what a Peace Corps volunteer is and have the – you almost end up describing the entire job and how it works to try to get the definition out there, which isn't a bad idea. Americans also don't quite understand exactly how it works.

It is kind of a nice thing to say a Peace Corps volunteer is paid enough to live at the level of the people they're with. They have enough money to not worry about money basically, but not more than that so that they have a whole lot extra to spend on anything which allows them to focus on just what's good for the community and helping others.

That concept actually lends itself to all kinds of different careers, all kinds of different jobs. It reminds me of the name of this conference. I'd love to hear your thoughts over the years how this idea of an everyday humanitarian has developed for you, what that means, how it informs your everyday life. But maybe let's just start with what do you think an everyday humanitarian is for you?

Bonnie: This is something that I've had a lot of time to think about and I still haven't come up with a definition that I really like. It's actually a question I've gotten to ask other people in the Everyday Service interviews. I can give you characteristics of an everyday humanitarian. It's hard for me to come up with a definition. I think part of that is because an everyday humanitarian doesn't really like to identify themselves as one.

As I ask people who I consider to be everyday humanitarians that, I find that they don't have definitions for it. They just do what is needed. If there's a way that they can help, if there's a community need that they've identified that's serious and they can do something about it, they will.

I have Girl Scout volunteers who've been working with the organization for 40 years. They wouldn't consider themselves an everyday humanitarian at all. I don't think I could do my job without some of them. They're so integral to what we do.

That can-do attitude is part of it and the desire to make the world a better place, but knowing that you probably won't see immediate results. Maybe some people will call it naïve too because they think they actually – I think there's a saying, right, the people who think they're crazy enough to change the world are the ones that actually do or something like that. I think that's what it gets down to, is identifying the needs and actually being crazy enough to do something about it.

Travis: I think that's wonderful. I also wonder when we talk about balance, or in Peace Corps this idea of being on 24/7 and serving your community in everything that you do, how has that been for you coming back now to America and having that perspective in Mongolia and allowing it to inform how you live now?

How has that helped you live a better life or how has that helped you think more carefully about what you do? You work in a non-profit, so I think this is a challenge for anyone who works in the non-profit field, but what has that been like for you coming back from Peace Corps and now being back in America?

Bonnie: Hard. I think it's something that I struggle with daily. Being abroad and being in the Peace Corps, I knew what my job was. On some days my job was just to be nice to other people, and that was community building. That was going out to lunch with somebody and being seen trying to speak Mongolian, or going to somebody's house for a meal and teaching them an hour of English. That was an accomplishment that day.

To suddenly be thrown back into the world with different relationships to manage, being in a busier society, being in traffic, all of these different things that America just kind of throws at you, it's exhausting and it's really challenging.

The best thing I can do is try to remember the tools that I was really able to learn from you, and some of the things that you taught me in Mongolia in your book. Exercise and self-care and all these things that are so important, I feel like the machine that is America sometimes tries to pull those away from

you and just make it, well, there's no time to work out. When would you do that? Instead of it being a priority, all of a sudden it's an afterthought.

So that balance is just extremely challenging. I think that for me too, like you said, working in the non-profit field it's this weird line of I work with volunteers all the time who have jobs and are working with Girl Scouts.

I'm working with Girl Scouts. So where's my volunteer side? Figuring out what is the things that I can do that are additional. I feel like I'm doing good work in my career, but indirectly. It's an indirect service that I'm providing to empower volunteers and to empower girls to do incredible things.

But when you don't have that direct service like I had in the Peace Corps and like I had in AmeriCorps, I suddenly feel myself feeling guilty or challenging myself thinking I'm not doing enough. I'm not saving the world today. Maybe a volunteer I work with has done an incredible project for the city of Tacoma, but I didn't do that. It's really hard to go easy on yourself, I think.

That's another thing. One of the unfortunate qualities I think of an everyday humanitarian is always pushing to do more and maybe being too hard on yourself when you don't. Having a really successful two-year period in the Peace Corps, I can look back and I can think every day was wonderful. It wasn't. That's not realistic. I didn't do something incredible every day. Some days I just watched a movie and that was it.

I think it's really hard to come back into America where all of a sudden you have resources and you have endless amount of possibilities of things that you can improve. Am I doing enough, that question just keeps coming back, and having a healthy balance between work and life and personal life and all these things, exercise, taking care of yourself. Travis knows because I talk to him about it regularly. It's really, really a difficult thing.

Not just in my field, but I think for anybody who is trying to be an everyday humanitarian or is an everyday humanitarian. It's a struggle. It's not an easy thing to do or else wouldn't everybody else be doing it.

Travis: Yeah. I learned that term, indirect service, from you. I had never heard that

before, but I know that it's something that you talked about a lot at the Carlson Center too.

Maybe to me having these conversations first of all is very healthy I think for volunteers, for people who are really in helping professions and trying to make a huge difference in the world. To be able to talk with other people about it, people who understand, then you're able to understand how important it is to take care of yourself, to be easy on yourself and to treat yourself the way you would treat someone else.

If you would never demand someone work 13, 14, 15 hour days or something, but then we do it to ourselves, then there's that – I think actually Tal Ben-Shahar calls it the Platinum Rule, that we should treat ourselves the way that we want to treat others. If we're able to do that, then we can provide greater service to others.

That was the thing in Mongolia that you were talking about before, that when you exercise you feel better, not just because of your physique but everything about you, your mind, everything just feels better, and everyone else around you notices that too. We always can see that in people around us, when they're happy, when they're healthy. That's a huge challenge.

I think you're absolutely right. It's a struggle. It's something that we can help each other through. It probably is a quality of most everyday humanitarians that is a darker side but that we have to help each other with.

Bonnie: I think part of that too, though, is the people I know who are everyday humanitarians are always aspiring to do more. I think that even that more sometimes is I'm going to meditate more and I'm going to be – I'm going to run a marathon next week. Three's all these things that we want to do and there is – I think I said this to you earlier today, there's only a certain amount of energy that we all have.

So knowing how to prioritize that becomes really difficult. I think the mistake that some people make is not prioritizing any of the self time. It's something that I've realized that I've done recently too, is not making that time for myself in an effort to be such a good – providing good indirect service to my

volunteers and answering their emails as soon as I possibly can. Then I'm exhausted, my brain is fried and I can't answer anybody's emails. I'm no good to anyone, specifically myself.

It's the always striving to be the best. Again, it's a little competitive for me. I like to be good at things. If I can be the best volunteer manager and fastest runner and all these things that would be great, but I would rather be well rounded than to be those crazy extreme things because that's just not really practical and it wouldn't be a happy existence necessarily.

Travis: Yeah, absolutely. Speaking of which, rounding out the interview I'd like to ask you a last question. This has been wonderful. I really appreciate all of your answers. This is going to be so helpful to so many people. It's very inspiring to me. It's always wonderful to talk to you. My last question is, how can we help you? You can take that any way you want, but that's our last question.

Bonnie: That's a good one. I think, like I said, this is something, that balance is something that we can all remind each other of. We as a society can remind each other that we don't have to all work 12-hour days. We'd be better off if we cut back a little bit. We need to take care of each other.

I think that you and I have been able to, especially I think when we were in Mongolia together, we were able to serve as good reminders of that, we would like to sit down and design this project but let's go on a walk. That might be the healthier thing to do. Then you get that refreshment. We were able to do more because we were taking care of ourselves.

I think that when we pressure each other to do things, to answer emails immediately, to schedule lots of meetings whether they're needed or not, and really put that pressure, again, as a society, on each other, we're not helping anyone. So I think that to help me is to chill out as a whole and help me remember to do that. I think that when I get caught up in trying to go, go, go, having somebody there to remind me to slow down a little bit is really crucial.

When you slow down for a little bit, you can get so much more done later on. Taking that time to relax and rest is so important later on in the longevity of anything that we as everyday humanitarians would like to accomplish.

Travis: Yeah. It's more fun at the end of the day when you're able to not only do something, but also enjoy it. Sometime we enjoy the planning more than we enjoy the thing, or we enjoy the pictures of it afterward more than the thing.

If we can help each other enjoy our days together and reflect on how grateful we are to be with one another, there's so many great things about now that we can enjoy together. I've never heard that answer before, but I love that answer. That is wonderful. Thank you so much.

Bonnie: Yeah. Thank you. This has been really great. Like I said, this has been a long time coming that we've been – I think two years that we've been planning on sitting down and actually recording some of our conversations. So I'm happy that we finally did. Hopefully some of these answers are useful to folks.

Travis: Thank you. I think this is definitely one of my favorite interviews of this whole conference. It's so wonderful to talk to you. Thank you so much for taking this time. I hope that we can have another interview sometime soon.

Bonnie: Thanks, Travis. I'm excited for this conference and I'm excited to see what you do next.

Travis: Thank you.