

"ENLIGHTENING AND UPLIFTING!" - PAUL THEROUX

A TOWERING TASK

THE STORY OF THE PEACE CORPS

A FILM BY ALANA DEJOSEPH
NARRATED BY ANNETTE BENING

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
JULIANE HEYMAN, PAUL SACK, THERESA GALLANT
SCREENWRITER SHANA KELLY
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER DAVE STEINKE

IN THE CAUSE OF PEACE PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS A TOWERING TASK

A DOCUMENTARY BY ALANA DEJOSEPH WRITTEN BY SHANA KELLY

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY VANESSA CARR ANIMATION AND GRAPHICS THOMAS SEIDL

ORIGINAL MUSIC LANCE BENDIKSEN

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JOURNEYS IN FILM™
educating for global understanding



A TOWERING TASK

The Story of the Peace Corps

Discussion Guide

For community screenings, panels, and workshops, and for college courses and seminars



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Facilitation Guidelines

Filmmakers use immersive storytelling to produce intense thoughts and emotions in the viewer. **Journeys in Film** uses this powerful medium as a springboard for meaningful dialogue around humanity's most pressing issues. In this guide, you will find suggestions for leading productive conversations that broaden perspectives, increase global competency, encourage empathy, and build new paradigms for education.

- When watching a film or having a powerful discussion, normalize taking breaks and exercising bodily autonomy. Acknowledge that conversations around complex topics can be vulnerable, complicated, and challenging. Encourage members to voice and do what is right for them without needing to explain or apologize.
- People do their best when they know what to expect. Start and end your meetings on time.
- Share or co-create your intentions for the meeting.
- Create your space. If possible, share snacks or find other ways to create an inviting, comfortable atmosphere.
- Create a trustworthy space. Maintain confidentiality and only speak to your own experience.
- Minimize distractions while you are together. Silence cell phones and devices so you can give your full attention to the conversation.
- Practice whole-body listening. Listen to words, tone, body language, and the feeling in the atmosphere.
- Acknowledge voices that may be absent. Is there a lived experience that isn't represented in your group? Who are the bridge people who might be able to connect you with other people in your community who might bring new perspectives to the table?
- Adopt an attitude of positive intent. If someone says something that bothers you, assume positive intent and ask for more information.
- Ignite your curiosity around other people's views and opinions. Listen to understand, not to respond. You don't need to agree with others in your group or make it known that you are "right" to have a worthwhile conversation.
- Words matter. Be open to learning and practicing new ways to communicate with others.
- Be clear, direct, and kind in your communication. Nobody benefits when you bottle your opinions.
- Everyone has blind spots and biases; cultivate a space of grace as you enter into new territory together.
- If a conversation gets heated, practice acknowledging the tension, pausing as a group, and taking a collective breath together before diving back in or taking a longer break to reset.
- Privilege your relationships with others over the content or agenda of the meeting. Show each other kindness.
- Create a closing ritual that celebrates the time you've spent together and either gives closure or gives members something to think about before your next meeting.

About the Film



A Towering Task tells the remarkable story of the Peace Corps from its unlikely birth in the early days of the Kennedy administration, through the turbulence of the Vietnam War and the “greed is good” mentality of the 1980s, to its renewed sense of purpose and soul-searching in more recent decades.

Narrated by Oscar-nominated actor Annette Bening, the documentary features stunning cinematography and thoughtful, humorous, and heart-wrenching interviews from volunteers across the agency’s 60-year history. In addition to volunteers, interviewees include staff and former directors of the Peace Corps, President Jimmy Carter (whose mother and grandson were both volunteers), and notable voices from the countries where volunteers have served, like President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, as well as scholars and journalists to provide a deeper understanding of the history.

The film incorporates fascinating archival materials which bring to life the political and historical context of each decade. Through exhaustive research, the filmmakers gathered a substantial amount of available Peace Corps history and pulled it together into one place for the first time, including rarely seen network television reporting, presidential speeches, and entertaining vintage public service announcements.

Viewers will find themselves swept away by the unpredictable story of the Peace Corps and caring about what challenges this scrappy agency will face in the 21st century.

A Towering Task is the first feature-length documentary to chronicle the remarkable history of the agency. As the pandemic subsides and the world once again will have to reevaluate how to cooperate, the story of the Peace Corps will serve as a reminder of Kennedy’s call to action: “*My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: Ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.*”

Letter from the Filmmaker

In these times of short videos, short sound bites, short attention spans, history documentaries are slowly disappearing from the media landscape. Who has the time when new and existential information is coming at us through a fire hose at all times of the day? A historical documentary about a government agency, now that sounds like the stuff to put just about everyone to sleep — except, perhaps, the most die-hard political junkies and history buffs.

So why did we feel that it was not just worthwhile but imperative to create this documentary about the Peace Corps? Why is it important for all of us to understand where our government agencies come from, how they evolve, and what purpose they serve in today's context? Why should we care that since 1961 American citizens, as Peace Corps Volunteers, have worked on the ground in countries around the world? And, most of all, what is it about this story that grips an audience by the heart and awakens the global citizen?

When we first started working on *A Towering Task* back in 2013, it began as a passion project. I had served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Mali, West Africa, from 1992 to 1994. I knew it had been the most transformative experience in my life. I had found a new family in a completely different part of the world, and I had found myself. Perhaps, in my work with Malians, I was able to make some lives just a bit easier — I certainly made them more humorous in my bumbling attempts at the Bambara language and Malian culture. What I know for sure is that I built bridges of a more lasting kind. My friends in Folona, Bassa, Oure, and Keleya, Mali, have a different perspective on Americans. They accepted me as a human and shared so much with me. I, on the other hand, will never forget Sali and Bintu, Adama and Mariam, and all the people who taught me about Mali and its culture.

A few years after returning from West Africa, I had the privilege to work on the team that produced a documentary about the history of the U.S. Forest Service (*The Greatest Good: A Forest Service Centennial Film*). My first reaction to the notion of a government agency history was certainly not the excitement and enthusiasm one hopes for at the beginning of a project. But it was work, a new experience, an opportunity to learn. It wasn't until I got to watch the directors bring to life a tale of passion and pain, of idealistic vision and political intrigue, a story that spanned an entire century, that I fell in love with the idea of citizenship, of truly understanding and appreciating this oh so imperfect, but ever evolving project that is the U.S. government.



Alana DeJoseph, Filmmaker

So, if understanding the U.S. Forest Service had awakened my sense of citizenship, then it was only logical that I should revisit my Peace Corps experience. After all, the Peace Corps also is a U.S. government agency tied to similar forces of history and politics, and defined by the characters that saw it as an integral need for the American people. My very personal experience was part of something much bigger that was an important part of every American's experience. At the same time, because my life as a Peace Corps Volunteer was so personal to me, I needed a fellow storyteller who could keep me honest, who could ensure that we told the whole story, warts and all. And that person was screenwriter Shana Kelly. It was through her independent perspective that we were able to paint a more three-dimensional image, illustrate a living, breathing, and ever-evolving organization that had its stumbles and challenges, sometimes even systemic flaws, and also those quiet and enduring successes.

Understanding the Peace Corps means understanding an important part of American culture: its idealism. Understanding how the agency evolved over time means understanding American resilience. Most of all though, while we hear so much about American exceptionalism, through the Peace Corps' story, we also learn about Americans' ability to be humble.

The mind is a muscle and only by training that muscle with stories about who we are and where we come from can we hope to hold history in our grasp and learn from it.

In peace,
Alana DeJoseph

"If you have come to help,
you are wasting your time.
If you have come because
your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together."
— Lilla Watson

Discussion Questions for the Film



1. How does *A Towering Task* portray the origins and evolution of the Peace Corps? What directorial or editorial decisions contribute to this portrayal?
2. What challenges and criticisms of the Peace Corps does the documentary highlight?
3. In what ways does the Peace Corps, as depicted in the documentary, reflect the broader goals and values of U.S. foreign policy?
4. What impact does the documentary show the Peace Corps having on host countries and communities? To what extent are these impacts positive? Ground your assessment in, or against, the film's portrayal.
5. In what ways does the documentary portray the experiences and perspectives of Peace Corps Volunteers?
6. How does the documentary depict the Peace Corps's role in promoting intercultural understanding? To what extent does this effort appear to be successful? To the extent that it is not successful, in what ways does it fall short?
7. To what extent does *A Towering Task* portray the Peace Corps as an agent of "soft power" in international relations? What general conclusions can you surmise from this portrayal?
8. What impact do the assigned readings have on how you think about the Peace Corps and the documentary itself?

Film Credits

NARRATOR

Annette Bening

DIRECTOR

Alana DeJoseph

WRITER

Shana Kelly

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

Juliane Hyman

Theresa Gallant

Paul Sack

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Vanessa Carr

EDITORS

[Alana DeJoseph](#)

Brian De Herrera-Schnering

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**PO Box 65357
Albuquerque, NM 87193**