

## THE POWER AND THE POTENTIAL

*High Atlas Foundation's Model for Continued Service*

by Kate McLetchie

**A** year after finishing my Peace Corps service, I had the opportunity to return to Morocco to visit the village where I had served. While there as a volunteer, I attempted to introduce several different projects into the community, and although they were met with some success, they were met with even more challenges. With that said, the one project that really seemed to take off was a literacy program for women and girls—something deeply advocated for by the entire village. I left shortly after it began and sadly was never fully able to understand how important it might have been or what an impact it would have on the community.

However, during my reunion visit, all of that changed.

Greeted by the familiar faces and laughter that had lingered in the back of my mind for so many months, I was

told that I was to attend that evening's literacy class. I was thrilled to see that it was still so successful. Sitting among the women as they proudly showed me their graceful writing and recited verses from the Koran, it hit me—this project was successful because it was something the community really wanted and owned.

Whether it was fate or just random luck, I learned about the High Atlas Foundation (HAF) shortly after returning from my trip. HAF is a nonprofit organization that was started by Peace Corps Volunteers who served in Morocco, as a way to continue to build upon the knowledge and relationships they developed during their years of service. The organization helps to establish development projects that local communities design and manage, and that are in partnership with government and non-government agencies. I started volunteering, then



Dennie Kirtley

The author with community members during a tree planting project last winter.

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joined the Board of Directors, and last October I became HAF's first staff member, moving back to Morocco in order to manage projects on the ground and expand the organization. It didn't take long to convince me that there is a place for High Atlas Foundation not only in Morocco, but in every Peace Corps country throughout the world.

It goes without saying that there are plenty of RPCVs doing good things to benefit their countries of service. But what sets a group like the High Atlas Foundation apart from the rest is that it seeks to leverage the entire Morocco RPCV community (all 4,000 plus of them going back 45 years, as well as former Country Directors and U.S. Ambassadors who once served Morocco) along with Peace Corps counterparts from various government ministries. The model is simple and effective: using a grassroots participatory approach, we facilitate community meetings where beneficiaries determine for themselves their priority development projects; introduce the partnerships and raise the funds necessary to support the projects that are designed, implemented, and managed by the communities themselves.

Need evidence of the power and effectiveness of this model? Until just recently, HAF was an all-volunteer organization, and since its founding in 2000, it has planted nearly 150,000 fruit trees, benefitting over 23,000 people; funded the construction of three women's cooperatives and one irrigation basin; supported numerous Peace Corps Volunteer projects; facilitated with its partners dozens of community meetings; formed instrumental partnerships with Morocco's High Commission of Waters and Forests and Ministry of Agriculture; hosted six fundraising receptions in the United States that brought together the Moroccan expatriate community, RPCVs, as well as academicians, politicians, and private sector leaders with an interest in Morocco, including one just this past June that celebrated 45 years of Peace Corps service in Morocco; and hired its first full-time staff—and most of these accomplishments happened just in the past few years.

As Peace Corps prepares to celebrate its 50th anniversary, HAF can serve as model for strategically developing ways to leverage the power and potential of the RPCV community to address the myriad social problems around the globe. Creating a robust network of RPCV groups with a development focus and providing the training, technical and financial support they need to get their organizations off the ground is the place to start. After all, what sub-set of the American population can you tap into that has spent two years collectively living at the grassroots level in 139 countries, experienced first-hand the intricate social and economic challenges of some of the most under-resourced areas of the world, learned the local languages and culture, and upon returning, often seek out advance degrees and training, including those available through Peace Corps-affiliated graduate programs?

We know that in general, host countries like Peace Corps Volunteers; after all we are there by invitation from the host countries' governments. So think about how much it means to those countries when Volunteers continue to serve beyond their two year commitment. When RPCVs organize themselves to support projects of current Volunteers and their communities, when they assist the most remote villages in their development efforts, and when they create dialogue between government agencies and local communities—all of a sudden Peace Corps is not just a two-year program that parachutes in wide-eyed idealists looking to change the world. Instead, it is seen as a sophisticated international development agency, one that leverages the knowledge, skills, and relationships of RPCVs—and most of all, the genuine love for the host country and its people.

*Kate McLetchie is the first Country Director of the High Atlas Foundation — a NPCA member group. She served as a Peace Corps Volunteer from 2001-2003 in Morocco. You can learn more about the High Atlas Foundation at [highatlasfoundation.org](http://highatlasfoundation.org).*