

Maury Albertson Helped Change U.S. Volunteerism

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As a consultant to the World Bank as well as the United Nations, Maurice Albertson has influenced international education and world development programs for nearly 60 years. One of his most recognized contributions led to the creation of the Peace Corps.

The man who crafted the model for what's been called the "toughest job you'll ever love" says his first call to service was inspired by his father.

Maurice Albertson grew up in Hayes, Kansas in the 1930s, when a prolonged drought turned the farmland of the American prairie into a dust bowl, forcing many to give up all that they had. "My dad was always helping people," Albertson recalls. "He'd call other people and say, 'Joe Blow needs help, and what could we do to help him out?'" That made a lasting impression on a young Maury.

He worked in the oil fields of Kansas to pay for his college education, and his boss suggested petroleum engineering as a career. But memories of great billowing clouds of dust fueled Albertson's interest in water, and in making sure there was enough of it. So he studied Civil and Hydraulic Engineering, eventually earning a PhD.

During the early years of college, Albertson lived in the parsonage of a Methodist minister, who taught him an equally important life lesson. "He's the one that gave me the idea that we're on Earth for one purpose, and that's to put the Sermon on the Mount into practice."

Albertson took Jesus' message to help the poor and feed the hungry to heart. In 1947, armed with determination and a doctorate, he moved to Ft. Collins, Colorado, where he developed an engineering program at what's now Colorado State University. "Within eleven years we had the largest graduate program and research program in water resources in the world, starting from zero," he says with a proud chuckle. Under his direction, CSU took on an international role when it opened a similar engineering program in Bangkok, Thailand, to encourage social and economic development in the region.

That success led to a challenge from the U.S. State Department, one that would change the face of volunteer service in this country, although Albertson didn't realize it at the time.



Maury Albertson continues his efforts to make positive changes in the world



Hubert Humphrey was the driving force for the volunteer program that became the Peace Corps

"They wanted to have a study done on the advisability and practicability of a Point-4 Youth Corps," he says, explaining that Point-4 was the foreign assistance program in the State Department. "Hubert Humphrey wanted to call it the Peace Corps."

Senator Humphrey had introduced legislation in 1960 to create an international volunteer service program for young people. Albertson was named director of the congressional panel that was to study the feasibility and public support for such a youth corps. "We very quickly came up with a plan," he says, "and we spent the rest of the year testing [it], refining it. So it was ready when Sarge Shriver called me."

Sargent Shriver, the brother-in-law of newly elected President John Kennedy, was named director of the fledgling program in March of 1961. But, as Albertson recalls, there was just one problem. "He said, 'I don't know what the Peace Corps should be, and yet I'm the director of it, and I want to talk to you about what the Peace Corps should be.'"

Shriver accepted and implemented all the recommendations of Albertson's panel, and within six years, the Peace Corps had more than 14,000 volunteers working in 55 countries. Since then, 187,000 volunteers have served in its ranks, and the Peace Corps continues to have an impact on the world. The organization has projects in 73 countries, in education, youth outreach and community development, the environment, and information technology.

And Maury Albertson continues working for the benefit of humankind as well. At the age of 88, he's now collaborating with a group of retired Peace Corps volunteers on a project called Village Earth. It's a plan to end global poverty.



Whatever project he's involved in, he says the underlying theme will always be the same: "We have to overcome the temptations of greed and make service as important as the profit motive. It's just that simple. And that's why we're here."

He adds that much of the Village Earth concept is based on that original 1960 feasibility study which led to the development of the Peace Corps. But this time around, Albertson says he knows what's he's doing.



Photo: Peace Corps

Sargeant Shriver (left) was first Peace Corps director; with current director Gaddi Vasquez

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