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Peace Corps inducts 41st group of volunteers for Ukraine

by Mark Raczkiewicz

Special to The Ukrainian Weekly

KYIV – When the main hall in the Teacher's Building in Kyiv erupted in thunderous applause on June 16, U.S. Ambassador John Tefft urged the 103 newly inducted Peace Corps volunteers to take that enthusiasm with them to their community sites.

Mr. Tefft had just administered the oath to the 41st group of volunteers. The ceremony coincided with two other 2011 milestones: Ukraine's upcoming 20th year of independence and Peace Corps' 50th anniversary.

It was also a reminder that Ukraine still has a demand for Peace Corps volunteers. It's a need that has long been phased out in neighboring Poland and Slovakia, as well as the three Baltic states to the north – all of which have made the transition to market economies and joined the European Union and NATO.

"Ukraine isn't in the European Union, but we see Ukraine moving in that direction. We're helping to support that through English language teaching; there are programs in place that we offer to assist Ukraine to be more effective in the global environment," said Douglass Teschner, Ukraine's Peace Corps director.

Mr. Teschner, himself a former Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco, said Ukrainian government agencies have been receptive to the idea of having native-speaking English teachers of English and youth development volun-

teers serve for two year terms, with all expenses paid for by the U.S. government.

That's part of the reason why Ukraine is home to the world's largest Peace Corps contingent with 462 volunteers as of the June 16 swearing-in ceremony.

"Ukraine is a big country with 46 million people, so that drives numbers," explained Mr. Teschner. "There's obviously a lot of need and we've a lot of support from government agencies who want more teachers, more youth development and people to work for non-profit organizations."

The majority of volunteers in Ukraine teach English as a second language and are mostly in small towns and rural areas where communities need them the most. The newest group consisted of 41 English teachers who will be based in schools and lyceums. Twenty-eight were community development volunteers who also will work in schools and social centers to promote healthy lifestyles, safe Internet usage, leadership skills, as well as other activities. The remaining 34 volunteers will be sent to civil society organizations and local city councils to work on small to medium-scale community development projects.

"It's a common misconception that TEFL [Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Language] volunteers are here to teach English," said Sam Johnston, a volunteer in Haivoron, Kirovohrad Oblast. "I realize now that I'm doing something

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Peace Corps...

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else, something that can't be accomplished through a wire. I'm connecting people with a world they may not have known, showing them a way to forge their own path by extending a hand."

The Peace Corps program for Ukraine started in 1992 after President George H.W. Bush and President Leonid Kravchuk signed a bilateral agreement. More than 2,400 volunteers have served in 1,200 communities in all 25 oblasts of Ukraine and Crimea. They've worked as teachers, management consultants, environmentalists and youth development specialists.

Peace Corps directly cooperates with the Ministry of the Economy and the Ministry of Education, Science, Youth, and Sports.

Volunteers initiate projects in Ukrainian communities that include civic education, youth leadership training, community development training and business development training; they establish libraries and resource centers, and strengthen NGO management and operations.

Applicants undergo a rigorous screening and application process at home, with only about a third of applicants being given "invitations" to serve. They then undergo 11 weeks of intensive in-country, cross-cultural and language training – even more drop out during this phase – before earning the honor of being called a volunteer.

In Ukraine, volunteers receive a monthly living allowance of 1,400 hryv paid for by U.S. taxpayers. It's enough to live on. Significantly, that sum doesn't allow volunteers to live much better than many Ukrainians among whom they work.

Unlike in the 1990s and early 2000s when Peace Corps volunteers were most-



Taras Tymchuk

During the swearing in of the 41st group of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers on June 16 in Kyiv (from left) are: Peace Corps Director of Programming and Training Thomas Ross, U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine John Tefft, Peace Corps Ukraine Director Douglass Teschner and Mykhailo Harmash of the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, as they listen to a live rendition of the American national anthem.

ly sent to Ukraine's urban centers, today the vast majority get sent to underdeveloped rural towns.

Since President Barack Obama took office, the Peace Corps has received renewed attention. The number of Peace Corps volunteers worldwide peaked in 1966, at 15,000. Today, it's roughly half that amount.

However, the State Department-run organization is currently taking a look inward with a comprehensive impact and needs assessment. Mr. Obama's administration secured more cash for the program on June 30, 2010, when its budget was upped by 11.5 percent, to \$446 million.

The Peace Corps is also what U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton calls "smart power" – an attempt to revive a

positive view of American's standing in the world.

"Peace Corps volunteers around the world, not only in Ukraine, serve to promote American culture and better understanding of America so this does contribute to our foreign policy," said Mr. Tefft after the swearing-in ceremony.

"Ukraine understands and appreciates the contribution Peace Corps volunteers make to strengthen our country, especially its human potential," said Mykhailo Harmash, deputy director for international technical assistance and cooperation with international financial institutions of the Economic Development and Trade Ministry.

According to official statistics, the average age of a Peace Corps volunteer

is 20 years and only 7 percent are ages over 50. The Peace Corps wants to change that to send more experienced volunteers abroad by invoking memories of former President John F. Kennedy who established the organization in 1961.

The program – dubbed "The 50 Plus Initiative" – has no budget for advertising, but it has dispatched recruiters to conventions where older Americans congregate. It also launched a special website designed to lure older volunteers. It features photos of older volunteers in exotic locales and words that deliberately echo Kennedy's: "Still asking what you can do for your country? The Peace Corps wants you. It's not too late."

While it's too soon to gauge whether this new initiative will succeed, Ukraine's volunteers aren't looking back.

"Go forth and set the world on fire," Mr. Teschner told them, using his favorite St. Ignatius quote.



Peace Corps volunteer Katherine Lankford speaks during the swearing in ceremony in Kyiv on June 16.