

Robin Solomon, Peace Corps Volunteer, Kazakhstan (2001–2003)

Biography

Hello from Kazakhstan! My name is Robin Solomon, and I am from Houston, Texas. Since I graduated from high school in Houston, my life has taken me farther and farther away from home. In 1997, I told my parents, brother, and large extended family that I planned to attend Georgetown University in



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Washington, DC. "Washington, DC?" they asked incredulously. "What do you want to go all the way up there for?"

I explained that it was my first choice among universities, where I could study international relations and learn to live in the fast-paced political environment in Washington. The family finally agreed, and I took off for the East Coast.

But that wasn't enough for me. In 1999, I announced that I wanted to spend my junior year of university abroad in Paris. "What? Washington isn't far enough away from Texas for you?" my family asked. I laughed and insisted that Texas would always be my home, but my studies and personal interests were leading me to Paris to improve my French and experience life immersed in another culture. With reluctance, the family nodded in consent, and I left for a year in Europe. During that year, I certainly improved my French and experienced another culture, but living in Paris also gave me a taste for travel and learning about foreign languages and cultures that wouldn't leave me alone. I knew that I would live abroad again.

As graduation from Georgetown approached, I realized that I wasn't ready to return to Houston, and the travel bug was biting me hard. The Peace Corps, which I had become familiar with during an internship at their headquarters, attracted me because it combined the adventure of living in a foreign culture with the humanitarian goal of serving a community. Without much hesitation, I made the decision to join the Peace Corps and spend two years in Kazakhstan, a large country south of Russia that used to be part of the Soviet Union. "Kazakh-what?!?!!" my relatives exclaimed, throwing up their hands in resignation. "Well, that's it. You're never coming back to Texas again." I left Texas in 2001 with promises of an eventual return.

Now, I live in Kokshetau, Kazakhstan, a city in the north of the country, near the Russian border. I write letters home to Texas describing my work in this town of about 130,000 people, where I work as an English teacher and jack-of-all-trades. The educational system of Kazakhstan has a lot to be proud of, but I work with English teachers on improving the quality and breadth of instruction. In my own classroom and through teacher-training seminars, I show people how to teach English, health, leadership, and more, trying to give young people tools to improve their lives and the future of their country. Besides teaching, I lead a Girls Club, work with the English library in the city, volunteer in an orphanage, and organize summer camps, among many other things. One of my most important jobs is being "the American," who is a constant

source of information and support for people in Kokshetau who have ideas to improve their community.

And what do I write home about this country? Kazakhstan is a fascinating place of contrasts and bitter history. The country and its people lost a great deal when the Soviet Union ended in 1991, and since then, they have struggled to build a prosperous nation from the meager remains of the great Russian empire. Russians and Kazakhs live peacefully side by side with numerous other ethnicities, speaking many different languages and practicing different religions, such as Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Together, everyone battles the harsh, cold winters, and it gives people a solidarity and toughness with which they live their daily lives. History has been hard on this country, where nomads were forced to live in cities, exiles were sent to suffer, and farmers were challenged to grow wheat on land that won't support agriculture. This country teaches me on a daily basis, sometimes far more than I think I teach people here.

Living in this country, I think often about home and what it means to me. I know that before I return to Texas to live, there is a whole world still to explore. Washington, DC, Paris, and Kokshetau are not quite enough for me. But try telling that to my family back in Houston!



Robin Solomon (center) with fellow Peace Corps Volunteers in Kazakhstan