

In war-torn world, the Peace Corps

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“Do whatever is in your sphere of influence,” Peace Corps director Carol Spahn tells attendees at a summit of internationally involved Minnesotans.



RASH REPORT JOHN RASH

“The toughest job you’ll ever love” was the old slogan in Peace Corps PSAs.

The public service announcements still ring true for former and future volunteers, Peace Corps Director Carol Spahn says.

It “resonates with anyone who has ever served in the Peace Corps, because it so directly speaks to not just how challenging it is, but just how transformational it is.” Including for Spahn herself, who served in post-Cold War Romania from 1994 to 1996 as a small-business adviser. Later, before her 2022 ascension to director, she held other organizational roles, including chief of operations in the Africa region.

Spahn spoke Nov. 3 at the Minnesota International NGO Network (MINN) Annual Summit, held at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs. The venue was fitting, Spahn said, because Hubert Humphrey’s “role in the establishment of the Peace Corps is profound.” And apt that she was at the U, which is ranked 16th among colleges and universities in sending volunteers, with 1,674 answering the call since the Peace Corps’ 1961 founding, and that she was in Minnesota, since the state ranks 13th all-time in total volunteers, well above its population base.

In an interview, Spahn said that the famous phrase from the PSAs “speaks to the kind of people we want to bring into the Peace Corps; people who are not afraid of the challenge and have the grit and resilience to be able to work through those challenges and know they’re going to fail at some point, and they’re going to dust themselves off, and put forward the ideals of JFK.”

In recent years, the Peace Corps itself has had to have grit and resilience, especially after COVID completely curtailed the organization. Since then, Spahn said, the orga-

nization has built to about 2,400 volunteers serving in 57 countries, with volunteers typically serving for about two years, working with local community members in one of six sectors: agriculture, environment, community economic development, health, education, and youth in development.

The demand is there, Spahn said, adding: “The real question is just how can we get back out in a very intentional and thoughtful way.”

It’s encouraging that the demand endures, given the geopolitical strains that can cast America on one side of an increasing ideological divide between the West and Global South.

Acknowledging that searing images of global strife may make most want to turn inward, not international, Spahn said that “first, let me say it is devastating to watch the just unbelievable atrocities happening around the world in ways and in places that we just never imagined possible. I’ve had several people reach out to me and just say they’re depressed, it takes a lot out of us spiritually and emotionally — and particularly when we feel a sense of hopelessness that there’s anything we can do to change that trajectory.”

Spahn said that she responds that the Peace Corps mission is “world peace and friendship, and it’s no small mission, particularly at this point in time, and we truly believe that world peace and friendship is not just in the hands of politicians and governments, it’s the mandate of each and every one of us in how we engage, and particularly how we engage across differences.”

That ethos was shared by many MINN summit attendees — an optimistic lot at a time when pessimism is rising, if not reigning, globally and locally.

“We stay true to our mission; our mission is to end the book famine in Africa,” Books for Africa Board President Mike Essien said. “Because we serve outside of this country, we need to be alert to the fact that folks look at us differently,”



Peace Corps Director Carol Spahn (center in white pants) is joined by former Peace Corps volunteers and other attendees at the Minnesota International NGO Network Annual Summit in Minneapolis on Nov. 3.

he added. “We are cognizant of the fact that we live in a global community, and what we do impacts people and how we do those things. It’s necessary for us to be alert and pay attention to feelings and reactions and all of those things. But generally, our mission is to get books to people, to increase literacy, and if we make that mission, then things seem to take care of themselves well.”

Lift Up the Vulnerable, an anti-human-trafficking organization that works in war-torn Sudan and South Sudan, is also acutely aware of the increasingly fragile security and economic environment. “There have been risks involved, we’ve had some close calls, but fortunately, to my knowledge, everyone in our network has been safe thus far,” said Sasha Nicolle, the organization’s operations and advancement officer. “What I have seen amidst all of this conflict and strife is just how dedicated our local partners are to investing in the children and their network to become changemakers

in their own community.”

Reflecting on the chronic challenges international nongovernmental organizations face, Nicolle said that “when you work in this kind of a sphere, you have to be both hopeful and a little bit stoic. You have to recognize that there are problems everywhere, and you have to get up every day and do the best that you can in that day. And even if you’re not going to solve the world’s problems, you’ll solve some of the world’s problems.”

The intrepid internationalist at the summit — including several former Peace Corps volunteers — were likely motivated by Spahn’s keynote speech. And she was likely motivated by them.

Projecting an optimism in the interview that might belie the bleak geopolitical environment, Spahn concluded by saying that “I think anyone who chooses to engage in the business of world peace and friendship has to be optimistic, you have to have hope in order

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actually do the work and show up every day." Then, in words channeling "the toughest job you'll ever love," Spahn said: "And that does not mean it's going to be easy. It's hard work."

"There is tremendous turmoil in the world right now. Do whatever you can do; do whatever is within your sphere of influence. Get out there and make a difference, whether it is kindness at the grocery store or engaging in your local community — that meaningful connection is what we all need to come together, and every person has that in them and can do something in their sphere or really challenge themselves to go outside that sphere and engage."

"It's only through that engagement that we can really make a positive difference."

John Rash is a Star Tribune editorial writer and columnist. The Rash Report can be heard at 8:10 a.m. Fridays on WCCO Radio, 830-AM. On Twitter: @rashreport.