

# Q&A with Michael Learned

President of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Peace Corps Alumni group

by Adrienne McCloud

When the theme for the spring issue of *WorldView* was chosen, we knew that it had to include an interview with Michael Learned, president of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) Peace Corps Alumni group. In addition to Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs), the group that also strives to connect with prospective Volunteers, currently serving Volunteers, former and current staff, and family and friends. Their website ([www.lgbtrpcv.org](http://www.lgbtrpcv.org)) provides the locus for communication with members around the world and includes resources for applicants considering the Peace Corps and training staff, vignettes of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender life in a developing country, and a listing of the group's accomplishments over the years.

**Q: Michael, what was your experience like as a gay Peace Corps Volunteer?**

A: "I was a Volunteer in the very early days of Peace Corps (1963-65). During these early years Peace Corps would not select an applicant/nominee who was known to be gay or lesbian. So, I was very closeted during my time in Malawi. Very much an experience of the times."

**Q: How did the LGBT Peace Corp Alumni group come about?**

A: During Peace Corps' 30th Anniversary in 1991 several lesbian and gay Peace Corps staff and some of their lesbian and gay RPCV friends were disheartened by the lack of acknowledgement of the contributions they had made. About the same time, RPCV Jim Kelly, who was working on a graduate degree, conducted a survey of all the lesbian and gay RPCVs he could find. The nature of the survey and his thesis, which came out of it, described the experiences and frustrations of gay and lesbian Volunteers. These two events brought people together and LGBT RPCVs was formed.

**Q: What have been the major accomplishments of the group?**

A: We have openly solicited policy change and influenced it: the inclusion of sexual orientation in Peace Corps' non-discriminatory policy in the mid-1990s, allowing healthy HIV positive people to serve as Volunteers—this occurred about 5 years ago—and

accepting transgender people as Volunteers. And we have openly encouraged Peace Corps to place same sex couples together as Volunteers where they can be safe. I am convinced that this policy change will come soon.

**Q: What changes have you seen in the Peace Corps community?**

A: Peace Corps has slowly evolved. It added sexual orientation to the non-discriminatory policy in the mid-1990s, but the pace of change has been the greatest in the last ten years. Peace Corps actively encourages the formation of LGBT-related Volunteer support groups in countries around the world, and they are quite common now.

**Q: The NPCA offers a mentoring program for recently returned Volunteers, how is the LGBT mentoring program different?**

A: By using information from our web site (mentor page) and our listserv, LGBT applicants, nominees, and PCVs can contact others who can advise them on the environment in various countries and answer their concerns. Our mentor program has been in place for years and is our most successful program.

**Q: Who developed the "Safe Zone" training materials?**

A: "They were developed by LGBT PCVs in the field, and include complete materials such as PowerPoint slides. Training packets are from Latin America, both French and English speaking Africa, and one from an Arab speaking country.

**Q: How does the group support PCVs coming out to their Host Country National (HCN) friends and family?**

A: Advice is given on an individual basis based on the country and the status of homosexuality in that country. We also refer individuals to articles on our website that deal with this issue. Most LGBT PCVs do not come out to their local community. But most are out to their PCV colleagues and at least some of HCN staff.

**Q: What story has stood out to you as President?**

A: We have dozens of articles on our website that are inspirational. One by Elizabeth Tunkle, the first HIV positive Volunteer to serve (in Lesotho), is a real inspiration. Articles by two transgender Volunteers tell quite brave stories.

**Q: Do you ever see the group as not being necessary?**

A: Not sure. We have been influential in changing and opening up policies that provide support and respect for LGBT PCVs and there's still a way to go.

---

*Adrienne McCloud (Benin 2006-09) is the program assistant for membership and development at the National Peace Corps Association. As a Rural Community Health Volunteer in Kolokonde, a medium sized village in northern Benin, she counts as one of her biggest accomplishments the completion of a USAID grant to teach 100 host country nationals how to properly build 50 latrines.*