



## CAREER PEACE CORPS WORKER

MEET **VERNON "VAN" NELSON**, FSHS CLASS OF 1962, PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER, COUNTRY DIRECTOR, AND CONSULTANT.

### Vernon "Van" Nelson

In 1969 Vernon "Van" Nelson wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life so he applied for the Peace Corps. That decision changed the trajectory of his life and career in ways he never could have imagined.

Van was raised in Faribault, MN, and graduated in 1962. He served as student council president his senior year and was involved in choir. During his 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade years, he worked at Poirier/Paul's Pharmacy and then at the Lavender Inn from 12<sup>th</sup> grade through his college years. Van graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1967 with a degree in Humanities. In 1973, he received a master's degree in Education with a focus on adult learning from the School of International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

When asked what led him to apply for the Peace Corps, Van gave the following answer: "After graduating from undergraduate school in 1967, I returned to Faribault, bought a trailer home, and continued to work at the Lavender Inn. Basically, I was making a good salary but did not feel I was going anywhere career-wise, nor using my education. The words of John F. Kennedy remained in my ears, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."

He went on to say, "As I was exempt from military service, the Peace Corps was an option for serving my country. In the summer of 1969, I applied for the US Peace Corps. I had decided if not accepted, I would settle down and stay with the job I had. Obviously, I was selected and left for San Francisco and on to the Big Island (Hawaii) in autumn of 1969 for three months of training in the Thai language/culture and the raising of chickens and pigs. I sold my trailer home, car, paid off all my debts except for student loans, and left for the Peace Corps. Incidentally, knowing this was an entirely new experience, I got off the plane in San Francisco and introduced myself as Van (**Vernon Arthur Nelson**) as I was starting all over in a new place/world. "

Van's experience and service to the Peace Corps has been quite extensive and varied. Initially, he served as a volunteer in Thailand for three+ years. From that point, he spent the next approximately 40 years in positions related to the Peace Corps. He was first employed as Education Program Manager to Iran and subsequently returned to Thailand as Training Director. After returning to the US in 1979, Van spent a number of years as a Pre-service Training Director (3-4 months per contract) in Oman, Tonga, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, the Republic of Kiribati, Czechoslovakia, the Slovak Republic, and Russia; and presented Project Design and Management workshops for Peace Corps/Washington, D.C. in Papua New Guinea, Thailand, Uganda, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, Kazakhstan, and Moldova. In 1998, Van returned to full-time Peace Corps employment as Training and Program Manager for PC/Russia. One of Van's special honors was being selected as US Peace Corps Country Director first for Moldova, secondly for Georgia, and lastly for a new Peace Corps post in the Kingdom of Cambodia. Due to exposure to a number of work locations, Van became fluent in the Thai language and achieved an intermediate level of proficiency in Farsi, Georgian, Pidgin, and Romanian.

Since retirement in 2008, Van serves as a consultant to the Peace Corps, as an International Election Monitor, and as a volunteer for the Santa Fe Folk Art Market. He also helped to manage a jewelry store in Scottsdale, AZ, from 1980 to 1998 during which time he served Peace Corps as a consultant.

Van shared that he has very fond memories of FSHS and the Faribault community. The two were closely interwoven, and his recollections of those years in school, his teachers and community, mean a lot to him. He hopes that today's students will have similar memories to cherish.