

He's 81; She's 77

Elderly Couple Ventures Into Peace Corps

By Kathleen Hendrix
The Los Angeles Times

SANTA MONICA, Calif. — At the time Harold and Bertha Soderquist, now 81 and 77, joined the Peace Corps a little more than a year ago, they were told they were the oldest volunteers.

Bertha Soderquist had seen an ad for volunteers in one of the Detroit Sunday papers that said there was no upper age limit. Holding Peace Corps to its word, she had sent the application in with the ad pasted over the top.

Nine months later, the Soderquists received their assignments, teaching in a

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secondary school in Western Samoa, but were summoned first to Denver for three days of interviews and screening — common Peace Corps procedure.

Regardless of the ad, Peace Corps officials were somewhat concerned about the Soderquists' ages. A psychologist approached the problem bluntly with Mrs. Soderquist during one of the Denver interviews.

"What would you do, he asked me, 'if your husband died over there?'"

Bertha Soderquist met him

head on. "Well, I said 'I guess we'd have to have him buried.'"

Her lack of concern matches that of her husband, who listened to the story, laughed and said, "I wouldn't mind dying and being buried over there, anyway. It's a famous place — Robert Louis Stevenson is there."

The Soderquists, evidently, had what it takes. They went on to Western Samoa for 2½ months of intensive training, then began their teaching assignments (English for her, math for him) in a girls' boarding school run by Congregationalists outside of Apia.

Now back in the States for six weeks' leave while the school closes for the rainy season, the Soderquists are visiting their daughter, Marta Kristen, an actress, in Santa Monica.

They make no claims for being the oldest volunteers. Another statistic may be serving elsewhere by now. Just in Western Samoa there are two volunteers, women, one 64, the other 74. And while it might be unusual for the Peace Corps to have people that age, it is obviously not unusual for the Soderquist to be there.

"We made a deal some years ago," Harold Soderquist explained, "'Let's do something unusual every year,' and we could always work out some sort of deal we'd agree on. No wonder people thought we were crazy."

Or envied them. The deals

seem to have been happening for most of their marriage. Married in 1923, they went to the Philippines a few years later and taught school for five years.

Then they settled in Michigan. Mrs Soderquist taught off and on; her husband was a professor at Wayne State University for 28 years, specializing in the philosophy of

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education. Forced to retire in 1965, he had two emeritus positions at North Dakota and Southern Illinois after that.

When the Soderquists were in their 50s they adopted two children, Marta, who was four at the time, and son when he was eight. That helped keep them young, they now agree.

They kept on the go after retirement, doing a lot of camping in Alaska and, Soderquist relates with pleasure, celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary two years ago on a nine-passenger freighter going up and down the east coast of South America.

With the exception of the rigors of Peace Corps training, volunteer life has been an easy adjustment for them and one they would like to see other older people make, although they understand, as Mrs. Soderquist said, that "not everybody our age could do this — but we've been so fortunate in our health and

we had skills that were needed."

Their health problems in Samoa have been confined to "colds and the runners," Harold Soderquist said. "Nobody escapes them."

The moments of wondering what they had gotten themselves into and whether they had made a mistake were few and limited to the training period, the bane of many a volunteer.

Language training borders on the incessant and has been known to cause mutiny and despair. And for the Soderquists there was the added difficulty that the Peace Corps does not expect volunteers over the age of 50 to do well in language anyway.

That bit of news produced no euphoria of being let off the hook. Rather, said Bertha Soderquist, "we went home and crammed. You pass with a '1' and we both got '1' plus."

The fact that most volunteers are in their 20s was, and is, no problem "We go to the parties," Soderquist said. "We can drink as hard as they do! That's off the record."

They watched some of their younger peers drop out of training and return home, some 20 of the group of 70, for such reasons as health and family problems and culture shock.

"There's a certain advantage in being older," Harold

Soderquist observed. "You know yourself better — what you can take. You've been through it before and know what to expect of yourself. But at the same time I'd rather be young."

Bertha Soderquist realized all of her limitations one night during training when she was at a Samoran party. Asking to be led to the ladies room or equivalent, she was taken to the seashore and pointed toward an outhouse or "sea toilet" 40 feet offshore, and reached by a wobbly plank, no handrails in sight. Defeat.

"I cannot go out there," she announced. Then, she said, a man put his arms

"We wouldn't just want a waste of time."

around her from behind and easily pushed her all the way out.

A minor crisis and one of few.

The Soderquists say the experience is about what they expected it to be and that they wouldn't have missed it. They look forward to returning in January for another year.

Although they do not answer to the term do-gooder, Harold Soderquist said the two of them have some idealism or altruism about them.

"We wouldn't just want a waste of time."

"I don't think there's any such thing as a simple, pure motive to do anything," Bertha Soderquist said. "Our motive was to do something useful but also to have a new adventure."



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