



►Far left: Bill Riley and Diocelina Jiron check eggs from Jiron's flock of laying hens, which Riley helped her establish. ►Above: Beautiful scenery masks poverty in Chujuyub, Guatemala. ►Left: Laura Gregory, of Hanford, Calif., helps rice farmers in Panama boost production and earn better prices against imports. When she discovered that local women wanted more meal-time variety, she started teaching cooking, too.

livestock experience. He shipped off to Guatemala, learned Spanish in Peace Corps training, dropped 20 pounds, and brought his cholesterol back to normal. He comes home after his two-year assignments, but seems to always find his way back to Guatemala.

High demand. Farmers are in high demand among volunteer aid organizations, and age isn't a barrier. Five percent of the Peace Corps' volunteers are over the age of 50. The average age of a volunteer in CUSO, Canada's top overseas service group, is 38. And ACDI/VOCA, a non-profit international development group that sends farmers and other professionals on brief missions worldwide, strongly prefers to see a few gray hairs.

"The farmer who is able to leave the business for 2 or 3 weeks is invaluable to us because of the experience they offer," says Diana Roach, director of volunteer programs for ACDI/VOCA. "Some of them remember farming before the high-tech production we have today, and that can help them

By Steve Werblow

Reaching out

Sharing ag knowledge opens up a world of opportunities

Diocelina Jiron used to carry huge cartons of eggs on the crowded bus to stock the crowded store that occupies the front room of her home in Santa Rosa, a village in the Guatemalan highlands. With the help of Peace Corps volunteer Bill Riley, she invested in a flock of 39 hens in her yard that lay eggs, provide fertilizer for her 3 acres of corn, and secure a profit in Guatemala's hardscrabble rural economy.

Riley stops by the store, checks out Jiron's coop and her eggs, and reviews

the daily record sheet he has her—and all of the small farmers he works with—fill out religiously. Feed concentrate is tracked ounce by ounce, eggs are counted, and profits tallied.

Active retirement. Raised on his grandparents' farm near Roseburg, Ore., while his father served in the Navy in World War II, Riley grew up raising chickens and other livestock. He earned a degree in dairy science and joined the Air Force with a plan to come out and start dairying. His hitch turned into a career, and his retirement turned into a chance to share

his love for livestock with poor farmers in Guatemala. At 73, Riley's a man on a mission, constantly on the move.

It beats retirement, he says. "In my military career, we were always time-oriented, mission-oriented—there were always objectives," he explains. "Then I retired, I went home, the kids were gone, and my wife wasn't used to having me around 24 hours a day. It sounds morbid, but I felt there was nothing ahead of me but death. I just didn't want to sit around and get older."

Instead, in 1986, he answered a television ad calling for volunteers with



►**Above:** Albertina Natareno Veteta is learning to reap more profit by selling broilers before their feed conversion dips. ►**Left:** Peter Redmond of the Peace Corps in Panama says volunteers over age 50 bring skills and experience to the job, and are especially well-respected by the locals.



when they're working in the developing world. That's fantastic for us."

Roach's description fits Damon Szymanski to a T. In his 77 years, he's watched his family's dairy near Pulaski, Wis., go from kerosene lanterns to automatic milking machines. A call for a Polish-speaking dairyman got him his first ACDI/VOCA assignment in 1990. Since then, he's been on nearly 80 assignments in 17 countries, from helping Moldovan farmers fix tractors to boosting milk output in Ethiopia.

Focusing on international aid helped ease the transition of the farm at home, he adds, allowing his son and nephew to take the reins in his absence. "It was a good thing for all of us," he says. "I wasn't there to watch their mistakes and lord over them."

Relevant. Szymanski points out that when he's in the field, he calls not only on his experience with cows and crops, but also the skills he learned in industry and civic leadership roles.

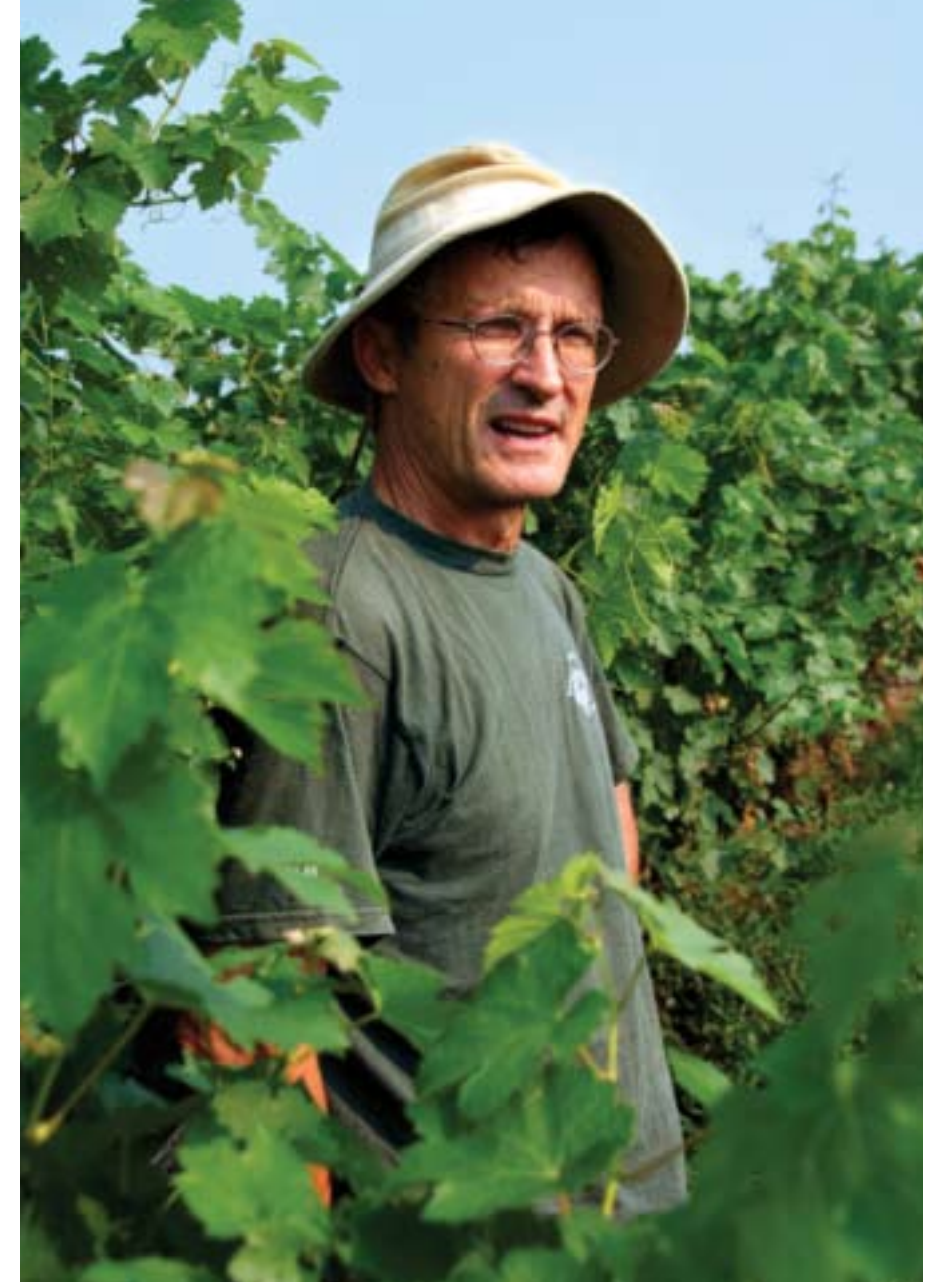
Peter Redmond, the country director for the Peace Corps in Panama, notes that U.S. farmers' management and marketing experience is invaluable abroad. "Many of our ag programs have an agribusiness component to them," Redmond says. "That's probably the most transferable of skills.

The production is so different, but the business skills translate so easily."

Language skills are optional, but whether it's a mission trip, a two-week ACDI/VOCA consulting job, or a two-year Peace Corps hitch, overseas work demands a taste for adventure and a tolerance for bare-bones living.

Charles Mayer of Cox's Creek, Ky., retired from managing a grain elevator and joined the Peace Corps with his wife, Hortensia. In Honduras, they had no TV, radio, or car. "You can't be the kind who has to eat steak and eggs and potatoes every day and avoids going to the Mexican or Thai restaurant," Mayer cautions.

Of course, variety and adventure hook some volunteers for life. Agron-



►**Above:** Charles Mayer met his wife when he was a Peace Corps volunteer in the '70s. In 2004, they took his-and-her Peace Corps assignments in Honduras. ►**Right:** Bill Riley explains the finer points of chicken biology to neighbor Silvestra Reyes Reyes, who harvests eggs for her family.

omist Jim Gregory of Hanford, Calif., got a taste in the Peace Corps in 1970. (It may be contagious: daughter Laura is with the Peace Corps in Panama.)

Today, Gregory spends much of his off-time with Land O' Lakes and Winrock International. He's evaluated farms in Ukraine and Uzbekistan, and worked in blueberries in South Africa and apples in Kosovo. "Instead of taking an ocean cruise or going to a resort, this is what I do for vacation," he says. "And I love it." ■

