I have been asked many times why I chose to become a volunteer in the Peace Corps. And I have many answers, which are similar to those of many other Peace Corps volunteers: travel to a distant place, learn a new language, meet interesting people, experience a different culture, gain valuable skills, challenge myself, help people. The simplest answer I have ever given, however, was when I was first learning to speak Bulgarian. My host sister Maria, whose family I lived with for the first three months of my service, was nine when I landed in her house in Sapareva Banya. She was the best teacher I had, miming, repeating words slowly and carefully, and intuiting when I hadn’t understood something. She would draw pictures and look up words in the dictionary until I got it. When she asked me why I became a volunteer, I answered in my simple Bulgarian, “Because I had to.” I had a need to explore and see how people very different from myself lived. I needed to experience giving up creature comforts because I was always a little wary of consumerism. I needed to help others in order to not feel so helpless. And of course, I wanted to save the world.

The Peace Corps was a dream I had had since I was a little girl, one that intensified through years of doing community service in school. For us (my school), volunteering was an everyday act. It’s important to remember that you don’t need to get on a plane and travel 5000 miles to do something good, to help solve a problem, or to better your community. In my school, community service was mandatory, but even when we were young we could choose where to put our efforts based on what interested us and what we were good at doing. This, I think, is the key to service. Requiring someone, especially a young person, to do something will not instill in him the pride that comes from having ownership and responsibility of a task. Let him choose how to serve. Let him do what he is good at and the service will be more effective, lasting.

Volunteering has always been a vital part of my education, and it continues to teach me invaluable lessons. In the 7th grade, for example, I chose to work on a project in which we gleaned the fields outside of Washington, DC after a harvest of vegetables. The food that the combines left was enough to feed a lot of hungry people in our city. It was important for me and my classmates to get out of the classroom, see how the farm was managed, understand that there were people less fortunate than us, and that the efforts of a few people (or even one person) can make a difference in the lives of others. This is not a lesson that can be effectively taught in a classroom. This learning requires doing.

When I first arrived in Bulgaria, I often had to explain the concept of “Volunteering/Volunteerism.” It was incredibly strange to many of my neighbors and colleagues that I would choose this assignment, go where the organization sent me (without knowing where until almost the last minute!), and give up an American salary. But fewer and fewer people ask me why these days, which I think is a good sign. Maybe the concept is becoming less foreign. Maybe people see the value of volunteers (foreign and Bulgarian!), the work they accomplish, and the important contributions they make to communities all across the country. And maybe, someday, people will not need to ask why I choose to volunteer, because they will have seen for themselves how good it feels to do good for others.