1. My background has always leaned toward social justice. Even as a child, I picketed my church when they said I, as a girl could not serve the alter. I have always had a heart of compassion for even those who are the most challenging to forgive. My desire to understand and feel why people make the choices they do, commit certain acts, and live a particular lifestyle, has forever intrigued me. I have deduced one’s choice to be primarily a fear-based or compassion-based decision. Regardless, the choices we make always seem to be correlated to survival. These questions have led me to developing restorative justice programs in prisons, developing a program and documentary for tsunami victims in India demarcating their process of healing and survival, and now, the Peace Corps.

I believe my passion to dig to the root of the issue, stems from growing up with a severe case dyslexia. Unfortunately my challenges all the way through primary school (70’s and 80’s) were erroneously diagnosed. I knew teachers were desperate to put me in a box, then placed me in remedial classes in my youngest years of school, which naturally never did help. What bothered me the most is that I felt I had so much to offer but they never paid attention to me in healthy and supportive ways. I was such a creative kid yet the focus was always on fixing me to be something I was not, rather than paying attention to what I had to gift. I mean how does a kid graduate high school with a 3.6 GPA but have a 3rd grade reading level? There is something there! Find it ya know?!

I knew there had to be a school somewhere out there, who would not only embrace my way of learning but celebrate what I had to offer also. I never did any research about Evergreen but when I saw the infamous Hamilton sign declare Evergreen as a land of homosexuals and environmental terrorist, something resonated. I knew it was a school not understood, and more importantly one that would embrace me as someone who sees the world from a unique perspective. This is what ultimately led me to Evergreen-first as an undergraduate full paid scholarships, then as a graduate student for the MPA program.

It was not my intention to enroll into the Public Administration program, but I knew I wanted to be part of a pedagogy that would embrace an innovative and interdisciplinary approach like I had as an undergrad. When I identified that I wanted to expand my knowledge in governance and deepen my development in systems of diverse social change, I was guided to Evergreen once again. I shared this perspective with a handy-woman working on the house I was renting in Seattle. She told me Evergreen had a program she graduated from that seemed to meet all those objectives-it was the MPA program. I was ecstatic that the school I already loved had a program that would be a perfect fit. That week I began the process to enroll into the MPA program and a year later I was a student, and graduated from the program in 1999. It just goes to show that there are many ways to be led to what the heart desires most. I should add that when I was looking for a doctorate program, I was led in a similar way. So though I am not well read, or conduct research in a traditional manner, I believe the answers are always before us when we pay attention to what is before us.

1. My intuition led me to the Peace Corps. After a career job in a women’s WV prison job fell through, I began asking myself questions where I could still have some independence, develop my own programming and best serve populations most in need of social change. Immediately the Peace Corps came to mind. Though I was originally told I would not be accepted given the fact I had lost my large intestine from Ulcerative Colitis (which occurred during the time I was enrolled in the MPA program), I knew from the fight I had already endured to save my life, to stay in my MPA program, and so much more, that I could also demonstrate I was quite able to live overseas for two years plus. I had already traveled throughout the world since then and have the tenacity, will and experience to be an amazing Peace Corps volunteer. How could they argue? I had demonstrated overcoming battles on a much grander scale, and soon thereafter I accepted my assignment.
2. The Peace Corps saw in me a fighter and advocate for social change, so it is no surprise the job they have given me is probably one of the most ambitious of the many assignments out there. Normally the Peace Corps will have a volunteer concentrate on one area/town but I have been given the assignment to start up an advocacy program for older persons in each of the eight districts and towns in Belize. The group I work with is called VOICE whose primary objective is to ensure older persons have a voice around issues concerning health care, pension, discounted rates, preferential seating on buses etc. As it stands now, none of those issues are fully implemented or supported. I travel extensively on buses throughout the entire country and meet with potential partners and advocates, conduct trainings and do my best to garner momentum, excitement and interest for the members in each district. Advocacy is an intangible outcome so it can be laborious and challenging to keep everyone feeling positive but I am looking forward to the positive change we will accomplish together. Travel is difficult especially when I have to ride three buses and finally 7 hours later I reach my desired district. While it can be a bit disconcerting when only a few members show up after a long day journey, I trust interest will grow once we identify clear objectives. Once we plant our collective seeds, something positive will flourish I am certain. That is what I CAN do now.
3. I am only a month into my service as I write, but even at this early state, it is so inspiring to see how the older persons with whom I am collaborating begin to feel a renewed sense of life and really embrace and believe in their potential and skills through the work we are doing together. It just goes to show that no matter the age of a person, skills and gifts can be birthed and celebrated at any time in life. Through this celebration, age dissolves and we become one unit working for the greater good for older persons. It is so rewarding to see the older people feel like they can make a difference. This is something that I will forever stay with me.
4. The most challenging aspect of working in Belize with the Peace Corps for me is the bureaucracy. But at the same time, it allows me to stretch myself in ways I would not otherwise have the opportunity. In Belize, so much is intertwined with politics, which presents unique challenges given that we are asked as Peace Corps volunteers, to not engage in, or converse about political issues. Yet we are thrust into environments that are political and divisive. Finding techniques to meet these challenges requires understanding the intricacies of Belizean politics. The entire experience feels a bit oxymoronic and uncomfortable at times but yet something we all accept as part of our every day life as Peace Corps Volunteers. At the same time I embrace the opportunity to garner information in a way that honors all voices and views.
5. There are a lot of small surprises that spring up in Belize. The fact that most Belizeans cancel meeting and stay at home when it rains is extremely odd for me! Coming from the rainy climate of Washington state, I find this really bizarre, especially since the rainy season is eight months long here! It seems to create a culture of disinclination and leads to the kind of perpetuation the advocacy program I am part seeks to overcome. It is ironic how the culture that Belizeans accept as “the Belizean way” is also indirectly correlated to many of the problems Belizeans have identified and struggle to rise above. On a lighter note, Belizeans LOVE certificates of completion. No matter if it is a 15-minute introduction to computer basics, or volunteer work, they want their certificate and they proudly pin those certificates on their dining room wall like it’s wallpaper. I love it!
6. The MPA program and Evergreen’s interdisciplinary modality of teaching and learning, really gave me an opportunity to blossom in a way that speaks so well to my skill-set. Evergreen and the MPA program nurture a culture of innovation and unique perspective while also exposing global injustices and how we play a part in those issues. This approach allowed me to transcend any expectation I may have had because I know there is always more to learn. The Greener environment always support and allow students to exercise initiative and innovation and will celebrate our successes by profiling our work through an interview on KAOS, or opportunities such as this one. I love how Evergreen’s pedagogy, models real life experiences and then honors the way in which we approach our career as individuals in a global community. Every success I have, I will always give some of that credit back to Evergreen. I am armed with the knowledge on how to effectively and compassionately assess an environment, investigate the root of the problem and communicate in a way that honors those cultures with whom I have the privilege to interact. There has been no better way for me to cross-pollinate healthy solutions than the practical application Evergreen has afforded me. This to me is the Greener way and one that has always been the truest form of learning, growing, and showing up in the world. I am a proud Greener who can honestly say, The Evergreen enhanced my life in ways I could have otherwise never imagined. Unlike my primary years of education, as a Greener, I was honored and celebrated for what I have to offer. Because of that, I have flourished and know I can offer the same to others who have yet to discover or uncover her or his potential. There is so much to uncover in this world and that is something The Evergreen State College understands and celebrates, one student at a time.
7. I have just begun my service here in Belize so I have two years to go. I have NO idea where I will go next but I do know I will continue social justice work in an effort to bridge the global gap and celebrate the diversity of our global community as best I can. Along with my MPA Greener colleagues, Breezie and Danny O’Neil also serving here in Belize, I hope together we will leave behind seeds that will flourish for years to come. And as Americans, I hope we are seen as peace-makers who will, 50 years after President Kennedy’s vision, continue to embrace the model of world peace, one volunteer at a time. More personally, I invite every Greeners consider becoming part of the Peace Corps family (or other volunteer programs). It just may be the best family you will ever be part, and will undoubtedly lead you to profound life-changing, ego-shrinking experiences that will stay with you and the villagers you work with forever.