

# Ramping Up

## IVPA ESTABLISHES STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE FOR INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING

by Sherry Schwarz

The revised focus of the International Volunteer Programs Association (IVPA), a unique alliance of non-profit and for-profit, non-governmental organizations involved in international volunteer and internship exchanges, is well timed with the rising interest in volunteerism among Americans. A baseline study conducted by the Brookings Institution estimates that about 50,000 Americans volunteered abroad in 2005 (this number does not represent comprehensive coverage of sectarian international volunteers); and, according to a 2006 survey conducted by the Travel Industry Association of America, nearly a quarter of American travelers said they were interested in taking a volunteer or service-based vacation.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF IVPA

The LaFetra Foundation, which promotes collaborations that contribute to a sense of global responsibility and solidarity, convened a meeting of international volunteer organizations, in 1996, to try and raise the standards of volunteering at a time of exploding growth in volunteer program options. The meeting resulted in the establishment of IVPA, the research and writing of *How to Live Your Dream of Volunteering Overseas*, and the creation of "Bridges" (now called "World Bridges"), which was developed to provide opportunities for diverse young people from low-income backgrounds to work for peace and justice.

Within its first few years IVPA was primarily focused on providing benefits

to its members. By the year 2000, it had grown to represent about 50 organizations that in total sent some 15,000 volunteers abroad each year. Despite its notable progress, however, IVPA faced some strategic challenges that prevented it from realizing its full potential.

### REVITALIZING ITS VISION

The current growth spurt in international volunteerism, spawned in part by the tragedies of September 11, the 2004 Asian tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina, prompted IVPA's leadership to re-evaluate the role of IVPA and the possibilities for its future. With the sheer number of new volunteer options emerging, and the resulting confusion among consumers regarding the quality of programs, it was becoming clear to IVPA that the need for its organization was never more critical.

"There was a sense that we needed to get ahead of the curve," says Stefanie Rubin, IVPA's executive director. "After some horror stories in the U.K., the government there started creating standards for volunteering. We wanted to work with practitioners in the field to standardize the industry before problems arise."

In 2006 IVPA executive board member Steve Rosenthal—the founder of Cross-Cultural Solutions, a non-profit organization that has been operating international volunteer programs since 1995—felt this was the time to revitalize IVPA. "Volunteer organizations have a responsibility to take safety and program quality very seriously," says Rosenthal, "and the public needs a way of knowing which organizations meet the highest levels of program quality. IVPA serves this role at a time when it is more important than ever."

He recruited Rubin, a former Cross-Cultural Solutions staff member, who went on to co-found her own international non-profit called "The Humanitarian Project," with the idea of surveying IVPA's members to gauge the level of interest in restructuring IVPA as a standards-based organization.

Rubin's reaction was favorable. As a past volunteer with special education students and orphans in India, Thailand, and

Peru and having interacted with many prospective volunteers in her position at Cross-Cultural Solutions, she felt there was a need for an accrediting organization that could provide unbiased information and resources to individuals and institutions interested in volunteering.

"Particularly because the field was growing so rapidly, it seemed there needed to be a centralized, governing body for short-term programs," Rubin says. "Most volunteers have contact through e-mail, mail, or a website, and sometimes the phone, but often not through in-person meetings so there is an added concern."

Tasked with surveying about 50 volunteer organizations over the period of a month, Rubin got a crash course in the needs, concerns, and interests of the field. She then presented the information to IVPA's executive committee members at the time: Rosenthal, Amigos de los Américas director of volunteer administration Glenn Bayron, and then director of the Foundation for Sustainable Development Alicia Robb. They all supported strengthening IVPA, and Rubin was offered the opportunity to assume the role of director in September 2006.

With the assistance of two new executive committee members, WorldTeach executive director Helen Claire Sievers and Globe Aware executive director and founder Kimberly Haley-Coleman, Rubin hit the ground running. She started focusing on building committees that could help her determine the organization's future direction.

### MOVING FORWARD

IVPA has restructured itself to become the seal of approval for volunteer organizations meeting its high quality standards. Its developments in 2007 have included new and much stricter membership guidelines, an improved 7-page membership application, an updated logo, and a new website. Rubin says even something as seemingly simple as a more rigorous application form has proven to be "a great exercise for new members." She says, "It forces them to think about their own standards and practices, as well as what some



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of their shortcomings are. One organization, for example, realized it did not have an emergency evacuation plan in place."

As another key initiative, IVPA formed a committee of experienced members to develop practices and principles, which are now available on IVPA's new website. Whereas its previous site was mainly used for program placements, with the robust search engines now available for such purposes, IVPA wanted to distinguish its new site as an authoritative space for providing information and training materials to consumers considering volunteering abroad.

Rubin describes IVPA's website as a one-stop resource center for anyone interested in volunteering internationally. It addresses key issues that prospective volunteers should consider, such as health and safety, the cost of programs and how the money is being used, the impact on local host communities, and awareness of programs' philosophies and affiliations.

IVPA also serves as a community for international volunteer program representatives to share knowledge and information, develop new skills, and collab-

orate on cost-saving initiatives. Rubin explains that it is particularly useful for organizations interested in creating international opportunities. "We feel IVPA has a responsibility to help new volunteer organizations start off on the right foot. We want to help programs to operate to the same high standards our members abide by," says Rubin.

One annual event that helps unite old and new members and provide them with training is IVPA's annual conference, which will be held in New York City on Nov. 14, 2007. "We expect that [the] conference will be our strongest to date. We have sessions planned on how to make your volunteer program inclusive of persons with disabilities, volunteer crisis management, ethical practices for marketing and public relations, and the list is still growing," says Rubin.

For more information about IVPA, contact [info@volunteerinternational.org](mailto:info@volunteerinternational.org) or visit [www.volunteerinternational.org](http://www.volunteerinternational.org).

**Sherry Schwarz** is editor and publisher of *Transitions Abroad* and founder and director of The Abroad View Foundation.

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## BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH VOLUNTEERISM ABROAD

Recognizing a need to increase dialogue between the United States and the people of countries worldwide, the Brookings Institution, in June 2006, launched an initiative on international volunteering and service to explore ways in which the culture of volunteerism can help enhance global understanding and security.

This 3-year project has already garnered the support of more than 100 corporations, non-governmental organizations, universities, and government agencies that are working to expand American volunteer service overseas and improve service quality, capacity, and positive impacts in communities abroad.

One of its signature projects is the Building Bridges Coalition, which aims to double the number of Americans volunteering overseas to 100,000 by 2010. The International Volunteer Programs Association (IVPA) is serving as the managing director for the Coalition, while a public policy team is focusing on policy development and education, and a research and impacts group is focusing on assessment of international service and promoting effective practices. Hundreds of former volunteers and supporters gathered on July 12, 2007 at Independence National Historic Park, in Philadelphia, Penn., to help launch the coalition and introduce its new website, which is accessible at [www.wevolunteer.net](http://www.wevolunteer.net). The site, hosted by Idealist.org, features personal stories of international volunteers and provides information on how to volunteer overseas.

As part of its effort, members of the Building Bridges Coalition are helping to support the Global Service Fellowship Program

Act of 2007 (S.1464), which was introduced in the Senate by Senators Russ Feingold (D-WI) and Norm Coleman (R-MN) on May 23, 2007. Its purpose would be to fund fellowships to promote international volunteering opportunities as a means of building bridges across cultures, addressing critical human needs, and promoting mutual understanding. The bill, which calls for \$250 million in federal funding (\$50 million annually), is expected to go before the Senate in September; if passed, Americans would be able to apply for fellowships, ranging from \$2,500 to \$7,500, to use toward airfare, vaccinations, program fees, local service project seed money, language and cultural training, as well as other expenses related to volunteering abroad.

Although criteria for how the funds would be distributed has not been determined yet, "[these] fellowships will make it possible for an additional 10,000 Americans to volunteer abroad each year," says Katherine Stahl, executive director of the American University Career Center and member of the Building Bridges Coalition leadership steering committee for campus engagement.

You can read more about the Global Service Fellowship Program bill at [www.brookings.edu/comm/policybriefs/pb160.htm](http://www.brookings.edu/comm/policybriefs/pb160.htm). For more information or to learn how to get involved with the Brookings Initiative on International Volunteering and Service and the Building Bridges Coalition, visit their respective websites: [www.brookings.edu/global/volunteer](http://www.brookings.edu/global/volunteer) and [www.wevolunteer.net](http://www.wevolunteer.net).

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