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Moraga Peace Corps Volunteer Packs for Ethiopia

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Rachel Micklas Photo Cathy Dausman

A glance in Rachel Micklas' mirror shows her how close she is to traveling to Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer. Three months ago she covered her bedroom mirror with sticky notes to count down the days until her departure. Now that same mirror is slowly unveiling the face of the 2010 University of Oregon grad who'll fly to Washington D.C. June 4 and then on to Ethiopia.

If all goes well, she'll spend a total of 27 months overseas. Micklas' only other international travel has been a six-month stint in England where she taught pre-school. She's also been a nanny to 15 East Bay families, and feels that her experiences with children will transfer to the work she'll do teaching primary school classes in Ethiopia.

Micklas originally expected to join the Peace Corps in 2010 but a surgery postponed this "new chapter" of her life for two years. So for the second time, the young woman prepares to "see life from a completely new perspective, and gain friendships that will last forever." She will join 1,134 California residents currently serving in the Peace Corps in 139 countries.

What drew this Moraga native to such an altruistic endeavor? It started six years ago. "I met one of my best friends during college orientation," she recalls. "When I met her parents they had so many exciting and intriguing stories about the Peace Corps. I didn't know much about it at the time, but through their explanation, stories, and experiences I knew it was something I wanted to be a part of." She also knew she wanted Africa. Potential Peace Corps volunteers submit a wish list of where they'd like to serve; Micklas' first two choices were Africa. She left her third choice open.

During the first three months, Micklas will live with a host family in Ethiopia to become immersed in the country's language and culture. "I want to master a new language by learning it firsthand in the region it is spoken in," she says. That language might be Amharic, Oromifa or Tigrinya. Micklas won't know until she's actually in the area she'll serve, but her best friend, now in Lesotho, South Africa jokingly assures her that "the Lion King language is real!"

Micklas is unsure what to pack. Since her final destination is uncertain, she won't know whether she'll need warm or cool clothing. She expects there'll be no internet, cable or phone service readily available, but actually enjoys "keeping the post office in business." Micklas will also bring several books for eventual rotation in the Peace Corps volunteers' library (Onward and Little Bee are two current favorites), arts and craft supplies, perhaps to decorate her own postcards, and a soccer ball since she lettered in soccer at Campolindo High School and also played at University of Oregon.

The Peace Corps (www.peacecorps.gov) has placed more than 200,000 U.S. volunteers in countries since its establishment in 1961. Over 3,085 volunteers have served in Ethiopia; currently 101 volunteers serve there.

Micklas advises those considering joining to be patient with the application process, be honest with yourself, and know specifically what you want to do. "I want to see life from a completely new perspective, and I want to gain friendships that will last forever," she says. "I'm excited for my service in the Peace Corps and can't wait for this new chapter of my life to start."

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