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# Podcast Episode 8: #BlindAbroad Peace Corps Kyrgyzstan



# "...she can now dream big and achieve bigger and I think we really achieved that goal...", Serena Olsen, Peace Corps Volunteer, Kyrgyzstan



MobilityInternationalUSA  
Episode 8: Serena Olsen - Peace Corps Kyrgyzstan



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Welcome to **Ripple Effects: Travelers with Disabilities Abroad**, a podcast brought to you by Mobility International USA, where we hear the powerful and vivid stories from people with disabilities going abroad and the positive impact these experiences have on shifting ideas, for everyone, of what is possible.

For our first podcast series we will hear from people who are blind or low vision as part of #BlindAbroad, a campaign from the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange project sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. We hope the heart of their stories resonates with you the listeners to empower more people with disabilities to go abroad.

I'm Monica Malhotra, a Project Coordinator with Mobility International USA and your host for Ripple Effects.

## Episode Transcript:

Monica: I recently had the pleasure of speaking with Serena Olsen, a current Peace Corps volunteer serving in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. She had a dream from when she was young ... but dreams aren't easily achieved ... through persistence and hard work, Serena achieved those dreams ... and Kyrgyzstan is a better place for it.

I would like to share some of my conversation that I had with Serena about her experience applying for the Peace Corps, what these programs that work in rural communities can do to make these opportunities more inclusive for people with disabilities, and most importantly how this experience is making a tremendous impact on her as well as in her community.

To begin, Serena was anxious to get her assignment, but received some delays. She decided to get creative and decided to start speaking with her friends. She was connected with an organization in Kyrgyzstan called Empower Blind People and that's when the light bulb went off.

Serena: So in that process leveraging my network was also a really important factor in how I resolved this issue. And that was a friend and colleague who happens to be the CEO at the Lighthouse for the Blind in San Francisco. Thank you, Bryan Bashin. And he said "Well, if it means anything I happen to know this very lovely lady in Kyrgyzstan who is building a training center based on this really unique model in the US. There are training centers in Louisiana, Colorado, and Minnesota based on this particular training model. I happen to know this very lovely lady in Kyrgyzstan that's building one of these centers and I think you would work well together." And I said great, that's Asia! Sign me up.

He introduced us via email and we had a phone chat and and as soon as I got off the phone with her the lightbulb just went off and I thought, "ah-ha!" I wonder if Peace Corps has a post in Kyrgyzstan? And I checked the unofficial wikis and found that they indeed not only did they have a post in Kyrgyzstan but they were staging, that is collecting to depart in April, which she and I had talked about me coming maybe in March. So I just thought, perfect and I drew up a proposal and presented it to Peace Corps and said this is what I want to do; make this my assignment. So I kind of reverse engineered this system a little bit and I was extremely fortunate to have both Elnura, the Director of Empower Blind People, and her cohort, Gulnaz, who is the program manager. Very fortunate to have them here on the ground because they were able to actually walk over to the Peace Corps office in Bishkek and knock on the door and say "bring us this volunteer. You can send us any

Peace Corps volunteer and we can assign them with technical tasks or whatever, but this is a living, breathing example of what we're trying to build here and we want her here as a role model." Long story short, it ended up working out and I was offered this post as an assignment as a volunteer. So it took a lot of patience and lot of persistence and a lot of creativity, and leveraging of my network but I was finally able to make it happen.

Monica: The Peace Corps has had volunteers, including volunteers with disabilities, serve in 140 host countries and currently in 62. Sometimes a challenge for any experiential programs abroad is finding placement for volunteers with disabilities in host countries, a place where the ADA doesn't exist and where the locals are not as aware about access and accessibility. I spoke with Serena about this question on how to educate the host countries more in order to provide more opportunities for volunteers with disabilities.

Serena: Yes, it is interesting. I can speak based on my knowledge of Peace Corps Kyrgyzstan. I imagine it is probably very similar worldwide among many Peace Corps posts in that a lot of Peace Corps volunteers work with organizations that serve disabled people. So it is not unusual for Peace Corps volunteer to be working in communities with people with disabilities.

Monica: Now going off the point that Peace Corps volunteers do work in communities with people with disabilities, Serena elaborates on one solution for educating host countries about placing volunteers with disabilities, which actually starts with placing locals with disabilities in those same projects. Not just having the volunteers support people with disabilities, but having them work side by side with the volunteers.

Serena: The question of integration is a completely different step. I've done a

little bit; I mean, just by virtue of me being here I've done this work but I've also done a little active secondary work with other Peace Corps volunteers talking to them about integration of disabled people in their projects and in their communities. No, really, there is no one size fits all answer for any group of people with any particular disability. But I talked to them about expectations and how expectations are often especially in the developing world they are often very low. And even in the developed world when those low expectations are placed on people, people just tend to live up to those low expectations. They internalize and they believe the things that they are told their entire lives about the very nature, of being with their disability.

If you expect more, then people tend to deliver more. So finding creative ways to integrate disabled people into their projects and programs and if they don't know the answer then definitely the first thing they should do is ask that person, you know, how do we make this accessible, how do we make this participatory for you. And they may not even have an answer to that and that's ok. But to start the thinking process and start experimenting and being creative with how you approach that.

Monica: When we speak about the low expectations of the locals with disabilities, it's the power of witnessing the possibilities from people like Serena that can change one's mind. The solution is integrating locals in the projects, but also integrating more U.S. volunteers with disabilities at the same time to drive progress forward.

Monica: We want to take this time to promote our #BlindAbroad campaign, where our aim is to increase awareness to people who are blind or low vision on the benefits of going abroad. With a big thanks to our sponsors at the U.S. Department of State. You can learn more about the #BlindAbroad campaign

by going to our website: [miusa.org](http://miusa.org). And also make sure to follow us on twitter @MobilityINTL and #BlindAbroad. We'd love to see your comments and let others read your messages too.

Monica: So Serena finally did it and received her assignment in Bishkek to work with Empower Blind People. We spoke about her initial arrival to Kyrgyzstan and I was anxious to hear about her experience entering into a new disability culture, one likely very different from the one she was used to.

Serena: So once I got past the pre-service training and had established myself as a fully functioning, competent human with all of the Peace Corps stuff, of course I went out into the big wide world of my assignment here in Bishkek and discovered that I still had a lot of advocating to do with locals, of course, and even back home in the United States. You do a lot of interacting with the public and you're constantly in educator mode even when you don't want to be. And the same is true here and I got a lot of the same reactions here as I ever did back home but they are a little more exaggerated here.

It is a very collective culture so there is a lot of what in America we might perceive as micromanaging but here it is caring and concern, and it is you know you look out for the people around you. So I was hyper sensitive to how people would grab my arm when we were crossing the street. So you know if I stood still for 2 seconds people wanted to help me, telling me when I could cross the street, which happens back home all the time of course. But the more I started talking to other volunteers, especially female volunteers, I discovered they were all being treated the same way as well. It wasn't necessarily a blindness thing, it was just a cultural thing that I needed to get over. So learning how to draw those lines was also very important. And as my language skills developed I was able to better articulate and interact with

people about politely declining assistance and just going on my merry way.

Monica: Serena was very aware of disability culture in her new society and especially how she wanted to be in it in. In addition to “getting” her new environment, she learned Turkic, the Kyrgyz language and also picked up some Russian. All of these were crucial tools to help her immerse and integrate more into her new community. Utilizing these skills provided momentum for Serena to make the impact she wanted to in her community...which was immense.

Serena: I feel like I have had a tremendous amount of impact. So I’ve been here 14 or 15 months now and in the time I’ve seen the impact of my presence in a way that has made it extremely rewarding for me. I think first and foremost just simply living and working in Bishkek and the impact of my presence just being visible in my community is probably one of the most important things that is going to come out of my two years of service as a Peace Corps volunteer. You know every day that I leave my apartment and I commute the length of the city literally I live on the south side of town and I work on the north side of town and I use every form of public transportation in between and you know shopping at the bazaar and just walking around my neighborhood and running errands around Bishkek. A lot of blind people are relatively house bound here. It is not common for a blind person to be so active, especially out and about by themselves. People are still in kind of a state of disbelief, so just setting that example that it is normal; it’s normal to live in an apartment and shop at the bazaar and use public transportation independently is a really important part of this experience that I’m having.

And then in addition to that I was able to help plan and implement a project to get one of our students to the US for the summer. She was there across

June, July, and August for a two month period. And she worked as a counselor and training at a summer camp for the blind in Northern California at Enchanted Hills, thanks to the Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in San Francisco. And she attended the National Convention of the National Federation of the Blind, and for about a week and a half just before she came home she was hanging out in the Bay area, essentially hanging out with a bunch of my friends.

But the goal that we wanted to achieve with this project was for her to soak in the day to day lives of confident, successful, active blind people, because that culture doesn't really exist here. It is just starting to . . . it is in its nascent form. It is just starting to emerge and since it doesn't really exist here we need young, enthusiastic blind people from Kyrgyzstan to go soak in it in the US and bring it back here. And she exclaimed to my counterpart Gulnaz just before she came home, "blind people in Kyrgyzstan are crazy! They just sit at home and do nothing. Everybody here works!" And that was delightful; that we wanted to see, that she doesn't have to sit at home and do nothing because that's what her family or her community expects from her. You know that she can dream big and achieve bigger and I think we really achieved that goal with her and then there was, on the Peace Corps front, a new volunteer was invited a year following my entry to the country, another blind volunteer was invited to serve in the Kyrgyz republic because, I believe, of the precedent that I was able to set.

Monica: It has to be because of the precedent Serena was able to set. The impact Serena has made by walking confidently in her community and also by providing an opportunity for her student to come to the U.S. and experience what it's like to be blind, active, independent, and confident will make an impact that will only continue to grow. She has planted a seed

among many Kyrgyz people and Peace Corps volunteers to show them what being blind can really be like...not looking at limitations, rather looking at all of the opportunities.

Serena: And anecdotally, I hear reports from my fellow volunteers and also from locals, they see our students and report back to us, "I saw your students cruising around Bishkek the other day." So our office is up on kind of the north side of the city but we send them on travel assignments all over the city. We had our first training program was funded by the Democracy Commission through the US Embassy. Early in my service the auditor came to go over the project budget and update on how the expenditures were going and she remarked that her office was near ours and that she had seen our students early in the training out with our travel instructor and that they were out with instructor and were looking kind of confused and not moving around very much and she saw them a little while later and they were out on their own and maybe they weren't moving super gracefully and maybe they were getting a little turned around but they were on their own.

A few months later she saw them again and they were moving quickly and gracefully and having a good time. And she noticed that and it is qualitative but those are the outcomes we are looking for. And of course other volunteers "oh I saw your students" and they were wearing very large sleep shades so that they get complete training in non-visual technique. Now the Peace Corps volunteers see the students and recognize, "I saw your students and now why they were wearing those sleep shades; I knew what they were doing."

Monica: This aligns with the mission of Mobility International on how to advance disability rights around the world, which is through these

international exchanges and to have people with disabilities witness, experience, and share these possibilities and opportunities.

I want to thank Serena for her time and sharing her Blind Abroad experience with us and leave you with her Ripple Effect Message.

Serena: At its simplest, and I hope there is no copyright infringement here, but “just do it.” If you even think that you might possibly one day might want to go abroad to study or to live and work, talk to anyone and everyone that you can about their experience, research where you might want to go, why you might want to go, what you might want to do when you get there, how are you going to get there. Start researching those logistics. There is no excuse; the information is there, the internet is there, there are lots of organizations like Mobility International USA. Just do the research and make it happen. I wanted to do this from a very young age and I did do a lot of traveling in my 20s but it was all kind of short term and my long term goal was that I wanted to go live and work abroad. If I can do this at 40 you can do it anytime you want. You just have to do it.

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