

In the ‘reverse Peace Corps,’ future leaders from abroad hone their skills

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Atlas Service Corps fellow Monica Aznar Diaz, left, with Miriam’s Kitchen senior art therapist Brittney Washington. Atlas Corps, founded in 2006, is known as the “reverse Peace Corps,” bringing talented young leaders from abroad to work at U.S. nonprofits for a year. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

After the speeches, the presentation of certificates and the photo op come the slightly sophomoric awards you might expect at an eighth-grade graduation.

The “most outgoing” is Renata; the “most likely to make everyone laugh” is Darren, who (drumroll) makes everyone laugh. Then there are a few tributes that indicate the unusual ambition behind a ceremony that has brought a couple hundred proud supporters (though nary a grandparent or even a parent among them) to the industrial-chic basement of the former Wonder Bread factory in Shaw to cheer, stomp and clap for 15 newly minted graduates.

An award for the “most culturally adaptable,” which goes to Chiedza from Zimbabwe, suggests the kind of cross-border comfort that will be necessary if members of this class are to fulfill the promise that won them the privilege of being here. And “most likely to lead her country” — split among four young men and women from Brazil, India, Mexico and Tunisia — is presented in the sincere belief that any one of them might someday actually be el presidente or premier ministre.

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Graduation day at the Washington International School? A fin d'annee fete for Model U.N. students? Or some hug-the-globe gig for junior diplomats that Secretary of State John F. Kerry dreamed up?

No, this is the 15th graduating class of [Atlas Service Corps](#), a Washington-based nonprofit founded in 2006 with the goal of creating a “global network of changemakers.” At a time when terrorist groups win attention for recruiting disillusioned young Westerners to join them, Atlas Corps is acting as a “reverse Peace Corps,” aiming to identify outstanding young nonprofit leaders around the world, and to bring them to serve and share their overseas experience for a year or so in the United States before they return home to apply their new skills. After a recent endorsement from the State Department, the fellowship has attracted as many as 1,000 applicants a month.

“You’ll never walk into a more diverse room,” says founder Scott Beale, 39, as he scans the honorees and the enthusiastic onlookers, who include current fellows, funders and a smattering of globally sensitive do-gooders. Beale wants to produce leaders who are not only well trained but also “well networked,” digitally equipped to share tactics in tackling the world’s thorniest problems, from human trafficking to the oppression of minorities to homelessness.

And he’s already seeing payoffs, big and small: Atlas Corps alumni advise presidents, run for parliament and lead nonprofits, and a major conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital, on women’s issues featured an Atlas Corps graduate (from Nigeria), a current fellow (from Jamaica) and a new recipient of the fellowship (from Panama), and brought differing perspectives and shared networking skills to a common cause.



From left, Atlas Corps founder and chief executive Scott Beale, Subecha Dahal of Nepal, Ifesinachi Sam-Emuwa of Nigeria, Hulu Chen of China (front), Dan Friday of Kenya (rear), Esther Pinnock of Jamaica, Samita Thapa of Nepal, and Saqib Riaz and Prem Sagar, who are both from Pakistan. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

That networking starts with “the only bomb that creates peace,” quips Beale, who displays a fondness for one-liners. He is sitting at a laptop in an airy upstairs office, “friends-bombing” Marcela Calle, who lives in Colombia and learned recently that she has won a fellowship to come to the United States. Over the next few minutes, Beale will bombard her with suggestions of people to add as friends on Facebook — about 250 Atlas Corps alumni from more than 60 countries.

As he punches keys and watches for Calle’s response, Beale talks about the challenges and changes the fellowship faces: It was hard to obtain visas for Liberians during the Ebola crisis, for example, and competition for the award has become so stiff that any African applicant with an interest in health care probably has to be a qualified doctor.

Beale came up with the idea for the program about 10 years ago, when his wife was working as a junior U.S. Foreign Service officer in India and the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi hired him to help combat human trafficking. In some sense, he sees the program as a realization of part of the early thinking behind the Peace Corps, established in 1961 — that spreading peace isn’t a one-way street and that volunteers should be brought to the United States, too.

Fellowship recipients such as Calle, who represent between 1 percent and 2 percent of the applicant pool, are invited to join one of three classes a year, each numbering about 25 members. The typical fellow is “29 years old, with five years of experience, a master’s degree, bilingual with international perspectives,” Beale says. Ten percent are married; many have children. The annual number of fellowships has grown from 12 in 2008 to about 75, and Beale envisions a time when there will be thousands of fellows.

Last year, Atlas Corps established a formal two-year relationship with the State Department as part of President Obama’s [Stand With Civil Society](#) agenda, allowing the nonprofit to increase its reach. Traffic on its Web site doubled, and the first cohort of fellows under the new arrangement arrived in January.

Atlas Corps fellows come to the United States on J-1 professional exchange visas. A fellowship costs about \$45,000 per person, with two-thirds of the money coming from the nonprofits with which the fellows serve. The rest comes from contributions from the U.S. government, various foundations, and corporate donors such as Nike and American Express.

For all the 21st-century networking, there’s something slightly geeky and cliquy, even Skull-and-Bones-ish, about Atlas Corps rituals. There’s an Atlas Corps cheer, an Atlas Corps oath and a secret Atlas Corps handshake. There’s also an Atlas Corps pin (worn on saris and suit lapels alike), and a few fellows apparently bear a permanent Atlas Corps tattoo. (It’s inked in a spot that’s discreetly covered, at least for such formal occasions as a graduation ceremony).

The result, Beale says, is that Atlas Corps events feel “part high school pep rally, part diplomatic reception,” reflecting a depth of bonding that he hopes will ensure the network’s future strength and global reach.

A few Atlas Corps fellows have claimed asylum and stayed in the United States, but 95 percent have returned to their home countries. That’s important for Beale’s goal of seeing the developing world not as a passive recipient of aid but as a partner in development.

“We don’t want to be a brain drain,” he says.



Monica Aznar Diaz, left, works at Miriam's Kitchen in Foggy Bottom on July 22. Her experience as an Atlas Corps fellow, she says, has given her "so many ideas to take back" to her native Spain. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

Unrelenting rain has swollen the numbers at Miriam's Kitchen, a D.C. nonprofit that provides services to the homeless, where Atlas Corps fellow Monica Aznar Diaz is serving. About 60 people are sitting at tables, with some working on art projects and others joining a writing program or waiting to see a nurse. Many have come in search of shelter, but several have more specific, bureaucratic concerns. They stand in line at a desk where Aznar Diaz is fielding questions and helping fill out forms.

One man holds up a check that got wet and is no longer legible. Another has a question that requires online research. Aznar Diaz moves fluently from her native Spanish to accented but accurate English, combining efficiency with empathy.

Part of what she is doing in every interaction is "building trust," she says.

Originally from Spain, Aznar Diaz says she was shocked to learn the extent of homelessness in the nation's capital when she arrived. Her own learning curve has helped her understand the challenges faced by the people she helps. "I'm an immigrant," she says. "I understand how hard it is to get government documents. The connection is very powerful."

It took a couple of months for her to feel at ease answering immigration questions, getting police clearance, or finding birth certificates for men and women whose current home address is a manila folder in the filing cabinet right here against the back wall of the basement office at Western Presbyterian Church in Foggy Bottom.

"I couldn't understand the system," Aznar Diaz says.

Tom Murphy, director of communication for Miriam's Kitchen, sees the \$30,000-a-year cost to fund a fellow such as

Aznar Diaz as a sound investment. Not only does it give Miriam's Kitchen an energetic employee with an instinctive grasp of the immigrant experience and expertise that comes from her native Spain, but it also arms Aznar Diaz with insights that she plans to apply back home.

Aznar Diaz sees advantages in the nonprofit's holistic approach — on a wet afternoon like this, somebody who came in to get out of the rain might end up receiving medical advice or finding clothing spiffy enough for a job interview.

"Here, we cover everything," she says, giving a tour of the kitchen, then pointing out closets full of art materials and rows of donated jackets and pants. Such one-stop shopping would be unusual in Spain, where services, she says, are "more segregated."

From the everyday experience of working as a case manager to learning how Miriam's Kitchen fits into the broader U.S. system of social services, the Atlas Corps fellowship has given her "so many ideas to take back" with her, Aznar Diaz says.

As well as a network of ambitious young leaders with a similar commitment to social change.

And a tattoo to boot.

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