

# Grassroot Soccer

Using soccer in the fight against HIV

by Kristin Kennedy

It wasn't long into my service in Zambia when I realized how challenging it would be to deliver health information to subsistence farmers who were often too tired, too ill, or too busy to attend the formal health meetings my counterparts and I relentlessly scheduled. Meetings were cancelled for reasons as varied as bad weather and witchcraft. Sometimes, there was no reason at all. Twelve months into my service, I entered the stage of grief I believe is called "acceptance." I realized the truth in the old adage, "if you can't beat them, join them." It would have to be at the one place that people frequently and energetically gathered: the soccer pitch.

The passion that much of the world has for soccer is almost indescribable. Children who have never seen an image of Mickey Mouse know the names and stats of dozens of their favorite players. And the energy with which both young and old play, watch, and cheer on the beautiful game is unrivaled by anything else the village has to offer.

In 2002, four years before I started my Peace Corps service, four professional soccer players in Zimbabwe realized the power that soccer had not only to unite communities, but also to break the silence and stigma around HIV and AIDS. They founded Grassroot Soccer (GRS) with the mission to use the power of soccer to educate, inspire, and mobilize communities to stop the spread of HIV. Eleven years later, half a million young people around the globe have graduated from a Grassroot Soccer program.

Grassroot Soccer harnesses this global passion for soccer to improve health by embedding critical life skills and HIV prevention messages into

an interactive, activity-based series of health 'practices' for young people. The activities are simple, but the messages are powerful. For example, "Risk Field"

requires children to dribble soccer balls through a series of cones or obstacles labeled with HIV risk factors such as having an older partner or using drugs

  
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Tate, a PCV in Botswana, looks on as a learner dribbles between cones to avoid risky sexual behaviors in "Risk Field."



Mary, a PCV from Ethiopia, poses with her youth group at graduation after the students have completed their first skillz program.

and alcohol. When someone hits a cone, powerful discussion often follows. At the end of the game, the whole team does pushups together when cones are hit—representing the community-wide effects of HIV.

By the time I was posted to Zambia, Grassroot Soccer had a permanent office in the capital of Lusaka and agreed to try something new by partnering with me to bring Grassroot Soccer to a rural site in Luapula Province, about nine hours north of the city.

A magical moment came as we tested "Find the Ball" with a group of local teenagers. The youth formed two lines, secretly passing tennis balls labeled "HIV" behind their backs. Each team took turns guessing who held the balls. Often, their guesses were wrong—demonstrating the key message that you can't tell who is HIV positive by someone's appearance. As it often happens in the village, hoards of younger children circled around to watch. After a few moments, a group of 5-year-olds began to play the game themselves. With no instruction, they gathered mangos and used them as balls, passing the fruit behind their backs in perfect formation just like the older group.

It was then that I saw the incredible power this new sport-based approach

held. For the very first time in my Peace Corps service, more children were interested in our programs than we had space for—children who were willing to teach themselves the activities just so they could participate.

Over the next several years, requests to work with Grassroot Soccer began pouring in from other Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) who saw the value in combining soccer with health education. As a response, in 2011 GRS developed the "Peace Corps Skillz" HIV prevention curriculum specifically for PCVs to use at their sites. In June 2013, a malaria education curriculum was developed and rolled out to 15 countries across Africa in partnership with Stomp Out Malaria (see *Stomping out Malaria in Africa*, *WorldView*, by Chris Hedrick, vol. 25, no 5). A girls-only program for PCVs will be released in early 2014.

Since the start of Grassroot Soccer's partnership with Peace Corps in 2011, 475 volunteers in 26 countries have reached more than 5,100 young people with the information they need to stop the spread of HIV.

"The kids absolutely love it because the program is so interactive and allows them to express themselves as they learn. In fact, during our most recent intervention, our 67 kids actually applauded us every

time we entered their classroom for a session," explains Samantha Croffut (South Africa 2011-14), who helped pilot one of the very first Peace Corps Skillz programs in South Africa.

After participating in the Peace Corps Skillz program, youth are able to correctly answer 19 percent more questions that assesses what they know, believe, and communicate to others about HIV. Nearly three-fourths of the children who complete the program are able to correctly identify the way HIV is spread and how to stop it. Most say they would still be friends with someone who is HIV positive.

The program also empowers local counterparts who serve as Grassroot Soccer coaches to act as role models and HIV experts in their community. "Grassroot Soccer has given me confidence to stand in front of people and talk without fear. It has taught me more about AIDS and how to tell a young person about the disease. This program has made me a role model to some young kids that I have coached. I have grown personally and love my life," says Figo Booi, a Peace Corps skillz coach in South Africa.

Peace Corps Volunteers provide immense value in rolling out sport-based health interventions to youth who

otherwise might receive little or no formal health education. Volunteers provide access to communities that organizations such as Grassroot Soccer simply are not able to reach. Long distances, transport challenges, and the high cost of sending staff to remote areas means that many organizations cannot extend their reach to the places that often need them most, and when they do, the cost per person is very high. In partnering with Peace Corps, Grassroot Soccer has turned this equation on its head. By utilizing the skills, dedication, and community relationships that PCVs have, what should be one of the most expensive and difficult programs to run is actually one of the most cost effective and efficient programs in the Grassroot Soccer portfolio.

Grassroot Soccer's programs are also powerful tools for PCVs, who no longer have to develop health education programs from scratch. The Skillz

curricula are some of the only step-by-step guides PCVs can use to facilitate dynamic, interactive, and evidence-based health interventions with young people—and it is certainly one of the most fun. GRS also provides on-going support through a monthly phone call or email support session with PCVs and helps transition the program to counterparts after their PCV returns home.

PCVs across Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and Southeast Asia have found success delivering life-saving health messages through the fun, sport-based activities in Grassroot Soccer's Peace Corps Skillz. Young people respond best when they are active, engaged, and valued. PCVs and Grassroot Soccer work together to bring the values of teamwork, mutual respect, and a caring coach to so many young people worldwide. It's a beautiful game, indeed.

Through the generous support of our donors, Grassroot Soccer mails a Peace Corps Skillz kit to every PCV who wishes to implement the program. For more information, or if you are a PCV who would like to work with Grassroot Soccer, please contact [PCSkillz@grassrootsoccer.org](mailto:PCSkillz@grassrootsoccer.org). RPCVs who wish to support the program can visit <http://www.grassrootsoccer.org/what-you-can-do/donate/> \$25 will ship a Grassroot Soccer kit to a PCV anywhere in the world.

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