



Jessica Jackson ('00) had never heard of Uzbekistan when the Peace Corps offered her an assignment there. But when the Peace Corps told her last September 22 that she and all the other volunteers in countries that border Afghanistan would be evacuated, Jackson said that leaving was one of the hardest things she has ever had to do.

Fond Farewell

After almost a year, she had surrendered to life in Asaka, a village in the Andijon region of the Fergana Valley. She missed the comforts of her life in the United States, but her host mother, a traditional Uzbek, had become one of her best friends. "I started thinking of it as my actual home," she said.

For the first ten months of her assignment as a primary English teacher, Jackson felt like she was battling the strangeness of life in a foreign culture. The economy of the former Soviet republic is dismal; when foreign investors flocked to Russia and the former Soviet republics, Uzbekistan remained isolated. Even McDonald's had not set up shop. The government, controlled by former communist party leaders, is rife with corruption and bribery. Women, although not veiled, are restricted socially. Girls are often married to strangers at fifteen or sixteen years old, and by twenty, they are considered old maids.

But Jackson made her peace with the differences. "I just started to get the rhythm of the life over there. I no longer viewed the people around me as strange and foreign." She and another volunteer had collected over 1,500 books from friends, family, and members of Phi Beta Kappa and they planned to open a library on October 1.

On September 11, she was at her host family's home when her host sister called on the telephone to say, "America is on TV." Jackson had heard this often, but her host sister insisted she watch. "It's really bad," she said.

Uzbek television only has a few channels, and the broadcast was on every channel.

"What I was seeing was a picture of New York City, but I didn't recognize it as New York City," Jackson recalled. She had lived and worked within a few blocks of the World Trade Center during the summer of 1998, but now could not recognize her old neighborhood. "It was the most surreal night of my life. I couldn't depend on the news, because I knew they make a lot of mistakes. For example, they said that eleven planes had been hijacked."

Because the telephone at her host family's home worked only locally, she sought out another Peace Corps volunteer. Together they went to the post office, called the Peace Corps office in Tashkent, and were told to stay put. Later that night she was able to call her mother at home and ascertain that her father, who often had business at the World Trade Center, and other family members were safe.

She had two days' notice before she left. Once she was gone, a local group and her host family opened the library Jackson helped organize. "It's now running and has over 100 members attending classes and using the library," she said.

Jackson has not abandoned the idea of returning to Uzbekistan and renewing her friendship with a people and culture she has come to love. She hopes to return as a humanitarian aid worker with valuable language skills in Uzbek and Russian.