

January 25, 2011

Dear Peace Corps Panama Friends,

The Annual GAD Youth Conference provides an opportunity for youths across the country to come together and learn valuable life skills and has taken place for over ten years. The material will aim to get the participants thinking about their futures and how the decisions they make now can affect them in the future. These life skills will aim to lower the alarming teen pregnancy rates (over 40% in certain areas!) and to give the youths the skills necessary to be a part of the solution in the prevention of the spread of HIV.

Over 70 youths, ages 13-18, representing every province in Panama (excluding the Kuna Yala) will attend the three day conference at the Girl Scouts Camp in Penonome. The participants are from over 40 different communities where Peace Corps works. They represent indigenous, rural, and urban populations. This camp not only provides the opportunity to learn valuable life skills they might not otherwise receive, it is an opportunity to make new friends from every corner of Panama.

After the conference, participants will work as counterparts with volunteers back in their communities to implement a project to help their community. These projects and pictures will all be posted on a Facebook group created for the camp participants, whose use will also help the youths develop the computer skills so often necessary for employment. This Facebook group will allow us to monitor and evaluate the progress of the participants post-conference in a way that is fun and easy for the youths. As an added incentive to complete the post-conference tasks, those who have completed the projects and evaluations will be eligible to return the following year as junior counselors. As more former conference participants take on more responsibility and return as facilitators in the future, the conference will evolve to rely less on Peace Corps Volunteers.

This conference has been such a rewarding experience for all involved. At the 2009 conference in San Felix, Chiriqui a small ngöbe boy from Bocas seemed to be quite timid and hang back a bit during lots of the activities, the volunteer who nominated him wasn't sure he had enjoyed himself or learned anything new. The next year on the exact date of the first day of the 2009 camp, the boy showed up at the volunteer's house wearing his t-shirt and with his workbook from the camp ready to go again! He had been counting down the days, he was so excited.

Every year it seems to be a scramble to get the money together and this year was no exception. We had been promised donated facilities and they pulled out at the last minute leaving us scrambling to find a new place and the money for it. Luckily the Muchachas Guias camp of Penonome is helping us with a big discount and their beautiful camp outside of Penonome. We are receiving funds from the Embassy's SPA grants and the PEPFAR (Aids prevention) grants, but those funds can't be used for the t-shirts that we give the kids to wear for a group picture, to remember their camp experience, and also as a safe way to identify them while traveling to and from the camp. This year we are asking for your help to provide the t-shirts that have become such a symbol of the camp.

I know that your organization has done wonderful things to help VAC with their small grant program and I hope that we can also work more closely with you to improve our ability to support volunteers. We would greatly appreciate your consideration to help in making this PC Panama tradition more sustainable by asking your members to support us in years to come.

Thank you for supporting GAD.