Last spring I sat in one of those generic, overpriced cafés on Miami’s South Beach surrounded by a gaggle of college classmates, each of us nursing frozen margaritas in glasses with rims thickly coated in sea salt. It was our last spring break, and we wanted nothing more than to push anxiousness about our future as far from our minds as possible. I was casually scrolling through e-mails on my phone when this popped up: “From: Peace Corps. Subject: Congratulations, Glynn, we invite you to Cambodia!”

Now, less than a year later on a 101-degree spring day, I look out over rice paddies as I swing in a hammock under a mango tree in my host family’s backyard, some 8,826 miles away from my native New York City.

To be honest, I’m probably the most unlikely twentysomething you would expect to be a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in Cambodia, one of the poorest countries in the world. I lived my teenage years thinking I was a character on Sex and the City. I loved the lavishness of cosmopolitan New York and was overly impressed with the trappings of status—you know, all things bling. I understood I would have to land a “good job” to carry a Birkin bag, so I enrolled at Howard University to prepare for a career in public relations.

Then, in my junior year, I went to Milan as part of a study abroad program. I had designed the perfect class schedule: intensive Italian lessons and courses in marketing luxury goods, art history and business communications. But as the semester went on, I discovered I wanted the Italians’ lust for life. They engaged in long, robust conversations over cappuccinos in the mornings and took quiet strolls through piazzas in the afternoons. They had the ability to see art in the ordinary and understood that what you do when you’re not working is more important than what you do when you are. I immersed myself in this way of life, and it was delicious.

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I returned home longing to experience life in other parts of the world. I worked up the courage to tell my parents that instead of going right to work after graduation, I wanted to travel for a year. My father secretly fantasized with me, but my mother is from the “God bless the child that’s got his own” school of thought and said I better figure out how I would finance such a notion. So I did.

I remembered a visit two returning Peace Corps volunteers had made to my eleventh-grade history class. They seemed genuinely happy and fulfilled by their work. I knew even then that I wanted to be just as excited by what I would one day do for a living. While I still believed public relations would bring me some measure of fulfillment, it was a no-brainer that using my talents and gifts to make a real difference in the lives of people overseas would bring immeasurable joy. Plus, the Peace Corps would fly me to my assigned country and arrange for me to live with a host family. I would be able to travel to nearby countries when school was not in session. Perfection.

I applied to the 53-year-old U.S. government program at the start of my senior year and sent out job applications as a plan B. It was a grueling six-month process of paperwork, e-mails, interviews and essays. Sure, a few of my friends hit me with “Isn’t the Peace Corps something privileged White kids do?” or “Why would you give up a good-paying job opportunity to live in a Third World country?” But most of them got it. After all, many of them had courageously switched from surefire job-magnet majors like international business to less stable ones like filmmaking, all in the pursuit of happiness. Even my career-driven mom has come to embrace my decision, agreeing that I should be just as desirable to top-notch employers after finishing my 27-month stint. No doubt, I will have to have “the talk” with her about my intention to continue traveling and to write for a living once I return home, because the bottom line is I’m dead set on satisfying my soul.

Read more of self-proclaimed culture lover Glynn Pogue’s writing at glynnypogue.com.