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Charles Lewis aims to make a difference in Portland with his program offering free or low-cost music lessons to children. His nonprofit music center, Ethos Inc., may serve as many as 200 students in January.

Got a cause? Go to Portland

Scores of ex-Peace Corps members and like-minded people settle here, where involvement is encouraged

By **JULIE SULLIVAN**
THE OREGONIAN

Charles Lewis left Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government in June with experience as a student body president, the school's top public service award and a master's degree in public policy.

He moved directly into a friend's living room in Portland, put his groceries, insurance and cash advances on credit cards and hasn't drawn a paycheck since.

"I think it's going very well," says Lewis, 28, who chose Portland to start a nonprofit music center offering free and low-cost lessons to schoolchildren. His goals: "to help people and make a difference."

The Anchorage-raised Lewis knew from attending the University of Port-

land as an undergraduate that "there was room for the idealist here. Portland is the pacesetter for the rest of the country. It's possible to be active, set good public policy and see the results in people's lives."

More than 225,000 people have moved to the Portland area since 1990 from other states, and most of them probably came for jobs, the Oregon landscape or both, according to the Center for Population Research at Portland State University.

But subtler magnets also are at work, drawing immigrants such as Lewis who sense opportunity in the area. Nowhere is this more obvious than with former Peace Corps volunteers who say the region's reputation for being socially progressive, culturally rich and environmentally conscious brought them to the

Portland area from all over the world.

Lewis, who served two years in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is among the 1,525 returned volunteers who've notified the Peace Corps that they now live in the Portland area. Officials, who think that is only a fraction of the total number living here, say it is nonetheless "very impressive."

"I think it's huge," said Carla Semmler, public affairs specialist with the Seattle Regional Peace Corps Office. "It's a very active community."

"Portland is one of the top cities to go to after the Peace Corps," said Niki Scott, president of the Columbia River Peace Corps Volunteer Association.

That may be in part because Oregon also produces many volunteers: The

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University of Oregon ranks ninth in the nation for the number of volunteers it sends overseas, and Reed, Lewis & Clark and Linfield colleges are in the top 25 for smaller schools.

It's no surprise that a popular Northwest city with lower housing costs than Seattle would be a magnet for educated, well-traveled people.

But it wasn't the cost of living that brought Nancy Yuill and her husband to the Portland area last November, right after nine years of Peace Corps and development work in Africa. They'd never been to Portland before.

"We knew there were like-minded folks here and people who shared our goals and values," said Yuill, 37. The Massachusetts-born and MBA-trained Yuill was quickly hired to create a Neighborhood Pride Team program. Using strategies she used in Lesotho and Uganda, she launched a program that helps women in outer Southeast Portland create and sell arts and crafts made from reclaimed fabric and found objects. Trillium Artisans opened in a former adult video store in Lents in August.

Thirty years of bottle bills, health plans and land-use policies have produced a progressive reputation, said Carl Abbott, professor of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University. But it is what Portland lacks that may allow people like Yuill and Lewis to find a niche here.

Historically, Portland has never had the large ethnic groups and organized churchgoers that are the strong traditional sources of social capital in many American cities, Abbott said. Thus the networks of civic engagement and cooperation the community needed had to be consciously created.

Networks of volunteer neighborhood organizations and grassroots groups emerged. As a result, Portland has become more open to citizen involvement, new ideas and newcomers than many other cities. "You don't have to have lived here 20 years before people will listen to you," Abbott said.

Active people create further activity, and thus the reputation snowballs.

Returned Peace Corps volunteers tend to be involved in their communities. A 1996 national survey showed 78 percent had formally volunteered their time to other causes since their return — a figure 11 percent higher than the national average.

Consider Anne Kimberly, raised in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, who came to Portland in 1989 from the Peace Corps to take a second degree in nursing. Kimberly has volunteered as a relief worker in Somalia, in a Rwandan refugee camp and, most recently, in Honduras. She spent the last year trying to bring the son of a Sierra Leonean health worker to Oregon for nursing school. But she also volunteers up to three evenings a week as a nurse practitioner for Portland Neighborhood Health Clinics, and she is a member of Bicycle Transportation Alliance and a Master Recycler, passing thousands of red worms from her worm bin to co-workers, their children, "anyone."

"I feel like I should have always been from here. Growing up, I was always the only one I knew washing out my sandwich baggies," Kimberly says.

"A lot of Peace Corps people come back and just tunnel under, but most of them are the people out there on the cutting edge of community involvement in one way or another," said Jana Potter, a Floridian who moved to Portland two years ago after eight years with the Peace Corps in Africa.

Potter, 50, works for the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, but she also volunteers helping newly arrived refugees and immigrants start their own businesses. Most of the volunteers she works alongside were also affiliated with the Peace Corps and deliberately seek opportunities to work with people of other cultures.

"The attitude or image of the Northwest as very homogenous and white is not true; you can find every ethnicity here; there is a res-

taurant and store for everything," Potter said.

Returned volunteers also tend to find one another. Once a month, ex-Peace Corps members gather at the Lucky Labrador Brewing Co. where "Ohmygosh, that was my village in Ghana too!" is heard. On a recent Monday, 11 of the 14 seated hailed from outside Oregon.

Returned volunteers usually experience "reverse culture shock" leaving villages in poor countries for strip development, SUVs and e-mail. Three volunteers told of breaking down in a grocery store shortly after returning. Having lived where there was one kind of soap for their hair, bicycle, dishes and clothes — "it was blue soap" — they suddenly had to choose between 39 varieties of hand soap.

"I was a very angry person," said one volunteer. "Americans waste so much." She still owns almost no clothes, does laundry less often and is the only person she knows who worries about the number of times she and her roommate flush the toilet.

"You learn how phenomenally privileged we are and how outrageously disproportionate our comfort level is compared to the rest of the world," Potter said. That reaction gradually gives way to deeper cultural concerns about American consumption patterns and self-centeredness. That drives many returnees to become determined to work on problems here.

At Harvard, Lewis was writing Internet policy for Microsoft for his master's thesis when he switched to helping a folk music center boost its role in the community.

During a school break, Lewis saw a similar need for access to music education emerging in Portland. Property tax measures had left about two art, music and drama teachers for every 1,000 children in Portland public schools. He designed a music program for children whether they could afford lessons or not.

Lewis had no money, staff or instruments. Nevertheless, on Oct. 26, four months after he arrived, the first 11 students sat down at pianos and drums in borrowed University of Portland classrooms with volunteer instructors.

The music center, Ethos Inc. (named for a person's defining characteristic), now has a down-

town office, 15 volunteers and \$10,000 in donated instruments, and it plans to serve as many as 200 students in January. A \$5,000 grant arrived last week.

Now Lewis is thinking of a "Music Mobile" to bring multicultural music education to the entire city. He's eyeing a vacant building that would be perfect for a center's headquarters. He sees the future, and it's in Portland.

"I knew I could make it work here."

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