Extension professor emeritus wins Kennedy service award

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Fairbanks, Alaska—It’s a good thing Tony Gasbarro isn’t the kind of guy who likes to display awards on his office wall. If he did, the emeritus associate professor of forestry extension would be hard-pressed to find enough space to hang all the accolades, honors and recognitions he’s received for his humanitarian efforts since he “retired” from the University of Alaska Fairbanks a decade ago.

Earlier this month, Gasbarro added yet another award to his long list of tributes. He became one of only six people in the nation to receive a John F. Kennedy Service Award. The award was established this year in celebration of the U.S. Peace Corps' 45th anniversary and recognizes those who have demonstrated exemplary service and leadership in fulfilling the Peace Corps’ mission.

Gasbarro first served as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1962, the year he graduated from Colorado State University with a forestry degree. For two years, Gasbarro worked in the Dominican Republic training foresters in fire control, timber sales preparation, logging road location and forest measurements.

In 1996, at the age of 57, Gasbarro joined the Peace Corps again, after serving 23 years as a jointly appointed forestry professor with the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service and the School of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences. Upon his retirement, he was awarded the rank of emeritus, a title given to faculty with whom the university wants to maintain an ongoing relationship. As emeritus faculty, Gasbarro is provided office space on the Fairbanks campus where he continues to work today.

Not one to sit behind a desk for long, Gasbarro served as a Peace Corps volunteer in El Salvador until 1998. He’s been returning to El Salvador regularly since then to help raise funds for community development and educational opportunities for Salvadorans. In 2003, former President Jimmy Carter presented Gasbarro with a Lillian Carter Award in recognition of his Peace Corps work.
Gasbarro firmly believes in the Peace Corps’ philosophy of promoting world peace and friendship through educational opportunities and on-site training in countries around the globe. Gasbarro, along with Extension Food Specialist Kristy Long, was instrumental in developing a Masters International Program at UAF, in partnership with the Peace Corps. Gasbarro serves as the volunteer UAF coordinator and this year is co-teaching a graduate seminar in international development.

Most recently, he’s helped start a vision screening program for children in El Salvador and this spring, working with the Extension’s Kenai Peninsula District office, will bring two Salvadoran university students to Alaska as part of the 4-H International Home Stay Program.

The UAF Cooperative Extension 4-H and Youth Development program will sponsor their visit. Gasbarro said the program offers a great opportunity for the Salvadorans to develop leadership skills and share their culture with Alaskans.

“There are so many needs in El Salvador and among the poor throughout the world,” he said. “It takes so very little to make such a huge impact in the lives of kids in these countries. Just a chance to get a good education offers great hope for the future of these people.”

As friends and co-workers can attest, Gasbarro’s sincere and tireless efforts are making a positive impact, large and small, both at home and abroad.

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