

# GOING

# AWAY,

## FINDING YOURSELF

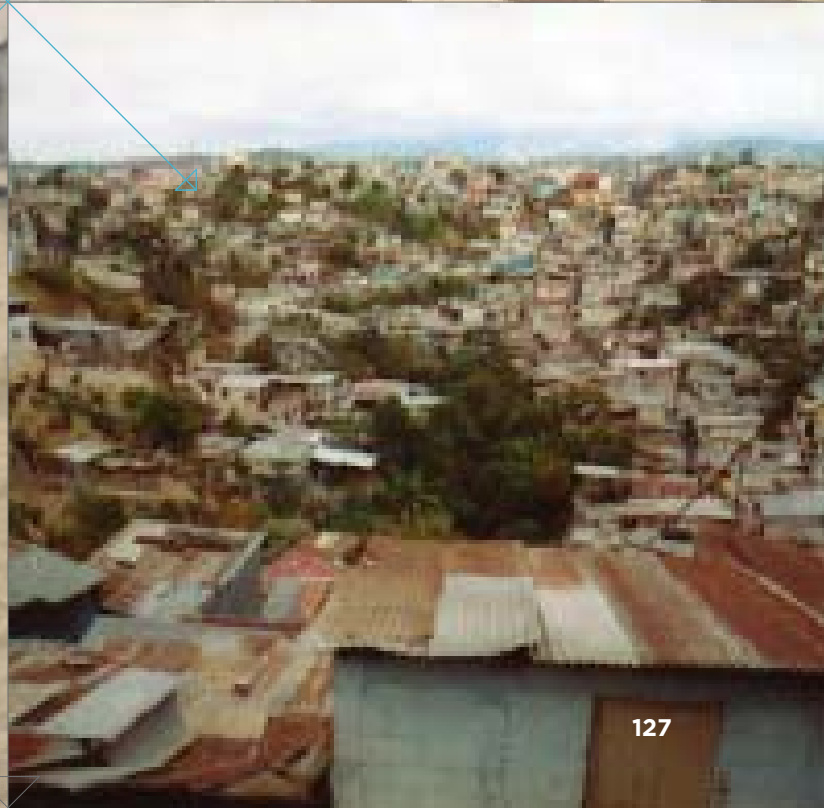
AS WE ASSESS OUR LIVES AFTER 40, THE DESIRE TO GIVE BACK BECOMES EVEN MORE POWERFUL. VOLUNTEER VACATIONS ENABLE US TO DO THAT WORLDWIDE—AND, AS KATHY SHERIDAN FOUND OUT, WE WIND UP GETTING MORE THAN WE GIVE

IT'S A PLEASANTLY WARM LATE AFTERNOON, and we're having a couple of beers alfresco. The bar is an upright wooden crate on scrubland in Guatemala City. Our fellow patrons are a free-range army of mangy dogs, strutting roosters and fidgety chickens scratching the dirt.

Amy Adams gazes around contentedly. In careful Spanish, she asks where to find the bathroom. Then the tall, blonde 46-year-old follows lengthy directions down the street—way, way down. So far down that it's 25 minutes before she makes it back. But what's 25 minutes? Last year,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP  
In Guatemala City: Amy Adams, a volunteer with Cross-Cultural Solutions, in the doorway of the CCS house, decorated with handprints of volunteers. La Limonada, a settlement for the poor in Guatemala City. Volunteer Kim Young with a student in an after-school program in Lima, Peru.

PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JONATHAN MOLLER (2), COURTESY OF KIM YOUNG



she signed up as a volunteer for six weeks in a Guatemalan orphanage, but she stayed for 26. Adams, who is married and lives in Vermont, may seem unusual, and in one sense she is: Her stay is rather extended. Otherwise, she is just one of thousands of over-forty women deciding to give the wheel of life another spin.

Midlife crisis? The end of a marriage, an empty nest, the loss of a parent, illness, menopause? That could explain the impetus, but it's more than that. Our generation—gifted with hope, health, education, life experience and financial independence—is asking big questions of itself. The women who sign up for volunteer vacations want to make a contribution, and merely writing a check doesn't always cut it. For good or ill, we want to dive in, get up close and personal.

Soul-searching usually precedes signing up for a volunteer vacation, according to Virginia Burmester, the country director in Guatemala for Cross-Cultural Solutions (see "Signing on to Volunteer," below). She says, "Many women we see feel they're missing something. Children leave. Some have gone through a recent divorce—as one put it, 'I found myself having breakfast alone after 27 years of marriage.' This may be the teenage adventure they didn't have. Some do it as service; they're grateful because they know they have a lot and they want to share." The base requirements are the courage to leave home and an open mind. When it's over, as often as not women return to their old lives filled with fresh energy, insights and confidence, ready to begin a new chapter. Sometimes, they tear up the old script altogether.

## SIGNING ON TO VOLUNTEER

A number of organizations with excellent track records offer worldwide programs for volunteers to join ongoing research projects and participate in humanitarian relief.

**Cross-Cultural Solutions**, the organization that arranged the trip in this article, has programs in 10 countries around the world (800-380-4777, [crossculturalsolutions.org](http://crossculturalsolutions.org)).

**CARE CORPS** is an arm of CARE, which arranges a series of one-week trips in Guatemala (Peru will be added in 2007) that enable volunteers to observe what the organization does on the ground. Its philosophy is to let people in a country do the work, as participants watch and learn. Trips are \$2,500 a week. For more information, see CARE's Web site ([care.org](http://care.org)). More has just partnered with CARE in a fund-raising challenge. You can read about it in this month's "Editor's Letter" (page 12), on CARE's Web site and on [More.com](http://More.com).

**Habitat for Humanity** has Global Village Work Trips that enable volunteers to work with local people to build homes. Destinations for 2006 include Uganda, Romania, Poland and Sidell, Louisiana. Trips start at \$700 and most run seven to 14 days (800-422-4828, [habitat.org/gv](http://habitat.org/gv)).

**Amizade** in partnership with other international and local nonprofits organizes volunteer programs in Ghana; in the Navajo Nation in Tuba City, Arizona; and Brazil. From \$500 to \$2,000 for seven to 14 days (888-973-4443, [amizade.org](http://amizade.org)).

## MAKING THE DECISION

Angela Roselle is frank about the thinking that lay behind her recent five-week stint in Guatemala. "It was not selfless," she says. "I was really doing it for myself. I tried to think about my motives, and there were so many, so muddled up. Mostly I needed to feel good about myself."

Roselle, a 48-year-old stay-at-home mother from Vicksburg, Mississippi, describes the killer year that was 2004: "I raised three daughters, and the last one left for college. My husband and I still loved each other but were stale and unhappy, and we decided to separate. I went to look after my father, who died shortly thereafter. I was starting menopause. My whole world turned upside down. I had a real choice that year: I could become bitter and angry—I know a lot of people like that. Then a good friend, an Episcopal priest, planted a seed. She said, 'Find yourself through service to others.'" Roselle discovered CCS while tooling around on the Internet looking for the Peace Corps. She picked Guatemala because she had been sponsoring a child there for three years.

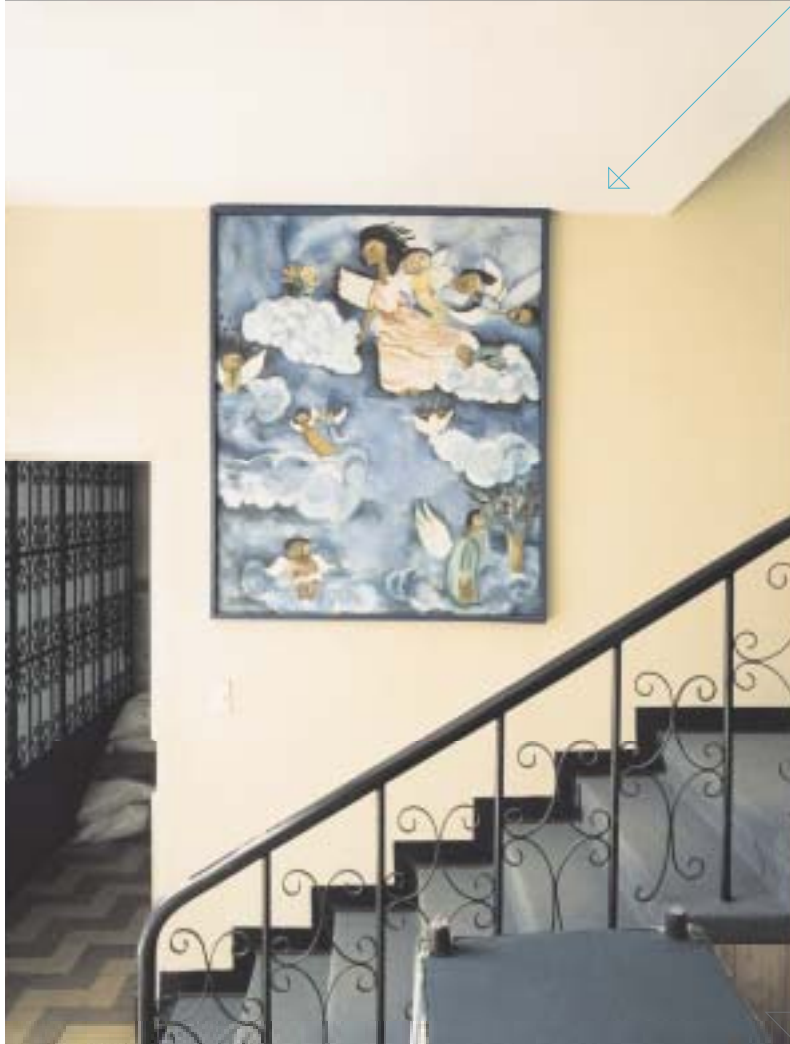
For Amy Adams, there was no single trigger either, just a persistent feeling of wanting to do something for others. Years of working as the manager of a Vermont country club kept her too busy planning ahead to let her live in the moment. Then she was diagnosed with thyroid cancer four years ago, which made her assess her life. She had worked with children as a mentor in a local youth center and says, "I enjoyed their company hugely. I suppose you could say I had been tiptoeing in this direction for a while."

When Kim Young, a 49-year-old mother of two from Florida, first took the leap, volunteering in Lima, Peru, she brought her husband, Scott, and her teenage daughters with her. A student-exchange experience with an Argentinean family when she was 15 had hooked her on travel. Now she wanted to show Stephanie and Elizabeth, 16 and 17, that "there is more to life than Gucci handbags."

## SETTLING IN—WHAT'S IT'S REALLY LIKE

Young's first impressions of Lima were similar to Roselle's of Guatemala City. (Most guidebooks advise travelers to get out of Guatemala City as fast as a cab can carry them—which, be warned, can be hair-raisingly fast.) "All you can see is graffiti and trash in the streets, and enormous walls with concertina wire on top," Roselle recalls. "But we pulled up to this solid metal gate and the driver, who spoke no English, honked the horn. The gate opened to a paradise, with bougainvillea and a lemon tree and parrots in cages. And nine of us were

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP  
Amy Adams with two of  
the disabled children  
at the Hogar Mariana  
Guirola Home. Virginia  
Burmester, country  
director of CCS in  
Guatemala. The entryway  
with a work by Ludwin,  
one of the children, who  
paints with his mouth.



sitting in the van, stunned, everyone with the same thought: “What are we doing here?”

The CCS facility where volunteers are housed has small, six-bunk rooms and across the yard, showers and lavatories where the plumbing and hot water are sometime things. Food is served buffet style and eaten around a long table—a perfect setting for soul-baring chats that continue late into the warm Guatemalan nights. “I was going off to be alone in this Third World country,” Roselle says, laughing, “but then I had this immediate family.”

The workday starts and finishes early. Breakfast is at 7:30, before the van comes to whisk volunteers away to various placements. Some are within walking distance. Most volunteers are back at base for lunch at one o’clock, drained of energy.

Eager first-timers are often dismayed at the shortness of the working day, but Burmester has the psychology down. She produces a chart in which levels of anxiety are expressed within widening circles. Predeparture anxieties about food, cleanliness, sleeping arrangements are at the center. On arrival, the concerns are about survival, language or coming to grips with the currency, the work site or finding the way to an Internet café. By the Friday of the first week, people who are workaholics back home are amazed to find themselves exhausted. It’s a big learning process, Burmester reminds us. By the second week, it is easier: Routine begins.

On our first day, I set off to observe how the placements work, beginning with a small orphanage down the street. The CCS volunteer is Sue Peterson, 72, a long-divorced, well-traveled nurse from Idaho, in Guatemala for 11 weeks. Her twin motivations are to avoid every last one of the November and December holidays in the U.S. and to learn Spanish. The orphanage is a privately run institution, well managed and reasonably staffed by local standards. Peterson, like most nurses, is highly practical and needs to be doing rather than talking. But volunteer placements demand a delicate balance; the purpose is not to displace local jobs. Burmester says, “It is about one-to-one engagement with children who never have had such a luxury. For volunteers it is about adapting, not imposing your ideas.”

Karen, a pretty curly-haired little girl, born to a 12-year-old mother, is a success story. A CCS volunteer had noticed her poor leg movement and tardy emotional development, and each of the CCS successors took on the task of befriending her and encouraging her to exercise. With the eighth volunteer in the chain, at the age of 18 months, Karen started to walk. Today, her movement is fluid and joyful.

Peterson excels at the diaper-changing phase of the morning’s work, but when it comes to the one-to-one engagement she falters—she knows only a few words of Spanish. Burmester says a placement is what you make of it. Amy Adams filled in for a week at an orphanage, where she was dismayed by what she felt was the cruelty of one of the

caregivers. Her next assignment was in a home run by nuns for mentally and physically disabled children, and Adams found her niche. She says, “I’ve been working with two priceless women in a wonderful home.” There are 18 children, most in wheelchairs, which can be a daunting sight for the unprepared. But they include boys such as Ludwin, a smart and funny 16-year-old, a talented artist who paints and writes with his mouth, speaks excellent English and serves as her interpreter. I hand him my notebook and ask him to write something about his life. Unprompted, he makes allowances for my feeble Spanish by writing every alternate line in English.

Adams, with her boundless energy, has become much more than someone who hangs around befriending. I watch her coordinate an energetic outing to the park with the help of a dozen local high school volunteers; her honest, respectful,

## WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU SIGN UP

All the women mentioned in this article volunteered with Cross-Cultural Solutions ([crossculturalsolutions.org](http://crossculturalsolutions.org)), an 11-year-old, nonprofit provider of two-week volunteer vacations; you can choose to extend your time once you are there. The average stay is just over three weeks; there are many repeat volunteers.

Reputable sponsoring organizations offer a safe, organized way to get under the skin of a country. For a CCS trip, the base cost is \$2,389 for the first two weeks (plus airfare), and \$261 a week after that. Most of the trips are tax deductible.

Advance planning can smooth the way: Avoid the summer high season, when college students predominate with the inevitable late-night noise and door-banging. Low season means smaller numbers at home base and work, leading to richer relationships.





## COMING HOME

Roselle's memories of that bleak place are anything but: "I'm glad I got that placement. The children's stories are so sad, but the people are so open and warm. The whole thing was surprising and wonderful."

Like all the volunteers, Roselle took advantage of the weekends to travel: "Five of us rode the chicken bus to Antigua at 90 miles an hour on mountain roads, cut off from anything familiar. And then came 'California Dreamin'' out of the speakers. We also went to Lake Atitlán—probably the most beautiful place in the world. And we got to Tikal to see the Mayan ruins deep in the jungle."

Roselle spent only five weeks in Guatemala, but it changed her: "I think I'm still processing it a year later. We had so many volunteers from around the world—young and older, all so different. And we would sit and have these long conversations. A lot came with preconceived ideas about others, and that all changed while we were there. I'm more open. When I see foreign politicians speaking, I'll stop and listen. And one thing I've noticed since I came back home—in America, there is such abundance." It is then that Roselle remembers "those people in the shanty towns, the children working harder than any child should have to." As for her own life: "My husband and I are back together, and it's better than ever. I think the trip certainly contributed to it. I really surprised myself by actually doing it. I think I was braver than I thought I could be. So I was coming back to my marriage as more of a whole woman. I think I lost myself in the marriage and in the raising of the children. Who wants to be married to a bit of a person?"

Kim Young's horizons have broadened dramatically too. She says, "CCS opened my eyes to what I could offer, how I could be my own woman. I found something in me that I didn't realize was there." She has been working locally, helping New Orleans citizens who sought refuge in Florida after Katrina—sorting out the bureaucracy, befriending them—and has become part of the Disaster Action Team of the Red Cross. "I don't know that I would have done that before," she says. "I swear that before CCS, I'd be thinking, 'I'm so old . . . too old.'"

As for Amy Adams, when she decided to make the trip to Guatemala, she had to fund-raise among family and friends for the \$3,400 needed to stay for six weeks. Her big joke is that they all obviously wanted her the hell out of town, because she ended up with \$11,000. Their generosity bought her time and gave her the freedom to go out on weekend fact-finding trips with CARE, whose microlending projects for women fill her with particular zeal. Adams admits, a bit sheepishly, "I'm working on my résumé. I'm trying to use this journey as career development. That would be the life-changing part. So far, I think it's been more like a refresher course, maybe a strengthener. But this is definitely a step in a new direction. Where it will lead, *yo no se.*" **M**

joshing relationship with the children is deeply touching. "These children lived in a good house," Burmester says, "but they never went outside. Now because volunteers talk to them and take them out, the neighbors recognize them and say hi and the children are much more motivated."

Angela Roselle's placement in Guatemala was in another orphanage, which was depressing, sad and wonderful all at the same time. Soon after her arrival, the children came down with chicken pox. Roselle, with no Spanish, worked next to Nurse Betty, who knew no English. She tells me, "I wanted to stay with the babies after they had been fed and changed, but every morning Nurse Betty would go to the door and use a gesture that means get out. So I would leave.

"When I consulted Virginia, she suggested that I give Betty a gift." Roselle chose a volume of Pablo Neruda poetry in English and Spanish. Not only did it reduce Nurse Betty to tears of gratitude, Roselle also learned that the gesture to get out had in fact been an invitation to come out in the hall to sing and play with the babies. "But I'd just hang my head and leave, so what could she have been thinking?" she says, laughing. Roselle even had a brief fantasy about adopting one little boy. She says, "I connected with him on the very first day, but I came to my senses and realized that I am 48. Still, I think of him often and wonder how he is doing."

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** Time out in Guatemala: the utter tranquility of Lake Atitlán. The National Palace in Guatemala City. The Arco de Santa Catarina, in Antigua, a city filled with the color and exuberance of Guatemalan colonial architecture.