

Reflections on a life ended far too soon

It began with a number — 279, if the figure I found was accurate. Sadly, to this total we now add one of our own.

My curiosity had been piqued while reading reporter Roselee Papandrea's story about the Nov. 27 death, in a car crash, of Peace Corps volunteer Emily Balog in Paraguay. Balog had worked there since June 2010 as a community development volunteer, doing what she could to make a difference in the lives of those she worked with. And now, at age 26, suddenly she was gone.

I didn't know Emily Balog; though she was a fellow UNC alumnus, we graduated a good nine years apart. Nor had I spent much time thinking about the Peace Corps' mission — but reading Roselee's story, I suddenly wondered how many Peace Corps volunteers had died over the years while serving overseas.

A quick Internet search produced a site called the Fallen Peace Corps Volunteers Memorial Project (fpcv.org) — an online memorial dedicated to this very subject. I didn't know how complete their records were — the site was created by a woman in Maine whose son died serving overseas some years ago, and isn't affiliated with the Peace Corps itself. But what they did have was names — 279 of them, with a biography page for many of the fallen volunteers, stretching from 1962 up to 2011. Two others had died so far this year, one who'd served in Jordan, the other in China.

I kept thinking about Emily as the evening wore on, trying to figure out why this girl I'd never met was lingering on my mind. We appeared, after all, to have been very different people — Emily Balog had devoted herself to helping people half a world away, while many days I struggle to come up with a single altruistic thought. The obituary stated that hers was a life dedicated to service, a choice that implies a level of idealism and commitment to building a better world. Myself, I just get older and more cynical, a decade's worth of ink running through my veins.

But still — as her obituary indicated — she was a Tar Heel through and through. Maybe our lives had taken different roads, but we had walked the same road once. The UNC connection tends to run strong in us Carolina graduates, who remember Chapel Hill as the place they came, young and bright-eyed, hoping to discover the person they would one day become. Emily, no doubt, had loved the university as much as I, had walked those same brick pathways, sat on the stone walls. Maybe she had even taken shelter from the sun under the old poplar tree on the north quad where, 2 1/2 years ago, I asked my wife to marry me.

More than that, I remember being that young — that full of faith in the future. Life is frequently a ruthless proposition, and college doesn't always prepare you for just how hard the pavements are out there. Emily was lucky. She still had that faith — and though she's gone, far too soon, it'd be doing her a disservice to forget the example she gave.

That night, I emailed the webmaster at the Fallen Peace Corps Volunteer Memorial Project. "Emily Balog died in Paraguay on Sunday," I wrote, including a link to Roselee's story. "If you could add her to the list, I'm sure her parents would appreciate it. Thanks."

I heard back a few days later. The lady thanked me for writing and said they'd created a page in Emily's honor (<http://fpcv.org/volunteers/emily-balog/>). So maybe, if only in a

digital/virtual sense, Emily Balog's back where she belongs — alongside her fellow volunteers who, like her, lived their lives by that age-old creed of peace on earth, goodwill toward men.

From where this cynical newsman's sitting, they sound like some of the finest people around.

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