Embracing their 70s with the UN: a tale of two senior UN Volunteers

This year, the United Nations turns 75 years old. This milestone provides a timely opportunity to celebrate the organization’s accomplishments and reflect on lessons learned. On 10 October this year, James Haddow turned 75 years old; his wife, Carmen Haddow, is 72. They are both currently serving as UN Volunteers: James as an Electoral Logistics Specialist with the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), and Carmen as Administrative Officer, Human Resources, Training and UNV Support, with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Oceans and continents apart, they are united in their passion for the United Nations and advancing sustainable development.

Senior UN Volunteers are not common – the average global age of UN Volunteers is 32 – but the Haddows can attest to the many benefits their presence brings both to the missions they serve, and to themselves as older volunteers. Rather than spending their retirement...
years in quiet relaxation, the Haddows, both from the United Kingdom, chose to share their lifetime of expertise as UN Volunteers with United Nations missions.

James served in the military, before finding his way to the UNV programme over two decades ago, in 1999. Prior to his current role as Electoral Logistics Specialist with UNSOM, James served as a UN Volunteer with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

Carmen, a former UN staff member, was approaching her retirement age when, through her former boss, she discovered an opportunity to continue contributing to global peace and development as a UN Volunteer with UNAMA. It was an exciting moment for her.

"I think this idea of having older UN Volunteers is absolutely fantastic," Carmen shares. "We've had our careers, we're not here for the money, we're not here to try and lobby for a better job or a higher grade or whatever. We're here because we really, really want to do this work."

Volunteering has helped us enormously, because it's kept us healthy, and it's kept us mentally alert. I would recommend it to anybody who is fit and well enough to be useful. We're both really valued, and I have personally received so much support from my supervisors and managers in UNAMA, the UNV Office in Afghanistan and UNV headquarters. I'm just so grateful to have the opportunity to be a UN Volunteer. --Carmen Haddow
While sharing their journeys as UN Volunteers, James and Carmen convey undeniable enthusiasm, optimism and hope, all of which underlie their experience with the UN.

“I’ve been in several missions as a UN Volunteer, and I can only say that I only ever found kindness from the day I got there.” -- James Haddow

Much like the UN’s 75 years of experience, James and Carmen have racked up their own impressive portfolios that are invaluable to promoting peace and development. James’
military and technical background, for instance, gives him a unique perspective on the ground in Somalia, as he supports his team with organizing the nation’s upcoming national elections.

One of Carmen’s proudest moments as a UN Volunteer was to be at the launch of a National UNV Youth Programme for Afghan women, which was initiated by the UNAMA Mission Support office. To date, the programme has engaged over 30 women, who have had the opportunity to cultivate their skills and prepare them for future opportunities.

UN Volunteers of all ages have the opportunity to learn from each other in their roles. The Haddows strongly believe that cultural sensitivity and "getting down and dirty", as James says, are essential aspects of succeeding in this work. What’s more is that James finds his senior age to be an advantage in cross-cultural exchange and understanding. "I believe that I have an impact on the older local and national staff," he explains.

Good things don’t come easily, though. The Haddows’ current success is the culmination of twenty years’ worth of trials and tribulations. They have found that their younger colleagues tend to struggle with adapting to new environments and cultural contexts often characteristic of UN Missions; James and Carmen feel it is their duty to encourage them and remind them that they, too, can persevere through hard times.

For the young people who become volunteers, it’s a tremendous cultural change and shock. I’m a great believer in the UNV buddy mentorship system. So, wherever I am in a UN Mission, I always volunteer to be a buddy, and it's fantastic, because I can meet people at the airport, take them to the badge office. I can even lend them some of my tea bags—it is, you know, a privilege for me to give a tea bag away. --James Haddow

It is evident that James and Carmen have shared more than just tea bags with those around them. Their combined 40 years of experience with the UN and unflagging enthusiasm for their work is contagious. Carmen instills confidence in younger colleagues as an official 'peer helper' in Afghanistan, while James takes on an informal mentorship role in Somalia.

"Some days, they don't feel too confident, and we pass our confidence on to them. And it works. It definitely works."

My message to my younger colleagues joining the UN system as UN Volunteers is that serving with this organization is a gift that comes
with huge responsibilities. That means that you have to show respect for yourself, and for the people we serve and for the responsibilities that you’ve got. You’re being given tremendous responsibilities. -- James Haddow

The UN is marking its 75th anniversary at a time of unprecedented challenges for the world, compounded by a global pandemic that seems unrelenting. Climate change is altering nature’s balance, digital disruptions are threatening humanity’s survival, global inequality is increasing, while the refugee crisis continues to mount. Needless to say, the challenges of the 21st century call for even greater international cooperation.

When asked what her message to international community and world leaders is at this pivotal point in time, Carmen replies, "It would be peace, it's got to be peace. I know that sounds very old fashioned, but we're all human beings. We're all on the same world and you just can't be deterred. I think you just have to put across the message that we're all one and we have to be as one and strive for peace and unity. I think it's as simple as that really."

For James, world leaders and development actors should practice just a little more empathy if we are to transition into the world we want. He would like to see UN personnel, for example, spending more time deep within communities.

When you spend more time and even volunteer with the communities you serve, you get to see and understand their plight in life better, their daily trials and tribulations. Just a simple day of getting their children to school in clean clothes and clean shoes. That is why the UN Volunteers programme is such an essential part of the UN. It’s the heart of the UN system. --James Haddow

As James and Carmen embrace their 70s together with the UN, they remind us that the solutions to the world’s challenges are within our reach. We just need to find the spirit of humanity in each of us.
James Haddow, at the time a UN Volunteer with UNMISS, inspects fortifications in a mission camp in Wau, South Sudan. Like the UN, James turned 75 years old this year. He is currently serving as a UN Volunteer with UNSOM in Somalia. ©James Haddow/UNV, 2020

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