John Guy LaPlante ’51 shared some stunning news with his Assumption Prep classmates when he attended his 60th reunion in September.

“Some of my classmates were astonished—stunned is a better word—to learn I was going into the Peace Corps,” LaPlante said. “My old pal Leo Darsigny AP’47 stared at me and asked, ‘What’s the matter with you? Are you crazy?’ He was dead serious.”

LaPlante isn’t crazy, just adventurous. A curious traveler and consummate communicator, writing has been his profession and his ticket to some of his greatest adventures. Last fall, his masterful way with words, both written and spoken, took him to Ukraine where he is teaching English in a university as a Peace Corps volunteer after completing 12 weeks of intensive language and cross-cultural awareness training. LaPlante, who will celebrate his 79th birthday in April, is committed to the Peace Corps until January 2010.

“I look forward to it as a wonderful adventure,” LaPlante said just before he left. “It’s a chance to do a little something for my country. I was never in the armed services, plus the Peace Corps can be very attractive for senior citizens.”
On paper, LaPlante retired at 62, but it never seemed to stick. With increased life expectancy and better health, vigorous American retirees like LaPlante eschew what he calls “armchair retirement” to work, travel and otherwise stay active in their later years. He says that he has never golfed in his life and has no plans to start now.

LaPlante, who grew up in Pawtucket, RI, and lived and worked in Massachusetts for most of his life, calls home “the pretty little village of Deep River,” in the estuary of the Connecticut River. He spent 15 years as a journalist, primarily at the Worcester Telegram & Gazette, where he began as a reporter and moved up to wear a variety of different hats, including bureau chief and editor of the Telegram’s popular magazine, “Feature Parade.” He left the news business to become the director of public relations at Assumption, where his fund-raising responsibilities included the College’s first capital fund drive.

After leaving Assumption, LaPlante established his own public relations firm. In his later years, he has worked to promote a variety of organizations, and has freelanced, consulted, written a newspaper column and published articles and books about his travels. He celebrated his 75th birthday by taking a solo trip around the world.

“I believe that every college kid should travel abroad independently, with a backpack and on a shoestring (budget),” he said. “They will learn a lot. Maybe the most important thing they’ll learn is about themselves. The back of my Around the World book has some 50 pages of practical, how-to info on how to travel safely, economically and more effectively.”

Five years ago LaPlante went to Alaska with a videographer to produce a travelogue about Alaska’s extensive public ferry system. He has published several books, Around the World at 75, Alone Dammit!, and a companion photo album, as well as a new book, Around in 80 Days. Oops, 83! His first book was translated into Chinese. After the marketing launch in Shanghai, he traveled to 10 nearby countries. That trip motivated him to write his latest book, which includes 300 photos.

“I stopped in Hawaii on my way home,” he said. “After I bought the (airline) ticket I realized I would be visiting my 50th state,” LaPlante said. “That really tickled me. I never set out to visit all 50 states. It just happened.”

Visiting libraries, primarily public ones, is a serious interest that LaPlante has pursued during his many years of traveling the world. “I’ve visited libraries in Paris, London, Prague, Singapore and Nairobi, and in tiny cities in Mexico and Canada and South Africa,” he said. “I consider public libraries the world’s most important institutions. What would we do without our libraries? I consider Andrew Carnegie one of our greatest visionaries and public benefactors.”

LaPlante has three grown children and four grandchildren. His son, Arthur, is a trial lawyer in Florida.

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–John Guy LaPlante ’51
daughter Monique is a lawyer in California, and son Mark is a professor at the University of Georgia. His pastimes have been many, but reading remains his first love, especially newspapers, which he hopes to have easy access to in Ukraine.

“The Peace Corps surprised me,” he said. “I speak and write French, thanks to l’Assomption, so I expected to go to West Africa, but I was assigned to Ukraine. ‘Volunteers have to be flexible,’ the Peace Corps says, so I’m being flexible. Now I’m studying the Cyrillic alphabet. It has 33 characters. Most of them are unrecognizable to us.”

LaPlante says he packed long underwear to face the second biggest challenge of living in Ukraine—the weather. Despite the cold, he is looking forward to the warmth of the Ukraine people and the country’s “splendid architecture and rich culture.”

“Right now they’re struggling to build a real democracy,” he said. “Very commendable. I think teaching English is the most important thing anyone can do in any Third World country.”

John Guy LaPlante can be reached in Ukraine at johnguylaplante@yahoo.com.

Excerpted from John Guy LaPlante’s diary:

I am in Chernihiv, a beautiful city of about 300,000 people in north central Ukraine, only an hour or so from Russia...Ukraine is the official language here, but I have been assigned to study Russian, very popular in some sections of the country.

The training is intensive and daunting. We were 86 who arrived together in Ukraine, including eight seniors (over 55). So far, four have quit and gone home because it has been so tough. I am the most senior...17 years older than the next oldest one. But everybody is very nice to me...although they are puzzled why I am putting myself through this. Sometimes I am also.

“Ukraine has the largest group of Peace Corps volunteers in the world, more than 350, I believe. (The) Peace Corps currently serves in more than 70 countries. We are here to teach, work in public health, and do community development. This is a big country, about the size of Texas, so we are spread very, very thin.

“The big surprise is that once we get a two-year assignment to a permanent site, there’s a 95-percent chance we’ll be working alone in that city or town. Sounds lonely and very isolated. That’s why (the) Peace Corps tries so hard to make sure we get trained in every way to survive and thrive in that setting...and to do our jobs.”