Kanstantsin's Story – Peace Corps South Africa

Interviewer: Okay. We're doing a recording for the first installment of AU Peace Corps story archive. I'm here with ... If you could please introduce yourself.

Kanstantsin: I'm Kanstantsin [Ivano 00:00:13].

Interviewer: And where did you serve?

Kanstantsin: I served in South Africa from 2014 to 2016.

Interviewer: Okay. And you're attending American University, what are you studying now?

Kanstantsin: Global governance, politics and security at SIS. So, [00:00:30] yeah.

Interviewer: Kanstantsin will be responding to the first question. The question is, often we assume that emotions and ideas are ubiquitous and much like our own until we meet someone that thinks very differently. Please share a Peace Corps experience where cultural difference challenged your notion of the world.

Kanstantsin: All right. I'll just give a little back story to this story because I don't think it will make much sense if I don't. I lived in this beautiful, beautiful area in the [00:01:00] bush, and there were trees, there were animals, and I was in South Africa. It was amazing for the most part, but one thing about the area that I lived in was it was all beach sand. You couldn't get away from it, all the roads, everything. One of the big problems was a lot of cars got stuck in the sand. It was a daily struggle just to walk through the sand, [00:01:30] and that's just how it was. The big thing that I want to talk right now in this story is about the way people hung out in my village. The sand part will come in later and you'll understand why it's important.

The biggest thing for me was the way I hang out with my friends in the US is we go out, we sit in a bar, and we all have our own beer, we drink, and we sort of jump in the conversation, banter, we talk with each other, maybe play some games if we don't feel like talking, but [00:02:00] that wasn't the case when I was in South Africa. I learned very quickly that you really, really have to share. If I invited friends over, my local friends there that I made that were great people, one thing that sort of stood out to me right away is we didn't have individual drinks, it was one bottle or one cup, and that just got passed around. Someone from the US, especially with a bit of a germaphobe [00:02:30] culture that people have here sometimes, that was very weird for me. And you don't abandon your friends throughout the night. I mean that goes for US too, but there that was way more pronounced, you don't leave until everybody leaves.

So this one night, I spent two years in South Africa, I'm about to go home, and I decided to rent a car just so it's easier for me to get all my stuff to the airport. I rent the car, and I drive through my area, and on my last [00:03:00] day all of my friends just want to send me off. They're like, "We want to hang out with

you one last time." I absolutely say yes, they're great people and I spent so much time of my life with them that I thought it was of course I will hang out with them.

We go out, and we celebrate. We have a beautiful meal, and then I drive them to town in my car, the one I rented, and it's all going [00:03:30] well. It was fabulous. Then we end up staying really, really late, which in retrospect was not a good idea at all. I start driving all of them back, and it's about 2:00 a.m. at this point. I'm very tired. I know I have to leave really early in the morning. I drop people off at their respective places, and right when I drop off the last guy, it's just me, I'm about to go home, I [00:04:00] start driving and then my wheels start spinning. I'm in the middle of the bush, there is nothing around me. It's just this sandy road and my car is stuck. I don't know if I can get help, it's dark outside, there are hippos around me. I know I'm not supposed to walk around in the dark, and I'm just stuck in this car. I get out, I start digging, I'm trying to get it out, I'm on my knees. [00:04:30] I'm just being like, "God, please. I don't want to be stuck here. I want to go home."

The most incredible thing happened was that I called some of my friends and not one, but that friend I called called another friend and another friend, and three guys showed up. And they brought shovels, and we literally dug the car out from this road, and we made it, and we made it back home. That was [00:05:00] one story that I had, that experience that I thought was very interesting and culturally different, at least the way I saw it. So, yeah.

Interviewer: Thank you, Kanstantsin. I don't know if you wanted to answer any of the other questions.

Kanstantsin: Sure.

Interviewer: We have one about a person in your host Peace Corps community, and how they changed your life.

Kanstantsin: I was working at a local school, I was a teacher, and I had the opportunity to work with the most amazing [00:05:30] guy. He was actually still a student at the time, he was just doing his training at my school, and he was doing distance learning. He was trying to get his degree in education. I thought his story was one of the most incredible ones I've heard because here he was in a village that did not have any electricity, at the edge of the world, and he was putting his time to go into work every day, because this guy did not miss any days, and he was trying to get his education. [00:06:00] He worked so hard on it, and beyond that, he was the most welcoming guy ever. He showed me around the community, he answered all of my dumb questions. I got to work with him and help him with his assignments in the University, and that was one experience that I really cherish from my time there.

Interviewer: What was the most difficult aspect of adjusting to life back in America?

Kanstantsin: For this one, I don't know if [00:06:30] that's really readjusting. I got to come back, and I got into grad school, and it was starting pretty much right after I got back. So a lot of people come from Peace Corps and they have a bit of a breezer where they get to chill with their family or do something for a couple of months or anything. I landed home and I had two weeks with my family and that was it, and with my friends, with everyone back home, and then I had to start grad school because I just couldn't [00:07:00] find a way around it. Saying goodbye to them again in such a short time felt such a defeat for me even though I knew I was doing the right thing, going to grad school was the right move. It's fine now, we talk and everything, but at the time it was a hard thing to sort of process – being like, I'm home, but not anymore. Yeah, so that's all I got.

Interviewer: Well, thank you for sharing, [00:07:30] Kanstantsin.

Maren's Story – Peace Corps Guinea

Constanine: All right. So we are doing our Peace Corps story project. Please go ahead and introduce yourself.

Maren: My name is Maren [Louhan 00:00:03] or Maren [Louhan 00:00:14].

Constanine: Okay. Where did you serve?

Maren: I served in Guinea, West Africa from 2012 up until the Ebola epidemic in 2014.

Constanine: Okay. What was your project?

Maren: I was public health.

Constanine: Okay. All right. I will just go ahead and ask you the first question they [00:00:30] have here. Often we assume the notions and ideas are ubiquitous and much like our own until we meet someone who thinks very differently. Please share a Peace Corps experience where cultural differences challenged your notion of the world.

Maren: Yeah. I think for a lot of Peace Corps volunteers, we go into our service and we want to be respectful. We want to learn about the culture. We want [00:01:00] to embrace everything that our new host family does, and sometimes that's really difficult and easy to see ways sort of like, "Oh, I use toilet paper. They use water method." Those are very sort of noticeable cultural differences. But I think sometimes we want to accept sort of what [00:01:30] the host culture does, and sometimes we kind of miss maybe that there are different perspectives on whatever happens in this culture so it's not a homogenous culture. And so I guess I wanted to kind of preface my story with that point.

In Guinea, girls get married off at a very young age. [00:02:00] Like me, I'm trying to respect that this is just a cultural difference these young girls, that's just how it's done. They get married off at 16 or at 17. I remember one time, one of my best friends in my town of [inaudible 00:02:19], [Fatime 00:02:22] was her name or is her name. She invited me to come to her sister's wedding. She was really excited. Everyone was [00:02:30] really excited. The entire town, it was a small town, was super excited about this wedding. There was gonna be a huge party. So you party sort of the weekend leading up to the actual sort of marriage or when she leaves with her groom. And so it's a Saturday night.

I had dressed up specifically for this event. Everyone was proud of me because I'm wearing culturally sensitive clothes. I'm wearing my [inaudible 00:03:00]. [00:03:00] My hair is braided. So I'm fitting this role of what they want for this wedding celebration. There's music. The family has spent all of this money on this event. There's music, there's dancing. They have lights. They even have dancers. So people are crowded around in the circle. The women are dancing and now the men are dancing and now they have special drum dancers. It's this [00:03:30] wonderful event and everyone is having fun and everyone's enjoying it. And then I think it got to one point later in the

night when the groom shows up, I guess, with his vehicle and my memory's a little bit fuzzy now, but I think he shows with a vehicle and it's Saturday night.

They've maybe have gotten married on Friday, but this is the first time that she, the wife, the bride, is now leaving [00:04:00] with the groom. And so she is dressed up. She looks beautiful. Her bright bride clothes. Her suitcase is full of clothes for her. He's ready to drive off with her, and this is her first time to leave with her groom. So the family and friends start saying goodbye to her and we're gonna keep dancing all night long, but she's going to leave [00:04:30] with her groom. Presumably this would be her first intimate night with him. It's [Fatime's 00:04:40] sister and she's about ... I don't know how old she is. She might be 14 or 15 or 16. Very young. She's crying. She's crying. Everyone is so happy to see her off, and she's crying.

It's not even just like, "I'm sad to say goodbye to people," or "I'm sad [00:05:00] to be leaving this event, but inside I'm happy about being married," or something like that. No, she's crying that she is leaving, that she is married, that she is now a bride. Perhaps maybe she doesn't know her husband that well. It could have been an arranged marriage. I actually don't know the age of the husband. I don't know anything about him. I turned to my friend and I'm confused, you know, "Why is she crying? Why is she not happy about [00:05:30] her wedding or about this event?" And my friend turns to me and she says, "Would you be?" Sort of the expectation never existed that she should be happy on her wedding night.

That's just not something that is expected or assumed. I was taken aback. This is not something that I had necessarily thought about. I had considered, obviously, that perhaps [00:06:00] not all of the young women that got married were happy in their marriages or with arranged marriages that their parents had made for them, but the realization that there was never an expectation that you would be happy to be getting married. That was new for me. It made me ... I have other friends who [00:06:30] had been married, who had been divorced. My friend, Fatime, also was married. Now, looking back on it, I think she was honestly the happiest when her husband was away, when he would leave to go spend time at his first wife's village and would leave her to kind of stay with her family and to take care of her own children.

It was just something that completely changed the way that I perceived marriage and love and [00:07:00] just how women in Guinea, perhaps perceived it completely different than me. And maybe what their expectations were of it. Maybe it was just something that was accepted. But my friend, Fatime, is definitely someone that changed my life in more than one ways. You know, I remember one occasion where she said, "I'm your friend and I would do anything for you." And she meant it. I had another friend that had visited, [00:07:30] and she just went out of her way to be hospitable to my friend. This was someone who would explain things to me when I didn't get it and was patient with me. She would get mad at me, of course, when I didn't do things the appropriate way, but she would explain it to me and she would ... I think she's the person that taught me most about the Guinean culture.

I think that's one of the hardest parts coming back to America, too, is just coming back with the knowledge that she's back [00:08:00] in Guinea and her reality is extremely

different from mine. Which isn't to say that hers is worse or mine is better or mine is worse and hers is better, but it is a very different reality, and I do miss my time with her, and I miss my time living in Guinea sometimes. It's kind of hard to readjust to American life sometimes when you've become so fond of what you learned [00:08:30] while you were abroad. That was my Peace Corps story.

Constanine: No. Thank you so much for sharing with us.

Maren: Thank you, Kanstantsin.

Jessica's Story – Peace Corps Ethiopia

Stephen: How are you doing, you all? I'm here with Jessica Himelfarb, and what are you going to talk about today, Jess?

Jessica: I think I'm going to tell you about a person in my community in Peace Corps and how they changed my life. My name's Jess, and I did Peace Corps from 2014 to 2016, in a really small town called, Limu Genet in Ethiopia. [00:00:30] Like most people in Peace Corps I got to my village and started my work as a teacher in high school and found myself the first few weeks awkwardly sitting alone on benches, trying to make conversation with people, thinking to myself, "Man, when will this feel like home? Will I ever make any friends?" Sure enough [00:01:00] in a culture that's very dominated by men, in a school where there were very few female teachers, I happened to, somehow, meet and make friends with the only other single woman who was also an English teacher at the school, who loved cooking and spoke English but wanted to improve her [00:01:30] English.

Yeah, one day she just invited me over for food, which is what you do, and basically from that day on for the next 2-1/2 years, I spent every lunch and dinner cooking with her. Her name is Itabizel, which means, "many sisters," because she was the fifth daughter. Basically cooking with her meant I was chopping things, and she was actually [00:02:00] cooking, which, in Ethiopia takes all day. I guess why she changed my life is because I've grown up moving around a lot and grown up sort of on my own a lot, traveling, and have a sense of independence and [00:02:30] like I can do ... I feel pretty confident that I can handle new places and new situations. I'm really introverted and shy and being social drains me, so being in Ethiopia where the culture is very sociable, and where being alone or being quiet or being home is sort of the worst thing anyone would, could imagine.

I [00:03:00] actually had to shift. I had to shift basically everything about who I thought I was and since I spent all of my time with Itabizel and she would never let me be home alone. I think I realized the longer I was there that I actually really do need other people and I really do need, [00:03:30] depend on those kinds of friendships and relationships. Where before, I thought that I could sort of do it alone. In that way, Itabizel sort of opened my eyes to who I think ... Who I think I really am. I think I'm better for it, [00:04:00] because I don't want to ... I want to keep traveling but I don't need to keep thinking that I can do it on my own, so, that's my story.

Jessica's Second Story – Peace Corps Ethiopia

Jessica: All right. Hey, my name is Jess and I served as an education volunteer in Ethiopia from 2014-2016. I am going to tell you about a difficult aspect of readjusting to life back in America, but for me, I grew up mostly in sub [inaudible 00:00:19] Africa so, it's more like adjusting to life in America. I served in Ethiopia and [00:00:30] Ethiopia is pretty big on coffee. Coffee is sort of the center of the world in Ethiopia, and all aspects of life sort of have something to do with a coffee ceremony. For two years, I spent countless, probably more hours than not, drinking coffee surrounded by people in my village, [00:01:00] sharing stories.

Basically every morning, the women get up. If they've already picked their coffee beans, they will prepare the jabana, which is the clay pot. They will roast the coffee beans and walk around so everyone can smell the smoke from it, then they'll pound them by hand in a mortar and pestle. Then they'll put them in the jabana and boil it [00:01:30] with hot water, and then there's a whole process of pouring the coffee and serving it. Then everyone then has to have the first cup, the second cup, and the third cup, which is the weakest.

Anyway, that's when everyone socializes. Then you do that after lunch and then again in the evening. Yeah, I feel like a lot of my life and a lot of conversations that I had happened around the coffee table. [00:02:00] Ironically, my difficult aspect of adjusting to life in the America also had to do with coffee. It had been over five years since I'd been in the states and I came directly after Peace Corp to Washington DC, where I had never lived, and a friend called me up to go grab coffee, which [00:02:30] is I guess, what people in DC do. So, I went to coffee and had not prior to that, thought about coffee. I was never really a coffee drinker, except for in Ethiopia, so I hadn't gotten coffee in the states yet.

I found myself standing in line, looking at the board with all kinds of coffee on [00:03:00] it. I thought, "I'm just gonna get coffee, I don't know what all these other things mean. I don't know why they're not in English, what does 'grande' mean? Why isn't it just 'big'?" I got up to the register, they asked me what I wanted, I said, "Coffee", they asked me if I wanted milk and what kind, and proceeded to list off several different kinds of milk. I felt myself getting flustered. I was already nervous about [00:03:30] the big board full of kinds of coffee, and then the milk question threw me for a loop, and I sort of panicked and yelled back, "Milk from a cow!", and so overwhelmed that there could be other types of milk. Then I ran out of the coffee shop.

I feel like, I guess the [00:04:00] challenge then was just, I felt so confident about my coffee abilities. I thought I'd known everything about coffee because my life had been so centered on that. It just makes you think that you can have the same thing like coffee in another country, and it has a totally different culture attached to it. Yeah, it's definitely an adjustment, and [00:04:30] that's my story.

Erin's Story – Peace Corps Senegal

Speaker 1: Tell us about one person in your host Peace Corp community and how they changed your life.

Erin: One individual who changed my life in my service was my Master Farmer Omar Tope. Peace Corp Senegal has a program called the master farm program, where individual farmers throughout the country who are interested in learning improved farming techniques and teaching those techniques to their neighbors are taught over a long period of time, several years, by the Peace Corp staff. Then they become these local [00:00:30] agriculture extension agents who can disperse this knowledge to their communities. They're such better resources than volunteers, because they're there long term, they really understand the ecology of the area, because they've grown up there and they're working there, and they're local, so their language skills are going to be much better than any Peace Corp volunteer's is ever going to be.

When I first came to my village, I was told that I would be paired with a Master Farmer, and it wasn't a wonderful situation, because at the time, he wasn't meeting [00:01:00] the program's benchmarks, he wasn't meeting the deadlines, he wasn't producing very much. My supervisors told me he was going to be under probation, and if he didn't perform well the next year, they were going to kick him out of the program. So it was a bit difficult for a new volunteer.

I thankfully had other volunteers working with me with my Master Farmer my first year. They had been there longer, so they were shepherding me into the program. When I first approached my work with Omar, I was thinking about it in a very [00:01:30] American international development mindset, even though I didn't realize it. I heard, "He's not meeting these benchmarks. He's going to get kicked out of the program," so immediately I thought, "Okay, how are we going to get him producing more, keep him in the program, and make him a better resource?"

I had this pivotal moment where I realized that I was approaching it entirely incorrectly. We were at a training where we had about 20, 30 community members at our Master Farmer's farm, and there was another Peace Corp volunteer [00:02:00] who was going to help with the training. As we were getting started, there was a bit of a cultural miscommunication, and the Peace Corp volunteer who had been there longer, who was a bit of a mentor to me, got angry at the Master Farmer and started yelling at him in public. I could just see how humiliated he was. He had 20, 30 respected farmers from the community over at his farm, and he was being disciplined by this 20-something American girl.

I realized okay, if [00:02:30] we have this snafu, he's not going to meet that benchmark, but him being humiliated in front of people and losing his self-confidence is a bigger detriment. Once the training was over and the dust had settled, I sat down the next day with Omar, and I said, "Omar, if we do a training like this in a month or two, how would you do it?" I saw him think, and he asked, "Well, how would you do it?" I said, "Well, I don't know. Tell me. How would you do it?" He [00:03:00] thought and thought.

You could see him taking ownership about how he wanted to teach. Then he said, "Well, why don't we do it this way." I thought it was a kind of a crazy harebrained idea, but I said, "All right."

The next training, we did it the way he suggested, and it worked wonderfully. I decided that's how I really should be approaching everything with him. When we were talking about what crops to plant the next year, areas to improve, things we wanted to teach, how we wanted to teach, I would ask Omar, "How do you want to do it?" It was exciting to see his self-confidence grow [00:03:30] and to see his ownership grow, to see his willingness to buy into the program, and his willingness to teach, and even desire to go out and teach without me if I wasn't available to communities surrounding our own.

I could brag about how he produced more and became the poster child for the Master Farm program for a couple of years, but that wasn't really what I learned. My experience with him was great in a very concrete way in that because he started doing so well, my supervisors [00:04:00] decided that I must be a good volunteer ... Which I think everyone is in their own ways ... and so they asked me to stay an extra almost a whole year to train the new generations of volunteers and to be an advocate for the Master Farm program. What more can someone ask for, for someone who to change their life and help further their career, but in a much more intangible way. Omar really reinforced the adage that when you go into a situation, I shouldn't be looking for what I can teach [00:04:30] and how to meet those benchmarks and bringing my mindset, but I should instead be coming in and looking for what I can learn.