

Cutter Uhlhorn Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Cutter Uhlhorn
Interviewer: Julius Sztuk
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Biographical Note

Cutter Uhlhorn served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from January 2017 to March 2019 as an English teacher.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Cutter Uhlhorn

June 20, 2019
Austin, Texas

By Julius Sztuk

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

SZTUK: [00:00:07] Today is June 20th, 2019. This is Jay Sztuk, and I'm interviewing Cutter Uhlhorn, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from January 2017 to March 2019, and he worked in the education program. Cutter, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed today. Let's start by having you tell us something about your background, what you were doing before you joined Peace Corps, or how you decided to join and why you decided to join.

UHLHORN: [00:00:44] Yeah, for sure. So my name is Cutter Uhlhorn. I am originally from a small farming community in South Texas called Harlingen that's probably about five hours south of where we are now. Used to be five hours south, but with Austin traffic it's now like six or seven. It's in the Rio Grande Valley. It's about 20 minutes north of the border with Mexico. It's close to Brownsville, McAllen. Grew up there for the first 18 years of my life, went away to school at Tulane University in New Orleans. Really liked that. But I originally wanted to go to law school. But at the point of

leaving my time there, just had this recognition that it seemed like the majority of my people in my class were also planning on going to law school, and that there were a lot of people graduating law school were having problems finding jobs. You know, it had seemed like the safe and easy bet. But now it didn't seem so safe or easier, or really that cheap.

UHLHORN: [00:01:44] And so I kind of, you know, spent the next. I moved back home, spent the next kind of year just really confused as to what I really wanted to do with my future. I was kind of upended and very unsure of like how to proceed, what I really wanted out of life. At the time was undergoing a pretty severe spiritual crisis as well, as I was transitioning out of like a strange form of Gnostic Christianity into something more Orthodox. And I suppose like the real impetus to kind of join Peace Corps came from reading a book by a man named Richard Rohr called Wild Man Spirituality, as cringey as I suppose that sounds. I had kind of come, I suppose, on my own to this recognition, and then this was further kind of supported by this book.

UHLHORN: [00:02:38] That there was this idea that in modern Western civilization, at least for men, there is not this clear and easy definition dividing line between boyhood and manhood. Boys just kind of grow up and they easily transition, you know, into college and then into work life. But there's not that definitive, liminal experience that kind of takes one from being a boy into being a man. And so just what I had seen with some older men in my life is that, you know, even though they inhabited the bodies of, you know, 35, 40 year old, 50 year old men, you know, there was still like this hankering of youth that somehow had not been tamed. And it was just kind of like flaring up with, you know, spying a sports car, just kind of like spur of the moment. And just like this, this wanderlust that I suppose, had never been sated.

UHLHORN: [00:03:24] And so kind of like seeing that that's where I was headed. You know, it's just like, I have no idea, like kind of like how to how to go about doing this. The military kind of seem closed off to me. And so, you know, I had heard about the Peace Corps and I was, you know, I was kind of curious about it. I was like, there's no way I would get in, but you know, it seemed like something to do. I was kind of, you know, at least really had

no plans on like what I was doing in the time being. And so I just kind of went off and applied.

UHLHORN: [00:03:52] And, you know, that set off kind of a number of months of getting accepted to Panama. That can be taken away from me. Moving up to Austin, living in Austin for a while. Having another crisis of faith, eventually like coming to Christ in a more reformed church, more Orthodox. And then, you know, eventually forming some wonderful relationships with people in Austin and all the time, you know, getting accepted to Columbia after reapplying. And, you know, having to decide if this was something that I still wanted to do or if I wanted to stay behind in Austin and make my life there, you know, in this faith community that had been so welcoming, had taught me so much. You know, in that time, you know, I really didn't know how to pray all too well. And so I was just kind of like, well, it seems like something I want to do. And you know, you know, everything seems to be happening just fine. And so I decided to get on that plane to go to Colombia in January of 2017, as insane as that sounds so.

SZTUK: [00:04:50] So originally you had an invitation to go to Panama?

UHLHORN: [00:04:53] I did. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:04:55] That didn't work out?

UHLHORN: [00:04:55] No, it was medical stuff. You know, there are some things on my record were. Of course, now the way that it works, as opposed to, I guess, like how it used to work in the past, is you didn't use to have to get medically cleared for. You'd have to get medically cleared first and then apply. It was the reverse, so you would get accepted and then you would have to get medically cleared. And so, you know, I had originally really, I was really interested in post-Soviet states. I'd really wanted to go to Kosovo or Armenia. Those sounded fascinating to me, but as soon as they saw Spanish, there was like pigeonholed me for Latin America.

SZTUK: [00:05:24] Because you spoke Spanish?

UHLHORN: [00:05:26] Because I had spent some time, you know, just like both like within New Orleans and just on the border, like working with refugees who would come over from, you know, Central America. And then also too, there were a lot of like when people cross over from East Africa, usually what they'll do is they'll fly in from like Nairobi into Brazil and then go overland up, like through Colombia, through Panama, through Costa Rica. And they just make that trail up and eventually wind up at the border with the United States, like 20 minutes away from where I live. And so by the time they get there, too, they are all pretty much fluent in Spanish. So I was learning Spanish from people from Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia. Zany stuff.

SZTUK: [00:06:03] Wow, so you had been working with refugees?

UHLHORN: [00:06:06] Yeah. That was back in 2014. I mean, so you know, there were things that were picking up, obviously in Somalia. There was, you know, always kind of like unrest in that area of like northern Ethiopia that kind of like touches Eritrea. And then there are people always historically, you know, flooding out of Eritrea. You know, people had kind of seen that floating over the sea trying to get to Italy really wasn't working out too well. And just because of the way that things were happening in Italy, like you kind of you go there and you get asylum, but there's not a clear and easy path to citizenship. And so it was just kind of this thing where it's like, well, you know, we might die crossing this river. Not that, you know, it's any less extreme crossing up to South America, but it's just they're just kind of left in limbo there to a certain extent. And it's just like at least in the United States. I mean, it's not Canada by any extent, but you know, there is like if you pass through and you get asylum, there is an easier path to citizenship that can allow you to have like a normal life. And that's what people are eventually looking for, the ability to be able to provide for their family and eventually have them come over here. And that's kind of closed off to them in the European Union. So.

SZTUK: [00:07:03] But in spite of this background, with Spanish and the experience with the refugees from Africa, you were somehow drawn to Eastern Europe.

UHLHORN: [00:07:14] I mean, I just had, you know, I was like really into looking at this website called the Calvert Journal, which is kind of like a photo journal of people going around and like looking at these ruins of Eastern Europe. And I was really drawn to that, you know, and of course, you know, I was like, interested just because, you know, being from the United States, this idea of like Soviet power and communism. Of course, like, you know, I'm coming out of school, so I have no idea exactly like what that means. You know, I was like all rah rah rah rah to like very much to the left kind of coming out of a liberal institution like that. So I mean, I was kind of curious. You guys kind of like pick through the bones and kind of like, be a part of that like living excavation of like what that meant, if that just meant touring. But, you know, ultimately, I think it was probably for the best that I went to Latin America. Or at least that's like what God had in mind.

SZTUK: [00:07:57] So what time of year was that? What month was it that you got accepted and started your training?

UHLHORN: [00:08:05] Probably. So for the first time around or the second time around? The second time around for Colombia?

SZTUK: [00:08:10] Right.

UHLHORN: [00:08:11] So I was living in Austin and working at a radio station, and it was probably around, maybe about seven days before my birthday. So it's probably like July 12th or something like that. And so, you know, I had done like an interview a couple of months back. I just been waiting for an entire year just to apply and apply and apply. And so it just it'd been really, you know, gnawing at me because I just, you know, I still felt very driven to do this. And so I heard back and it was this really great thing. I allowed myself like 10 minutes to be happy and excited. But just with everything that had happened with Panama, I was also very well aware, like, oh, this could be something that is taken away from me. And so, you know, then began the long and arduous process of Peace Corps medical clearance. And so the entire time, the only people who really know were my family, obviously, you know. They had originally not been

too excited about me going away because it just seems so out of character for me.

UHLHORN: [00:09:11] You know, I was kind of like going through the middle of a spiritual crisis, so I was changing. And then suddenly, you know, I had always just kind of been kind of a homebody. And then suddenly he's like wanting to go, not to the other side of the world, but, you know, live in a different culture and it was very different. You know, they were kind of like, well, we don't really know about that. But at that point, I had been on it for like a year, you know, been on it for a while. And so, you know, they had seen that and they had kind of at least accepted it at that point. And so my girlfriend at the time, she also knew that as well, and she had been, you know, very accepting of that as well. But no one else at my work knew because I was afraid to tell anyone because, you know, it's kind of one of those things. You get good news. It's like.

SZTUK: [00:09:50] In case it fell through.

UHLHORN: [00:09:52] Yeah. you know, I mean, obviously, I don't want to use. Yeah. Like, you know, you find out you're pregnant, right? But you don't tell everyone right away because you got to wait because there could be a miscarriage or something like that. Not to use such a, you know, gruesome example. But it was kind of this thing that was it was still in gestation. There was nothing sure of it at that point. So I just kind of sat on it and, you know, I was working at a radio station so I would go off and do different events. I was, you know, always kind of going around everywhere and, you know, at the height of the Austin summer. So it was really hot outside. And, you know, I just be like, oh, I've got to go run this errand and then, you know, I would go to like a clinic and get blood drawn or, you know, and just no one knew. No one knew that that was kind of what was happening while I was out doing events for the radio station.

SZTUK: [00:10:30] Now had your family ever done any traveling or was it kind of going off somewhere, was it kind of a foreign concept to your parents and your friends?

UHLHORN: [00:10:41] Well, not necessarily. I mean, you know, just because of the proximity of the Texas border with Mexico, you know. My dad had grown up living in Mexico kind of, like, you know, going to living in San Miguel for the summer. And so, you know, he was, you know, raised on the border. So he was fluent in Spanish and, you know, before things got really bad in the early 2000s with, you know, with the narco violence, you know, we would go over on the weekend to eat there. And so it wasn't too crazy. And you know, by that point in time, my sister had been doing some kind of like backpacking trips. She was still in high school, not in college. You know, had gone to Mongolia and Laos and a whole bunch of places. So at least with her, you know, she had seen kind of like, OK, we've got one traveler in the family. And then, you know, there was me trying to go off and live somewhere else for two years. And so at that point, they had kind of, I think, like felt like, maybe this is feasible.

SZTUK: [00:11:30] Do you think that experience of growing up so close to Mexico kind of gave you a predisposition to blending into or adapting to other cultures?

UHLHORN: [00:11:43] I think to a certain extent, yes. You know, I just kind of, I consider it normal. But you know when, like, people always kind of expect things to happen on time or things to happen like just how they're supposed to happen. And just kind of like living on the border, you know, there's like a more fluid concept of time. You know, like a meeting is supposed to start at like three o'clock. No one shows up till 3:45 and you're just kind of like, oh, that's normal. Or, you know, you're just kind of casually like late to everything. Things are really slow. There's also corruption on the border as well. So like, you know, when really heinous things happen, it's just kind of like, oh well, you know. It's just kind of like, you know, part and parcel like, you know, we have like this representative government. And you know, it's sometimes you think that's really representing people is not the vote, but money.

SZTUK: [00:12:26] So that might have helped you adapt to the changes in moving to Colombia?

UHLHORN: [00:12:31] You know, you would have thought so, but it was just kind of. I had this suspicion before going, you know, just kind of like, you know, I knew the history of Mexico just kind of like having grown up next to Mexico. You know, you hear about it, you know, you celebrate the Fourth of July, but in school, you know, it's also *dieciséis de septiembre*. So it's like the Mexican Independence Day as well. And so, you know, the history of Mexico, and you've also seen it too in the north. But it's also too, you know, it's just like, oh, there might be something that's kind of different about Colombia, you know. It seems like they kind of speak Spanish, but it also might be really different, too. And that's kind of the way it was. So, yeah, very different from northern Mexico, Colombia.

SZTUK: [00:13:11] So did you have any orientation in the U.S. before you went or did you just ship out?

UHLHORN: [00:13:15] And we had a phone call where, I don't even know what it was. I was driving to go visit my grandmother. Actually, I was. Before I decided to leave, you know, my grandfather was kind of, he wasn't doing so well either. So I was kind of doing a, what do you call it, an oral history with him as well.

SZTUK: [00:13:34] Oh were you?

UHLHORN: [00:13:34] Yeah. So just kind of asking him about his life, and I remember that, you know, I was on there driving, the conference call came through, and I pulled over into like a Chili's parking lot right off of I-35 here in Austin and had a conversation with, you know, it was like the Peace Corps medical officer in the country, Dr. Jose, at the time, Geraldine Sheehan, who was the country director. And then all these people, I just knew their voices but, you know, would come to very shortly know them very well as the people who I would spend two years of my life with. Just kind of like asking questions like, is it OK if we bring guitars? Like, yes, Colombians, they like guitars, they like their music. Like, can we exercise in Colombia? Yes, of course. You know, it's safe to run outside. And so we just had no idea. You would have thought that we were like trying to go to Mars or something like that. Just the kind of questions we were asking.

UHLHORN: [00:14:24] But that was kind of the extent of our orientation. They told us, don't watch Narcos, you know, but you know, you show up in country and of course, everyone's like, yeah, I'm on season two of Narcos. And you know, I'd intentionally. They had, you know, kind of recommended us some books to read, you know, but it was kind of one of these things where I was just like, I just don't really want to enter this country with any kind of expectations. The northern coast, I had like, you know, I'd never heard of the northern part of Colombia before, you know, and so I was just like, Barranquilla. I was like, I know Shakira is from there. And that's kind of what I went in knowing because I figured, well, you know, I've got two years. I guess I'll know it well soon enough.

SZTUK: [00:15:04] OK, so you got on a plane and flew down there, do you remember?

UHLHORN: [00:15:09] Oh yeah, we did. We had like 24 hours in Miami, and so we got to meet everybody in Miami beforehand. So that was kind of zany. You know, both of the people who, you know, were introducing us, you know, they'd all served in Latin America, but it was like the Dominican Republic and Peru, which, you know, although they're located close to Colombia, it's like very different. I remember we're in there, we're in the room and they're just like, oh my gosh, guys, Colombia, it has such great food and we're like, yeah. They're like, you guys are going to have arepas and we're like, what are arepas? And they're like, the best thing in the entire world. And so they got us all hyped up on this Colombian food. And then, you know, of course, we go there and we're just, you know, by the second, we were just like, I can't believe that this is the entire cuisine. It's just like really bad cornbread, you know? Of course, you know, it's. We learn a year later, you know, we learned to, you know, love our yucca, you know, love our fruit juices and stuff like that, just with a *monton de azucar* inside of it. But you know, at the time, we were just like, man, they really bamboozled us there in Miami, making us want that Columbian food, but it was good.

SZTUK: [00:16:16] Do you remember when you landed in the country and what your impression was then, or how you felt?

UHLHORN: [00:16:25] I just had never felt sun that hot before. You know, when you land in Barranquilla, it's a huge city. It's two million people, right, and the thing is that, you know, you get your. I was like kind of afraid to get on this airplane because I was committing to something for two years. It was something and I, you know, was determined to stick with it so I was nervous. And so we wake up really early in the morning. You know, we get to the airport in Miami, you know, we wait around in the airport for a while. And then we get on this plane and then three hours later, like, we're in Colombia. You know, it just takes no time at all to get there. It's not very far away from the United States or at least from Miami. And it's just, you know, the Barranquilla airport is like really small. You know, they're not. You have to like get out on the runway. I'd never done that before, you know, because I'm, you know, millennial, you know, there was always like a terminal. And so I just remember getting out of the plane and getting on to the tarmac and being like, wow, it is insane. I have never felt a sun this strong before.

SZTUK: [00:17:25] And you don't come from a cold climate.

UHLHORN: [00:17:27] No, no. I mean, like, I thought that like the Rio Grande Valley was hot, kind of like in southern Texas. But it's just, I've never. You hear sometimes people say, like, this is an oppressive heat, you know. But you know, it's just like, wow, the sun seems like it's a little bit too close to the Earth right now. And so I do remember that. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:17:50] So you arrived there in Barranquilla. Is that where you did your training?

UHLHORN: [00:17:54] So we did our training. We did our training in like a, or orientation, in Barranquilla. And you know, of course, the funny thing about this is that, you know, they put us up in the nicest part of the city. Like, what we would later come to understand is like, you know, in Colombia, they call it poopy, which is like, you know, really hoity toity. You know, it's just a beautiful, gorgeous area. You know, we would later walk around this area many times over the course of our service and just come to love it because this is like, you know, where all the nice grocery

stores were, if you like, wanted to try to get vegetarian food, wanted to try to have a nice meal. But they told us, like, you cannot leave the hotel because it is very dangerous, like you cannot walk within one block of the hotel. And so they scared us straight. And so we're just like all here at this hotel, just kind of like looking out over the balcony and just thinking like, there are all these people who are like trying to get us. They all know we're here as gringos.

UHLHORN: [00:18:45] So we stayed there for about four days and then they put us, they loaded us up on busses and we went down to some training towns that were about an hour south of the city. And so we were in Sabanagrande, Santo Tomás, Palmar de Varela and Polonuevo. And so, you know, they kind of split us up by language group. And so the people who are kind of like advanced low went to Sabanagrande. The people who were super advanced went to Palmar de Varela. So they were like basically superior fluent Spanish speakers, and my friend Matt, who was a novice, he was kind of thrown in there. You know, the one novice with all these advanced speakers. Kind of like medium high, or kind of like intermediate mid, they were in Polonuevo. And then the intermediate and beginners, we were thrown in Santo Tomás. And that's where we spent the next three months or so.

SZTUK: [00:19:41] And how many were in your group?

UHLHORN: [00:19:44] Originally, I think there were 28 or 29. There are two people. So originally I think there was like 31, but a couple of people didn't even show up to staging in the United States. And so there were 29, 28, 29 of us originally and then we were 19 at the end.

SZTUK: [00:19:59] So tell me about this town where you did your training. What was it like and what did your training consist of? What was a typical training day?

UHLHORN: [00:20:12] Man, training. Well, Santo Tomás. At first, you know, you come to these towns and they're in Atlantico. You have no idea this is the only part of Colombia, rural Colombia that you've really ever seen before. And so we're just like, man, you know, there's just like nothing

here. You know, like the bars are really dingy. You know, there's like these grocery stores, but they're really small, you know. Little do we know that we're being absolutely spoiled, right? You know, in a year like we'll look on Santo Tomás like the big city. All these places, you know, like, oh my gosh, they've got an *olimpica*, you know, like, they've got bars. You know, my town doesn't have anything. It's only got one paved street. And so we were really being spoiled, but we didn't know it.

UHLHORN: [00:20:51] And so a typical training day is Monday, Wednesday, Fridays we would have language classes. Those were always, it was just a really interesting time just because, you know, we had come in in January and it's the height of Carnival. And what that basically means is that like, you know, at least on the coast, like Colombian society is just at a standstill. Like, you know, it'll kind of go, you know, school will happen for a little while, you know, we're like trying to go into the schools and teach, but you know, one day you just show up and it's just like, oh, you know, we're having a beauty pageant or, oh, we're having a folkloric dance.

UHLHORN: [00:21:26] And you know, until like, of course, like you're having all this fun, right? You know, you're skipping language classes and you're going to see parades and stuff like that. But you know, it's really kind of cut up. You know, sometimes, you know, like the town, the towns just shut down, and it's just like people are walking around with like *aguardiente*, which is like anise liquor, it tastes like licorice, you know. Just given, you know, swigs of whiskey to people and they're trying to protect us. So they're throwing us in the Peace Corps office, this house in like this kind of gated subdivision in this area in Santo Tomás, having us watch movies and stuff, trying to protect us from the debauchery that's happening around us. But Tuesdays and Thursdays we would go and have technical training. And so that's when we would all kind of come together as a group. Because originally we were all just kind of split up in our respective language groups. But Tuesdays and Thursdays we would come together and learn, kind of attempt to learn, something about the educational system in Colombia.

SZTUK: [00:22:26] That was so the technical training had to do with education.

UHLHORN: [00:22:32] Right. Yeah, it was interesting for sure. It was basically three months. But basically, you know, the gist of it was, you're not going to know until you actually get there. Just because all of the different departments are so incredibly different, you know, the issues that each town is facing. You know, the opportunities in each town are just so vastly different that it was kind of just like a, you know, basically just kind of like preparing us just to kind of like, hey, listen, like you just got to wait and see.

SZTUK: [00:22:58] Did everyone in your group make it through training and eventually swear in?

UHLHORN: [00:23:04] Not everyone. You know, at the time there was, you know, Peace Corps kind of made this shift, you know, recently. Obviously, you know, there was this break in Peace Corps history in Colombia, where in like the early eighties, I believe, it was kind of like the start of the violence in, um, in Colombia in terms of like drugs and everything that was happening. In Antioquia, there was a volunteer that was kidnapped so Peace Corps left the country for a while. And it was because of people like Pat Wand, you know, working with Friends of Colombia that, you know, the Peace Corps eventually went back into Colombia only on the coast and in these major cities. Um, so Barranquilla and Cartagena in Bolivar and in Santa Marta in Magdalena.

UHLHORN: [00:23:53] What had happened just maybe, you know, three or four years before was the cities were really expensive. They were also over overrun with crime. And so what they decided to do to save the program, because Colombia was on the chopping block, was they just got all these volunteers who had been living in cities and they just said, you're going to rural pueblos. And so you went from living in a city of, you know, two to three million people to live in the pueblo of like 5,000 people, right? And so this was a program that was in the midst of pretty serious transitions, obviously, because in the cities, there are a lot of opportunities of teaching, which has a lot of interest. You know, they were still trying to figure out exactly what this would look like, kind of in a more rural or peri urban environment.

UHLHORN: [00:24:35] And you know, there was not necessarily, you know, they weren't necessarily sure like what kind of qualities they were looking for with volunteers. And so, you know, there were some volunteers who were, you know, they were kind of like looking for reasons to cut us like, as you know, because they wanted to make sure because you know, the thing is with a volunteer, a volunteer is an asset. A volunteer once is a liability, right?

SZTUK: [00:24:55] Sure.

UHLHORN: [00:24:56] Because you've got like this kid who's fresh out of college and, you know, maybe might not know all the ways of the world and could be out drinking. So it's a certainly a liability, but it's also an asset as well. You're investing, you know, you've invested at least a plane ticket and then you have invested significant amounts of hours and time in them. And so if you're going to do all of that during training and then place them in a pueblo, right, you don't want them leaving three months in, right, because you've also invested time with this community. And if you have a volunteer that's leaving that community too soon, that's going to like kind of mar the relationship between Peace Corps and that site. And so you want to make sure that people who are there dedicated, right?

UHLHORN: [00:25:30] And so you know, they kind of establish this culture where it's just like nothing's set in stone. You know, the first day of training, they're just like, this is kind of like a relationship. You're dating Peace Corps and Peace Corps can decide to kind of send you home. And I was like, this seems like a very strange kind of. I've never really been in a relationship like this before. But I think that ultimately, you know, what they were doing was they were trying to prepare us for the reality of service that was cut. It was very different from our training towns. And they also because, you know, it was so new to them, they also didn't know what we were experiencing either. And so, you know, there were some people who kind of like they thought like weren't going to be able to make it. You know, there was a guy who was sent home, you know, because they didn't think he was going to be able to handle the heat. You know, he was kind of like a little bit heavier set and they were kind of worried

about him, like walking long distances. I believe in that heat, you know, because it can get very hot. It's hot all the time.

UHLHORN: [00:26:26] There were a couple of people, and these were people who had had like foreign experience before, had gone and like lived in the southern cone. You know, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, down there in South America. And you know, they kind of went and, you know, they lived, you know, they went on their training visits, you know? And you know, pretty quickly, they were just like, you know, this isn't for me. You know, we're not going to put Peace Corps through this. You know, I can go, I can go do grad school somewhere else, you know. Or there was one girl who had, like, she already spoke Spanish so well and she had like this Argentinian boyfriend who had like come up, flown up, from Argentina to visit her in this small site. Like, it's just like this rinky-dink site in, you know, just south of Barranquilla. And we're just like, wow, you're so mature, you're so mature. And she left pretty quickly. It was like, oh my gosh, she's going to get married. It was just like, this great like Latin American love story. And this all happens like, you know, before training, we're just like, wow, she's so grown up, you know? So, yeah, so we, I think we probably lost three people or so before.

SZTUK: [00:27:26] You said before that you didn't want to read a lot and have preconceptions about the country, but you must have had some ideas when you were in country for a little while during your training. Were there any great revelations or things that surprised you?

UHLHORN: [00:27:49] Well, I mean, one of the things that was kind of surprising. It was just, you know, I had lived in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, right? And you know, the city shuts down, right? That is a citywide festivity. And, you know, like for a couple of weeks, you know, people like to go out and enjoy themselves. But the thing was that kind of like became apparent to me was that, you know, people on the coast really like to enjoy themselves, you know, and it was kind of just like it seemed like it was just Carnival, you know, because they were kind of letting loose. But I was like, oh, these people just like to enjoy themselves all the time, like to dance, like to drink. You know, Sunday is a big night, you know, to go out drinking. And I was like, you know, there's work on Monday, but it's

just like, you know, you'll get to work eventually. There's kind of just like the sense, you know, like what's going to be is what's going to be.

UHLHORN: [00:28:37] And so, you know, there was always just like, hey, like, let's make the gringo dance, let's make the gringo dance. And so, you know, I knew that, you know, we were kind of these novelties. Not a lot of gringos had kind of been in that area, and they were kind of curious to see, like, you know, what we would be like. You know, they thought it was funny that we didn't speak Spanish very well, but also thought it was like, very strange and weird that we spoke English. They would ask us like, you speak this language, right? And there's an entire nation that speaks this language? And I was like, yeah, of course.

UHLHORN: [00:29:04] Like, you know, I knew that everyone in Colombia had like spoken Spanish, and I think everyone had kind of come there with that understanding. But so much of their media that they get piped in like is dubbed. So when they watch an American film, it's just like everyone speaks in Spanish, you know, and everyone has like a similar accent, too. So, you know, like, it doesn't matter if it's like, you know, someone who's like African American or Hispanic or, you know, Caucasian, like everyone speaks the same. And so it would kind of be funny sometimes to Colombians who would speak English, you know, would hear someone who was like, you know, African American speaking, they'd be like, I have no idea what you're saying because they never experience the accent before.

UHLHORN: [00:29:43] So there was that there was like this sense of, you know, kind of like, whatever happens, happens. Show up late, busses sometimes don't show up on time. You kind of got used to things just kind of not necessarily breaking down, but things just kind of like not going to plan. Power going out. You know, there's really kind of nothing to do during the day. So you would, you know, people would just kind of like, sit outside and talk, you know, which, you know, our language classes were kind of were kind of strange. You know, I think that like our language teachers were kind of new and trying to figure out like how exactly to teach us. But you know, fortunately for a lot of us, like our host families, you know, were really kind of excited by the opportunity. You can go

outside and just spend hours just talking with them, you know, and that's just Atlantico culture.

SZTUK: [00:30:28] So did you stay with a host family throughout training? Or did you just do a home state during training?

UHLHORN: [00:30:36] Throughout training, throughout service, just the security situation in Colombia was such that in order for them to keep volunteers and to keep receiving volunteers, we needed to stay in home stays throughout the entirety of our service. And so I was very fortunate the host family that I had was just so incredibly like loving and open.

SZTUK: [00:30:58] The host family during training or?

UHLHORN: [00:30:59] During training, during training. They were incredible. And, you know, I was also very fortunate too. I lived on the same street as my really good friend Karen. You know, she had an awesome host family as well. And then also Kelly, my good friend Kelly, who's still in Colombia right now, serving as a Peace Corps volunteer leader. Her family was over there, too, so we would just spend a lot of time just kind of like going to each other's houses, you know, talking with our families, going to a park that wasn't too far away. Playing with the kids, you know, teaching them English. And so it was, you know, just because of like our location on Sixth Street, which is weird to think because there's a Sixth Street in Austin but it's just all bars, on Sixth Street in Santo Tomás, like, you know, we just kind of like fell into like this pattern of life. And it was just three months of training. It really wasn't that long at all, but it just kind of it felt like forever.

SZTUK: [00:31:47] Well, when you live in somebody's home, you can get pretty close in three months.

UHLHORN: [00:31:52] Absolutely. Absolutely. And so, you know, we, you know, felt really close, you know, to all of our host families, to each other's host families. You know, we'd also kind of like started to grow really close to each other too, you know, just as Peace Corps volunteers. And it was, you know, like as the end of training kind of begin to approach. We're

just like, oh man, like, how are we going to be able to do this without each other because we all kind of got sent to different areas. But, you know, it was a, training was a really great time. It was so short. But it also felt like so much happened in that time as well.

SZTUK: [00:32:27] So then you completed training and where did they send you?

UHLHORN: [00:32:31] Yeah, so we got sent all over. I wound up being sent to a department called La Guajira, which was up in the north to a site called Tomarrazon, which is about an hour south of the city of Riohacha. No one had ever been in that site before, it was a completely new site. No one could tell me anything about it just because, you know, I never had a chance to meet the person from the office who had gone in there and visited. I just knew it was really small. Didn't really show up on Google Maps when I saw it. Karen wound up going to Guachaca, which was maybe about an hour north of Santa Marta. Kelly wound up staying in Polonuevo so she wasn't too far away, and she would come to love that. And I was really fortunate and felt really happy that my friend Matt Paws, who had, you know, I'd become really close to during training, he got sent to Dibulla right on the coast of, you know, La Guajira maybe about three hours or so away from me. It looked really close to the map and we were told you guys are just 15 minutes away. Three hours away. I mean, it's just, you know, the map is different than the territory, and no one knew anything about this department that they were sending us to.

SZTUK: [00:33:45] So you were all dispersed.

UHLHORN: [00:33:47] All dispersed, and we formed a far-out crew. We were just. Because the way that kind of Peace Corps Colombia had worked at that time was, you know, after the massive exodus from the cities, it was just so simple, you know, Peace Corps was based out about Barranquilla in Atlantico. So a lot of the sites that volunteers were going and refilling from my program, they were all in Atlantico. And Atlantico is just it's a very, very small department. And so a lot of most people kind of stayed in Atlantico. And then there was also kind of this peripheral area that was like right outside of Cartagena, you know, which is not too far away from Atlantico. And so everyone kind of stayed in that area and then it was

just kind of Karen in Guachaca was really far away. And then it was like Matt and I. And then Mixi, one of our friends who was in Riohacha, the capital city of La Guajira, we were just really far away and we just like didn't see anybody. People would, you know, we had a WhatsApp group. So people were like, oh my gosh, like, we're getting together in Santo Tomás and we're like, we're, you know, eight-, nine-hour bus ride away from Barranquilla, you know, so we kind of formed our own group and kind of made our own fun out there.

SZTUK: [00:34:58] So what was the town like, where you ended up working?

UHLHORN: [00:35:04] Yeah, it was small. Very small. I mean, I remember, you know, I had a really great counterpart, Adolinda, who I would be working with for that time. And you know, she was, you know, really nice. She came down and met me in my training town, drove with me all the way by bus to Tomarrazon. And I just remember, you know, everyone else is getting off the bus. You know, Karen's getting off on in Guachaca, Matt's getting off in Dibulla. I just remember Matt getting off the bus, you know, in Casa Aluminio, just this, you know, this town with like one sheet metal building. You know, he looks terrified. You know, with his counterpart, Ruth, he's just like, I'm about to live here. And of course, you know, we'll later find out that he's living in paradise. He's like, on the beach. You know, it's like, you know, it's beautiful, beautiful, you know, the river meets the sea. And so, you know, it would turn out to be really nice, but you know, just ride with Adolinda. And, you know, we're on this road, the Troncal, it's taking you right by the Sierra Nevadas, this coastal range. And it's just jungle, jungle, jungle, beautiful stuff. These peaks that are rising up into these clouds, you can't even see the tops.

UHLHORN: [00:36:10] But we ride even further than that. Like, we get out into the desert and we're just still on the bus and we're still on the bus and we're still on the bus and we have to get out and then we have to go all the way to the Mercado Nuevo, which is on the south side of the city. And it's just like something out of Mad Max Thunderdome. It's just, you know, like complete disorder, chaos, cars like they're breaking down, you know, but they're still run. They're just goats that are being carted around like about to be slaughtered, animals being slaughtered everywhere,

people selling yucca in the streets, contraband gasoline from Venezuela. You know, people, you know, siphoning gasoline out and just, you know, putting it into cars, you know, with their mouths. It's just insane. And so we get in a cab and we head down there and there's a rainstorm that's happening and it's just like, we just keep heading down deep into, you know, into Guajira. And it's just, you know, it's nighttime. You know, there's a rainstorm that's happened. So all the power's out, you can't see anything and there's just the headlights.

UHLHORN: [00:37:10] We finally get to this town. I just can't see anything at all. Get to this house. You know, it's hot outside, but it's still raining. I have no idea what it's like until the morning. And it's just, you know, it's a beautiful little town at the foot of the mountains. Fifteen hundred people, one paved road, one and a half-paved roads. Everything else is just kind of mud, some kind of a central park, you know, with some exercise equipment. You know, Colombia. I would like to say Colombia is in the midst of a lot of corruption on the coast. Those parks in Colombia are really nice. They do a really good job with those parks. And one school that served the agricultural communities all, you know, all the way around it, barbeques galore, and some of the kids up in the mountains would come down there to go to school as well. I mean, about a thousand kids in the school in total.

SZTUK: [00:37:59] All grades from?

UHLHORN: [00:38:00] All. Yeah, there was all grades, all grades. So there was a *primaria* there. There were individual like primary schools like in each of those towns. But you know, the middle school and the secondary school, all in Tomarrazon. And my counterpart Adelina taught every single one of those middle school and high school kids. No breaks, five days a week, you know, 7:00 to 12:00.

SZTUK: [00:38:22] Wow. So what subjects did you teach?

UHLHORN: [00:38:27] Just English.

SZTUK: [00:38:29] Only English.

UHLHORN: [00:38:29] Only English, yeah, that was the thing to do. School is only five hours a day, at least, and I'm not sure how it is in the interior. Obviously, we're going to find out as Peace Corps kind of moves further into the interior, but just with the way it is on the coast, you know, maybe this is just because we just assumed it was because it was so hot, but it just seemed like it had been the way that it had always been done. School would usually start in most towns, probably around like 6:30 or 7:00, and it would go until 12:00. It would go until lunchtime and the kids would go home and they would have lunch. You know, and it's just because, you know, by 12 o'clock, you know, power would be out. No AC. It's just hot. You know, and these buildings have tin roofs. And so you're just in there. You're like in an *horno*, you're in an oven. And so you're just baking in there and the kids, they go home and they go to lunch. And I think historically in those agricultural communities, they would have like helped out in the fields or done something like that.

UHLHORN: [00:39:27] But, you know, just because of the effects of El Nino in like from 2013 through 2015, there had been a drought on the coast. And so I think that at least in my area had wiped out a lot of the mountain based agriculture. These are, you know, Colombia is just such a rich and fertile land. But you know, there hasn't been a lot of investment in terms of industrial agriculture. So these are a lot of like subsistence farmers who have just formed like these very rudimentary associations and they're just up there in the mountains just like, you know, seeding, just like throwing corn seed like onto the side of a mountain and just kind of seeing, you know, of course, some will spring up. But it was wiped out. And so a lot of these kids just kind of like hung out at home, hung out in the town, just were on like Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp.

SZTUK: [00:40:09] Oh, really?

UHLHORN: [00:40:09] Yeah, it's everywhere, man. You think it's just teenagers in the United States, but it's just you. It's there too.

SZTUK: [00:40:19] So describe the school to me. What kind of facility was that?

UHLHORN: [00:40:26] It had originally been really nice. It had originally been designed with plumbing. And this is something that, like a lot of people had kind of noticed and I'm, you know, still kind of mystified like why this would be. It had restrooms that were like hooked up to plumbing, but they were all locked and there was no water coming out of the toilets at all. We could never really figure out why that was, you know? You know, a lot of it, like the toilets were either just like completely broken, like someone had kind of come in and broken them. We really weren't too sure like why that vandalism would be. But, you know, for the most part, the classrooms were just kind of. They usually had, um, they were made of brick, they're made of cinder block that had been painted over. Usually two walls of those were some of the brick had kind of like holes, decorative holes that were kind of cut inside to permit some kind of airflow.

SZTUK: [00:41:24] Ventilation.

UHLHORN: [00:41:24] Yeah, ventilation. Most rooms had a fan just because, you know it would be necessary to kind of keep away the heat. But of course, you know, the power would be out. And it really wouldn't help out too much. So sometimes you'd try to have class outside, really wouldn't work out too well. The English classroom that I taught in, you know, was really nice because it was one of the few rooms other than the administrators' rooms that had AC. But about midway through, probably six months in, like the AC broke. And so, you know, we'd have to open up all the windows.

SZTUK: [00:41:54] Any way to fix it?

UHLHORN: [00:41:55] No, yeah, no way to fix it because it's just, you know, you're close. You're so close to the capital, the biggest city in the department, but it's just no one wants to come down because it's just like. There's nothing. There's nothing down there, so. But, you know, it was an agricultural school, it's an agricultural high school. The kids would graduate with something like, I guess it would be like an associate's degree in the United States with like some kind of agricultural training. And so, you know, there are just mango trees everywhere all over the

school. I mean, just all over the coast. And so, you know, kids would be like running around during mango season, just like, you know, climb up in the trees, throwing rocks, getting the mangoes down and eating the mangoes. You know, there were cattle that were in there, like right on the school property. Sometimes they would come inside, which was just pretty zany. They had a really, really, really great agricultural program. Those teachers, like, they lived in that town and they cared for those students, you know, wanted to see them succeed.

UHLHORN: [00:42:50] And so always some kind of like weird thing going on, you know, there'd be like an entire cow's like reproductive system, just like on like this metal table just outside and just, you know, the agricultural coordinators just showing them like, hey, this is how you like, artificially inseminate a cow. And it's just something strange was always kind of going on at that school, but always very hands-on, very educational.

SZTUK: [00:43:13] And how are the kids? How did you find them? Were you teaching, first of all, were you teaching primary school or high school?

UHLHORN: [00:43:22] High school. Yeah. So I mean, the way that education at least worked from my program was we were supposed to be teacher trainers, right? So sustainability obviously is a big thing with the Peace Corps. So you teach the teachers and the teachers then teach the students. But we were also encouraged to be there in the classroom, right? Because, you know, it'd be kind of weird to not meet the kids at some point. And so, you know, I would do my best to kind of be with Adolinda and kind of work on her with her English. She had visited the United States, I think, in '97, you know? And so she had spent like three months there and so she could understand me when I spoke, you know. By the end, you know, we would be able to kind of like have like better conversations and stuff like that. But, you know, she would teach English, you know, to all these kids and I would just be there in the room. My job was to make English fun and interesting, kind of do *dinamicas* with these kids, which are kind of like active games.

UHLHORN: [00:44:13] And so the kids were, um. I really, I mean, there are kids, right? Kids are kids are kids anywhere, and you know, of course, the

thing is, is that. They are always kind of looking to have a good time, sometimes I kind of got in the way of them like really dedicating themselves to, like, study and learn English. It was kind of hard to teach them like, hey, like, listen, like, I'm like, hey, I'm here speaking to you in this language. It wasn't fun. You're learning this language. I had to go home, I had to memorize and they're like, memorize? Like, why would you? I was like, no, you got to memorize. It's just part of the thing. And they're like, aww, you know, like, we won't. And so it's just no one ever really necessarily learned, but we always had a good time in class, so we always had a good time in class. I will always say that it was like always fun to teach those kids.

SZTUK: [00:45:05] And you stayed with a host family there?

UHLHORN: [00:45:08] Yeah, I did. I did.

SZTUK: [00:45:11] What was your living situation?

UHLHORN: [00:45:14] You know, it's, the thing is, and to kind of put it in context, you know. You're living in a site, fifteen hundred people, right? Everyone has known everyone else since they were born.

SZTUK: [00:45:26] Yeah.

UHLHORN: [00:45:27] Right. Like, you've never met a stranger in your entire life because you've just grown up and you've known everyone. No one ever moves to that. No one ever moves there, right? If they do move there, they're like a primo of someone else. And so like, they've been going there for the summers, right? Because, you know, people, you know, this is like the area like *afrodescendiente* area. This is like an area of Guajira where like the escaped slaves would come and they'd live in the mountains, you know, to escape. And so everyone's there, the *afrodescendiente* live there for generations and generations, right? And so, you know, I'm this kind of new person and like, I'm this male, I'm 20 years, you know, I'm 25 and it's just like. Guajiran culture is like, there are two things about it. Like number one, there's this influence of this indigenous culture called the Wayuu, and this is like the one probably

one of the one indigenous cultures like in Colombia that just completely resisted Spanish conquest. You know, they are a stone faced, like, very reserved people, you know, very resilient.

UHLHORN: [00:46:32] And you know that influence of the culture is kind of influenced a little bit in Guajiran culture. They'll get rowdy and they'll get wild during a party. But it's also kind of like you've got to prove yourself first. It's not like being in Atlantico or like one of the other coastal departments where it's just like, hey, gringo, come and dance with you. They're very suspicious and they kind of hold, you know, hold you at arm's length. And so it takes a while to kind of get integrated right because they're just they're looking at you. They're kind of like, should we trust this guy?

UHLHORN: [00:46:58] And the second thing is that while Guajiran culture is also very much *mujeriego*, right? So which means that you know you're a man. There is this joke that our Peace Corps medical officer would tell us. He had, you know, had spent time in Guajira as a youth because he had family there and he's just like, you know, I'll try to remember what it was. Like, you know, every Guajiran man has like. You know, you see a Guajiran man and you know that like attached to him is like, you know, six and a half women and a donkey, right? Which is, you know, it's this terribly sexual joke just because, you know, like every Guajiran man, they usually have like six girlfriends.

UHLHORN: [00:47:41] You know, there's a lot of, they call it *cenamoan la conosco*, like, you know, so like, sometimes you get drunk and you kind of find yourself in a sexual relationship with another man. And then there's also, it's a rural area, right? I'm sure everyone's read the Kinsey studies about in the United States about bestiality in the fifties, but it's just there's a lot of that going on in rural Colombia. And so, you know, they kind of, people see a man of any stripe, especially a gringo man, and they're just like, we got to, you know, our women are here. Like, what's he going to do with the women? You know, is he? Like he's new, he's novel. And so, you know, I think a lot of that kind of made things difficult in terms of like really being able to find like, you know, a good kind of like stable environment in terms of living. It was always just kind of like, you know, I

was at once kind of on the outside. But then I was also because of my gender, just kind of assumed to be like, you know, someone's got a wife.

SZTUK: [00:48:35] So this family that you stayed with there was a completely different experience than the one in training?

UHLHORN: [00:48:40] Completely different. Yeah. And it was, you know, my friend Matt in Dibulla also had a similar experience as well. His host family, they were just *mounay* in that family were just so lovely. You know, Matt was just like their new son, their new gringo son. And then he goes, and he's like living in Dibulla and it's just like stone faced, you know, maybe exchange like one word, you know, with the family the entire week. And it's just it was different and that was tough. That was really, it was really tough. You know, maybe like trying to explain it to other people in Atlantico, they didn't really understand it. Karen had, you know, she had a really wonderful host family in Guachaca, just a lovely, lovely, lovely host family, you know, and it wasn't really. Like it was so hard to describe to other people because it's just that culture in Guajira is so different from the rest of the coast because it was, you know, historically pretty isolated from the rest of the coast. It was just, you know, not developed, you know, there weren't roads going into the capital city until, like probably like 20, like maybe 40 years before. It's a very rural, very isolated.

SZTUK: [00:49:39] Yeah. And were you the first Peace Corps volunteer to serve there?

UHLHORN: [00:49:42] Mm hmm. I was the first volunteer in that site.

SZTUK: [00:49:46] They probably didn't get visits from many other outsiders.

UHLHORN: [00:49:50] No, they did not. They did not at all.

SZTUK: [00:49:53] So this was very new to them.

UHLHORN: [00:49:55] It was very new to them.

SZTUK: [00:49:56] Didn't know what to do with you.

UHLHORN: [00:49:56] They had zero idea of what to do at all.

SZTUK: [00:50:02] Did at any point did it get easier? Must have been some kind of acceptance at some point.

UHLHORN: [00:50:12] At a certain point, you know, you just kind of accept this is going to be the way it is. You know, you kind of find projects to keep yourself busy, right? So I mean, it's kind of like, you know, a couple of things happen, you know, like, you know, my faith is deepening this entire time. Like, I'm kind of like learning more to rely on God in the midst of all of this. And I've just kind of like, look, I wouldn't be here if there wasn't some reason for it. So I've just got to accept it, right? I can't tell people, I can't tell Peace Corps I don't like it here, because it seems kind of presumptuous. I mean, people live here, you know, like and they're not like, I don't like it here, and Peace Corps doesn't just get to move them. And it also seems too like, this difficulty. I'm like, I signed up for this, right? You know, I thought it was going to be easy. This is hard, right? And I've kind of got to live through this and just kind of like, recognize that as long as I'm trying to live in my vocation, things are going to be good, right? So that's happening. And then also at the same time, you know, I felt very fortunate just because, you know, like the education system in Columbia on the coast was just, you know, there had been like a month long *paro*. When we first got there, we basically moved to site and we don't have school.

UHLHORN: [00:51:16] And then also just La Guajira too, like there was just a lot of kind of like just local corruption in the Riohacha area. So like, you know, like the school didn't have busses to like bus in half the student population. And so what wound up happening is like, I just had a lot of time. You know, there was nothing to do in the afternoon. All the associations that met, like farming, like they were all up in the mountains. We couldn't ride on motorcycles. So like, well, legally at least.

SZTUK: [00:51:41] Right.

UHLHORN: [00:51:42] And so I couldn't legally go up there and establish relationships with people there. So I had all this time. And you know, there was this boys camp, this boys initiative called Camp Hero, which was. It's now *hermanos y respeto y orgullo*, but it used to be health, equality, respect, and outreach. It was kind of on the rocks. It was meant for 13 to 15 year old Colombian boys tried to teach them civic values. It was like a youth camp that would happen. And it was just like kind of not necessarily in shambles, but it was kind of like on the brink of happening or not happening. I just had nothing going on. They were looking for someone and I was just like, hey, sign me up. Like, I'll do this. Like, I'm like looking for this kind of stuff like, you know, I don't have anything to do in the afternoons. And so thankfully.

SZTUK: [00:52:23] Who was looking for somebody, was it people in the local community or?

UHLHORN: [00:52:26] This is a Peace Corps initiative.

SZTUK: [00:52:28] So it was Peace Corps.

UHLHORN: [00:52:29] Peace Corps initiative. And so there were other volunteers who were kind of looking for that kind of stuff. And, you know, they had come and done some presentations to us and, you know. They would do the presentation, but they wouldn't put the presentation in like presentation mode, you know, so you're just kind of like scrolling through the PowerPoint program without it being a presentation. But it was, you know, they were just like, we don't really know what we're doing. You know, there's like no background in anything. It's just like plain, you know, Helvetica text. Everyone in my group is like, you know, all the guys are like, man, we don't want to be a part of this. We don't want to be a part of this at all. Like it's going to be like, this is going to be a disaster. I don't want to like, get a group of boys together and do this. And it's like, Listen, man, like this seems like it might be like a really cool opportunity, right? Like, you know, at the very least, I'll learn something.

UHLHORN: [00:53:14] And so I signed up for that, probably in August of 2017. And so and I kind of, that was my first kind of crash course with like learning how to go through and get a SPA grant. And just like event planning. And, you know, it pushed me with my Spanish, too, just because, you know, I wasn't getting a lot of Spanish practice in site just because, you know, people are kind of stone faced and quiet. And so and I hadn't learned how to pray yet in Spanish. And so this was kind of one of those things where, you know, you're getting on the phone and you're just kind of like, you just got to kind of like hope and pray that the Spanish will come. And sometimes it comes, and sometimes it doesn't. But it was a really great learning experience.

SZTUK: [00:53:50] So then you did you establish this program in the area where you lived?

UHLHORN: [00:53:56] Right. And so at that time, it was just this one off thing like, you get a group of boys together and you go for like four days to like this resort. There are presentations, you know, because the thing you got to remember is that like in Colombia, like these, these boys in these rural towns like they don't ever leave.

SZTUK: [00:54:15] Right.

UHLHORN: [00:54:15] They don't. I mean, like, you know, family is such. Yeah, such a big thing. They don't ever leave their families. And so for these boys to like, leave their home even for like four days and like, meet someone else, even if some like another town. Like kids in Tomarrazon where I lived would never have had another opportunity to. Like they know where Dibulla is in Guajira, but they never would have had an opportunity to meet those kids. They'd heard like, oh, there's a beach in Dibulla. They've never seen the beach. They never would have gone and done that. And so that's kind of what it was. So, you know, finding a group of kids and. You know, there was this really great group of. These kids, there was this group of 10th graders that like almost immediately. It's like one of those things where I don't know if you've experienced this in your Peace Corps service, but it's just like, you know, you never find

your projects. Not to consider people projects, right? Like you never find like your opportunity, your opportunity finds you.

UHLHORN: [00:55:05] And it was just these this group of like 10th graders, like these 10th grade boys, you know, just 15 years old. You know, everyone else is just kind of like, who's this gringo? Who's this gringo? And these kids just like come up to me and they really kind of invite me into the pueblo and you know, they're interested and they want to talk, you know. They think it's fascinating that I speak English. You know, they want to talk with me after class. And you know, it was really like those kids. They kind of like became my first group of friends. You know, I'm simultaneously like their teacher. And, you know, like if I'm just kind of like walking around and, you know, they're out on the porch, they'll motion over to me and I'll go over there and I'll sit there. And you know, their mom will have like, you know, a big plate of rice, the burnt rice on the bottom, which is like, you know, the delicacy and they'll give you that big plate of burnt rice and you'll eat it up. So they found me and those were the kids who came became my Hero group, the initial group.

SZTUK: [00:56:00] How about your coworkers at the school, the other teachers? Did you develop relationships with them or bond with them at all?

UHLHORN: [00:56:08] You know, obviously, as I've said before, Adolinda is a fantastic woman. So I got to know her really well. And you know, in the midst of kind of having some fractured relationships with like kind of my host family in town, she was always very motherly with me. You know, I never. She helped me out just through a lot, and I could tell that she deeply cared about me as a person. You know, obviously she didn't know anything about me. She's just a really good Catholic woman, and she was just like, look, this kid, if it's not me, like, who is it going to be? And so she really helped me out there. Her friends were always really nice as well. She had originally lived, Adolinda had originally lived in that community, you know, but had left a couple of years before because she wanted her daughter to have the opportunity to go to a high school in the capital city in Riohacha. And so she had a group of teachers and so many of the teachers commuted in from the capital city. They didn't live in the site. And I kind of got to know some of them as well. I'd see them

in Riohacha because I would go in twice a week, you know, to be able to use WiFi.

UHLHORN: [00:57:08] There was a gym in Riohacha, which is really great, an outdoor gym. I spent a lot of time in June One's gym. So I got to know them and they were always, always, always very welcoming to me. They certainly didn't have to be, because I didn't speak very good Spanish when I first got there, so they didn't know anything about me. I could have been really mean, but they were always very nice. But there were a couple of professors who didn't stay in town. You know, one of them was Luis Vasquez, who would wind up being, at least in this first iteration of Camp Hero, he wound up being our counterpart. These, like all Olfrece, Professor Olfrece and Professor Luis Vasquez were just incredible with these kids. These were people they'd grown up in Tomarrazon, you know, they knew these mountains, you know, like the back of their hands. They knew these animals. They loved these animals and seeing the way that they would go and they would work with these kids. So much of the Colombian education system could just be rote memorization. Write something down on the board, write it in your notebook, right? You know, and it's just like the kids don't ever really know how to learn. And these teachers, they see that and they realize this. And so everything is very hands-on and in this culture where, you know, of course, is very *mujeriego*.

UHLHORN: [00:58:14] Some of these kids aren't growing up with fathers like, you know, their father, like has another family in Valledupar, has another family in Santa Marta. You know, lives with that family in Santa Marta. They never get to see their dads. These men, like, became the fathers of so many of these kids in these town. And we'd teach them responsibility. We'd teach them civic values, would like hold them accountable in midst of like these agricultural projects. Like, you know, they're raising chickens at the school, like you have to be here at this time in the morning. And if not, like, you know, it's not just, you know, you're going to be in trouble, but you're also letting down your classmates. And so they created these opportunities in the midst of these educational environments to teach these kids about responsibility, to teach these kids about like dependence and would give them life lessons too. And it

was just, you know, it was incredible, you know, the responsibility they were saddled with. You know, kind of like taking these boys and taking these girls who had, you know, never really seen a positive male figure and then kind of like becoming that father figure. It was really incredible to see that happen.

SZTUK: [00:59:13] Good. Well, it sounds like you did establish some good relationships with your coworkers.

UHLHORN: [00:59:20] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:59:21] But did you also get together on your time off? Get a chance to get back together with your fellow volunteers and maybe do some traveling around the country for break?

UHLHORN: [00:59:37] For sure. You know, I only ever stayed on the coast. You know, there were these kinds of things. It's like a stereotype on the coast that, like all of the store owners are like Paisas or Santandereanos like people from the interior of the country. Paisas being people from Medellin, Santandereanos as being people from the Department of Santander, which is like also in the interior. And so I lived right across the street, my second host family in town, from these Santandereanos. They had moved from this small village right outside of Bucaramanga up in the mountains to this town in order because they knew that there was opportunity here for them to run this store because the *costeños* weren't going to run it. And it was just, they would show me pictures of their town and it was the exact same size as Tomarrazon. But because the culture is so different in the interior and you know, there's not as much corruption, it was just. This town, there wasn't just trash all over the streets, the streets were well-maintained. You know, the school was, you know, was well-maintained as well, you know, and they just show me they're just like, it doesn't look like the schools here. And I just I had so many friends go to Medellin and come back and just be so sad.

UHLHORN: [01:00:49] They're like, oh my gosh, it's like, I love Medellin. And it's like probably one of the best cities I visited in the entire world. And now I have to come back and my pueblo just like it's facing all of these

difficulties. I just knew that like, I wanted to be focused on my site and I wanted to be focused on the coast. And so I decided never to go. So I've never been to Bogota, I've never been to Medellin. But you know, when we would get together. Back when Karen was still there, you know, we had our friend Mixi, so we would try to meet up with her. So it'd be my friend Matt who lived in Dibulla, Karen, who lived in Guachaca and then Mixi lived in Riohacha. And we'd all try to meet up with her because she lived in the big city. And like Mixi's experience was so completely different from everyone else's like in our cohort, because she was living in the capital. You know, she had cafes and she had WiFi. She had two malls. We were so jealous. And you know, it's just, she was a perfect person for that environment too. She had like, you know, she was older than the rest of us. She had gone and like, lived in Seoul and like, you know, taught English in Korea, maybe not Seoul, but like, you know, outside of there.

UHLHORN: [01:01:50] And so she was just kind of designed for the city environment, so we would go and kind of leech off of her. But, you know, she kind of like she got too, she was so in deep. She had like, there was a university. So she's like, oh, I'm going to be out with my friends so I can't meet up with you guys tonight. We would feel like, oh my gosh Mixi, we can't believe you'd do this. We don't have friends on our site yet. When you already have like 16 different groups. Like you've got the rappers over here, like the university students over here. And she's just like one of my friend groups. I was like, forget it, Mixi. We loved her all the same, but we would go to Dibulla and Guachaca. So we would, you know, I would just get on a bus, you know, on a Friday afternoon. And just like head on down, you know, to, you know, go see Matt and Karen. And you know, and for a while, it was kind of. We would just kind of hang out and just like, you know, there's not a lot to do. So we would talk.

UHLHORN: [01:02:38] And, you know, Karen was all. Karen was Christian. And so, you know, like, we had that kind of in common, you know, Matt, like, you know, read sci-fi. So we had a book club that would happen and we would read books together. We would all get together, you know, we would read Lord of the Rings and we'd all get together. And we talk about Lord of the Rings, you know, have conversations about stuff. We'd

annoy Matt so much talking about Christianity because he was Jewish, but you know, he didn't believe in it. So he just, you know, we'd get into arguments and stuff like that. But it was a really good time. You know, just go, just go to Dibulla. There's a hostel there and it's just so beautiful. It's a sleepy little town, kind of like, it's sleepy. It's kind of a little bit sinister, kind of like Twin Peaks a little bit. You know, there's kind of a weird energy going on there, but you know, we grew to kind of love that town and just go there and just, you know, 10:00 at night, you know, finish watching a movie or something like that on a laptop, just go out there to the beach and just get out under the stars and just get in the ocean. It was incredible.

SZTUK: [01:03:32] So that helped make your week more tolerable, that getting together with your friends?

UHLHORN: [01:03:38] Yeah, I mean, not to show myself as a rule breaker, right? But you know, the previous the previous administration, you know, they were really dedicated to like making sure that we were integrating with our communities. And of course we were, we were showing up to these schools and like, you know, you can't live in Colombia without integrating because someone's going to try to pull you in. If it's not a teacher, it's one of the kids, right? So you're going to make relationships. But you know, we only got like one weekend or two weekends away a month. It was something like that, right, where we could officially be out of site and we'd have to text up to the office.

SZTUK: [01:04:08] OK.

UHLHORN: [01:04:09] But the kind of the thing was, is that, you know, we're a little bit further away from the office, you know, not as many people really wanted to come up from the office to go out to Guajira because there's nothing there. And so, you know, we kind of were able to find a little bit more time to kind of get away and see each other. And so it definitely, in the midst, I think, I know with Karen, her host family was so great. I know with Matt and in our living situation, so it was sometimes really difficult. And so I know that for a while, it was kind of like those trips were really the thing that were kind of like keeping me sane. And so I was very

grateful for Matt and for Karen and also for Mixi too, when we were able to see her in Riohacha, for their camaraderie and for their support.

SZTUK: [01:04:57] Now going back to your job, you said that you were supposed to be training teachers. So do you think you made any headway there?

UHLHORN: [01:05:11] It's an interesting question. You know, without Adolinda, it was so hard just because. She never had any break time, and she, you know, so we couldn't just find a free period to talk and go over things. She also lived in Riohacha so far away. You know, it was not a place where I could just kind of like leave and come back. You know, we were making like maybe 23 mil a day, which is 23,000 Colombian pesos. How much would that be in U.S. dollars? Probably not a lot, like maybe eight bucks a day? To get into the city was seven mil. Seven mil ride back. So it's just, it was kind of prohibitive to do like more than once a week, and I wanted to make it, you know, make it count. And so we established a really great relationship.

UHLHORN: [01:06:01] And thankfully, a lot of the work that Mixi was doing in the city, you know, doing classes at the university, I know that Adolinda had the opportunity to do that. And then when I moved sites after the security incident, you know, I know that, you know, I was able to kind of continue some of the work that Mixi had done in the school, in the *megacolegio* she was working at, just kind of like get them prepped for the other English volunteer who was going to be there. You know, kind of be able to sit with them, work with them on their English skills, answer their questions about, you know, grammar or like a particular English idiom. But you know, they were motivated. Adolinda was always very motivated and very loving and those teachers at the *megacolegio* in Riohacha were also very motivated as well.

SZTUK: [01:06:40] So you said you moved sites. So you didn't stay at that one school for your entire?

UHLHORN: [01:06:47] Yeah.

SZTUK: [01:06:48] This new site was a different town?

UHLHORN: [01:06:50] Yeah, it was. It was the big city. I got moved. Yeah.

SZTUK: [01:06:54] So how long did you spend in the smaller? Was that an entire year?

UHLHORN: [01:07:00] It was over a year. It was probably a year and eight months because I didn't move. I wasn't in Riohacha until, like maybe November of 2018.

SZTUK: [01:07:07] So it was only just your last few months.

UHLHORN: [01:07:09] Just my last few months.

SZTUK: [01:07:13] And you said there was a security incident.

UHLHORN: [01:07:15] Yeah, it's just that area of Guajira and historically, you know, you know, the FARC and the ELN, they're not necessarily the presence on the coast that they have been in the interior, right? The FARC and the ELN being like rebel groups that are opposed to the government, you know, kind of like take part in a lot of the violence, drug trafficking kidnappings, that, you know, when people think about Colombia, they think about these things, right? The thing is, is that that particular area of Guajira has these mountains, part of the Sierra Nevadas. The army doesn't go there. They're very hard to reach. There's not a lot of surveillance, and like 15 years before I moved there, there had been a FARC contingent, you know, that had come down from the mountains, you know, shot up the police station, killed all the police. Kind of came into town and took what they wanted, maybe took some people and then like, went back up. There are people in the town like who remembered this.

UHLHORN: [01:08:17] And so, you know, I always kind of knew that there was something that was kind of going on in the town. But at the same time, I figured, you know, Peace Corps sent me here, you know, God sent me here. So like, I'm just going to stay here, I'm going to make it work. People were always kind of like, hey, don't walk in the town outside

during the night, like, there are bad people around, and I just always just assume like, oh, you know, it's people from an older generation, right? And I'm a gringo, you know, they think I can't handle myself. And I'm like, listen, I'm tall, I'm strong, I can handle myself and I can walk around. And so I kind of lived in that site for a really long time. You know, in the midst of like, you know, some difficulties with like host families, you know, sometimes difficulties at school and difficulties work, you know, just like with the difficulties that isolation kind of affords, you know, just kind of like, oh, it's not that big of a deal. It's not that big of a deal.

UHLHORN: [01:09:02] But you know what was happening kind of like up towards the end was that, you know, I would go. I would teach in a school up in the mountains, right? I had found this school. I had this friend named Micayell, who unfortunately would move to Riohacha like probably within three to four months of like me being there. But he had during the *paro* that initially happened, the strike, the teachers strike, the nationwide teachers strike that initially happened when I moved to site, had taken me up into the mountains, deep into the mountains, like maybe an hour into the mountains. And he kind of introduced me to a community there that has school. And so, you know, kind of introduce me to the teacher, and I was going up there once a week to kind of work with them just because what other opportunity would they have had to, you know, have someone to kind of like, work with her or put the English. You know, the teacher, like, lived in the mountains like further than the school. I was always very impressed with her.

UHLHORN: [01:09:50] I thought that my town was isolated. This town was really isolated. And so I'd been going there kind of off and on for a while. Sometimes like, you know, I would walk there, you know, I'd get dropped off in the nearest town. I'd just walk in the mountains. I didn't think anything just, you know, maybe I'm just being a Pollyanna, you know, just thinking everything's going to be all right. But I never felt in danger. But there was one time probably about, I don't know, maybe September, October, that I was up in there and I'd always heard that, you know, there were people in the mountains, you know, there were groups kind of doing strange things. But I got up there and I hadn't been there in a couple of months just due to like summer vacation and the army was

there. You know, 17 or 18 year old boys just kind of walking around with assault rifles and they had tents. And so during *recreo*, I just kind of sat down and I was sitting there and, you know, these teenagers just kind of seeming, they're just like, like, where are you from? I don't look like anyone else there.

UHLHORN: [01:10:41] Just, you know, kind of explaining like, why I'm there. And they're asking me like, oh, yeah, like, where do you live? I'm like, Tomarrazon. And they're like, wait, why are you there? I'm like, I don't know, it's where I live. I've lived there for like probably a year and a half. They're just like, listen, man, are you sure that's safe? I'm like, why? He's like, you know, the reason why we're here right now is because like, there's something going on in the mountains, like they're getting closer. I'm like, who's getting closer? The armed groups are getting closer to your site. And, you know, I was kind of shocked by that. And I noticed that, you know, when I went into Riohacha that week, you know, I would talk with, I would talk with Mixi. Had a really wonderful rector who would wind up being my rector at the school, uh, principal. Elloy. So wonderful, man. You know she would tell me stories because she would, you know, she knew that I was in Tomarrazon and Elloy had worked in Tomarrazon as a teacher, and he would always tell Mixi, I don't know why Carlos is still in Tomarrazon, because he owned a *finca*, like a little plot of land with a house that he would go to on the weekends right outside of Tomarrazon.

UHLHORN: [01:11:45] And he's like, listen, I can't go there anymore because there's, you know, I went there one weekend and there was just these kids with guns. They took my money. They were eating my *platanos*. They told me just like, hey, you can leave, but just don't come back. And so he's just like, I don't know why he's still there. And so, you know, the thing was, is that like at the time I was, there were a couple of things. I was worried because like, A, I had this support system. Karen had already left. She'd gone back to the United States by this time. But you know, Matt is in Dibulla. You know, I love Matt and, you know, Mixi is super involved with her friends Riohacha. But you know, I still care about her, right? So I'm like, where are they going to move me to? I don't want to leave like La Guajira because I'll lose out on the support group. I also, you know, have

these relationships with these boys, like by the time, you know, everything's happening with, like, Club Hero, Camp Hero. I have a little boxing group that's happening with the boys. You know, my English classes are in shambles just because no one necessarily like wants to, you know, kind of like, sit down and learn. But I'm watching like, you know, Dragon Ball Z in English with these boys, you know, and they're loving it. I was like, I can't leave these boys, what's going to happen there?

SZTUK: [01:12:54] You were a big part of their lives.

UHLHORN: [01:12:55] Right, and so I also figured too like, you know, Peace Corps sent me here, so it can't be that bad. But, you know, eventually I was kind of away on a business, you know, it was like right after I presented the Hero grant, I think, in September of 2018, and I just kind of called up the security guy. You know, there had been this, there had been like a shooting, I think, in Tomarrazon. Someone had gotten shot like on the front steps of the police station. And that kind of stuff happens in Colombia. You know, it's just, you know, it's kind of a bloody place. You look at the newspapers and you know, someone's been decapitated. It's just, you know, it's a little bit different, kind of made me a little bit nervous. And so I called Alberto. You know, and the security guy just kind of let him know. And he was like, oh, we didn't know that. Which makes sense, right? Because my area is really remote.

UHLHORN: [01:13:46] You know, there's a tank battalion based out of Santa Marta that would patrol that area. You know, I'd be awake, you know, calling Karen back in the United States at 12:00 because we were dating at that time. And like, you know, sometimes I would just kind of like I would come back from the soccer field and there would be like, you know, 30 soldiers, you know, in fatigues with like machine guns walking around the town at like 1:00 a.m. in the morning, like on patrol. And it's just, you know, and I guess, that had just never gotten back to Barranquilla. And so that kind of started the long process of me moving site. So it took a while. You know, Peace Corps, there were a lot of things that were kind of like happening at once. A lot of people were, you know, kind of like switching host families, moving sites. And so it kind of took them a little

while. I moved back to Tomarrazon. And kind of in the midst of that had some interesting experiences there where I'm just like, why am I in this site if it's dangerous? But fortunately or unfortunately, I got dengue and I didn't know it. And so I kind of left for Riohacha and was just in a hostel for a week like, you know, semi lucid, just really in a bad shape. And then finally, I was able to kind of like, you know, convince the Peace Corps doctors to let me go into Barranquilla.

UHLHORN: [01:14:52] And so, you know, kind of with all that happening, it gave the Peace Corps enough time to kind of like, work with Mixi in Riohacha, for them to find me a school to go to. That was the thing, they needed to find me a school and a house to go to. And, you know, eventually they all kind of worked out and I went back to site. I found a car leaving the bus station, just like someone's private car, and just got in the car with these people I didn't know. And just like, you know, of course, like cars are a lot faster than busses. So like four hours later, you know, I'm dengued out, back into Tomarrazon. Pack up all my stuff, you know. A little bit of it was pre-packed. Packed it all up in one night and the next day a Peace Corps van was there. I got shipped out, moved into my new house, and I began my life in Riohacha for the last couple of months. It was weird. It was surreal. But I'd been living in Riohacha, I'd spent so much time in Riohacha. It didn't really feel like a big thing. It just kind of felt like I was just like, oh, I'm on vacation right now, and I just never stopped being on vacation. So it was kind of nice.

SZTUK: [01:15:51] Yeah. Well, I'm sure it was a big disappointment to leave the friends you made there in Tomarrazon.

UHLHORN: [01:15:55] And that was, yeah, that was really the toughest part.

SZTUK: [01:16:00] But you were close to the end of your service. Maybe it was a good transition for you.

UHLHORN: [01:16:06] It was a good transition. I think it happened at a good time, especially because things were picking up with Camp Hero. You know, Club Hero, at that particular point in time, it was just like, things had kind

of fallen apart with our club, Camp Hero. Like I still had these boys, but there wasn't this rule established where they could attend camp again.

SZTUK: [01:16:28] Mm hmm.

UHLHORN: [01:16:29] So it was, you know, and then I was like, kind of away. And so there was really no way that they were going to be able to come. And, you know, so it kind of happened at a good time, but it was still really difficult because I didn't get to finish out the school year with those boys. So I did get to see them before I left, though, and that was really tough.

SZTUK: [01:16:43] So you returned to say goodbye.

UHLHORN: [01:16:45] I return to say goodbye my last week. I mean, I didn't take any money with me. You know, I told my friend Matt like, hey, listen, like, I'm going to text you at like, if I haven't texted you by six o'clock tonight, like, let Peace Corps know. Because the week after I had left site, there was, um, you know, there are agricultural engineers like in that area working all the time. You know, that area is, you know, there's like an aqueduct, you know, they're always doing agricultural studies there in that area where I was living just because, you know, the ground's really fertile and you know, they're trying to get that area back up on its feet and producing after El Nino. And so there was like this agricultural engineer from like Medellin, and he was like in town and he got like *secuestrado*, like he got kidnapped. And I was just like, you know, so I kind of knew walking in, like, I need to be careful. But you know, it was tough just because, you know, I had lived in that site for so long.

UHLHORN: [01:17:35] And so like, I show up and like all these people are, you know, I know all the *colectivo* drivers, the people who drive the cars from the mercado in the south of the city to my town. And they're like, we thought you went back to the United States. And I'm like, no, I'm still here. Like until when? Like until this weekend because I'm leaving. And so I went back and it was good to see those kids for one final time. It was tough. I had not cried in Colombia and I thought I wasn't going to cry. You know, I left Riohacha and I was like, I know I'm not going to cry when I left Riohacha. But like I saw, like, I saw Leandro, and I saw Alejandro, and I

saw Antony, and I saw Joseph, and I cried. I cried when I saw those boys and like, and I just I was like, oh, I can't believe this is happening. This is so embarrassing. But I really miss those kids.

SZTUK: [01:18:21] So one of my last questions is about your feelings on the completion of service and having to leave your site.

UHLHORN: [01:18:31] Yeah. Yeah.

SZTUK: [01:18:33] It's a tough thing to do.

UHLHORN: [01:18:35] It was tough. It was tough for sure. And I mean, it's just also too. I mean, I imagine that like for people who are like, you know, in like some far flung Peace Corps country, it's just kind of like, you know, I was leaving early because I was, you know, trying to start things up. Because we were permitted to kind of like COS a month early, close of service a month early, if we had something waiting for us back in the United States. And I was applying to go into the Navy, so I needed to go up to maps, military processing, to do that. And so like what wound up happening is that like, you know, like kind of COS with two or three other people. Not a lot of other people, not a lot of fanfare. And it's just, you know, you just kind of, you wake up on Saturday at like 5:00 a.m., get to the Barranquilla airport, walk into the airplane, and then like two hours later, you're in Miami. It's just like, it's this really weird thing. And I mean, you know, Matt and I would always, always, always talk about this. And with Karen too. And we'd always talk about this. Like, listen, is this going to be like Narnia? You know, like how in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, you know, the kids go into the wardrobe.

UHLHORN: [01:19:40] And then like, you know, they live their entire lives there. You know, like they become like the kings and queens of this land and they're like adults. And then they like, stumble their way back out of the wardrobe, and it's just like, nothing's changed. And it was kind of like what it was like. You know, we were just like, oh, nothing's changed at all. And it's like, were we even there? And it kind of was just like, was this a dream? Did we dream it? It's still kind of feels almost dreamlike. And talking with Matt. I know that Karen has had a little bit more time to

process it just because she's been back in the United States for a while and still missed it very deeply. It's also kind of this thing where it's like, this could have happened or it could have not happened. I obviously hear the Colombia I volunteers talk about it, and it's just like, I'm guessing maybe with time, it will seem like as like concrete and real to me as it does to them in their old age.

SZTUK: [01:20:22] And you just COSed a couple of months ago, so you're still adjusting.

UHLHORN: [01:20:28] Well, fortunately, like the area that I go back to. Obviously, Mexico is very different than Colombia. I always like want to put that on the record because some people kind of assume that it is, but it's very different. But my town's really sleepy. It's like, you know, it's really small, you know, and there is kind of like this really like laid back culture that that's there. And so, you know, the process of kind of, you know. It is nice that like I, or maybe not so nice because, you know, it would kind of. Shift work is kind of a difficult thing to be awake at, like 12:00 in the morning and at a grocery store. But you know, like if I need to buy something at 10:00 at night, I can go and buy something at 10:00 at night. That's kind of nice. You know, like hamburgers here in the United States are really good. I kind of like that. Don't, you know, driving everywhere is still something, I don't like that. I do not like that. I like walking. I prefer it so much more to driving. But you know, I live in Texas and, you know, unfortunately, that's just kind of like how the majority of Texas is kind of constructed. So I'm still getting used to that.

SZTUK: [01:21:28] Things are far apart.

UHLHORN: [01:21:31] Yeah.

SZTUK: [01:21:31] So it's a little early to ask how your Peace Corps service has affected the rest of your career and your life, but how do you feel about your Peace Corps service? Are you happy that you chose to do that?

UHLHORN: [01:21:47] For sure. Absolutely. Yeah, I would not be the same person that I am right now. It's just it's been really difficult for my family because

they knew me in 2016, you know, like right before I left. And then I come back and there's kind of that adjustment period there, and they're like this guy is kind of a little bit different. You know, he thinks about things a little bit differently. He's a little bit more calm about things, you know, like way more like how I'm way more relaxed about things. And, you know, obviously, like a lot of like my views have changed pretty significantly as a result of being in Colombia as well. So I don't know. It's adjustment for me. I'm sure it's adjustment for the people who know me and hopefully love me.

SZTUK: [01:22:25] If you were to meet somebody now that's interested in joining the Peace Corps, what advice would you give them?

UHLHORN: [01:22:31] Peace Corps anywhere or Peace Corps Colombia? Because. Just anywhere?

SZTUK: [01:22:37] Just anywhere.

UHLHORN: [01:22:37] Yeah, for sure. Just do it. I mean, you know, two years seems like a long time, but I mean, I'm sure like, you know, you would say it, it's just like, you know, you get to the first year, end of the first year, like, this is not enough time. Like you have those relationships with people in the community. You have like all these projects and you're just like, listen, I need at least four years if I wanted to do anything. And it's just, you know, that time that seemed like it would take so long. Like in retrospect, everyone's just like it'll pass by in a flash. All the volunteers who are like in countries like, you know, you have no idea, it's like, it's like no time at all. And that's the thing. People are so worried about the time. "I could never do two years." I mean, I think this is like probably like the best, even in the midst of just like, you know, I would say like those times where I was like in Tomarrazon. There hasn't been power, you know, for like two days or anything like that. And you're just like sitting on the floor, like laying on the tile floor of your house because that's the only cool thing, just like sitting, like looking up at the ceiling.

UHLHORN: [01:23:35] Like, I'd say, like, yes, like in the midst of so many moments like that, it was like probably some of the best, best time I've ever spent.

And of course, like the whole time wasn't like that at all. So many more wonderful things and beautiful things happened in the midst of that. I mean, of course, like, you know, Peace Corps is about the work. It's about the work that you have this opportunity to be productive and useful to a community in a way that it's just so difficult in the United States. You think of like, you know, you kind of like you wake up in the morning, you go and you're of use to someone in a corporation. And you just kind of like, go home, you know, when you live like this really atomized existence. But you know, when you're in Peace Corps and especially in a rural environment like, you know, of course, it was kind of hard to get people to really apply themselves with the English.

UHLHORN: [01:24:17] But like, you know, I was just the English guy in town. And if people had homework, you know, sometimes people would commute to go to the university. Like they'd come to my house and they'd be like, oh, like, you know, I have this industrial refrigerator and the instructions are only in English and German. And so I could help them out. Or like someone is just like, you know, I've got like these roosters and I bought like this nutritional supplement for them, but the instructions are only in English. And so like, we need the English guy. Just like, you know, there was a guy who knew how to lay bricks. There was like the guy who knew how to wire the houses. There was a guy who like owned the store. There were the ranchers, you know, they all had these different specialties. And I had that specialty.

SZTUK: [01:24:55] You were the English guy.

UHLHORN: [01:24:56] I was the English guy, and I was just like, I'm a part of this community. Kind of outside of it, but I have this purpose, right? And it's not just like this purpose that I. It's just kind of like, you know, thrust upon me in this really individual way. But it's this thing that kind of permeates throughout this community. And it's just, it's so hard to capture that in the United States, maybe in a really small community. But I mean, just to feel that, to see that at least like once in your life, it's like really incredible just to know that there's something that kind of like exists other than just, you know, the nine to five grind. It kind of ruins you a little bit, I guess.

SZTUK: [01:25:30] Do you see any plans in the future for traveling overseas?

UHLHORN: [01:25:36] I mean, with the Navy.

SZTUK: [01:25:39] So you are going into the Navy.

UHLHORN: [01:25:39] I'm going into the Navy, and I mean, that certainly was kind of one of those things where, you know, seeing their medical mission. They did a medical mission in Riohacha that I was fortunate enough to take part of. You know, I mean, I'm no nurse or anything like that. So the likelihood of me being on a mission like that was probably pretty slim. But you know, the opportunity to potentially like, you know, to respond in a humanitarian way, if that opportunity ever came up in the Navy, you know, to travel around, maybe in the southern hemisphere and Latin America, that would be incredible. So I mean, I do have those plans.

SZTUK: [01:26:10] Great. Well, is there anything else you'd like to share as we wrap up here?

UHLHORN: [01:26:19] Man, how long have we gone for?

SZTUK: [01:26:20] I'm not sure.

UHLHORN: [01:26:22] I would be, I'd be really. I thought this was going to be over in 15 minutes so.

SZTUK: [01:26:26] Well, let's see. We're about an hour and 25 minutes, I think.

UHLHORN: [01:26:32] Golly man, you must've gotten bored with me talking all about that stuff.

SZTUK: [01:26:35] No, it was great.

UHLHORN: [01:26:36] Well, you know, I think that's probably good, you know, I'll probably like, look back on this like in 20 years and be like, man, you know, I had just zero perspective and I'll probably cringe. But you know,

this is what these memories are for, right? To look back on your younger self and be like, I can't believe I said those things.

SZTUK: [01:26:51] All right Cutter. Well, thanks very much. It was a great interview. I enjoyed every minute of it. This concludes our interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]