

**Elizabeth Bonfeld Kenton Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

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**Interviewer:** Patricia A. Wand  
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**Biographical Note**

Elizabeth (Liz) Bonfeld Kenton served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mauritania from September 2000 to February 2004 in an agro-forestry project.

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Oral History Interview

with

Elizabeth Bonfeld Kenton

May 4, 2019  
Keene, New Hampshire

By Patricia A. Wand

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

WAND: [00:00:04] Today is Saturday, May 4th, 2019. I am Patricia Ann Wand and I am interviewing Elizabeth Bonfeld Kenton. Elizabeth Kenton was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mauritania from September 2000 until February 2004. She served in an agro-forestry project. Elizabeth, I am going to start our conversation after I tell you thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. I'm going to start the conversation with asking you that question that so many people have asked you. Why did you decide to become a Peace Corps volunteer?

KENTON: [00:00:57] I don't remember a particular moment of deciding. It was just something I always knew I would do. My dad had served in Nigeria '64 to '66 as a teacher, and I grew up on his stories, and it was always something I wanted to do and knew I would do and did.

WAND: [00:01:16] And what was your father's name?

KENTON: [00:01:17] Stephen Kenton. Stephen with a H.

WAND: [00:01:21] Aha! So you grew up as the child of a Peace Corps volunteer and heard those stories. Tell us more about your family of origin. Where did you grow up and what was your environment like?

KENTON: [00:01:36] I grew up in eastern Connecticut, still a bit rural, um, in a family of teachers. My mother's side are all teachers. Uh, she taught kindergarten and first grade and Latin and all her sisters and cousins, my aunts, all the women on that side are teachers. High school, university. My father taught at Eastern Connecticut State University and very academic family. Um, already a bit of a mix of cultures. My dad is Bronx Jewish and my mom is a small town New Hampshire self-described WASP, and they met at UNH in Durham and fell in love. And that was, that was that story. I have one sister, older sister, and she now lives in Philadelphia with her kids.

KENTON: [00:02:29] We saw both sides of the family very frequently. My mother's family all were still in New England, so closer, and we spent summers all together in one house at the beach with my grandmother and grandfather and the four of us and my mother's sister and her family, four more people. Um, and when the nearby cousins would all come in, we'd have 17 people around the dining room table. I grew up running wild in the woods in the afternoons, which I don't think kids are allowed to do these days anymore, and being encouraged to be intellectually curious. And with a sense of fairness and effort.

KENTON: [00:03:15] Other stories I heard frequently were, my parents had both been involved in protests in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. There were a couple of conscientious objectors, Harvey and Daniels, who were jailed at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, and my folks were leading the protests to, to have them released, so I heard a lot about that.

WAND: [00:03:37] So. When it came time to go to university, what did you, where did you choose to go?

KENTON: [00:03:49] I started going to university at Smith College and made it a year and dropped out for a semester. Worked teaching environmental ed and then enrolled at Eastern Connecticut State.

WAND: [00:04:07] And that's where you finished?

KENTON: [00:04:09] That's where I finished.

WAND: [00:04:10] Uh huh. So did you go into Peace Corps as soon as you finished at Eastern Connecticut State, or did?

KENTON: [00:04:20] Yup.

WAND: [00:04:20] How did that decision come about?

KENTON: [00:04:22] No, I don't think I did. No, I did, yeah. I was, I was applying during the end of university. Um, it was, it was just time. It was the next thing. And, um, yeah, it wasn't a conscious decision. It was, it was just what I'm doing next. And I've always been going to do next.

WAND: [00:04:44] Right. Interesting.

KENTON: [00:04:46] Yeah.

WAND: [00:04:47] And was that pervasive in your, did your sister also carry that expectation of herself?

KENTON: [00:04:52] Not a bit. No. She's a, she's a city person. Yeah. Preferably a clean city with lots of coffee on every corner.

WAND: [00:05:01] Right. So. All right, so you applied and you must have gotten accepted. How, how did that come about?

KENTON: [00:05:11] The application process, in retrospect, I think is a very good screening tool for whether you have the persistence to make it through service. Um, my application process was seven months long, which I heard from other folks was about average. And, you know, if you're

missing a piece of information or a checkbox isn't checked, you wouldn't hear from Peace Corps about it. You just wouldn't have heard from them in a while. So you would call up and ask what's going on. So I think sticking with it and doing your own footwork, um, are requirements from the application process all the way through service. And I don't know if that's conscious on their part or not, but that seems how it worked out.

WAND: [00:06:00] So you had to persist.

KENTON: [00:06:05] Mm hmm.

WAND: [00:06:06] And were you given an option when you applied as to where you might serve, and if so, what, what did you state?

KENTON: [00:06:17] They said, as I remember, the form said something about you can indicate a preference. You may or may not get it, which again I understand is very different nowadays. Um, I said mountain or desert or island. I didn't specify a country.

WAND: [00:06:34] That's pretty broad. That left them a lot of flexibility. Okay, so what happened? When did you get your invitation and what was your reaction?

KENTON: [00:06:45] I don't know when exactly in the calendar year I got the invitation, but my reaction was it had, it had been building up for seven months. I don't, I don't remember specifically my reaction. I assume I was pretty excited. And, you know, it went from not a running in place feeling, but a, you know, I'm in the process, I'm applying, I'm applying, I'm applying. And then the momentum shifting forward to I'm going to serve. And I actually, I got my invitation to Haiti first and turned it down. And then I got an invitation to Mauritania and figured I was probably not going to get a third one, so I took it.

WAND: [00:07:29] And do you mind sharing why you rejected the Haiti invitation?

KENTON: [00:07:34] As I remember, political unrest and, um. The country description was pretty heavy on the Christian aspect, which seemed daunting. But then I ended up in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. So.

WAND: [00:07:56] So you went from, you were still deeply engrossed in a country that had a major religion associated with it.

KENTON: [00:08:05] Different to my own. I mean, the U.S. is fairly Christian as well. I don't know if it would show up in somebody else's literature as such, but I was raised Jewish, so I've always felt that contrast.

WAND: [00:08:16] Okay. So you started your training in September of 2000. Was that also the year you graduated from Eastern Connecticut State, or had you worked a year or so before, or a while before you, um, joined Peace Corps?

KENTON: [00:08:36] I think that must have been when I graduated, because I graduated high school in '95. And I must have had some kind of odd job. I've always worked. I always had, you know, something, but I can't remember what that might have been. I didn't have my first real job until I got back, because I remember showing Peace Corps pictures to my colleagues.

WAND: [00:08:59] Right. So, um, talk about training. Where did, where did you train? And, um, you were needing to leave your family too. Was there any, anything you remember particularly, uh, um, unusual about saying goodbye to your family and being off to the country, or off to training?

KENTON: [00:09:27] When my folks took me to the airport, I flew out of Bradley to Philadelphia, where we had orientation and first vaccinations and met, the cohort all met each other and played some icebreakers and that kind of thing. And at the airport. I think it's more in retrospect that that was another moment of enormous change, that I was going away to become someone else, and.

WAND: [00:10:00] Yeah.

KENTON: [00:10:01] A real, a real next stage, I think, but I think that's in retrospect. At the time, I was just, you know, getting on a plane. I'm 19 or 20 years old and just excited. And so we were in Philadelphia, we got to meet each other. We talked about what we were looking forward to and what we were apprehensive about. We got a taste of government medical bureaucracy, lots of lines, lots of shots. Some of those shots were pretty intense. Um, got us in every limb and the front and the back.

KENTON: [00:10:30] And then we got to Mauritania. I don't remember arrival. It was a long flight. And we must have stopped in Nouakchott, in the capital, and spent a night or two there. Maybe we went straight to Kaédi down in the south. There was, there was some training in the capital, and we had the *maison du paysage*, the Peace Corps house, and the old volunteers were there. And there was some welcoming and some cultural tips. And, you know, this is all going on for three months. So it's, it's kind of a blur what order things happened in. And we went down to Kaédi. I don't know, I think our host families were there to greet us when we arrived. And we were all posted with a family, and we'd come back to the training center.

KENTON: [00:11:24] And the day was broken up. You know, there are schedules out and their staff all around kind of observing everyone. Um, and there was group sessions about the technical topics. So ours was, you know, mud stoves and *pepinieres*, tree nurseries. Um, what else are we doing? Stage. And then language lessons was a much smaller group. My, my class was the three of us and Mukhtar, who was our teacher. And toward the end of training, it was Ramadan. So poor Mukhtar would just give us worksheets. And, you know, people aren't eating or drinking all day. But he still had to teach.

KENTON: [00:12:09] And we studied French, and toward the end of stage we got into Hassaniya Arabic a bit. But we all, everyone became fluent in French. But Mauritania has multiple ethnic groups and the more Arabic is Hassaniya. That's where I was. And more in the south along the Senegal River there's mostly Pulaar, but there's also Soninke and Wolof people. And I think my group just learned Hassaniya or Pulaar, depending on where you were going to be sent.

KENTON: [00:12:43] And the host family. There were, there was no father in my host family house, and of course, I could barely talk to them in French or Hassaniya at that point, but they were very kind and welcoming. Um, the kids had a good time watching me learn how to carry water on my head from the well.

KENTON: [00:13:05] And it was, uh, yeah, we were each issued a trunk, so we got our, our equipment. So we had a metal trunk, travel trunk, and it was all Chinese made, um, stuff that you saw everywhere in West Africa. So the same stuff, a big enamel bowl, a one liter cup to drink and or wash with. And we later had contests of who could bathe with the least water. Um, a blanket, a towel. Probably a couple other things, but that's all I remember being issued.

WAND: [00:13:41] Those were in your trunk?

KENTON: [00:13:43] Yeah. Oh, and a *madala*. Uh, a *madala* is like a seven foot long, three foot wide piece of foam with a with a cloth sewed over it. It's a portable bed. It's in the, in the hot season, or most times if it's not raining, you take your *madala* outside to sleep. And we also got a mosquito net. And maybe a pillow, and I think it was stuffed with plastic bags, very crinkly and not very soft. So we learned how to use all these things, and we learned how to name all these things. In some of the language lessons we'd sit and talk with each other, and some of them we'd go to the market with an assignment to practice a certain set of vocabulary words.

KENTON: [00:14:34] We had old volunteers come in, sometimes leading the technical trainings, sometimes cultural things. We were very busy. There were vaccinations now and then. A lot of meals together.

WAND: [00:14:57] How many were you?

KENTON: [00:15:00] We were. In my stage group, there was the ag-fo, the agro-forestry group, and there was also small business, small enterprise development or SED. So there was ag-fo and there was SED and there were fairly different kinds of people. If you just think of like farmers and finance people broadly, but all of, all of those farmers and finance people

are the kind of people who go to Peace Corps. So we had more in common than not. But maybe, maybe 20 in ag-fo and maybe 15 in SED?

KENTON: [00:15:38] And by the end of stage, of training, half of the group had ET'd, had early terminated service and gone home. And I think that was just half of the ag-fo. I'm not sure if that was SED and ag-fo. And the interesting part was of the ag-fo who remained and entered service, half of us extended for a third year. So.

WAND: [00:16:01] So how many, if you, if in your cohort you had 20 people initially.

KENTON: [00:16:07] Maybe? No idea if that's an accurate number.

WAND: [00:16:12] Right. Yeah. And about half of them, so maybe as many as ten left?

KENTON: [00:16:17] Maybe. And that may be an exaggeration. I don't know who I could possibly check it with. There's no Peace Corps in Mauritania anymore.

WAND: [00:16:23] Right. Yeah.

KENTON: [00:16:24] Yeah. They closed the program.

WAND: [00:16:26] Yeah, yeah. So and what was your sense about why they left?

KENTON: [00:16:32] Somebody told us. I don't know if it was the director. It was somebody, some staff member, an American staff member said that Mauritania was considered a hardship country in Peace Corps. Um, and I think the things that would make it so, if that was accurate, would be the weather. Um, you know, it's the Sahara Desert. So in the hot season, it's 120 degrees for several months.

WAND: [00:16:59] And no air conditioning.

KENTON: [00:17:00] No air conditioning. No, I mean, there's air conditioning if you make friends with the European NGOs and go visit them at their houses. Or if you, um, are in the capital, um.

KENTON: [00:17:14] Religious proselytizing, kind of well-meant harassment. I never felt unsafe because of religion, but it would, it would just pop up and pop up. You know, you were having a normal conversation, or what I felt was a normal conversation about the trees we were planting, or town gossip or the weather or just, you know, um. And I would often, at first it was being blindsided. And then later I got kind of cynical, and I'd wait for it, for someone to encourage me to pray to Allah and sometimes with a visual aid. I, more than once somebody lit a lighter and pointed at the flame to illustrate that if I did not become Muslim, that I was going to the fire. So there was that.

KENTON: [00:17:56] But they, but the, the harassment there, at least because they were so strictly religious, there wasn't physical harassment. Like men would not touch a woman they weren't related to in public, um, at least. You know, people had people climbing over the walls because there's, uh, perceptions of who we are and what we're like because of where we come from and how we dress.

WAND: [00:18:24] Explain that just a bit. What were those perceptions?

KENTON: [00:18:28] Well, a woman who doesn't cover her hair is is loose and available kind of thing. Um, women wearing pants, a lot of it was visual. And, yeah, non-Muslims are just, I mean, some people, some few people and even, even, like, out in the Badia, out in the bush, there were people who. There was, there was an imam who was the host dad of a friend of mine who was just so curious and so interested and not pressuring, but just humanly curious about different religions and different ways of believing. But that was very unusual. It was, it was.

KENTON: [00:19:10] Most people are not very literate out in the, out in the Badia. So they, there's, I think kind of the basic understanding of what Islam is and what. And if you're not Muslim, then you're, to many people, not worth respect or not, not worth the same respect as people who are believers. I

only once had a woman refuse to shake my hand because I was unclean. So that was pretty weird.

WAND: [00:19:45] So in terms of the attitude about women, if they didn't cover their hair or they wore pants without a tunic covering their thighs, uh, what was the attitude? Was the attitude then that you were perhaps available?

KENTON: [00:20:00] Mm hmm.

WAND: [00:20:00] Okay.

KENTON: [00:20:00] Yeah, there was lots of, lots of hissing and whistling kind of sexual harassment, but no grabbing. That was the difference. And I didn't travel much, um, while I was there. I wish I'd traveled more around the continent. But friends who went to, you know, Morocco and Nigeria and South Africa said that the physical harassment was much more aggressive, that people would actually grab you and pinch you and so on. And that really didn't happen in Mauritania.

KENTON: [00:20:26] And I could use it to my advantage. Once I learned Hassaniya, I was in the market once, and a man was kind of following me in a, in a sleazy way and going [hisses], um. And I sat down with the market women, just plunked down and shouted in Hassaniya, I don't know you! Why are you talking to me? You're not from my family. You're not from my village. Stop talking to me! And the women all gave it to him. They were yelling at him and telling him to leave this decent girl alone and so on. You know, I'd become culturally literate enough to know what buttons to press to get help.

WAND: [00:21:03] And did, did you sit on that day, did you sit among women you knew or were these, knew, these were women?

KENTON: [00:21:09] This was in the city.

WAND: [00:21:10] This was in the city. And they didn't know you and you didn't know them, but you sat with them and shouted out at him, called him out for what he was doing, and they joined you.

KENTON: [00:21:22] Mm hmm. They found my, my behavior appropriate. And I mean, they may have known me by sight because I, when I would go into the capital, I would, I would go wandering in the market frequently. And that was one of, one of my spots to kind of ground. And I need a lot of alone time, or like wandering, exploring kind of time. And that was just, walking around the city was one way to do that. So I had been in that in that space many times, but I didn't. There was only a few people that I spoke to regularly, and we knew each other by name and face, like there was the money changers I always went to. I knew them, um, and there was a couple of women who made cloth, but most, most people, I was just in my own head. I wasn't, I didn't, um, make as many personal connections in retrospect as I wish I would have. I had, I got stuck in my own experience. I wish I had, I had opened up more and sulked less.

WAND: [00:22:21] Did you cover your hair?

KENTON: [00:22:23] I did. I wore kind of a kind of a fisherman's hat, like a, like a cap with a brim all the way around.

WAND: [00:22:30] And put your hair inside of it?

KENTON: [00:22:32] I think I had a ponytail coming out the back.

WAND: [00:22:35] And that was ok, that was acceptable to them?

KENTON: [00:22:38] Yeah. I mean, a lot of, a lot of Peace Corps women didn't cover their hair at all. There's, you know, there's this middle ground of neither fish nor fowl where you're not Mauritanian so the rules don't fully apply. Although people really wish you would cover yourself up, it'd be much more decent, but they're not going to, um. Well, they are going to tell you to cover up, but, um, yeah, it was, it was a funny middle ground. There was some leeway like that. Like that, I was think of that Albanian custom of the unmarried woman being able to live as a man in that role, and it's accepted and just kind of switching. So we were somewhere in between male and female in terms of what we could wear and do and say and where we could go.

KENTON: [00:23:22] And often if I was having a meeting about a project, I would be the only woman in that space, even though there are women who are political leaders and, you know, strong leaders in the family. And I don't think I know very much about really what kind of male-female power dynamics are like there. I know what it was like in specific families, but I wouldn't be able to make accurate generalizations. Because there are women leaders, whatever that means. But the, like, politicians were, seemed mostly to be men, mostly.

WAND: [00:24:05] These are areas that I would love to explore with you a little further. And, and before we, we do that, maybe you can tell us how, uh, we've officially got you into training here. And you were with a host family there and learning a lot about the country. So if there's anything else that you'd like to say about training that you're remembering, this would be a great time. And then we'll move into your permanent assignment or your, whatever your next assignment was.

KENTON: [00:24:40] I think I want to describe the context of a few images that, that recur to me when I think about Peace Corps from training. One image is, I think I was off to language class in the morning and the daughter of the house was, could be 12 or 13, and she was doing something menial and gross with the dishes. I think she was scrubbing them with sand or something. It was her job to do that every day. She was kind of the, the workhorse, but she was, she was the daughter of the family and did a lot of work. Um, richer families would actually have slaves, literal slaves that which still exist in Mauritania. And like, I can talk more about that later. But this was, you know, she just got the crap jobs because she was the youngest female.

KENTON: [00:25:28] And I remember her watching me leave for class. And just something about, I don't, I don't think I ever spoke to her much. She showed me how to carry water on my head, but other than logistics. But, you know, maybe I was, maybe I made this up and maybe I really saw it, but it seemed like she was looking at me just from, from another world. And I think about what is she doing now and the chances I have had and the resources I have consumed, and just the magnitude of the difference

in our lives. And I don't even remember her name, but I remember her looking at me that morning.

WAND: [00:26:07] And did, could you read her expression?

KENTON: [00:26:10] That's what I read from it. I don't know if that was me projecting or if she was just kind of glancing up and I caught it in a moment of intensity.

WAND: [00:26:19] Right. And I'm going to see if I can interpret what your, what you were reading, which was perhaps a mix of, of, um, resentment because you were doing something that she, that was totally out of her reach. Does that?

KENTON: [00:26:39] Yeah, that resonates. Maybe, maybe envy, maybe resentment, maybe just curiosity.

WAND: [00:26:49] Was she literate?

KENTON: [00:26:53] I think so. But I think, you know, to the, to probably, she probably went to school until puberty hit. So whatever writing you can get in in that time. And I think, I think only boys went to madrassas and learned to read and write the Quran, or at least just memorize it. They may not have actually read and written, but I don't think girls were sent to Koranic study.

WAND: [00:27:30] And you said there was another image, or a few more images from training?

KENTON: [00:27:34] Uh, another one from training is locusts. And it was, I think it was, let's see, it was September. The rainy season was maybe just ending. I don't remember, but, but there were locusts, um, and all kinds of flying things because there was water around. And one of my cohort mates dared me to stand under the, dared anyone to stand under the, the light bulb in our training space. We had a big, um, mesh tent to try to keep bugs out, but of course they were all in. And he would, he would pay, you

know, 40 ouguiyas, the Mauritanian money, to whoever could stand there for 30 second.

KENTON: [00:28:20] So I jumped up and I wrapped my scarf around my face, because we all had a big, a big cloth, which actually one of our later newsletters, volunteer newsletter, was 101 uses for your *howley*, which is just a big piece of cloth, a pillow, skirt, all of those things. So I wrapped my scarf around my head and stepped onto the light and stood there for 40 seconds with the bugs bouncing, bouncing off the outside. And we had a wonderful discussion about whether or not that was cheating, but just the camaraderie and the grossness of it. And, um, the locusts being kind of a normal thing, and we're going to play with it and engage with this and just all of it. That was a really good moment. And that volunteer, Jared, was one of my good friends throughout service. Um, so that's another one.

KENTON: [00:29:09] And another image, I suppose, would be the donkey graveyard, um, just on the edge of town. I mean, there was, there was carcasses everywhere, but particularly for the donkeys. They were in this one cactus field, um, as you were coming into town. And we got used to, you know, seeing things in all stages of decay. And donkeys have a terrible life there. Um. I would like to adopt one some day and give it a good life to make up for all the rest of them that are getting their tails beaten off, literally. A friend of mine saw that happen. Um, and, you know, maybe an environment that harsh, you don't think of animal cruelty in the same way. So there's a few images, I mean.

KENTON: [00:30:01] And being sick in my room, in my, it was a cement cube with like a logs and thatched roof. In the afternoon, in kind of a semi-feverish haze, and I was just kind of listening to the bugs eat the roof and there's like little bitey sounds and a little, a little bit of dust filtering down from the roof. And very bright sunlight coming in from after, from outside, and how dark it was inside and how bright outside. And the square room made a, what do you call it, a camera obscura. And the shadows of people were going across my wall upside down. And it was just such a strange but totally comfortable moment. I haven't thought of that in years.

WAND: [00:30:55] Yeah. Almost surreal.

KENTON: [00:30:56] Very. Yeah. Just kind of suspended in between doing anything. And I didn't go to language class. I don't know what I was sick with, probably something intestinal. Yeah, but feverish too. And so it was just, just resting and having this weird moment. And that same day or week that I was sick. Um, just like anywhere, I think, there's a bit of a taboo around flatulence, but especially there, it's, it's. Some of the volunteers, the old volunteers stressed it to us as if it was especially grave. Like I wouldn't make fart jokes in a professional setting in the U.S., um, and they just, it was just really, really forbidden. And there's.

KENTON: [00:31:51] So anyway, I was, I was home, you know, laying on my *madala*, getting better, and the grandmother of the house. So there's, there's officially more respect for elders there than I think we formally assign here. Um, so this very dignified person was sitting on the platform in the middle of a yard, and, and I don't think she knew I was there. And she looked around very furtively and lifted her leg and farted. And it was pretty funny. And she didn't know I was there, and I didn't greet her.

KENTON: [00:32:28] And, and the first word I really recognized in Hassaniya when I heard people speaking, it was skit, which means listen or hear me. Um, when the, when, when my host mom's friends would come over or relatives and, again, I wish I knew who these people are. I wish I had engaged more. Um, but you'd hear them all talking and you'd hear, you know, laughing and telling stories and lots of skit, skits, skit. Like, listen, listen, listen to this story. Or listen, honey, or whatever it would translate as. But skit was the first word I got in Hassaniya.

WAND: [00:33:04] And you got it in the context in which it was used.

KENTON: [00:33:08] Yeah, it stood out as a word from the flow of language. You know, when you don't know a language, it's just a, it's just a river of sound. And then when you can pull words and meaning.

WAND: [00:33:18] Yeah, it's a breakthrough.

KENTON: [00:33:20] Yeah.

WAND: [00:33:20] It's a breakthrough in language learning. Yeah. So are we ready to yank you out of your comfort, shall we say, comfortable training?

KENTON: [00:33:33] I was about to go on a tangent about language instruction in the U.S. versus in Peace Corps and school.

WAND: [00:33:38] Well, if we have time, let's get back to that.

KENTON: [00:33:40] Okay.

WAND: [00:33:41] But let's take you to your first assignment. Or maybe it was your.

KENTON: [00:33:45] Only assignment.

WAND: [00:33:45] Only assignment. Okay.

KENTON: [00:33:48] So I was in the regional capital of Ayoun el Atrous in the Hodh El Gharbi region, which is the next to last governorate going east from Nouakchott. It's about, I don't know, 200 miles inland from the Atlantic coast. And regional capital, so, you know, the high school and the airport. And by the end of my service, there was an internet cafe. The new volunteers were coming in with laptops, which was bizarre to us. Um, and that's all, that's all normal now. Um, I don't know how many people live there. I want to say around 10,000 if you count the skirting villages.

KENTON: [00:34:30] And I can't remember if we were assigned a host family when we got there. The village volunteers were because they had to have somewhere to live. And I, I didn't end up having a host family that I lived with the whole time in service. Um. I rented a few different rooms, and I was friends with a couple of families that I would visit regularly, but I didn't have my host family as assigned.

WAND: [00:35:05] The rooms that you rented, were they in family homes?

KENTON: [00:35:08] Yep. yeah. They didn't have non, there wasn't a hotel.

WAND: [00:35:12] A commercial kind of leasing opportunity. So you just rented a private home from a private family.

KENTON: [00:35:19] And a room in the compound, in the courtyard.

WAND: [00:35:21] Uh huh.

KENTON: [00:35:21] Yeah, I lived in the *maison de passage* for a while.

WAND: [00:35:25] What is that?

KENTON: [00:35:25] The Peace Corps house, like the regional house. And kind of, um, not managed it, but I was like kind of a point of contact for the village volunteers. Like, I would make sure that when they came in that their mail was already at the house, unless they, unless they liked to go to the post office. But our postmaster was pretty difficult, and I had a good working relationship with him after a while, which involved, um, attempts of keeping our packages from us to try to get bribes slash treats slash some of the goodies we were obviously receiving from America. And we would share some things.

KENTON: [00:36:06] But we got to be buddies, I think I would say, after some shouting matches and after an incident where he was trying to say we had no mail, but I could see it in the back room, so I just jumped the counter because I knew he wouldn't touch me and I just walked in and took them. And then helped him sweep up the post office and shut the shutters and put things down for the end of the day, like, no hard feelings, but these are mine. Um, and he, he was, yeah, the kind of person that got over it and thought that was kind of funny. He was just trying to see how, how, what he, what he could get from us. Yeah. Um, so, you know, truce.

KENTON: [00:36:48] The paved road went through Ayoun. It's called the Road of Hope. And the joke was, where you hope there's a road. Um, for a whole year of service, there were so many pits and holes and potholes and gouge spots and it was falling apart, and they were fixing it so there was these divots, and you had to, like, detour into the desert. And, um, I had a

moment of mortality of, of really, this really feels like this is the trip that I'm going to die on. And I accepted that and came to peace with it because of the speed and the bad road and the bad car. And we're, you know, going on these what felt like very steep sideways angles, way too fast over bumps. Um, so I just kind of accepted that.

KENTON: [00:37:35] It was I think about ten hours by, 10 to 12 hours by Peace Corps car from the capital to get to Ayoun el Atrous. About eight hours if you rode with one of the Belgians or the French or the German, because they had super nice cars and drove extremely fast. And anywhere from 12 to, 12 hours to a few days if you took local transport. Um. Which was pretty full, 13 people on a station wagon. Goats tied to the sides.

WAND: [00:38:18] And this was the distance between the regional capital in which you lived and the capital of the, of the country?

KENTON: [00:38:29] Correct.

WAND: [00:38:30] Okay.

KENTON: [00:38:31] And then from Ayoun out to the villages was another several hours just across the desert. And the best truck was the Toyota Hilux, and they called it Helux with the French accent. So if you had a Hilux, you had a good car, and they would make it across the desert. There's a lot in common with driving in snow and driving in sand. I've learned since coming back to New England.

KENTON: [00:38:57] So I was assigned as an agroforestry volunteer with the specific projects of mud stoves and vegetable gardening. And I don't know if I already thought that vegetable gardening was a little misplaced in a desert pastoral country with lots of camels and sheep and goats and not many vegetable gardens. Um, but I definitely thought that after a little while there. People were not interested unless it was for the goats to eat.

WAND: [00:39:38] And this, is this because they didn't have vegetables as part of their diets?

KENTON: [00:39:46] Potatoes. Lots of potatoes that most, I think they came up from Mali. Potatoes and onions were really the only vegetables. So maybe this goes back to the comment about it being a hardship country is the food. Um, a lot of couscous and rice, uh, dressed with, um, I would call it rancid. There's probably some culinary term for doing this on purpose to butter and milk, but sour milk and sour melted butter as, as dressing. Sour milk. Um, and people in Mauritania say they're, in the, in the hot season, they go out to the countryside and graze with the animals and drink milk. And people commonly say, I'm going to drink milk. And we learned that in training.

KENTON: [00:40:30] One of the old volunteers was taking us on a, on a walk or, you know, a language, just around, around the town where we were having training. And somebody called out, where are you going? In Hassaniya, and he was translating this for us later. And he answered, we're going to drink milk. And they cracked up, the whole family that was, you know, being neighborly nosy of where you're going. They thought that was the greatest thing, because that's the common answer. Like going to drink milk is a, is a, that's how you describe going to your country home.

WAND: [00:40:58] Which means that they would be able to get fresh milk every day from those animals. They didn't have to worry about refrigeration, and they didn't have to worry about sour milk because it would be fresh from the animals.

KENTON: [00:41:09] And they don't mind sour milk.

WAND: [00:41:11] Right.

KENTON: [00:41:11] They like it.

WAND: [00:41:11] They're used to it.

KENTON: [00:41:12] Yeah.

WAND: [00:41:12] But this was a treat.

KENTON: [00:41:14] Yeah. Yeah, a seasonal treat. So we're going out to the Badia to drink milk and, yeah. And year round people drink *zorig* which is, um, either condensed milk or sour milk from cow or camel or sheep or what have you, um, watered down with a lot of sugar and whisked. And it's pretty good.

WAND: [00:41:39] I was going to say it sounds good to me.

KENTON: [00:41:41] Yeah. Well, sour milk.

WAND: [00:41:42] Yeah, I like sour milk. I mean, I eat yogurt, you know, that's sour milk, one form.

KENTON: [00:41:49] In a sense.

WAND: [00:41:49] Yeah, yeah. Cultured.

KENTON: [00:41:52] So there's couscous and *zorig*, potatoes and onions, and *meshwi*, which is, um, I guess you'd call it barbecued. Uh, you could, if you're on the road, if you're on the Road of Hope between towns, or you're in a town, you can recognize a restaurant because they would have a goat carcass skinned and opened with the ribs hanging from the outside of the, of the thatch structure. So that's a restaurant if they have the goat displayed. So you go in and order *meshwi* and they hack off a chunk of it and put it on the coals and cook it. And that was the protein available. And then for a few weeks, I don't remember what time of year, but there were mangoes.

WAND: [00:42:54] So, um, talk a bit about how you, you were trained, you were introduced to the language, you got to your assignment. And how did you go about trying to work? Did you have a host country counterpart? And how did you work with that person? And what kinds of projects were either underway or that you worked with to initiate perhaps? Or how did you go about ingratiating yourself into the community and a work project?

KENTON: [00:43:35] So I had a counterpart at the Ministry of Agriculture, which isn't the right title. I can't remember the full, exactly how they called it. Um, but

he was, I think, the equivalent of an extension agent. And he was a very, a very curious person. Um, so besides the mud stoves, which is, which is a formed, customized ring of cooled mud, um, dried, that you put your cooking pot in so that you're using less wood for fuel. A lot of places the women are walking for hours and hours and hours, the majority of their day, to pick up what twigs they can. So this is supposed to save, save wood because it's not an open fire. It's got a big opening and a little opening on the other side, and the, it's more efficient use of fuel. And in the cook pot fits right into the ring, kind of, um, not quite airtight. So that was one project.

WAND: [00:44:32] And so, just so that I get, help me get the image. The clay was formed into a bowl?

KENTON: [00:44:40] No, on the ground you would build a ring.

WAND: [00:44:42] Okay.

KENTON: [00:44:42] A ring in place.

WAND: [00:44:43] Yeah. And then how did you get the wood, or did you put the wood in the bottom?

KENTON: [00:44:48] Yeah. And on, on, on one side in the ring. You know, imagine it like city walls. There's gates and there's a big gate on one side and a tiny gate relatively on the opposite side. Um, so the big one was big enough to poke in a few sticks at a time, so you'd start your fire, then put the cook pot on top. So it was, it was for a specific pot, and it was permanent in location. And one of the women that I was, became close with, it was, they were kind of like my friend host family. I spent the most time hanging out with them and got the honorary name of that family. They would address me as Liz Jara. Um, and they were the Jara family. Remind, remind me to talk about Jaras and Jallows and the last name joking relationship thing, which you may have already heard about if you talk to people who are in West Africa. Um, beans is the, is the key there.

KENTON: [00:45:40] Um, so the Jaras, uh, the mom explained that she moves her pot around the yard, whether she's dyeing clothes or cooking food or, you know, doing different things. And based on what the wind is doing, where the sun is. She doesn't want to be out in the middle of the sun. She's going to move it over under the shade of the wall and so on. And I remember that being kind of a revelation about appropriate technology and this, this key way of functioning was something that this apparently Africa wide, as far as I knew, Peace Corps projects had not told us about or taken into account, and they were promoting the mud stoves. Um, and maybe she was unusual in how much she moved it around, but I don't, I don't think so from what I saw.

WAND: [00:46:25] Was her cooking point a mud stove, in essence, or did she just?

KENTON: [00:46:31] Three stones.

WAND: [00:46:31] Just stones.

KENTON: [00:46:33] Three stones.

WAND: [00:46:33] Three stones.

KENTON: [00:46:34] Yep.

WAND: [00:46:34] So that, that particular, uh, engineering, if you will, would have burned more fuel because it had so much draft.

KENTON: [00:46:45] Yep, yep. More fuel. But she could move it where she wanted.

WAND: [00:46:48] Right.

KENTON: [00:46:49] And I don't know where they got wood there were, there were not trees around, it was the Sahara. There was a few trees. There were also, another project that made me suspicious, um, of what I was doing there was that the trees, *Prosopis juliflora*, was highly promoted. It has a very, it's very fast growing. It has a long taproot. It had been promoted for

a decade or two before I got there. And I think right around when I was getting there, they were realizing that these, or maybe, maybe a little after I was there, uh, people were realizing that these trees grew so fast and so deep that they were drying up wells, they were drinking the wells. So, again, something that, you know, we thought, we being the establishment that I was there as a part of, we knew best and put it on people, um, who had been encouraged to think that we knew best. So the whole, the post-colonial stuff, um, was troubling.

WAND: [00:47:52] Persisted. Right. So when you became aware of some of these things, did you loop that information back into the Peace Corps offices and talk about trying to re, redo the approach or rethink this particular project?

KENTON: [00:48:11] I probably made a comment in my quarterly report. You know, this didn't work because. But I don't think I thought to, to advocate or escalate it. Yeah. And I don't know what good that would have done. Maybe it would have, maybe it wouldn't. Um.

KENTON: [00:48:32] I'm talking about projects and the context and training and I'm, I have trouble disentangling my attitude toward the experience with the experiences I was having, and I wonder still how much of where my head was at had to do with mefloquine. We had this anti-malaria medication, which has since been discontinued. It's been tied to psychosis and murder suicide and all kinds of pretty unhealthy things. Um, I lost a lot of weight. I lost some of my hair. I had some nightmares and depression that may or may not have been linked to mefloquine or just the whole intensity of the experience, so it's hard to disentangle that. And I was having a lot of feelings and were they my feelings or were they anti-malarial feelings?

WAND: [00:49:26] Hmm. In retrospect, can you sort of point to a time in your experience after having started, starting to take the anti-malaria, uh, treatment or drug. Uh, is there any time that you remember distinctly saying I first began to feel depressed, or I first began to lose weight, or I first began to lose my hair?

KENTON: [00:49:54] No, no. I think we took our first pill in Philadelphia before we got on a plane. And then it was every week or every two weeks. And I took

mine. There were volunteers who didn't take it at all, which was grounds for separation if HQ found out. Um, there were volunteers who just didn't take it during the hot, during the dry season because there weren't mosquitoes out, and there were volunteers who took it the whole time. And in retrospect, I would have stopped during the dry season and just seen if there was a difference. Um, but I was just rolling along.

WAND: [00:50:26] Forging, persevering despite the fact that you. And talk a little bit about the depression you were feeling, did it come in waves or was it kind of a subterranean part of your every day and you just tried to ignore it?

KENTON: [00:50:43] I think both. I think kind of ongoing and I would, I would be reminded that it was there when I was having a great time, you know, a workshop went well, or I mastered a new sentence, or I learned how to make a dish or, you know, in some way was actively engaging and still doing things. And I would notice how great that was. Um. But yeah, I think, I think it was just kind of ongoing.

KENTON: [00:51:11] I only had a couple nightmares. And I will say that as open as Peace Corps volunteers are about everything that's going on with each other. I mean, these are your, you know, in a sense, your only people who know who you are or who you were and how close you get. So we're talking about, you know, everything. Um, you know, our memories and who we are and our bowel movements and what texture they are, you know, all of it. But I never heard anybody tell a mefloquine dream because they were that bad. They make you worry about your sanity. Um, yeah. The ones I had did just really, really, like, violent and awful. And, like, I never read much comic book superhero comic books with guts and bleeds and explosions. But that's all I'm going to say about that.

WAND: [00:52:06] Let's talk a bit about the local people. Who did you befriend? And, and, um, what are the kinds of experiences did you share with them? You talked a little bit about some of the women that you interacted with in the marketplace, but on an on-going basis, and, and this extension agent who worked with your counterpart.

KENTON: [00:52:31] Mm hmm.

WAND: [00:52:32] Um, and who else? You know, did you become close with any of the local women and how did that affect your life?

KENTON: [00:52:41] So my counterpart was Mahmoud Al Elisali and I spent a lot of time at his house and his very patient wife let us tinker around with bio gas, which was another one of the Africa wide efforts. There were a girls mentoring center, mud stoves, and bio gas were the main, and moringa oleifera trees. Those were my main projects.

KENTON: [00:53:06] And the bio-gas was trying to create very, very small scale, like household scale or maybe village scale, um, anaerobic digesters of manure to produce cooking fuel, again to save wood. And so Mahmoud's wife let us set up 50 gallon drums in her yard, and we would go out collecting cow dung, um, dried cow dung, and smashing it up, uh, with a mortar and pestle and putting it into the, into the barrels through the like, you know, three inch wide opening, which took a while. And then fill it with water and then close it and get the valves and get the tubes and get the tank. And so all this stuff and she, she very patiently like tried cooking with the gas, which wasn't much gas and it wasn't very good quality.

KENTON: [00:54:00] And you know, I had, I have no chemical or engineering background. Um, so I don't know if it was the design that Peace Corps provided or it was something we did wrong, but it just never really produced. And I read about it, bio-gas technology, a bit afterward. I didn't have really access to, to internet. I mean, the way it is now, you just think, oh, you just look it up and you can learn anything you want to learn. Anything, it's magical. But, but, you know, we had the one internet cafe and it was this much per hour and sometimes it was out. So it was a different, um, and also like, I didn't put in the effort that I could have to really learn more in retrospect. But anyway, for whatever reason, it didn't work very well.

KENTON: [00:54:46] And I learned that, you know, in China, they're exploring household or village sized biogas. And the digester and the gas tank are like the size of a, of a room, like the size of a garage. And we had 50

gallon drums. So for whatever reason. So Mahmoud and I worked on that. And then the moringa oleifera trees. Um, I made friends with Chun, who became probably my closest friend, and his family were Jaras, and they became kind of my friend neighborhood host family. Mamadou Coulibaly and he was known as Chun. And he had a garden on the back edge of town across where I later discovered in the rainy season there was a flash flood path. We got trapped in the garden with, with him and a couple of cousins, like all, I think for a night until the water went down, which was which was normal for them, but surprising for me.

KENTON: [00:55:54] But he ran a small garden. He produced some vegetables. He thought they were interesting, but, you know, people didn't really buy them. Um, his main income was cultivating plots of mint and they were rented, the space and the service were rented by women from town who sold the mint in the market. So they would pay him to cultivate it, and they would come and cut it and pick up their mint and take it. So it was this whole contract arrangement, and he knew whose plots were whose. And so he cultivated that. And he gave me some space to plant moringa trees, which is this unbelievably nutritious. I used to know all the statistics, and I could spout them in three different languages. And I wrote a beautiful fact sheet, um, about the nutritional content. But it's a leguminous tree, so nitrogen fixing in the soil, and just terrific levels of vitamins. And you can in, uh.

KENTON: [00:56:48] In Central America and in Sri Lanka and in further south in Africa, it's grown commonly as a living fence, or it's grown for the, for the pods, which are eaten like beans. And I was cultivating it as a cut and come again. So kind of like keeping it small and not allowing it to grow into a tree. And we would grow it, dry the leaves, pound them into powder, and then just add the powder as a nutritional supplement. So that was a main project of mine. And that was actually what made me stay for a third year was to make the two years have been worth it, because I was just starting to get in with the gardening cooperatives that Mahmoud had introduced me to people, and then I would figure out how to make it out to their village or to their, um, garden site, um, and, and provide a training.

KENTON: [00:57:35] And by the end of my third year, I was wandering around in the back, taking pictures while the cooperatives led each other in the training or provided a training for another cooperative that was visiting. So I think that was relatively successful, although, again, you know, lingering cynicism. I'm sure the goats have eaten all those trees by now.

KENTON: [00:57:56] And so I Chun gave me space and I tested spacing and fertilizer and watering. And so I had close spacing. And then a little further and just to see how, how, how the little trees did, how the seedlings did, depending on spacing. Um, and I built a, you know, bucket on a platform, drip irrigation. I don't know where the materials for that came from, if it was one of the European NGOs gave me that stuff, or did I write a Peace Corps partnership? I did, I did write a Peace Corps partnership. And my dad back home, um, raised a bunch of money, which was then sent, and I can't remember which project that was for that, that application. I think it was moringa trees. So, you know, fencing and. Or maybe it was for the girls mentoring center.

WAND: [00:58:53] So you helped, you worked on a girls mentoring center as well?

KENTON: [00:58:57] Yep. That was another continent wide or region wide effort. Um. And yeah, the idea was keep girls in school, foster girls' education. You know, we know the research that links educated women to better health, health outcomes for all people. Um, so I found a space at the high school. You know, I just introduced myself to the officials and, um, at the school and explained the project and got permission to clean up a building that was kind of falling apart, but kind of usable. Fix the windows, put in electricity, bring in computers, chairs, paper, markers.

WAND: [00:59:39] So let me just ask a little clarification. In terms of this girls, um, mentoring center, did local people help you with the upgrade of the center, or was this really a Peace Corps volunteer effort, or was it your working on your own or did somebody else join you?

KENTON: [01:00:02] In my case, it was working in cooperation with the school officials, including some teachers in the next big town over, which was about, I don't know, six hours, which it's easier to talk about time than

distance because it was irregular, how long it would. Uh, they, they had local people very much involved, including my friend later married one of the guys, the electrician that she met through that project and they live in D.C. now. Um, yeah. It depended on place to place. In some places it was teams of volunteers working with some local people. You had to have local, uh, involvement. Um, in my case, it was mostly me. And I got pretty burned out after a year of, uh, building things. You know, I got all the materials in the capital and brought them back out to Ayoun.

KENTON: [01:00:53] Um, you know, as cynical as I am and don't think I did much, it feels great to describe all these projects I had that I really was trying. Um. So we had the opening ceremony and this was another one, this was another one of those image moments where very clearly my perception and the local perception were almost opposite of each other. So I had set it up for the opening of the *centre de mentorat pour filles*. And, you know, we'd invited the officials, the girls mentoring center. Um, and I had set it up for the girls who had been selected by the teachers through the school as, um, you know, that would benefit the most. I think they had to be the top in their, in their grade. Um, and I'd put them up front as these are the girls who are going to benefit from this center.

KENTON: [01:01:54] So when my counterpart at the school, not Mahmoud, this was one of the teachers, one of the administrators, who'd been the most involved. Um, he was helping me set up the room and make sure it was all ready for the official opening, and changed around the seating arrangements so that the officials were at the front and the girls were on the floor, which. So that's how that goes.

WAND: [01:02:18] So you had to go with the flow?

KENTON: [01:02:20] Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

WAND: [01:02:21] Yeah, yeah. Right. Even though it was exactly the opposite of the emphasis you wanted.

KENTON: [01:02:25] Exactly. Yeah, yeah. And I, and I couldn't, you know, uh, nay say that. Um, and then, you know, I handed it off to a couple other

volunteers because I had really, um. I just burned out on that project, so I handed it off to incoming volunteers once they'd been there, you know, a few months and knew people and were willing to. And, um, when I later heard that, you know, the officials took a computer or two and it was, it was just a resource, uh, for them.

WAND: [01:02:57] So at the center. So your involvement then extended over some months, or was that during your third year?

KENTON: [01:03:06] That was during my mid second to mid third year.

WAND: [01:03:12] And so you stayed involved in helping to sort of?

KENTON: [01:03:16] Very little, very little.

WAND: [01:03:18] So mostly it was run by local people?

KENTON: [01:03:21] Local people and volunteers. Yeah. There were two, uh, volunteers in Peace Corps.

WAND: [01:03:25] Yeah.

KENTON: [01:03:26] Yeah. And I think we were we were too few and too new and, um, they didn't have enough local support. And I don't know if it's still open or not.

WAND: [01:03:35] Right.

KENTON: [01:03:35] I know the one in Kiffa, the next regional capital over, um, that went for a while. Like they were able to hand it off to next volunteers, next volunteers. Where I think, I think there was a gap in service in Ayoun too. And I think all the, all the materials, my guess is that they just went into various offices or homes or wherever. Or maybe, maybe, maybe they're still going. Maybe there was an innovative teacher who got into it. You never know.

WAND: [01:04:01] Yeah. Right. There's so many more things we can talk about, but just a couple of things that come to mind in terms of your service there. And, um, what about contact with home during the time that you were serving, those three years? Did you, did you come home at all? Did you have visitors from home at to your site?

KENTON: [01:04:24] I went home twice for weddings. Um, and my dad came out and spent several weeks, maybe a month. Um, yeah. He was excited and my mom said there was no way she was going after what she had heard about the food and the weather and all this and that. But he was just thrilled to, to get back over there. And he had a great time. And he helped me see it differently. You know, I had, I had become so just down. I remember we were taking, um, the local taxi because Mauritania had one plane at that point and we had bought our tickets. But then the president was using the plane so we couldn't go on the plane. Um, so we got on a local taxi, which involves waiting in the taxi yard. Um, and each town has an area where the taxis are, and that just means somebody owns a car.

KENTON: [01:05:17] Um, and there's different areas for going to different places. So I knew where the taxis going east congregated. So we go there and we got my dad some, you know, local clothes and sunblock and, uh, you tell, you find a car that's going where you want to go. And when it's full, you go. Um, so we went and we bought ourselves three seats thinking that we would actually have some elbow room. They just, they just put in as many people as, as will fit, which is a different way of thinking about fit, um, than an American car. So a station wagon, there would be 2 or 3 people in the front passenger seat, 4 or 5 people in the middle row, and then installed seats in the back, um, and between 4 and 6 people back there. And then all the bags on the roof and the goats or sheep in bags tied to the sides of the vehicle.

KENTON: [01:06:04] So we had bought our three seats, but there was, there was a very large woman and large there is specifically beautiful. They, I don't know if they still do this. I think they're shifting from force feeding women to make them fat and beautiful on milk to more Western types of eating disorders. You know, everybody's got to have opinions about how women's bodies are supposed to be. But yeah, they'll tie sticks together

and, uh, force a girl's fingers between the sticks to distract her from how sick she feels from drinking gallons and gallons of milk and sugar to make her fat. Um, so that happened. So one of these beautiful women, um, was in the same row as us. And so she, she just kept expanding as the as the ride went on, and it was 20 something hours. So we get out to Ayoun.

KENTON: [01:06:58] But at sunset, we stopped on the side of the road to pray, five times a day. They're always praying. And my habitual defenses were, great, here we go. I'm going to get harassed to pray to Allah and face Mecca and told I'm going to the fire. And while I'm kind of internally grumbling, I hear my dad just kind of gasping in wonder and he points out what we're looking at, which is, you know, this red sand and blue and white robes and the sun setting and just this incredible, like, beautiful landscape and different place and the people in it. And he was looking at it as a visitor and able to appreciate it, where I wasn't in it enough to not think about it. But I was there, but still an outsider. So I had that, I hadn't thought to just look at it and not think about how I was feeling about it. So that was really helpful to have his perspective on that.

KENTON: [01:08:05] Yeah. He said when he was in Peace Corps, you couldn't go home.

WAND: [01:08:08] No.

KENTON: [01:08:08] No. Yeah. No, but I went home twice. Um, yeah. To a wedding. To a couple of weddings.

WAND: [01:08:19] Right, right.

KENTON: [01:08:20] Yeah. And that was my only visitor from away. And then there were volunteers from other countries who would come through, and they would. That was great. We would get to meet people from other countries and compare notes, and they would all go, oh, Mauritania. And we'd, we'd feel very tough. Um, and then one of ours, one of our guys lost his mind and went wandering around West Africa under an assumed name and like possible criminal activity. And so, like all of Peace Corps West Africa was looking for this guy. So that was kind of exciting.

WAND: [01:08:51] Um, he was one of, one of your cohort?

KENTON: [01:08:54] Yeah, no, he was, uh, the class one or two before mine.

WAND: [01:08:58] Oh, uh huh.

KENTON: [01:08:58] Yeah. He'd been there a while, and I don't know if he was already having issues or if it was the mefloquine or whatever, whatever might be. And he ended up getting caught and sent home, um, finally. I think it was actually Peace Corps volunteers who turned him in because he was causing trouble for them and making them look bad and behaving badly. Um, and then as far as travels, should I talk about?

WAND: [01:09:21] Yeah, yeah. Absolutely.

KENTON: [01:09:23] So like I said, I didn't travel much around the continent, and I wish I had when I still had all my vaccinations and I was used to that mode of travel and could be comfortable, you know, sleeping with a pair of shoes for a pillow. Um. So I went, you know, a few times. So I went down to, we went across the Mali border, um, just to a town that was there. And we went to the West Africa Invitational Softball Tournament in Dakar. And apparently Mauritania had been banned, Peace Corps Mauritania had been banned from WAIST, this softball tournament, previously for debauchery. So we had a reputation to uphold. Um, so, you know, we played softball, we didn't drink water. Um, we drank, uh, Gazelle beer, which is mostly water. So we weren't too dehydrated the whole, the whole time we were in Senegal. Um, we streaked the Marine house party, you know, we made sure we were memorable and upheld the honor of Peace Corps Mauritania, at least the volunteers thereof.

WAND: [01:10:26] And you didn't get booted out?

KENTON: [01:10:28] No, we got cheered. And we also got beat by the high school girls in softball, shockingly, because we were all, you know, malnourished and half drunk. So. So yeah. I pitched one no-hitter. And then we were, we were kind of got wiped out by everybody after that. Yeah.

WAND: [01:10:48] You were a pitcher?

KENTON: [01:10:49] Yeah.

WAND: [01:10:49] Oh, congratulations.

KENTON: [01:10:51] But not MVP. That was the person who somehow managed to catch a ball without dropping their beer or their pizza. To this day.

WAND: [01:11:01] It was a memorable trip, I can tell.

KENTON: [01:11:05] And I wish I'd gone on the coal train. You know, it's the longest passenger train in the world goes across from somewhere in northern Mauritania. And the people who went on it, they, they just threw out their clothes after. There's no ever washing them clean of coal dust. Um, but they said it was, it was an amazing trip.

WAND: [01:11:23] They couldn't clean out their lungs, though, could they?

KENTON: [01:11:25] No, they had, uh, face masks. Well, they had their *howley* across their face, uh, the men's piece of cloth. And the women had a scarf.

WAND: [01:11:33] Mm hmm.

KENTON: [01:11:34] Yeah.

WAND: [01:11:36] Um, you mentioned you stayed a third year. What was the motivation for doing that?

KENTON: [01:11:44] Really to make the two years have been worth it, to feel like I had established a project. The moringa trees were really taking off. There was interest where there had not been interest or what I felt like success in with my other projects. Although properly scientific, you would say that discovering that the bio-gas wasn't going to work at a household level is a valid scientific result, and therefore a success in some sense. But I wanted

to see something work. And people were getting into it. People's grandmothers remembered moringa, um, but it had gotten drier, so they, they didn't have it anymore. Um, so yeah, that was taking off. So Chun let me have space in his garden and I then, then I went, I got Mahmoud to introduce me to the gardening cooperatives. I went out to some villages and just introduced it. And if people provided a safe space for the trees, for the seedlings, then I would give them seedlings and fence. And the fencing was, was pretty precious. Um.

WAND: [01:12:46] What was it made of?

KENTON: [01:12:48] Just like, like fencing. Like almost like we'd see here. Like a lighter, a lighter metal. But, uh, think of, like, a elementary school baseball field.

WAND: [01:12:59] So there would be metal poles?

KENTON: [01:13:01] Yeah. Metal poles. And then kind of a big woven mesh between. Very awkward to transport. It was much lighter than that because I was able to carry a roll. I wouldn't be able to carry a roll of that kind of fencing.

WAND: [01:13:13] Right.

KENTON: [01:13:13] Um, and those are the trees that I think cynically now that the fencing was to keep the goats out of their kitchen. Um, and they probably, yeah, let that, let the goats have the moringa trees. Maybe. Maybe not.

WAND: [01:13:28] Who knows?

KENTON: [01:13:28] Who knows?

WAND: [01:13:29] Maybe you'll have a chance to go back and check it out.

KENTON: [01:13:31] Nope! I don't think I will go back. Um. Some folks have gone back. I'm part of the Facebook Peace Corps RIM, République Islamique de Mauritanie. So some people report back that they've been there, and

some people are still very much in touch with their host family or with friends that they made. One of our language teachers, was one of, one of the activists against slavery in Mauritania, and he's been jailed several times. So we were all kind of following that and writing letters for a while.

WAND: [01:14:08] He is a Mauritanian?

KENTON: [01:14:09] Yeah. Ibrahim. Yeah. And he's out as far as I know.

WAND: [01:14:14] Courageous.

KENTON: [01:14:14] Oh, yeah.

WAND: [01:14:15] Wow.

KENTON: [01:14:15] Yeah. And they, they still, they've outlawed slavery multiple times, but you know. Yeah.

WAND: [01:14:22] Um. You're quite emphatic about that, about what, that. Of this simply saying you don't plan to go back. Is there a reason you're, you're feeling, you feel so strongly about that?

KENTON: [01:14:39] I don't really know people. I don't know the language anymore. I had a job and an official reason to be there when I was there. And I prefer to know what my purpose is. I have a tough time just wandering around chatting with people, which I think would be a great way to visit. Just get to know people, just have conversations. But I don't, um, operate well in that mode. Um. So, you know, they diagnose kids with everything these days. But when I was a kid, they didn't diagnose Asperger's, autism, anything like that. Um, but I think in some ways I functioned socially are like that. So I think it would make it difficult.

KENTON: [01:15:33] And I would be scared now. You know, Peace Corps left in, I want to say it was '09, after some, um, bombings and various attacks. And the Islamists are just, you know, infesting that whole area of the world, you know. I mean, to destroy the music of Mali and not allow that? That's a sickness of soul, the beautiful music. So they're coming, you know, down

from Algeria and west from Mali and up from Nigeria. So they, they are in Mauritania. Somehow I'm still on the State Department warning email thing. And it always says the same things, you know, don't, don't travel in groups. Don't, don't, you know. And they're relatively severe levels of caution if you're a foreigner in Mauritania now.

WAND: [01:16:23] And, and. Uh, I acknowledge that there are legitimate safety concerns for Americans traveling in that area. Uh, however, I also want to reflect with you that in the course of our conversation, you've mentioned several areas that, uh, that are still, to me they found, they seemed like, um, uh, legitimate questions. Like are the moringa trees still there? Are there still resources left in the girls mentoring center? Um, you know, do the clay, the mud stoves worked, did anybody use them since we? You know, but I understand exactly where you're coming from.

KENTON: [01:17:14] And another volunteer, actually, the person who convinced me not to quit, I almost left during training. I actually said, this is it, I'm going home. And was back in the capital, like was brought from my, from, was it from training or from my actual site? I think from training, um, back to the capital. Had the conversation with the director, and that night was sitting in the kitchen of the, of the Peace Corps house and got talking with an old volunteer who was, you know, six months from her COS [close of service] date. And she said something like, you know, we're talking about what's, why I was leaving and how she felt about her service and just, you know, getting to know each other and where we each at in our service. And, and she said one thing she was getting out of it that she knew she was going to go home with was I can walk into any room in the world and know that these people got nothing on me. That I can handle whatever happens in this room.

KENTON: [01:18:17] And somehow that was enough. And somehow the director let me not leave after saying I was leaving and sent me back to training and I stayed and then extended. So I saw Claire, that person, uh, last year. I went for a work trip to a conference out in Arizona and met up with her, and she had been back a couple of times. And she's a wonderfully social and warm person and had a great time and, you know, traveled locally and felt safe the whole time and met new people and was with people that

she knew. And, um, so it worked well for her to go back and visit, but I was. Yeah, it was hard enough. I just, I just don't have the guts.

KENTON: [01:19:04] And my closest friend there, Chun, died after I left, and I don't know how or where or of what. Um, the word came through the European NGOs. They kind of knew a few of the local people that we knew, not many. They more talked to officials, but somehow, like his. This French guy is the guy that worked in his house, knew the Jara family, and passed along to him because they knew I had been friends with Chun, and he died on the way to Nouakchott. That's all I know. I don't know if it was a car accident, if he was sick and he was going to the hospital. If, what was it? Um.

WAND: [01:19:40] How long ago was that?

KENTON: [01:19:44] Pretty soon after, like maybe 2 or 3 years after I left. Yeah. And we had had a falling out before I left over money, um, which. Yeah. Yeah.

WAND: [01:20:03] Um. So you stayed the third year. And, um, tell us a little bit about those last few days or weeks as you prepared to leave the country.

KENTON: [01:20:22] At that point, I was living with this French guy from one of the NGOs, had moved in, and so I was still doing my moringa workshops and visiting the garden and going out in the town. But I was, I had just. There was air conditioning and food and television and, um. Yeah. So I was, I was living in that situation, um, which felt fine, but also like cheating or escaping.

KENTON: [01:21:02] And somehow I had miscommunicated the timing of when I was leaving. So the last month, six weeks that I was there of service, there was a family that was a friend of his staying with us, um, parents and two kids, really nice kids, a nice, nice family all around. But we were, we left France on the same flight with this family. Um, so he stayed in France, but, but the family and I were on the same flight out, so it wasn't like my grand moment of departure. It was like they were visiting the whole time. And it was, it was just, it was just kind of funny.

WAND: [01:21:37] So you were leaving Mauritania at the same time and flying to France with this French family?

KENTON: [01:21:46] Yeah. Or no. We flew from, from Ayoun back to the capital, to Nouakchott. Um, the plane was available that week, and then they were going on with him to do more traveling. And then I flew from Nouakchott. Um. No. Because I remember them watching me as the plane took off from Mauritania, because I got really emotional and they were just, you know, kind of there, um, for that moment. Yeah. And then I went from the Sahara to the south of France. Who was I visiting? A family that I had visited there previously with, with this French guy. So I stopped in at their farm for like a week of just decompression. They had invited me to come back when I left Mauritania, so I stopped there first on the way out.

KENTON: [01:22:51] It's funny to think of a time when international travel was routine, like I knew where all the restaurants were in De Gaulle airport. And so I stopped in with them in the south of France. This is February. And then I went on to Rotterdam, um, which was progressively colder and darker and stayed with, um, just a family, a friend of some folks, some Dutch folks, that I had befriended in Mauritania. There's so much I haven't talked about that you can't, I mean, there's this whole other realm.

KENTON: [01:23:22] Oh, the Peace Corps partnership was for moringa trees because Frank helped me write it. Um, he was somehow working for an NGO. His wife was working for the UN, and he was just this big, loud, jolly, terrific person who got things done without much paperwork. And he befriended a few of the Peace Corps volunteers and really mentored us. Um, so he had introduced me to someone, or that person had visited him at his family in Mauritania. So I met them. So I went to Rotterdam to meet that person and stay over, and then got back to New England.

WAND: [01:23:55] Tell us about coming home and, and bring us kind of up to date to where you, what you are doing now.

KENTON: [01:24:07] So I definitely don't remember arriving home. And I think there were several months that are blurry of, of decompression and, um, telling the same stories, but like not being able to convey, you know, except to

my dad who had been there, um, and who similarly had a hard time. But it was an important part in his life, like he was one of the few people that, you know, wasn't like, oh, boy, that's great. You did that. Like, he knew that there are parts that are incredibly difficult and you just keep on.

KENTON: [01:24:40] Um, and then I worked. I was working at the Department of Environmental Protection in Connecticut doing GIS mapping. So like in an office, in a cubicle that a clean screen, doing data work and commuting on the highway. Uh, and then. Yeah. And I had a, I had a big poster, like a piece of flip chart in my cube with Peace Corps pictures. And people always wanted to hear the story of, you know, this camel or that robe or, um. I didn't put any, like, sheep eyeball in the, in the cooking bowl pictures up. But if they were, if they were lucky and really interested, they would get to hear those stories too.

KENTON: [01:25:22] And relearning how to act and how to speak, you know, what's normal to, to say and disclose and topics and, um, behavior. It took me years to accept money at a store into my hand. Um, because men in Mauritania, the shopkeepers were always men, except for like market women. But people who had a shop, it was almost always man run behind the counter. They would never put it into your hand because they might touch your hand, which is very offensive. So they would drop the money on the counter, which of course we thought was rude at first. And then you get that it's actually respectful because nobody's trying to touch your hand. We know you're a, you know, an okay person with good behavior. Um, so, um. I still feel weird when I eat with my left hand. You know, eating there was, you know, a ball of food in the sauce. Pop the ball in your mouth.

WAND: [01:26:15] With your right hand.

KENTON: [01:26:16] With your right hand only. And your left hand is for wiping. Um. And that was, the pantomime of, of what goes on with your left hand and the, and the pitcher of water was pretty funny during training that the old volunteers provided us. Um, yeah. What to talk about and what not to talk about and how to say it and food and language. And the balance of telling stories if people asked for them and realizing that mostly saying "when I lived in Africa" or even "when I lived overseas" is taken here as

pretentious and bragging and, and a little, a little rude, unless people are really interested in what you've done. But just drop it. Just mentioning your experiences, which seems so normal, um, are not common enough. It's really taken as bragging. So I learned to be careful about that.

KENTON: [01:27:16] Um, then worked at the DEP doing GIS tech and then got my very first real job, which actually, to this day, it's now 15 years later, is my only job ever in the private sector, I've been nonprofit ever since, for an engineering company doing GIS work. And it was deadly dull, um, and not terribly rewarding. And I was getting carpal tunnel, and it was a funny kind of old boys society, you know, engineers.

KENTON: [01:27:50] Um, so when a, somehow in my inbox popped up a one year master's program in Sri Lanka, I said, oh, that would be nice to go back to Sri Lanka. I lived there when I was younger. My dad was on sabbatical. My mother and I went with. So when I was 14, we lived there for a year. I went to school, so this seemed just meant to be, a master's degree in sustainable development in Sri Lanka. Great. Quit my job, went to Sri Lanka. Program was very, very much a pilot program, um, with the attendant stumbles, um. And then beyond their control, was supposed to be a one year program. Classes, practicum, capstone, inside one year. The Civil War got worse instead of better that year. This is 2006.

WAND: [01:28:33] And what, what institution was this with?

KENTON: [01:28:35] School for International Training, SIT in Brattleboro. And that's actually what brought me to Brattleboro. And I've been here ever since. Because it was supposed to be all in country, but they pulled us out in September. So January, it was supposed to be January to December. In September, just before our main research phase, we had to come up with our research questions and taking classes and, you know, program design, evaluation, all that stuff. Um, so everybody who managed to graduate, um, had a pretty robust section in their thesis on limitations of the research. And I ended, I ended up doing. I could go on all day about this as well. There's a lot to say, but I did a participatory evaluation of an after school program. So with the help of a translator, asked the after school program staff in the village where I was assigned. It was very much

a Peace Corps model, and SIT was where Peace Corps training started, as you know. Um, so we were in five different villages. Mine was in the war zone. I didn't know that at the time. Um, yeah. Pilot program. Uh.

WAND: [01:29:44] Just as a small clarification. Uh, SIT is where Peace Corps training for Asia began.

KENTON: [01:29:53] Oh, specifically.

WAND: [01:29:55] Specifically.

KENTON: [01:29:55] Okay.

WAND: [01:29:56] Right. Other training took place in other places for other continents.

KENTON: [01:30:00] Oh, interesting.

WAND: [01:30:01] But for Asia, it was at SIT.

KENTON: [01:30:03] Oh, okay. And I thought it was also where the language training model was developed?

WAND: [01:30:06] The model. Yes.

KENTON: [01:30:07] Yeah.

WAND: [01:30:08] Yes. Definitely the model for language training for all across the board. All Peace Corps.

KENTON: [01:30:12] Yeah. And I wish they'd highlighted that more when I was there. A friend of mine was teaching, her husband was teaching at the Greenwood School. And so they live on campus as staff parents, house parents. And they were in the house, um, the building where the Experiment for International Living and the language stuff started was, is now a home. Um, so that's, that's all interesting as an aside.

KENTON: [01:30:36] So anyway, so Sri Lanka. We got pulled out, we came back to Brattleboro. Some people quit. Some people tried to sue SIT for the, the problems with the program. Um, I finished up. I worked at, at that point I was up to four jobs, which is the Vermont way, while I was finishing my thesis. A food co-op, Boys and Girls Club, and two farms, which was a lot. Um, finished up my thesis and closed the door on international sustainable development as a direction for myself, based on what I perceived as my lack of success slash misguided or not quite appropriate efforts in Mauritania. Plus what was really parachute development with the SIT program. This was two years after the tsunami and I think we were part of, local people called it the second tsunami. You know, the aid workers coming in and driving up rent prices and issuing boats to people who hadn't had a boat before and doing a lot of good work.

KENTON: [01:31:39] But the, I tipped toward feeling negative and washing my hands of the whole enterprise. I figured if I'm going to meddle, which it seems like I'm a nosy neighbor kind of citizen, I'm going to do that in my own territory. So I've been in Brattleboro since 2006. Um, I'm on a few boards. I like to work the door at shows. And I'm working for the extension service, so I'm definitely a know-it-all meddler and doing my best to share that with people that I will see again. And if we're not equal in power or in access to communication or control over a program, that I know that. But generally they will speak up because we speak the same language and they're not, there's not this weird post-colonial, you know, white powered, not like white power supremacy, but, but, uh, the legacy of European domination, to say, oh yes, yes, whatever you say, regardless of what somebody really thinks.

KENTON: [01:32:52] And what stayed with me as valuable is an awareness of power dynamics and that people communicate differently. That if people don't explicitly say no, they're not necessarily saying yes to a project or to an idea or that there's, that that can be a form of being polite. You know, this direct yes is very American, but a lot of places that's childish to be that direct. Um, and if someone doesn't return your calls and doesn't really show up and, you know, that's them very courteously not saying it to your face. You're saving face. It's a form of politeness. So understanding, um,

that people might, might be saying what they're not saying, or they might not say what they're really saying, if that makes sense.

KENTON: [01:33:52] And patience. I mean, sitting in the taxi garage for however many hours it takes for the car to fill up, especially if you forgot a book. And this is before smartphones. Um, I can, I can spend half an hour looking at a square foot and all the textures and the wood grain or the cloth or whatever it might be, and just really, just really getting interested. Um, that kind of meditative, timeless state, that's been useful in traveling.

WAND: [01:34:25] It sounds like you walked away from your Peace Corps experience with a lot of lessons learned.

KENTON: [01:34:33] Mm hmm.

WAND: [01:34:33] And you're still sorting them out.

KENTON: [01:34:36] Oh, yeah. Yeah. Forever.

WAND: [01:34:40] Right. Yeah. Well, before we end our conversation, is there anything else you would like to add?

KENTON: [01:34:51] I want to make sure I mentioned all the work projects and the people who are important. I started with bio-gas and that got me an in. Application didn't work, but we tried it and we cooperated. Mud stoves. Moringa trees. And the girls mentoring center. I wish I could get a hold of my DOS, my description of service. Um, I wrote to Peace Corps asking for it and they couldn't find it, which I thought that was kind of one of the things they did was hold on to those. I got a certificate that said I had served. Um, but I would love to see what I wrote in early 2004 and 2003 describing what I had done.

KENTON: [01:35:40] Um, and people. Yeah. Frank from Holland was a mentor. Chun was a friend. The European NGO guys laughed at us for not having money and trucks and photocopiers and so on. And I think to a degree that helps you be more effective and appropriate, if you can't just throw

your money around. You have to convince people to participate. Yeah, I could, I could go on for weeks. Thank you.

WAND: [01:36:20] You're welcome. Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing your reflections, your stories, your experience.

[END OF INTERVIEW]