

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

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**Biographical Note**

Elizabeth (Lizzie) Johnson served as a Peace Corps volunteer in The Gambia from 2013 to 2015 in a health education program.

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Oral History Interview

with

Elizabeth Johnson

May 9, 2016  
Denver, Colorado

By Barbara Kaare-Lopez

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

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:00:04] Good afternoon. Today is May 9th, 2016. My name is Barbara Kaare K-A-A-R-E hyphen Lopez L-O-P-E-Z. I'm conducting one of the Peace Corps interviews for the archive project that Bob Klein created, and the interview will be sent to the Kennedy Library in Boston. Today, I'm going to interview Elizabeth Johnson, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in The Gambia G-A-M-B-I-A from October 2013 until December 2015. And she worked in the health sector. So now we're going to start the interview and there's 13 questions. We might cover all 13 or just, uh, some of them can be a little repetitive. So how are you today, Elizabeth?

JOHNSON: [00:01:06] I'm good. How are you?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:01:07] Very good. And I'm using my new Zoom recorder, OK. So anyway, if you want to start and you could describe your present

family situation, work, current residence, interests. As you can see, that's question number one.

JOHNSON: [00:01:25] OK. So my present family is my, I guess I don't know, it depends on what you describe family, but I have one grandparent who lives in England.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:01:37] Oh, OK.

JOHNSON: [00:01:38] My mom and my dad are here in Colorado. My little brother is at school in Scotland.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:01:43] Oh, OK.

JOHNSON: [00:01:45] I only got back in February. So right now I'm working as a nanny to earn money to go back to school for nursing.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:01:52] Nursing? How wonderful.

JOHNSON: [00:01:57] And I'm living with my parents. I really like. I don't know, like, I guess interests, like, volunteer work, soccer, running, reading. That's about it.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:02:10] OK. Do you, um, can you think back to the year before you joined the Peace Corps? For you, that would be like 2012.

JOHNSON: [00:02:18] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:02:19] And what were your, what was your life like back then? And that's kind of a broad question.

JOHNSON: [00:02:28] So I was at university. I went to university in Scotland, the University of St. Andrews.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:02:33] Oh, wow. OK.

JOHNSON: [00:02:35] And I took international relations there. So I was taking some international relations classes. I was president of the women's football club. So that was like really important to me at that time. So basically, I think for the most part it was school and, um, what's it called? School and soccer. The summer of 2012, or wait. This is 2012? OK, summer of 2012, I got to volunteer at the London Olympics, which was really cool.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:03:09] Wow.

JOHNSON: [00:03:11] It was just, like, really interesting to be able to be like on the inside of the Olympic.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:03:16] Yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:03:16] Process.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:03:17] What sent you over to Scotland to go to school?

JOHNSON: [00:03:21] So my father was born and raised in England.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:03:24] England, OK.

JOHNSON: [00:03:24] He came over here for his post doctorate and met my mother. And they've lived here all or like their married life, they've lived here and I grew up here. But I guess all of my dad's family lives in the UK, so maybe that didn't make it seem like a crazy jump. But surprisingly enough, like a lot of Americans attend the University of St. Andrews. It's marketed to Americans to some extent.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:03:49] OK, good. Well, and here's the second question on the interview outline. Why did you join the Peace Corps? OK.

JOHNSON: [00:04:05] I think I joined the Peace Corps because especially I feel like in this day and age, a lot of people are confused about what they're supposed to do when college is over. So I had one friend who's a year older than me who did Peace Corps Morocco. So I

knew that was something you could do like right out of college. And I just applied. And basically, I think I was just like, if anything accepts me, I'm doing it,

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:04:31] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:04:33] I mean, I really like to travel and I've traveled a lot in my life, so I don't think, like, Peace Corps seemed like super crazy to me. But yeah, I just was looking for something to do after college.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:04:45] OK, OK. You said you had this friend that was Peace Corps Morocco. But the third question is, how did you hear about the Peace Corps and what made you decide to apply? I mean, you've sort of answered it and you might want to add something else if you choose to.

JOHNSON: [00:05:01] I feel like I've heard about Peace Corps like for a while. I never like really thought about it that concretely probably until my friend went to Morocco. But I even had a second cousin who was. Was she in Nicaragua?

[MOTHER]: [00:05:17] She was in Ecuador.

JOHNSON: [00:05:18] Ecuador. So I knew it was like something that people did.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:05:24] Yeah. OK. Did you have a specific country or project in mind when you applied?

JOHNSON: [00:05:31] Yeah, I really was just like. I had talked to my friend who served in Morocco before I applied, and she kind of said that, I think it, obviously they've changed the application process. So it's changed a lot since I applied, which is really not that long ago, but back when I applied they said it was bad in your interview to want to go to a certain country.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:05:54] Really?

JOHNSON: [00:05:54] They wanted you to be prepared to go anywhere. And they think, you know, like if you fill out your application and you say, oh, I only want to go to Jordan, are you really prepared to like serve under hardship?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:06:04] Yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:06:05] I think that's kind of where that came from. Which I kind of appreciate, but also Peace Corps applications have gone up a lot since they changed it.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:06:13] Really? OK.

JOHNSON: [00:06:15] Who knows.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:06:18] What were your friends' and family's reaction? I know your mother's sitting over there. Family's reactions when you were accepted. Excuse me. It's the fourth question we're on, by the way.

JOHNSON: [00:06:31] Yeah. I think, well, because I. I mean, I'm sure almost many people say this, but the application process can be very difficult, mostly because you don't really know what's happening and it takes a long time to get responses. So there were like at least two times that I thought I had been rejected somehow. So when I was finally accepted and I didn't really have other plans after college, um, I was just like over the moon. I think my family was really happy because I'd been worrying about it for a while.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:07:02] How long was the process for you?

JOHNSON: [00:07:04] So I applied in October and I went out like the October after.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:07:09] Oh, so it was a whole year.

JOHNSON: [00:07:10] Yeah. And it was difficult, especially being in Scotland. I had to like find the Scottish police and get fingerprinted and.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:07:17] Oh, I never would have thought of stuff like that.

JOHNSON: [00:07:19] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:07:19] Oh, so you're enrolled in Scotland Yard, so to speak.

JOHNSON: [00:07:23] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:07:26] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:07:27] I think my British family thought I was joining the EU. They really had no idea what was going on.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:07:31] The European Union?

JOHNSON: [00:07:32] Yeah. Or like the UN.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:07:34] OK, OK.

JOHNSON: [00:07:36] They were just like confused.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:07:40] Did you have any reservations about joining, hesitations? Or did your family?

JOHNSON: [00:07:47] I mean, I think the funniest part was like that they told me, oh, you've been accepted. I got a phone call. I think people these days. Or maybe I got an email and most people get phone calls? But I looked and it was like, it was an email, and it was like, you're going to The Gambia. And I was like, I have never heard of this place before, but I'm going.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:08:08] OK, OK.

JOHNSON: [00:08:09] So I don't think I had any reservations, but I was like, I have no idea where I'm going.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:08:13] OK, so you only were presented with one country, I mean?

JOHNSON: [00:08:18] Yeah. I think like my first. Like after the interview they sent like an invitation to be a health volunteer. And so that's, I mean, that rules out some countries, but not a whole lot of countries.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:08:30] OK. Now we're on the fifth question. What project were you invited to join? I know you just mentioned health, but we'll start with that. So what was the project you were invited to join?

JOHNSON: [00:08:43] I was just invited for the health sector. I know some countries have like they divide up their health sector into like HIV AIDS focus, malaria focus, or something like that. But the country I went to, it's just like every health volunteer is a health volunteer.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:08:57] You're health, that's it. There's no differentiation.

JOHNSON: [00:09:01] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:09:01] OK. How did you prepare yourself and others for, it says dislocation, sounds kind of strange, of entering two years of Peace Corps service? How did you prepare yourself and others?

JOHNSON: [00:09:12] Um, honestly, I don't think I did like too much preparation. I remember, like, going to like, um, things with my family before I left, and people would ask me questions about The Gambia. And I would always ask my mom what the answer to that question about the country I was about to go to. So I didn't, I definitely like didn't research the country that much. I mean, I think we went out and bought some clothes and like a solar radio.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:09:43] Oh, yeah. OK.

JOHNSON: [00:09:45] Like, uh, maybe. Yeah, and like a solar powered battery charger. But I think mostly it was like material preparation.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:09:54] OK. Now we're on the sixth question and this is about the training, your training. Where did you train? If you want to tell us about the faculty, syllabus, things of that nature. We'll start with where you trained.

JOHNSON: [00:10:09] So I trained in Gambia. They flew us out to Washington, no. Where did? To Philadelphia for like one day-ish. Really it was like half a day of training, which was, once after two years of Peace Corps service seemed completely pointless. We didn't do anything in that half day that was really gonna change anything, but we went there and then we flew to Gambia. And then we were in the capital for like a week, mostly doing like shots and.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:10:43] OK, what's the capital of Gambia?

JOHNSON: [00:10:45] So the capital is called Banjul, but like it's kind of a widespread. So we were in the.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:10:50] Can you spell that?

JOHNSON: [00:10:51] B-A-N-J-U-L.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:10:55] How did you say it again?

JOHNSON: [00:10:56] Banjul.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:10:57] Banjul.

JOHNSON: [00:10:58] But like.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:10:59] So that's the capital of Gambia.

JOHNSON: [00:11:01] The suburban spread of Banjul is called Campo and we were in the area called Kanifing.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:11:09] How can you, can you spell that?

JOHNSON: [00:11:11] I think that's K-A-N-I-F-A-N-G [sic] but then again like.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:11:17] That's an area?

JOHNSON: [00:11:20] It's kind of like what you'd, like within Denver there's like.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:11:23] Denver area.

JOHNSON: [00:11:24] Washington Park. There's Capitol Hill. It's like kind of, I would, not at all like a neighborhood, but spatially similar-ish.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:11:34] OK. What was, who was your faculty? Was it like, for instance, Gambians?

JOHNSON: [00:11:42] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:11:43] Any Americans?

JOHNSON: [00:11:45] We, I mean, like I think these days you have the country director is always American, even though ours was. My first country director was from Zimbabwe. He had been like a Peace Corps employee, had managed to immigrate to America through Peace Corps, and then come back through and be a country director as an American. So I thought at first that all country directors were host country nationals.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:12:13] OK. I'm guessing his story was sort of unique then.

JOHNSON: [00:12:17] Yeah, I don't think.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:12:18] He's from Zimbabwe originally.

JOHNSON: [00:12:19] Yeah, it was like very strange. Um, so, but I think, I mean, like during training like you see the country director, you see the director of management operations is usually American. And then we got like a training manager, like after my first year of service, it was

an American, but really we had contact with mostly just the Gambian staff.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:12:42] OK. Can you describe your training some? Well, for instance, like they use the word syllabus. You were in the health sector. Did you, how did they train you to be a health volunteer in The Gambia?

JOHNSON: [00:12:59] I guess so. I mean, I would say like. Syllabus wise because like the technical studies is maybe what. So they kind of like, our main focus was language.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:11] And what was the language?

JOHNSON: [00:13:12] So Gambia I think teaches five different languages. I was with Pulaar.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:17] OK, spell Pulaar for me.

JOHNSON: [00:13:20] P-U-L-A-A-R, which it's part of like.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:25] P-U-L-A-A-R.

JOHNSON: [00:13:25] It's part of the Fulani tribe which can be found from Morocco to Cameroon.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:32] And the name, your language was Pulaar?

JOHNSON: [00:13:34] Yeah. Some people call it Fula. Like it's many different names for how to say Pulaar.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:41] Well, not that you learned the other four, but what were the other four languages?

JOHNSON: [00:13:46] Then we had Mandinka, Wolof, Sarahule, and Jola.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:52] OK. Would you mind spelling those?

JOHNSON: [00:14:00] Mandinka. M-A-N-D-I-N-K-A.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:14:05] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:14:06] Wolof is spelled many different ways. W-O-L-O-O-F.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:14:13] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:14:14] Jola, J-O-L-A. Sarahule.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:14:19] Oh, that's a good one.

JOHNSON: [00:14:20] S-A-R-A-H-U-L-E.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:14:26] OK. The last one was S-A-R-A-H-U-L-E? OK.

[MOTHER]: [00:14:30] It's not a written language.

JOHNSON: [00:14:32] Yeah, none of them are written languages so spellings are really just like.

[MOTHER]: [00:14:37] Spellings are random.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:14:37] None of them are.

JOHNSON: [00:14:39] Uh uh.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:14:40] OK. What do I say to that? OK. Well, that would be interesting how you learned that then. Did somebody, like I know some countries like a missionary might write down the words for some indigenous language? Did anybody try to write it? You know, how did you learn it?

JOHNSON: [00:15:01] There's been many attempts to like write in Pulaar. I don't think I would say that there's like a big like, what's the cultural conscience of the tribe? Like, oh, let's save our history, let's write our

language, so much. But especially like Peace Corps staffs have like, what's it called when you like sound things out?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:15:22] Phonetically.

JOHNSON: [00:15:23] Have like phonetically created words in Pulaar to teach us with. But like every time we would get annoyed with how a word is spelled or something, they'd just be like, this is just how we would phonetically spell it. But if you think you should phonetically spell it another way, that's fine.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:15:42] Yeah, I don't know if it was really the language group. You mentioned Fulani. That was the? What was Fulani again?

JOHNSON: [00:15:50] It's the tribe. But like the tribe, like it's called many different things through from Cameroon to Morocco. It's not like, like I'm trying to think. I know Upper Senegal has, like, a whole other name for them. There's like different *futas* that the.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:16:08] What's a *futa*?

JOHNSON: [00:16:09] It's like homeland I think. That's, I mean, I never had the word translated to me by a staff member, but that's where they say like certain of the Pulaar people originate. There's one that's in Senegal, one that's in Guinea. I think maybe two are in Senegal? Two in Senegal, one in Guinea, or something like that.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:16:32] All of these languages are part of the Fulani tribe?

JOHNSON: [00:16:36] No.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:16:36] Oh, Pulaar is though?

JOHNSON: [00:16:37] Pulaar is, yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:16:39] And is Fulani F-U-L-A-N-I? That's my guess.

JOHNSON: [00:16:44] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:16:44] OK. Oh, interesting. If you can remember, tell us more about your health training.

JOHNSON: [00:16:53] So health, like I guess. So they had a, like a training center that we would stay at sometimes. And they had. But mostly we were split into our language groups and stationed in villages. And so when you're doing language training, you just stay in the village with other volunteers. Like we each had our own host family that we would live with. And then we'd like go to lessons at our language teacher's compound. But then if they wanted to do like a health session or safety and security or cultural that all the volunteers would go to, regardless of what language group they're in, we would go to the training center.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:17:33] And was the training center in the capital?

JOHNSON: [00:17:35] No, they had kind of just rented from the agricultural ministry a training center. Um, because we were in the process of building a training center.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:17:47] What village did you live in for training?

JOHNSON: [00:17:50] Saaremusa.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:17:51] And you'll have to spell that.

JOHNSON: [00:17:54] But like the thing is, it doesn't really matter how it's spelled.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:17:58] OK, well how?

JOHNSON: [00:18:01] I can guess, but like, it's like anyone could spell it however they want.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:18:07] OK, what would you say?

JOHNSON: [00:18:09] S-A-A.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:18:11] A-A.

JOHNSON: [00:18:11] R-E-M-U-S-A.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:18:15] OK, S-A-A-R-E-M-U-S-A. OK, that was your village you lived in. And did you live there after training also or just for training?

JOHNSON: [00:18:26] Just for training.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:18:27] Training. OK. I know I already asked you. Could you expand a little on the health training?

JOHNSON: [00:18:36] OK. So then like sometimes when they would take us to the training center, we would do like specific health topics. So it'd be like handwashing, malaria, diarrhea, environmental sanitation, baby weighing, pregnancy. I'm trying to think of the other ones we had. Like basic first aid. So they would kind of like teach us things that you can do underneath that talk. Like so with malaria, like here's things and you can do. First it'd be like information. This is malaria. Then it would be like things you can do in your village to like talk to villagers about malaria.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:19:19] Mm hmm.

JOHNSON: [00:19:20] So they'd do that with each of those topics. I mean, I think there's probably like ten or so topics.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:19:28] OK, maybe there was ten. Which topics did you find out were the most relevant to teach? I assume you were doing teaching then, yes?

JOHNSON: [00:19:43] Um, not so much. It was just like, uh, I mean, I think like kind of. I don't know how it was back when you served, but I kind of heard that Peace Corps just drops you off in a village, and it's like there you go. Do things.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:19:57] Yeah, not for me. I was, I don't need to talk about myself. I'll just say that I was with the Ministry of Health, Ministerio de Salud in Honduras, and I had a defined job. And at that time in my life, that was good. I didn't have the life experience to go out there and just take off by myself. I did not.

JOHNSON: [00:20:19] I mean, I don't know if I did, but that's kind of what they did to us.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:20:22] OK, so how long was your training?

JOHNSON: [00:20:25] It was two months. So that's why I served only, what? Normally it's 27 months? I think I served 26 because we only have a two month training.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:20:34] Training, OK. Um. Anything else you might want to share about the training?

JOHNSON: [00:20:41] I just, I think it was awesome. It was like you really get to know your group of other volunteers. The people who were in my language group are like really good friends. My language teacher, I called, I've recently talked to him in Gambia. It was really, really, really hot. It was like the hottest part of the year.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:21:03] Do you know what the temperatures were? And I say that because I know some places don't have thermometers in their village I would think.

JOHNSON: [00:21:09] We don't. I mean, but I know it was like 100% humidity and I had like over 50 mosquito bites twice. It was.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:21:17] Excuse me, did you actually count them?

JOHNSON: [00:21:19] Yes.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:21:20] Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be laughing during this taping, but obviously I am. OK. Did they have a selection process? Do you know what I mean, to see? Did everybody who was went through the two months of health training and language training, did everybody pass? Or were some people advised to leave or deselected?

JOHNSON: [00:21:45] So they, I mean, they told us that like if you don't pass your language exams, like you might not, you might be like held back.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:21:53] Right.

JOHNSON: [00:21:54] Or like if you're not becoming culturally aware, like you might be held back. Like there were, I mean, they were like watching how we were integrating with the culture. But I think for the most part, like I knew of a couple volunteers, not from my group, who were held back, and it was because of cultural insensitivity, like they just didn't get it.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:22:14] Did they pass eventually, do you know?

JOHNSON: [00:22:17] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:22:17] They did. OK. The last part of this question, hindsight it says, regarding your training. Did you think your training prepared you sufficiently? Was it useful, the training you received?

JOHNSON: [00:22:31] I think I feel like my friends and I have talked about this a lot because I don't think that anything can really prepare you to be just, like, dropped off in a village with like no idea.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:22:43] Right.

JOHNSON: [00:22:44] I mean, like, you have like, you've been living in this other village for a while, but suddenly you're all by yourself. And in Gambia, they tell us that you're not supposed to leave village for your first

three months. Like, for the night. You can go to like the regional capital to buy toilet paper, but technically like.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:23:03] Spend the night elsewhere.

JOHNSON: [00:23:05] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:23:05] Wow. For three months.

JOHNSON: [00:23:06] And you're also supposed to like not start any projects. You're supposed to just observe like the community. You're doing a survey the whole time, like trying to figure out what might be the biggest health need in your village.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:23:19] Oh, did they give you an outline?

JOHNSON: [00:23:22] Yeah, they gave us like questions.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:23:23] Just say like go out there and do a survey. Or did they?

JOHNSON: [00:23:25] They give us questions.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:23:29] So you did a survey for three months.

JOHNSON: [00:23:32] So, I mean, but I don't think they could just like skip training, just drop you off in your village. Like it's a good that there is like an adjustment period. It's good that you get to talk to a teacher, like work on your language before you go out. But I mean, it's just like, I just don't know if there's that much you can do to be like prepared.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:23:54] Yeah, well, I guess I could. I could give a philosophical talk on life. I mean, we get different life experiences, and they can't be prepared. You can't be prepared for everything. OK, then we'll move on to the seventh question, which talks about your initial entry into the country that you were assigned to, which was The Gambia. If you want to say more about your project, as you can see, then they say

Peace Corps staff, etc. Do you want to say anything else about your project?

JOHNSON: [00:24:25] So like the health project?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:24:25] Yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:24:26] Um. I guess. I don't, uh. I guess the health project to me seems, um, like it could be like better directed somehow or like completely gotten rid of.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:24:45] Gotten rid of?

JOHNSON: [00:24:46] It's just like, so they, I mean, you just get to this village and, I mean, I lived in a fantastic village. I adore the people that lived there. But who am I to just show up and be like, this is how you live your life, like this is what to do?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:24:59] Right. Yeah. And I'm an American living in Scotland.

JOHNSON: [00:25:02] Yeah. Like, I don't know if that. And especially with health, there's not that just many tangible things that I felt like you could do. Like agriculture, there was a lot more, like create a model garden. Then you can be like, this is what's happening for real. But with malaria and like handwashing and stuff, like the people in my village haven't washed their hands with soap for hundreds of years. They're fine.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:25:25] I'm sorry, I shouldn't be laughing. Like hundreds of years. OK, OK.

JOHNSON: [00:25:30] So like, they're fine. So like, why does me telling them that they're not fine? Like, they're fine.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:25:36] Did they wash their hands, just like with water and use friction or anything like that or?

JOHNSON: [00:25:43] Like if you're in a good village, they'll use like a run. Like they'll have like a plastic kettle they have water in. And then you put your hands under it and you move them. If it's a bad village, there's a bowl of water, everyone puts their hands in the water.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:25:55] Oh, same bowl of water. OK. No soap. You've already said that. No soap. OK. Anything you'd like to share about the Peace Corps staff?

JOHNSON: [00:26:07] Um, I think we had really good staff, for the most. I mean, like I think everyone has the staff they like and the staff they don't like, but I just think Gambians in general are incredibly welcoming. And the Peace Corps Gambia staff really took their mission of welcoming us and trying to like make us, you know, not so much like successes as volunteers, but like keep us going.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:26:36] Yeah, yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:26:37] They did a fantastic job. The American staff, like, brought their own perspective. It's kind of hard when they're, I mean, I guess they just bring like the flavor of America because they don't know the country. Like most staff these days are there for like a year at most in a post.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:26:56] Peace Corps staff?

JOHNSON: [00:26:58] Yeah. Or like Peace Corps American staff because they move them around. You're only allowed to work for the government I think for five years.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:27:04] Yeah. That's how it used to be. It could still be that.

JOHNSON: [00:27:07] So they'll let them work in a post like a year and transfer them somewhere else. Or maybe like a year and a half.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:27:12] Oh wow. Yeah, that's not much.

JOHNSON: [00:27:14] So I feel like that kind of hinders the Americans from getting to know like what the country is like, because they also are living in the capital with all the diplomatic amenities so.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:27:29] OK. What was your impression of the local people? I know you already said welcoming.

JOHNSON: [00:27:32] They're just like fab, I like I think Gambians are fabulous for the most part. There's also a big culture of female sexual tourism in The Gambia, so I got a lot of harassment.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:27:47] OK. Yeah. I'm just trying to think of what to say about that. Was that legal? I'm guessing?

JOHNSON: [00:27:55] I don't think the president cares.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:27:58] Yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:27:59] I mean, we have white people coming and spending their money in The Gambia so.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:28:03] For sex?

JOHNSON: [00:28:04] Well, I mean, like but they'll stay at a hotel. They'll go out to dinner. So it's not like that's the only thing they're spending their money on.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:28:11] Yeah, but there is a big sexual trade.

JOHNSON: [00:28:14] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:28:14] Yeah. Do you know if, the only reason I'm asking this is when I was in Honduras, prostitution was legal, which I was so surprised. Was prostitution legal? Do you know that?

JOHNSON: [00:28:28] I don't know. There weren't, I mean, I lived in a 97% Muslim country, so that's not really a good thing in Islam, like women

are. That's, I mean, there's just, don't like, don't look at a man, don't like all those different things.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:28:51] And these women, I'm guessing, were then Muslim women in the sexual trade?

JOHNSON: [00:28:57] Oh no. So it would be like white women coming from like Europe for the most part.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:29:02] Oh, OK. Not the Muslim women.

JOHNSON: [00:29:05] No.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:29:05] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:29:06] And then it would.

[MOTHER]: [00:29:08] [inaudible]

JOHNSON: [00:29:10] I don't understand what you're saying, Mom.

[MOTHER]: [00:29:11] It was Gambian men.

JOHNSON: [00:29:13] Yeah, it was for Gambian men.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:29:14] Oh, OK, OK. Gambian man and white women. OK.

JOHNSON: [00:29:22] And it's almost, it would almost be treated as like a boyfriend girlfriend relationship, less like prostitution. Because like the Gambian woman would like take the guy out for like meals and like put them up in the hotel with her, maybe like give him money. But it was also like, you know, more than just showing up at a brothel, like sleeping with someone and leaving. And a lot of people get married and whatnot.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:29:48] OK. Huh. Yeah, you left me a little bit speechless. Yeah, um. You've said a little bit already about the heat and humidity.

Anything else you might want to share about the physical environment there?

[MOTHER]: [00:30:02] [inaudible]

JOHNSON: [00:30:04] Gambia. Mom, this is my interview. I just think that like Gambia is one of the least developed countries. I mean, it's definitely the least developed country I've ever been to. But like, if you're thinking of a village, like no roads, like my family had dirt floors. We had no running water, no electricity. They do have like some solar chargers. So most people have, most people, like 50% of the population has like a mobile phone or something.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:30:37] Oh, they do?

JOHNSON: [00:30:39] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:30:39] And how do they charge it then?

JOHNSON: [00:30:40] With the solar chargers.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:30:41] With the solar chargers, OK.

JOHNSON: [00:30:43] Um, yeah, we had like two roads. No bridges across the river that split my country.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:30:51] OK. I know when I met you at the Peace Corps happy hour, you said something about the dimensions of Gambia. What were they again, the length? Because it was a small country.

JOHNSON: [00:31:03] Yeah, I think it's like maybe 200. No, 200 to 300 miles long. And then like at its widest, at its widest, like 40 to 50 miles across. But there's a runner, a runner, a river that runs through the country.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:31:20] What's the name of the river?

JOHNSON: [00:31:21] The Gambia River. So you can't just like go the short way across the country, like there's a river. You have to get on a ferry.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:31:31] No bridge.

JOHNSON: [00:31:32] No bridge.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:31:32] No bridge. OK.

JOHNSON: [00:31:35] My closest, the closest volunteers to me from my group were on the other side of the river, so it was almost easier to go see other people.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:31:44] Yeah. OK. Now we're moving on to the eighth question and like I said, some of these questions might be redundant. Your assignment. I'll try to read through these. And if you want to say more about them. The specifics of your job, your living conditions.

JOHNSON: [00:32:07] Are you going to read them all and then I say?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:32:09] Well, do you want, do you have anything more you want to say about the specifics of your job?

JOHNSON: [00:32:14] So I think, like so I was supposed to be sent to a village that was really far away from the village I actually was sent to.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:32:20] For training?

JOHNSON: [00:32:21] No, like my site, my placement site. But the village I was supposed to be sent to couldn't find a house for me to live in. So then at some point during training, they scrambled to find me another village.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:32:36] Where did you end up?

JOHNSON: [00:32:37] This village called Jiroff.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:32:39] And spell that, please.

JOHNSON: [00:32:40] J-I-R-O-F-F.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:32:44] Jiroff. So you lived there. Two years or?

JOHNSON: [00:32:48] Yeah, two years. So that village, as a health volunteer, had no health clinic, no health post, no health workers. Nothing. So I didn't like, I felt in some ways it was good, in some ways it was bad. It kind of gave me more of an open slate to kind of do whatever I wanted. But at the same time, like I didn't really have any support for health projects.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:33:15] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:33:16] So I think that was, that was, I was the only person in my group who got put in a village like that.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:33:21] No support?

JOHNSON: [00:33:23] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:33:23] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:33:24] Or like I think a lot of health volunteers these days are like assigned to clinics or like maybe like a health worker.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:33:28] And you had nothing. Yeah, that would be very difficult. Yeah. Anything you might want to say more about your living conditions?

JOHNSON: [00:33:36] So all the, I mean, all the volunteers, except the ones that live in the capital, live with host families for both years. Um, so I lived with the host family.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:33:49] OK. Did you, of course you didn't know any different, but did you enjoy living with a host family?

JOHNSON: [00:33:56] Yeah, I think I would have felt much more isolated if I hadn't had them.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:34:00] OK. Um, what was your family like, your Gambian family?

JOHNSON: [00:34:04] There was my host mom and dad, and then halfway, I mean, people come in and out and family is like a very wide definition.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:34:11] Yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:34:12] In Africa. So then at one point my host sister came, she had twin babies. My cousin lived with us and my host sister's son and daughter and other daughter. And then one of my other host sisters, her daughter lived with us a little bit and then she took her back. And then one of my like dad's nephews for a while.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:34:37] Did you have your own room?

JOHNSON: [00:34:39] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:34:40] Yeah. I don't know how. Like when I was in Peace Corps training, they wanted the volunteer to have their own room, maybe a place to escape. Well, I lost track of how many people you had coming and going but.

JOHNSON: [00:34:52] It's a lot.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:34:52] OK. Can you describe a typical day?

JOHNSON: [00:34:56] Um, so I would wake up. I would sweep. I would eat breakfast. I'd water my garden, then I'd think of something to do until 5 p.m., then I'd water my garden again.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:35:11] Twice a day, water your garden.

JOHNSON: [00:35:12] I mean, like rainy season I didn't do that. So it kind of changes with the seasons.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:35:17] Was the garden at the house?

JOHNSON: [00:35:19] I built, or me and a counterpart built one in our compound area.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:35:23] OK.

[MOTHER]: [00:35:23] Tell her about the health clinic.

JOHNSON: [00:35:28] Mom. Literally.

[MOTHER]: [00:35:30] I know, but you did that often.

JOHNSON: [00:35:33] OK. A typical day is not a health clinic day. That happened like twice or three times a month.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:35:37] We'll get, I'll write myself a note. We'll get to health clinic day.

JOHNSON: [00:35:42] Then I'd always take a bucket bath in the evening.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:35:47] No running water.

JOHNSON: [00:35:48] Yeah, bucket bath. So I just would pump a bucket full of water, and then I'd throw cups of water over my head.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:35:54] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:35:55] I guess I just.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:35:56] Oh, so you had a water pump?

JOHNSON: [00:35:58] Like our village did. So I would walk to it.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:36:00] A community water pump. Am I saying that correctly?

JOHNSON: [00:36:06] Yeah. I'd eat lunch at 2:00, I forgot that. Then I ate dinner. And then usually I would like work on reading with my cousin. And then I'd go to bed.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:36:20] OK. What kind of food did you eat? What kind of food would you eat for lunch?

JOHNSON: [00:36:26] So they grew. They grow rice in The Gambia. So we'd eat rice a lot. There's like a porridge with rice in the morning, or we have a lot of millet, so there's a millet porridge or a rice porridge.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:36:37] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:36:37] And then lunch is always rice with some kind of like sauce, usually like tomato paste and, uh. What's it called like? What's that, stock?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:36:50] Like a broth or something?

JOHNSON: [00:36:53] Like but they have it in cubes and it's like MSG, but you just throw that in there. It's really good.

JOHNSON: [00:36:59] Like maybe a little bit of onion. Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:37:02] OK. Where did you?

JOHNSON: [00:37:04] Or peanut, there's a peanut butter. Peanut sauce.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:37:07] Cause I was going to ask you about protein. What did you? Peanuts. Did you buy peanuts?

JOHNSON: [00:37:11] Yeah. And then because we were close to the river, I'd say we'd eat fish like three or four times a week.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:37:16] A week?

JOHNSON: [00:37:17] Yeah. And then they also dried fish, and you could throw that in.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:37:21] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:37:24] Yeah. And then sometimes for dinner, there'd be like millet. And on a bad night, it would be millet and salt and water.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:37:31] Wow. Did you lose weight?

JOHNSON: [00:37:35] Funnily, most women like gain weight and then guys just like drop it like no one's business.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:37:39] Right.

JOHNSON: [00:37:39] But I just stayed the same.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:37:41] I know I'm asking you again about the protein thing, I mean.

JOHNSON: [00:37:46] I mean, I had my parents send me a lot of protein bars, but I'm pretty sure if they hadn't like I would have been fine. I was a vegetarian before Peace Corps so.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:37:54] Did you have any dairy products, milk, cheese?

JOHNSON: [00:37:57] So my family or my host dad had cows.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:38:01] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:38:02] So the cows would produce milk from about October, November to like March, April. After April the, like because we only get rain from like July to mid September. So after April there's nothing for the cows left to eat. So then they don't have enough to create, to make milk. So you get milk like a third of the year, quarter of the year.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:38:31] Wow.

[MOTHER]: [00:38:31] [inaudible]

JOHNSON: [00:38:33] Don't even ask me. I have no idea. I asked him that.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:38:35] I didn't even think about stuff like that.

JOHNSON: [00:38:37] Mom, I would ask him and he'd be like, I have none. I'd be like, Dad, why do you have no cows? I know you have cows. He's like, I lost them. I don't know.

[MOTHER]: [00:38:44] He had about 15 cows.

JOHNSON: [00:38:45] Mom! I'm sorry. This is my interview. Stop.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:38:51] I'm sure she's trying to be helpful, OK? But it's interesting once you start talking or you and me in this case. I didn't even think about things like no milk after a while because nothing for the cows to eat. I didn't think about that. OK. Anything more you might want to say about your relationships with the people of Gambia? Or you could say your village, you know. I know you talked about your host family.

JOHNSON: [00:39:20] Yeah, I think I just, even like my village was just like a super positive place. I think it takes a while, like basically harassment for females. It's just like, you just have to get over it. Like that happens. It's going to happen. It's a big culture of like joking in The Gambia. So it's always better to like not, stop being so serious about all these guys coming after you and just joke with them or like make fun of them. That's always better. And I know there were days that I wasn't that good at that and I'd just get really frustrated. But for the most, I mean, for the most part like just. If you just play it off as a joke, like that's so much a part of their culture that it just works out the best.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:40:09] What was your relationship like with other Peace Corps volunteers? And before I have you answer, were you the only Peace Corps volunteer in town or?

JOHNSON: [00:40:18] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:40:18] You were, OK.

JOHNSON: [00:40:18] So my closest volunteers were a K away on each side. And Gambia doesn't really, I mean, like for my village, like we have no organized transportation. So you'd just like go to the South Bank road, because there's two roads. There's the North Bank road and there's South Bank road. So that was only like a kilometer walk for me. So I'd go out there and then I'd just try and flag down a car if I was.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:40:44] Like hitchhike or something. Was that safe?

JOHNSON: [00:40:47] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:40:48] It was? OK.

JOHNSON: [00:40:49] I mean, that's what everyone did like, unless I was, because not everyone has a bicycle. So all the village people, if they're going to go somewhere, they're going to hitchhike there.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:40:57] Did you have a bicycle?

JOHNSON: [00:40:58] Peace Corps gives all of the volunteers in my country bicycles.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:41:02] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:41:03] So mostly if I was going to go visit like the close volunteers, I'd just bike there. Because you can be sitting on the side of the road for like two, three, 4 hours. So.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:41:12] Shouldn't be laughing. Oh my. Oh goodness. Yeah. Do you want to say anything more about your work time versus leisure time?

JOHNSON: [00:41:19] I mean, I think it was. Isn't Peace Corps where like you're always working, like because you're always representing America?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:41:28] Well, if you look at it that way, yes. Yes. We're little ambassadors. Yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:41:32] That's kind of what I think. I just, I mean, especially near the end of my service, like I didn't really want to be doing any. Like I found a lot of the time when I was doing like projects or work is because I was bored and I needed something to do. So I feel like.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:41:50] Did you read a lot?

JOHNSON: [00:41:51] I read a lot. Like 2 to 3 books a week.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:41:54] OK. Yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:41:56] But so I think like near the end, I would just like, really if someone like approached me and said they wanted to do something, or if there was something like I really, really wanted to do, I would do it. But I was trying not to just like push things on people that were really mostly me being bored.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:42:13] Yeah. OK. We'll move on to the ninth question. The end of your first year, if you can kind of remember how that was. Were there any notable events? I know your mom mentioned this health clinic day. Did that happen in your first year, this health clinic day?

JOHNSON: [00:42:31] Well, it's just like so every month, like women go and have their babies weighed and they also get immunizations.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:42:39] I'm interrupting you, I'm sorry, where? Because you had no health clinic.

JOHNSON: [00:42:42] So like our health clinic was the village next to us. And it wasn't actually a clinic. It was like they got some benches out and there was like some abandoned buildings that we used.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:42:52] Just abandoned buildings?

JOHNSON: [00:42:53] I think their original built purpose was to be like the place for the women to go for the baby clinic day. But like when we didn't go there for baby clinic day, there was like nothing. No one there. And so once a month they get used for that. And then yeah, there is.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:43:12] Did you give health talks during that time?

JOHNSON: [00:43:15] It was like the hospital staff that would come and do the baby weigh ins gave really long health talks. So for a while I thought about, oh, I want to do a health talk. And then I was just like, I don't really want to. These guys already talk for so long.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:43:30] They come from, the hospital?

JOHNSON: [00:43:31] So the hospital was ten K from my site and there's a volunteer in that village.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:43:38] OK. Anything you want to say about, like how they word this, joys and woes after your first year?

JOHNSON: [00:43:48] I'm trying to, I can't really remember my mindset at the first year. We had like a mid-service training. My parents came out right around my first year, which was really cool. They were in my village for about a week and then we did some of like the tourist stuff that I wouldn't pay for on a Peace Corps salary.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:44:08] Like what was the tourist stuff?

JOHNSON: [00:44:09] There was like a baboon island, or there was an island that had chimpanzees on it that you can like stay at a lodge and then go around the island in the boat. But you cannot go on the island.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:44:20] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:44:20] And then there's like an eco lodge.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:44:23] OK. And then who runs that? The Gambians or others?

JOHNSON: [00:44:26] It's like a joint. It's mostly a venture by these British people, but they're trying to be like cooperative with the community.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:44:34] OK. Any unexpected events during your first year?

JOHNSON: [00:44:42] Um. I just, like many things are unexpected, but I don't think there was anything like that really, really rocked.

[MOTHER]: [00:44:52] I think there was.

JOHNSON: [00:44:52] Yeah, I don't think I want to talk about it.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:44:54] OK. I'm sorry I'm laughing. This is the interviewer chuckling at times. Any relationships you want to talk about? With the Gambians, your host family?

JOHNSON: [00:45:11] I mean, I just think it was just like run of the mill Peace Corps. Like I love, I mean, I guess some people don't like their host family, but I like had a very family like relationship with my host family. Sometimes they really ticked me off, but most of the time like they were my buds.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:45:24] Good.

JOHNSON: [00:45:25] And then the Peace Corps volunteer community. I mean, there's obviously some volunteers I didn't like.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:45:30] Sure.

JOHNSON: [00:45:30] But for the most part, like all of the people in my group I was really good friends with and the people in my area less good friends with. But still there were some really good friends there.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:45:42] OK. Any health problems?

JOHNSON: [00:45:45] I was sick, pretty sick, twice my first year, but just kind of like high fevers won't go down with medicine.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:45:53] Do you know what the cause was? I mean, did you ever get malaria?

JOHNSON: [00:45:57] I didn't, but I was on Doxycycline for two years.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:01] Doxycycline.

JOHNSON: [00:46:03] I took antibiotics every day for two years.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:06] I know we had to take Aralen, but.

JOHNSON: [00:46:09] Yeah, well, they were trying to make us take mefloquine, which was crazy.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:14] Say it again?

JOHNSON: [00:46:14] Mefloquine is the one that makes people go crazy, luckily there.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:19] Could you spell that?

JOHNSON: [00:46:20] Uh, no.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:22] M-E-T-H. Meth-elquin?

JOHNSON: [00:46:22] I think there's an F, but I just don't know how to spell it.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:27] OK. You know, I don't know if you might know this. I know in Honduras they had Plasmodium vivax. I think in Africa.

JOHNSON: [00:46:35] We're falciparum.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:35] Yeah. And I think that's more deadly.

JOHNSON: [00:46:37] It is.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:46:38] Yeah. I mean, really, people can die from falciparum.

JOHNSON: [00:46:42] Yeah, so I would just get like really stressed out about it like, because cerebral malaria can kill you in 2 to 3 days. So if you have a fever that's not going down, like I think I am a secret hypochondriac. Like I'm not worried about like germs on your hand. But if I start feeling sick and I don't feel like I can explain why, I worry about things. But cerebral malaria is no joke so.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:47:10] Yeah. And I'm just being redundant for the interview. It was falciparum that they had in your area in Africa.

JOHNSON: [00:47:16] Yeah, P. falciparum.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:47:18] And it was doxycycline you took every day?

JOHNSON: [00:47:20] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:47:21] OK. You never got malaria. Did you take a vacation? I know you already mentioned your parents coming.

JOHNSON: [00:47:28] OK, so my friend who serves in Morocco, I think around nine months in country I went to Morocco and I met another friend from Denver in Morocco. And then that friend from Denver came with me to Gambia. I also went to the Stomp Out Malaria conference at like nine. OK, no, so maybe I went at like ten or 11. Maybe like ten

months I went to Morocco, but nine months I went to the Stomp Out Malaria conference in Senegal.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:48:04] In Senegal. And Gambia borders Senegal, right?

JOHNSON: [00:48:10] Mm hmm. Yeah. I also went to Dakar before that for some sightseeing.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:48:13] That's interesting. So Stomp Out Malaria conference. OK. And we already. This says travel but you talked about your vacation and all. We're on the tenth question out of 13. At the end of your tour, which for you was not that long ago.

JOHNSON: [00:48:30] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:48:32] Do you have, what was your sense of success, achievement, failure with your Peace Corps service?

JOHNSON: [00:48:41] Um. [phone rings] Um, I guess I think near the end, I was so grateful for being given the time in The Gambia that I just. Even though, I mean, I don't think I accomplished anything but at the end of the day, like I'm not the one who's going to accomplish anything. Like if behavior is going to change, I think it's going to come from the Gambian people. It's not going to come from me being like, oh, sleep underneath your bed net. So that was really cool. I mean, like things that I felt really proud about. Like I got a deaf girl enrolled at the deaf school in the capital, so that was really cool.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:49:23] Oh good, yes.

JOHNSON: [00:49:23] For me. I had a really good garden when I left, but I'm pretty sure it's all done.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:49:28] Can I interrupt you and ask what kind of crops did you grow?

JOHNSON: [00:49:30] Well, I built like a permaculture garden, so I was using berms and swales to direct the water and create like really good, um.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:49:38] You lost me on that. Berms and swales?

JOHNSON: [00:49:40] Yeah. It's like bumps and troughs.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:49:44] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:49:46] To direct the water so it stays in the ground because we have such a dry season. So you can like soak up the rainy season water and save it for the dry season. But I had like two pomegranate trees and three passion fruit trees. Peace Corps told they told me they were going to replace me. This volunteer would have eaten passion fruit and pomegranate. Did not replace me.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:50:10] OK. Did people, um, I know you've talked about your garden, did people grow and or eat many vegetables?

JOHNSON: [00:50:19] They like would grow vegetables. They're still, you want to sell vegetables? So it's just like.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:50:24] To make money?

JOHNSON: [00:50:26] Yeah. Like I would if I was at the market, I would buy a ton of vegetables and give them to my family so that we would eat some. But it's just like, yeah, vegetable, it's just not that much a part of the culture. Most people grow onions. That's what you want to grow.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:50:40] Really? How about fruit?

JOHNSON: [00:50:42] There's tons of mango trees everywhere, all over Gambia. So in mango season, you eat mangoes.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:50:48] Yeah, yeah. I forget about the season, so I thought, well, gosh, then you ate a lot of mangoes. In season. Yeah

JOHNSON: [00:50:55] Yeah. There's banana trees. Like, I had a banana tree. I had one harvest and then it died. That can be year-round. There's an orange season, but the oranges are like somewhere between a lemon and orange. And there's papaya, and then there's like local fruit, which is baobab, bush mango. I don't even know what other stuff is called.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:51:23] Right. Interesting. And I know you, we'll end in a few minutes. I want it to end at a certain time. We have like 9 minutes on the recorder.

[MOTHER]: [00:51:35] Tell them about the women's garden.

JOHNSON: [00:51:37] Oh, well I got the pump fixed in the women's garden, but like as a long term, sustainable thing, it was like a \$10,000 grant to fix it too.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:51:49] Wow. OK.

JOHNSON: [00:51:51] But it's kind of like, Gambia is becoming more arid as time goes, so there's never like going to be enough water.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:52:01] Yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:52:03] Especially if I'm not replaced. Like, there's ways you can like make the water stuff more sustainable, but.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:52:09] Yeah. OK. And I'm looking ahead at one of these questions, you know, it says. We won't even go into question 12, through the years have you continued any involvement? I mean, you've just been back a few months. So considering that you've been back a short time, is there anything else you might want to add about your service in The Gambia? I mean, you've given us a lot of good information. Interesting. Any regrets and satisfactions, we'll say?

JOHNSON: [00:52:42] Um. I don't know. I think, I guess almost I wish I hadn't taken things so seriously in the first year and just, like, spent more time like enjoying my village and being with the people there and.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:53:02] Yeah. What would you do with the people, I mean, like?

JOHNSON: [00:53:05] Just like, so they like.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:53:07] Talking, dancing?

JOHNSON: [00:53:09] Yeah, talking.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:53:09] Playing soccer?

JOHNSON: [00:53:10] I played soccer with them for a bit, but it was like only guys and it's so hot there and I just really wasn't. In the end, I wasn't enjoying it enough to do it. Mostly people just like sit there and they brew this thing called *attaya*, which is like green tea.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:53:24] Would you spell that?

JOHNSON: [00:53:26] A-T-T-A-Y-A.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:53:32] That's a green tea?

JOHNSON: [00:53:33] Yeah, it's like Chinese gunpowder tea.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:53:35] OK, so you drank a lot of *attaya*.

JOHNSON: [00:53:38] Yeah, I think that's, that you can find all throughout West Africa. It's a really big like thing that they do.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:53:45] Did you like the taste?

JOHNSON: [00:53:47] Kind of. It was really strong. I don't know. It's just like, that's just like what people do. That's like how you pass a day. You just like brew some *attaya*.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:53:57] OK. Do you think you helped the Gambians, like provide, as they say, better understanding of the United States or whatever?

JOHNSON: [00:54:08] I think so.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:54:08] I mean, do they get to, do you think they got to know you and thought, what do they think of you and or Americans after your life there?

JOHNSON: [00:54:16] I think that was like, that is why I feel like my Peace Corps service was like meaningful, or not. Worthwhile.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:54:25] That it was or was not?

JOHNSON: [00:54:26] Was.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:54:26] Was worthwhile. OK.

JOHNSON: [00:54:27] Because like I think especially in this day and age, like a lot of people see like American music videos and that's what they think of America.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:54:34] Oh, yes. Uh huh. And TV shows if they get shows.

JOHNSON: [00:54:37] So just like having me live in the village, like on the same level as other villagers for a year, like wearing what they wear and working. I mean, they work a lot harder than I worked but.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:54:50] Yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:54:50] I would like go to the rice fields and, you know, like get down and dirty. And I think that was really, I felt like meaningful because it's like, no, this is, we're just the same kind of people. Like, we just do our jobs or, you know, we talk to people. We take baths.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:55:12] Yeah.

JOHNSON: [00:55:13] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:55:15] What are your plans for the future?

JOHNSON: [00:55:18] So I'm hopefully, we'll see. I don't. I feel like Peace Corps really taught me that like, you know, don't make plans too far ahead of things and your life can always change and go in a different direction. But I'm looking to become a nurse, so I'm taking like prerequisites starting this summer. But it's also.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:55:41] Where are you taking the pre reqs at?

JOHNSON: [00:55:43] Community College of Denver.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:55:45] OK.

JOHNSON: [00:55:46] But also like I plan to do the summer semester as kind of like a trial. Like if I don't think it's cut out for me, then it won't have been that much money down the drain to just do a couple of classes.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:55:58] And I know this is, I'm not supposed to talk about myself, but I think I told you at the happy hour, there's so many different fields in nursing that one field may not suit you, my opinion, but another one might, you know?

JOHNSON: [00:56:13] Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:56:16] And I know. Anything else? You wanted to end about 6:15. Anything you might want to add?

JOHNSON: [00:56:23] Um. I just.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:56:25] How? Well, I'll just ask. What was the effect of your Peace Corps service on you?

JOHNSON: [00:56:32] Um, I think hopefully it made me like a little bit more patient, a little bit more relaxed. Hopefully value like spending time with friends and giving time to family and.

[END OF INTERVIEW]