

Jaclyn Tayabji Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
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Date of Interview: May 26, 2018
Location of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 26 pages

Biographical Note

Jaclyn Tayabji served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi from June 2016 to January 2017 as a secondary education English teacher.

Access

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Suggested Citation

Jaclyn Tayabji, recorded interview by Evelyn Ganzglass, May 26, 2018, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

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Oral History Interview

with

Jaclyn Tayabji

May 26, 2018
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:01] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 2000, uh, from 1966 to 1968. And I'm interviewing Jackie Tayabji, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi in 2016 to 2017. And she was in secondary education, English teacher. So let me start the interview by asking you, why did you join the Peace Corps?

TAYABJI: [00:00:33] I joined the Peace Corps. I guess I had always had an interest in, um, international, um, a lot of different aspects actually, but more importantly, like giving back to communities in need, um, and being able to kind of like, work with the people to, to make that happen. Um, my dad grew up in Eastern Africa, actually, so my whole paternal family was born and raised, um, in Kenya. So I my whole life kind of had this feeling of, um, knowing I had so many opportunities and privileges just based on where I was born and, um, the lifestyle I was raised in. And knowing that my cousins and aunts and uncles, their lives looked so different. Um, it didn't sit well with me.

TAYABJI: [00:01:25] And I think, um, I studied international studies through college. I think my passion and interest kind of grew through, you know, what I learned sitting in a classroom. But, um, I needed to kind of get out there and be able to contribute my part, at least for the short amount of time that I did. Um. And so I, I left for Peace Corps about a month after I graduated college. It pretty much, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:52] Where did you go to college?

TAYABJI: [00:01:53] I went to school down in Atlanta, Emory University.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:57] So how did you find out about Peace Corps?

TAYABJI: [00:02:00] It had always been. I had heard it again and again, just, um, through my interests, it had come up. But a recruiter came to campus my junior year, and I think that really planted the seed for me. Um, I applied the summer going into my senior year of college. So my whole last year of school, I knew, I actually knew where I was supposed to be going. I was initially assigned to Ecuador, and then about a month before I left, the earthquakes hit Ecuador and completely destroyed the infrastructure and part of the country. So, pretty frantically, we got a call that our trip was no longer going. Um.

TAYABJI: [00:02:40] And they gave us three options to decide where else to go, and Malawi was where I ended up. I think it did work out for the best. I absolutely, um, I loved being in Malawi, and I think I probably would have had a great experience in any country, in any program. But, um, it, I think while I was there, it definitely like suited my skills and interests.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:06] Did you speak Spanish?

TAYABJI: [00:03:08] I had been learning Spanish as, as a requirement for the Spanish speaking programs. You need to take language classes and kind of work on your skills. Um, I had been taking it, but as soon as I moved to Malawi and we learned Chichewa there.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:24] Mm hmm.

TAYABJI: [00:03:24] All the Spanish was just gone. Um, I think I would have had to put in work for language anywhere I went.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:32] Did you ever really learn Chichewa?

TAYABJI: [00:03:36] Chichewa. I, I had never learned it before. I had never learned anything outside of the romance languages. Um, I actually took to it pretty well. I think I really challenged myself to speak with my host family and to practice however much I could. Um, I scored intermediate high on the proficiency test, so I definitely, um, was able to get along in the village once I was placed.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:02] That's great. Talk a little bit about where you grew up. Your parents were immigrants to the United States?

TAYABJI: [00:04:09] My dad was.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:10] Oh, your dad.

TAYABJI: [00:04:11] Yep. I'm from outside of Boston, born and raised there. My dad was born and raised in Tanzania, and he moved to the country when he was 18 to kind of put himself through college here. And then my mom is from New York, so it's very interesting family dynamics. I think there are a lot of different, um, different ways that my upbringing influenced my commitment to, um, to this type of work specifically and to, you know, I really was committed to giving two years of, at least two years of my life to, um, giving back in, like, such, such a sustainable way.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:51] So were your parents happy when you joined the Peace Corps?

TAYABJI: [00:04:54] It took some convincing, I think. I think they eventually understood. But as I think a lot of people, um, might react, their first thoughts were why? Why do you want to?

GANZGLASS: [00:05:08] Why don't you get a job? Why don't you go to grad school?

TAYABJI: [00:05:11] We put you through school. Why? Why are you going to volunteer for two years? I think unfortunately, that's how a lot of people see it. Or, um, if they have, if they're not in my family, they're saying, well, good for you. You can go. Um. I think they saw how much I, like, how excited I was, how much I loved it, and were happy for me to have that experience. Um, I think they were also happy for me to come home. I, um, I was medically separated a few months into service, so my official close of service was January 2017. Um, my colleagues actually, or my, um, the rest of my cohort, the ones who were still there, just had their close of service conference. So I, um, there was a lot of service that I didn't get to, to give or to partake in. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:03] So maybe let's start at the beginning and then you can talk about your evacuation as well and that whole experience. Um, so in college, you knew you were going to Malawi?

TAYABJI: [00:06:16] Well, I knew I was going to Ecuador.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:18] Ecuador and then, then to Malawi. Um, what was the training? Where did you meet up with others? What was the training like?

TAYABJI: [00:06:27] We utilized Facebook primarily in order to introduce ourselves to the other group members. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:35] How many were there in your group?

TAYABJI: [00:06:38] For Ecuador, there were supposed to be, I think it was like 50 or 60. Um, the Facebook page was pretty active because, especially because we were learning Spanish. So some of our assignments were post a video in Spanish, introducing yourself. Um,

and I think that helped just to kind of calm a little bit of my nerves initially. Malawi, our initial cohort was 14, 15 maybe. Um, very, very small. And I think because of that, there wasn't as much interaction before we left. In my group, there were two other people who also were supposed to be in Ecuador and then got reassigned to Malawi. So at least I was familiar with a couple of people. But, um, yeah, it's just interesting, I think because we were a smaller group, we didn't need to talk as much before, but we immediately grew close during training.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:32] So where did you meet up? What? So where did you fly to? Did you meet in this country or did you just meet in Malawi?

TAYABJI: [00:07:41] We did. We met in Philadelphia for the first night, um, the very like initial training. And then we flew out of JFK all together. Um, and. I'm trying. I know we were in South Africa. I can't recall where our first layover was, but, um, so we had the plane ride all together and we're kind of through it for this first couple of days.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:08] And what happened when you got in country? What was the orientation like?

TAYABJI: [00:08:12] We were taken to a hotel. Um, or I guess it wasn't a hotel. It was more of like a campus, um, that was used for school. But we had rented space there, and we had the initial kind of, um, what you need to survive, the first few days training. We learned about very basic introductions, what our homestay visits would be like. We were there for three days, I think, um. If I remember correctly, I think we got in on like a Saturday or Sunday and left on Wednesday. So it was a lot of the, um, the things that we were most nervous about. I think the first question that was asked was like, how do we use the bathroom? Because once we got to the host family, we were, we were in a rural village, um, and no one, no one in my group and I hadn't had experience living in that type of environment. Um, so that was definitely a concern for us.

TAYABJI: [00:09:14] Um, we were fortunate because there were two what's called resource volunteers that were there at that time. They picked us

up from the airport. So those were volunteers who had come a year before and were extremely, um, influential or extremely helpful to just calm a lot of those jitters. Um, and to let us know that the questions we were asking, more questions they also asked, but were things that two weeks in, they, they were pros at, they didn't worry about anymore. I think that helped for a lot of us.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:50] So it was really asking questions where, um, anything about. Were you all English language teachers?

TAYABJI: [00:09:58] Yes, my group was all English, English language teachers. Um, between the year before us and my group, they had made a decision in Malawi to change all of the teachers to just English. So before that they had had science teacher, um, and then they wanted to shift the focus. So that was nice. My group, we had that in common. We took all of our, um, core classes together. We didn't have to separate.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:27] Where were you trained in being an English language teacher? How was that?

TAYABJI: [00:10:32] I, I didn't have. So I'm not sure how, um, the application might vary for someone who is initially selected from Malawi. My background, I had had some brief tutoring experience where I had worked with some children before in school settings. Um, nothing too substantial in terms of being a teacher, but I think that was pretty common in Malawi. I think it mostly was people who had had an interest working with kids, or who maybe had studied, um, English in school. Um, the core training took place over the three months of pre-service training, where we took our first look at the Malawian curriculum, took a look at the, at the books, um. And a lot of just discussing teaching methods and that type of environment. No matter what I think, um, there were some people in my group who had had teaching experience, but no teaching.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:32] So you all stayed together for three months in, in country before you went out to your villages, is that it?

TAYABJI: [00:11:38] We were in the same host village, but each staying with a different family.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:43] Okay.

TAYABJI: [00:11:44] So we were. We met every day from 7:30 to 4:30 for training, would split up into language groups, um, during that time. But we saw each other every day for those three months. Um, but it was up to each of us to kind of go back to each of our families and to make the most of that time with them as well. Um, I think it was a little introduction to being on our own in, in a village, but having the support for those initial months. Um. But because we were such a small group, it helped to have other people there. We, we grew close during that time.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:23] So did you think that worked well? Did it ease your anxiety about being in a village?

TAYABJI: [00:12:28] It definitely eased, it eased the anxiety I had. I don't think I was too concerned about being in a village. Um, once I got was placed in my site, I was thrilled to, to kind of be able to, um, go out and meet people and really, um, make it a home. I tried that kind of from the beginning when I moved, but being in the village was nice because we could help each other. I think for the language especially, that, that was a huge anxiety for everyone. It was a new language for all of us. So having people who are also studying who we could practice with and be beginners with.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:07] Yeah.

TAYABJI: [00:13:08] Before we went home and practiced with fluent Chichewa speakers, um, that was nice. And then just having that support network, I think, it was important for us to establish that because we were a small group. So we were spread all over the country. And I think when you don't see people regularly, it's important to like still feel that closeness with them. Um, in service especially, it's, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:35] So did you stay in, once you were in your villages, we'll get to that, did you stay in touch with each other? Or how did you stay in touch with each other?

TAYABJI: [00:13:43] I, I tried to stay in touch with people. I was, um, I had a site that actually had cell phone service, so I had, um, I could be on my phone anywhere in my village, which definitely would not have been the case a couple, a couple of years ago even. Um, it's interesting. I think it definitely changes the nature of service. But for me, I could reach out to people, especially the volunteers who were nearby. Um, we made, we talked a lot about, like, when we would visit each other, all of that kind of stuff. Um, I wasn't in country long enough to really, um, part to really make those plans.

TAYABJI: [00:14:23] Um, the first three months that you're at site are considered, um, we called it lockdown period. They had a better time for it. But you're not supposed to leave. You're supposed to. Um, it is really important, actually. But really integrate as best you can. Learn the school before you start traveling. Um, and so during those three months, um, I didn't, I didn't leave much, but I was able to be in touch. It also helped. Whether it helped or hurt, I'm not sure, but I was able to, um, use my, um, I had internet, like, I could be on my phone. I could look stuff up. So it helped.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:06] So you had internet, you had a cell phone.

TAYABJI: [00:15:08] Yeah, I had a cell phone. We had.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:09] Did you take your computer with you?

TAYABJI: [00:15:11] I did. I didn't really use my computer, but, um, I had a smartphone, so I was able to look up definitions and poems and stuff like that that I ended up using in my teaching as well. Um, I don't know, again, how that would have looked. I think I probably wasn't as creative as I would have been if I didn't have access to that. It certainly, it changed a lot of aspects. It was also interesting because a lot of other

people in the village, despite how rural we were and how impoverished the region or the, um, area I was in was, a lot of people did have phones and had social media, and it was interesting being in that type of environment. And, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:01] So different than the '60s when we were.

TAYABJI: [00:16:04] Right. Yeah, I think, I, um. I would write letters home sometimes and, but never really within country. I started. So I went on a two week training while I was in service and met volunteers from across the continent of Africa, and I actually started being a pen pal with one of them who was serving in Guinea. But yeah, there wasn't much letter writing. I think a lot of people had cell phone service. Some had to travel a bit to get cell phone service, but it definitely was something that was expected of us. Um, the Peace Corps, the staff, they, that's how they got in touch with us. We had forms to submit online. We had, um, people would call us and we would go over what was going on at sites. But so I think it, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:00] So that's how they stayed in touch with you.

TAYABJI: [00:17:02] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:03] Um, did you have to, I've heard from some people that they had to call in every day. Did you have to do that?

TAYABJI: [00:17:09] We didn't have to do that. I think that only came up when there was an issue or we had reached out to them, but there wasn't anything that was like, we need to make sure you're okay, so check in at this time. Um, at least while I was there, there was nothing like that. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:30] So you, so you went through the training. And then talk a little bit about assignment to the town you were in and how you got there.

TAYABJI: [00:17:41] I, so I was placed in central Malawi in a village called Mphomwa. And I think my background and my interests kind of played a role in my placement. I guess I can only speculate, but I had had experience working in a preschool back in America, and I was very interested in working with girls. And, um, I wanted to do grassroots soccer. I wanted to do a lot of secondary projects related to, um, like youth empowerment and female empowerment. And I think it worked out really well for this village because the volunteer whom I replaced, he, he had served as a teacher, but a science teacher. Um, he had actually started a preschool in the village with his counterpart. They had gotten a grant, they had spoken to the chief and had enrolled students. So I think that was a big draw for me to be placed there.

TAYABJI: [00:18:40] And all of the teachers in the school were male and the, the volunteer was male. So I think it was time and they were eager to have a woman there. Um, and so I think overall the, the placement worked out very well. Um, I don't think. I was happy by, I was very excited about those opportunities. So I got to my site. We actually, it was maybe like a four hour drive by public transportation, um, so pretty accessible to, to the capital, Lilongwe. And we were right on the main road, which also was interesting and also changed the nature of service. But, um, it was a rural village. But, um, as a volunteer, I definitely felt connected to other volunteers.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:33] So you were on the main, before we lose that, you were on the main road. How did that change the town?

TAYABJI: [00:19:40] It was interesting and definitely something I picked up on right away. But the, the village itself, the people were, they were aware of like life going on outside. They were aware of all of these nice fancy cars, the Peace Corps Land Range Rovers, Land Rovers, um, Land Rovers coming through every day. Malawi draws an insane amount of aid workers and aid money. So, um, you definitely see all of those foreigners coming through. And, um, I think that changed the nature of it. There was influence from, from the city. There was influence from other parts of the country in ways that maybe like a more rural village wouldn't have.

TAYABJI: [00:20:27] But it also was sad because it was an extremely impoverished village. So my students and other people in town, they couldn't afford to go take a minibus to the market. Um, and it especially came up because as a high school teacher, you're working with people who might want to work or, or hopefully would want to work and kind of embrace those opportunities, but they can't afford the transportation to get to the interview. So, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:58] Were they all in agriculture or what? What did people do in this town?

TAYABJI: [00:21:03] Primarily agriculture, um. I think I'm going to get this statistic wrong. But the vast, vast majority of Malawi's economy as a whole is subsistence farming, and that was definitely evident in the village. Um, there were, there were a lot of churches there. So, um, and a couple of, there was the one school. But, um, I think people like primarily were agriculture, subsistence farmers.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:38] And how big was this town?

TAYABJI: [00:21:40] Um, it was a couple of thousand people, I believe. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:47] What did it have, paved streets? Did it have?

TAYABJI: [00:21:50] No, just, it just had the main road which was paved. Everything else was dirt. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:56] And any indoor plumbing anywhere?

TAYABJI: [00:22:00] No.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:01] Any electricity, no?

TAYABJI: [00:22:03] There was some electricity. Um, our little, like, market area, a lot of them had lights on the outside, but. And I had electricity in my house. There were blackouts more often than not. So it wasn't working.

Um, but there were some people that had electricity. I don't know of anyone who had, um, who had like a toilet or indoor plumbing or anything. Um, we used what was called a *chimbudzi*, but, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:36] I have to ask, what is that?

TAYABJI: [00:22:38] It's, I'm sure similar to Somalia, but just the hole in the ground with a lid.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:43] Yeah.

TAYABJI: [00:22:44] Um, that was pretty common. And. Yeah, but again, not everyone was. It ranged within the town, so a lot of people didn't have electricity. A lot of people didn't really have, um, like a stable home, were living in more like, uh, destroyed brick structures. It, it really varied. Um, going back to the size, I think it was around 4,000 people. Um, and the population was growing. So my village was extremely, I guess being. Malawi as a whole was going through a lot of, um, difficulties. They had, they were extremely affected by climate change, weren't producing enough food. And then they also in the years before we came, were affected by a drought. And I saw that in my village especially, um, definitely a water shortage.

TAYABJI: [00:23:45] And my, so a lot of the women and my, my students would go. They would drop their bucket in the afternoon and they wouldn't be able to get water until the next day, until like 24 hours later, because of how low the water tables were. Um, and I had left. They have what's called the hungry season, which is the period right before, um, they start producing and being able to sell a lot of food where there's, um, definitely a food shortage. And I had left right before that time, so I didn't see the worst of it. But in the, the weeks and the months leading up to when I left country, it definitely, it, um, people would start talking about it. They knew it was coming. It was something that they were used to every year. But, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:39] They save up for it or can they save up?

TAYABJI: [00:24:43] They, they can't save up because it's mostly subsistence farming. There's not much saving in general. Um, and. My students would, would joke about it. They would say, oh, in these months, December, January, we eat mangoes, because there are mango trees everywhere. But that's all they could, mostly all they had access to. Um, that was something, you know, we had learned it or heard about it in training, talked about what that might look like in a school setting. Um, how to be the best teacher and volunteer you can be when people in the village aren't getting their basic necessities met. And then hearing students and other villagers kind of talking about it in such a way that they were used to it. It's, it's awful. But I think every year it has.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:39] It's the rhythm of the year, I guess.

TAYABJI: [00:25:40] Yeah, exactly. They, their production crop, production is dependent upon one rainfall every year. They have the rainy season, one rainfall. So especially more recently when the climate's changing and the rains are getting shorter, it, um, it affects the whole year and then that whole year affects the next year. And it's kind of a cycle. Um, but yeah. So as a teacher, that posed, poses so many different problems, like it was, um, it added another like level to my thinking in terms of how I could be a good volunteer.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:19] Well, let's go back to teaching. You said the, the prior volunteer was a guy, a male, and that all the teachers were male. When you came, how were you treated? I guess all the, the male teachers were still there. Were you the only female teacher?

TAYABJI: [00:26:34] I was. I was the only female teacher. I was also younger. I was 23 at the time that I was a volunteer, so it was difficult. I think they were happy to have a volunteer and specifically to have a female volunteer. But a lot of the daily conversations, um, I struggled with sometimes, whether it be, um, I did hear a lot of like vocal opinions about what I should be doing, especially when I say I'm 23 and I'm not married and I don't have kids and I want to go back to school at some point if, if, or I went to school. Um, those people that my,

colleagues, the other teachers, um, didn't understand a lot of like what had brought me to where I was and why I was doing what I was doing, which is fine. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:35] And never had met a woman like you, I guess.

TAYABJI: [00:27:37] Right? Um, yeah, I guess had just. And it's, it's interesting for even Americans to think about a young person kind of going off and, um, and spending two years in a different place like that. But in Mphomwa, the village specifically, I think it was definitely a shock to a lot of people. The volunteer I replaced was a little bit older. He, um, he had more of a peer to peer relationship with the other teachers, was, was friendly with them in a way that I never would have been able to. Um, so I did feel a bit of an oddball in the school environment. I, um, I tried to, you know, stick up for myself and try to, um, engage in conversation and, like, use, try and help them and use them as a resource to help me as a teacher. But it did affect me, um. I felt pretty lonely in that environment.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:42] Were you able to make any friends at all?

TAYABJI: [00:28:46] I would say, um, not peers my own age. I enjoyed speaking with the students. I enjoyed, um, because we were all in the village together. Like I would see students all, all over, um, they knew where I lived. So I think I was around other people, and, um, my neighbors had kids that were running, little kids that were running around all the time. I was definitely surrounded by other people, but I wouldn't say I had the, the types of friendships that you would find back home or, um, potentially in other, um, other villages. That's not to say that wouldn't have happened eventually, I think just initially, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:33] So how long were you actually in the village?

TAYABJI: [00:29:36] I was there from August to November. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:42] So not very long at all.

TAYABJI: [00:29:44] Not very long. It was just coming up on the end of my, let's see, the end of my three-ish months in site. Um, and so, again, I was new. People didn't know me, weren't used to a female volunteer there. So I think that is hopefully something that would have changed. But for those first few months, it was, it was hard.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:08] Did you talk to the mothers of your students?

TAYABJI: [00:30:12] I did, um. I think even other women, um, had a lot of the same reactions that my male counterparts had in the school in that, um, when, when a lot of them were 23, they had had kids and were running a household. And, um, there was definitely that divide. Um, I think people always welcomed me and were always eager to, to talk and to, um, be friendly. But, um, and so I did, I did try to get out and meet people as much as I could. I think, um, there just were a lot of cultural differences that I couldn't get past with the limited knowledge of the language that I had initially.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:04] And I forgot to ask, what grade did you teach?

TAYABJI: [00:31:06] I teach in the secondary school. So, um, the equivalent of ninth, 10th, and 11th grade. Forms one, two, and three.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:16] And how far advanced were your students in English?

TAYABJI: [00:31:20] English was a difficult subject. Um, the main issue was that there just weren't enough books. There weren't resources. So our classes, I had at least 100 in each class and we would have four books. Um, and I mean that, that poses challenges in and of itself. But, um, the language. People couldn't understand my accent, which I understand. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:52] Why is that? Had they been taught by Brits? No, they had a Peace Corps, American Peace Corps as well.

TAYABJI: [00:31:58] They, they had. I think he had taught a different subject. So maybe learning the, the English text and grammar was different. But,

um, just like the American accent in general, we tend to speak faster because we're comfortable with English. Um, it. And they have a test at the end of form four or like at the end of high school that tests very specifically based on the curriculum, um, text-based questions, questions that they are supposed to learn through school. So a lot of, a lot of the teaching methods that they were used to was kind of rote memorization. Um, so again, maybe they weren't used to my style of teaching also.

TAYABJI: [00:32:50] Um, I think. I tried my best and I, I think that's all we can really do. But, um, I did really enjoy speaking with students outside of class, as I mentioned. I think that was my way of really connecting with students, because in that, on that one on one or small group setting, you can, you can see when they don't understand, you can explain it in a different way. But in such a large classroom, you're not reaching everyone. You're probably not reaching most students. Um, and it was, it was a limited time that you were in a classroom. So it's, it's hard to kind of meet all of those needs.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:35] So you've mentioned several times that you left, um, in January. You said you were in the village till November.

TAYABJI: [00:33:44] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:45] Um, what happened to you?

TAYABJI: [00:33:47] I. So between the end of November, I left like right around Thanksgiving, and when I officially closed of service in January, I had been in Washington, D.C.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:58] Oh, I see.

TAYABJI: [00:33:59] Yep. On medical evacuation. Um, so during that time I wasn't in country, but I was still technically a volunteer. And I, I guess my journey is interesting. I don't think anything, it's not something that other volunteers haven't experienced. But I came to Peace Corps, um, kind of with my own demons. And being in the village, those kind of

came to light. I had struggled with drinking while I was there. And, um, I think kind of the loneliness that I mentioned and a lot of the struggles that I was seeing factored into that, um. And very quickly on, you know, only three months at site, I recognized that my drinking wasn't healthy and was only going to continue to get worse.

TAYABJI: [00:34:51] I was extremely fortunate with the medical staff that I had at the time, because I sent one text message to the, um, PCMO [Peace Corps Medical Officer] at the time and wanted to talk about my drinking, and they were so supportive. I think a week after they had booked a flight and I was on my way back to D.C. Um, I spent six weeks in, here in D.C., um, where I was living in a hotel with the other volunteers who were medically evacuated at the time. I was going to treatment and, um, kind of touching base with the Peace Corps headquarters while I was there.

TAYABJI: [00:35:30] Um, that was a difficult time because I knew, I just knew the nature of my evacuation and my diagnosis that I wasn't going to be allowed back to service. And I so desperately wanted, I wanted to be able to do the work that I was passionate about, and I really had committed two years of my life, at least, to doing it. So it was heartbreaking so early on to recognize that what I wanted and what was the reality at the time didn't match up. Um, I kind of spent those six weeks realizing that things weren't going to look the way, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:15] You had planned.

TAYABJI: [00:36:16] The way I had planned. And that because of the way I had left so suddenly from the country, I was really trying to come to grips with the guilt and like, knowing that I had I had left right before finals for the term and what that meant for the other teachers and how, you know, how my neighbors were going to respond with. All of these things were just coming to light, because no one really talks about those situations. People talk about when you leave service after two years, you're going to feel reverse culture shock, and you're going to maybe feel guilt after those two years and stuff like that. But I was so

unprepared for the flood of emotions that came with just picking up and leaving.

TAYABJI: [00:37:04] Um, because, you know, I didn't want to. I wanted to be doing service. I wanted to be the best volunteer. And unfortunately, I think, um, I was, I was the thing stopping myself from being that good volunteer and, um. I did need that change for, you know, my own health and, um, to be able to give back in the way that the ways that I wanted to. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:34] So, so let me ask you. In my era, a long time ago, something called deselection was a big deal. We had psychologists who interviewed us, who observed us, and our training was all in country, in the, in the United States before we went overseas.

TAYABJI: [00:37:56] For three months?

GANZGLASS: [00:37:56] That I don't know exactly, for about three months. Um, and people were, quote, deselected, kicked out of the program. Did Peace Corps know about your drinking and about your, as you say, your demons?

TAYABJI: [00:38:12] I, I think they. We did like a brief alcohol training in country during those three months of training. It came to light at that time, and I was always honest about it, that my history with drinking had looked like that. Um, and by that I mean unhealthy. Um, but, you know, I was coming from a college setting immediately to being in service. So in my mind, it was easy to say it was the context that led to my drinking this way. And so while we were in training, it was very, I think there had been issues with previous groups with drinking and drinking in or around the village. It was kind of ingrained in us from the beginning. You can't drink while you're staying with a family. It's not appropriate, um, especially for women, female volunteers. It wasn't culturally appropriate.

TAYABJI: [00:39:07] So those three months there weren't any issues. You know, I never I never wanted to jeopardize my stay there. So, um, it was once

I got to site and was on my own that they started creeping up again. All of those, those issues that I had tried to, you know, suppress and that I thought would be different in a different place. Um, you know, I truly thought once I was doing work that I loved and once I was in a new environment, I, I would outgrow that phase. And it wasn't true, or it wasn't the reality. So, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:45] What's interesting, you identified it. Peace Corps staff didn't identify.

TAYABJI: [00:39:51] I think.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:52] That it was affecting your, you know, your performance.

TAYABJI: [00:39:55] Yeah, I, I was scared, honestly, because I knew. I, I had spent a lot of years, like, wondering if it was a problem and then I was scared to kind of be in that environment where I, I was living alone for the first time. I was the only American within, you know, 45 minutes in any direction. So I was the only person holding myself accountable. And that scared me. I didn't trust myself to be doing that when, um, you know, I was making poor decisions also and.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:32] It's great that you were self aware and were able to, to do that.

TAYABJI: [00:40:36] Mm hmm, thank you.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:37] Lots of people wouldn't, right?

TAYABJI: [00:40:38] Mm hmm. I, um, and again, I was, when I reached out to the medical staff, they did give me the option of you can stay in country. We'll talk about ways that you can mitigate risks and try not to drink and that kind of stuff. Or you can, what'd they say, it was nip it in the bud and go back and seek treatment. Um, I, I just knew I wouldn't have been able to do it on my own. I needed the support. I didn't even know what that support would look like or how. You know, I certainly didn't foresee myself staying sober, um, after I came back, but I just knew I

wouldn't have been able to do it in country. Fortunately, I have been sober since, um, my last drink was actually on my flight home on my way to treatment. So. So far.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:28] So you've been in treatment all this time?

TAYABJI: [00:41:30] No, I was just in treatment for those six months, but I've stayed sober since. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:36] And how did your family deal with all of this?

TAYABJI: [00:41:41] Um. It was, again, it was interesting circumstances, because on the one hand, I think they were happy to have me back. I think, um, they felt safer with me back, even though I, I wanted to be Malawi and I felt safe in Malawi. I think, um, you know, when, when they couldn't see what my life was like there, the worries came out. So they.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:09] Did they know that you had a drinking problem before you left?

TAYABJI: [00:42:13] No, I. Or I guess as I've grown more comfortable with it, they have also come to see it. Um, it's such an interesting disease because I was able to perform well in school. I was accepted to the Peace Corps. I was, I had these opportunities. Um, so I wouldn't say I look like the alcoholic that a lot of people expect. And I do think that other Peace Corps volunteers have similar, similar experiences. There was actually another volunteer from another African country who was in treatment with me at the same time. We both were medically evacuated during the same few weeks. It is unfortunately something that does affect volunteers, um, whether it be substance use or other mental health.

TAYABJI: [00:43:01] But um, so my family has come to accept it and they do support me and are, um, crucial in my recovery. But initially it took a lot of, I guess, as you say, like self-awareness. I knew that even if I didn't know what was going to come, I knew that what had led me to that point wasn't okay, and I wasn't willing to kind of take it.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:24] Do something about it.

TAYABJI: [00:43:25] Yeah, take it day by day.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:26] So you came back. You stayed in a hotel. You were in treatment, in January that ended.

TAYABJI: [00:43:33] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:33] And then what happened?

TAYABJI: [00:43:35] And then they booked a flight for me to go back to Boston. And at that point, um, I was no longer, I was a returned Peace Corps volunteer. I had ten sessions of readjustment counseling, I think, um, I. That was my last connection to Peace Corps. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:57] Does everybody get that?

TAYABJI: [00:43:58] Everybody gets three. Any volunteer can get three. People who are separated for mental health concerns, or I think who expressed mental health concerns at the end of service can, are eligible for up to ten. Um, and so I was in touch in terms of like the paperwork, submitting that kind of stuff. And then um, there hasn't, yeah, that that was the end of my service.

TAYABJI: [00:44:27] I have, I've stayed in touch with my other, the other volunteers and actually I touched base with the director of the Peace Corps in Malawi. She's, she, um. I guess to backtrack that week between when we made the plans for me to go back to treatment and when I was actually on the plane, I stayed with the director at her house in Malawi and, um, like her and her daughter. It was over Thanksgiving and I didn't have, um, people to spend it with. And we celebrated Thanksgiving together. And so I've been, um, able to touch base with her a bit, which is nice as well. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:10] Um, did, you sound positive about the role of Peace Corps staff played in this whole, um, episode. Do you have any comments on that? Because there, you know, there have been comments about Peace Corps medical staff not necessarily always being helpful.

TAYABJI: [00:45:31] Yeah. I, I can only speak from my experience. I did have extremely supportive people who I felt like they were on my team. Um, I think medical training aside, it does come down to individuals and how they view certain, certain diseases, certain behaviors, and how they can express that compassion. So, um, even just from the get go, the fact that I felt comfortable sitting down and having this open conversation with someone when I was, you know, such a mess in my head. But that came down 100 percent to how, um. You know, her name was Lynette, and she just, she made me feel at ease. And that went so far.

TAYABJI: [00:46:21] And I don't think, no, I've actually thought about. She's, she's since left Malawi. She left maybe a few months after I left to take another position, but. It's, I think it was those little things that affected me the most and really helped me get through it. The fact that the director welcomed me into her home, and they didn't just put me up in a hotel, which they might have for other, um, in other places. But so again, I can only speak to my experience, but I only remember positive things from, from that time.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:55] And what have you done since Peace Corps?

TAYABJI: [00:46:58] I've been popping around a bit. I'm actually going back to law school in a couple of months. Um, I want to study international human rights law, and that was kind of my interest going into Peace Corps. But since then, I, I worked at a nonprofit for a bit. I've worked in, um, a college setting. I've worked at a police department, all different random stuff. Um, Peace Corps tends to be the one everyone loves to, to talk about it, to ask about it. In any of those settings, it's come up in my interview. So it's, it's interesting. I've definitely been able to not only, um, apply my like experiences in Peace Corps to anything else coming out of it, but to share what I learned and to explain about, um,

such a different, a different place and a different culture and lifestyle to people who probably will never experience it themselves. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:58] How do people react to that?

TAYABJI: [00:48:01] I get a lot of, a lot of surprised react people. Um. Just fascinated by the concept of, of signing on for two years of service in a different country where you don't know the language. Everything that drew me to it, you know? Um, I enjoy those conversations because no matter how other people feel about it, I really did, um, I believe in Peace Corps' approach. And I believe that volunteers can be successful. Um, I. I can't say how, I'm still so torn about how I feel about my service. Um, you know, who knows?

TAYABJI: [00:48:48] As I said, I wasn't able to teach for the full year. But, you know, I would like to think that maybe one of those relationships might have affected a student or a teacher or a neighbor. You know, I don't know, but I do believe that every volunteer that goes has something to offer, and. I forget what the question was. I just went on a ramble.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:13] Uh. I forgot as well. But, but it had an effect on you, clearly.

TAYABJI: [00:49:19] It did. I, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:21] And it's having a ripple effect on how you talk about the world and Peace Corps to other people.

TAYABJI: [00:49:27] Mm hmm. I actually, I did apply to go back since. Since I've been back, um, I reapplied to Peace Corps. I went through the selection process. I was actually accepted. And at that time I was told I wouldn't have been medically cleared, which I guess most, most of me knew. Um. They look for three years of sobriety for applicants. Um.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:55] And it would have been a hard thing for you.

TAYABJI: [00:49:57] I think it would have been, but I would have at least had the tools to, to, um. I didn't have the tools before because I had never had

to have the tools. Whereas, you know, I would have come in with a year, a year and a half of sobriety, not as much as they look for, obviously, but I really did believe that I would have had the tools form, the tools built, this, you know, plan that could have helped me when I was in. I would have been in.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:30] Well, that's interesting. It's three years because you were, because you were evacuated or you hadn't, you know, you encountered this while you were in Peace Corps. But there really was no discussion of that before you went in, right?

TAYABJI: [00:50:45] Well, actually, so as part of the medical clearance process for any applicant, I believe it's, they look for three years. They ask if there's a history of, yeah, substance abuse or if there's a.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:57] Oh, they do?

TAYABJI: [00:50:57] Substance use diagnosis, disorder diagnosis. Um, and.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:01] You just hadn't had a diagnosis.

TAYABJI: [00:51:03] Yeah. I didn't know I had a, or I didn't, um. Yeah. I had never been diagnosed before, and. Yes, I would have gone to another country in Africa where, um. Again, it was for the best. I think that was another instance where what I wanted so desperately didn't match up with the reality. Um, and I do think, um, I do think the guidelines for medical clearance are in place for a reason because it is such, um, such a different environment.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:41] Sure.

TAYABJI: [00:51:41] No one knows until they're there. But it, um. Yeah, I think that just goes to show that I really did want to, to give back in a way that I. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:51] And if you end up being sober for the rest of your life, that has a major impact.

TAYABJI: [00:51:56] Yeah. There's always time down the road to to go back.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:00] To do it again. Great. So do you have any other thoughts about your whole experience or the impact of, of Peace Corps?

TAYABJI: [00:52:10] Oh man, that's a loaded question. Um, I really am so excited about this project because I do feel like it's. It's an opportunity that I wish more people had, but that I know, um, it does take a really special person to, to make a successful service. Um. And I'm so grateful for the opportunities that Peace Corps gave me to not only to recognize what I needed to do for like, my, my own health. You know, I don't know what would have happened if I had never been in Malawi and experienced, um, my alcoholism there. But, um, it shaped my, my perspective in a way that I know now like how I want to be able to give back and how I want to continue doing that.

TAYABJI: [00:53:10] Um, no matter where I am, I think that remembering like, what, what life was like and what those conversations were like and the people who influenced my stay while I was there and my life since, remembering that stuff I do here could affect, could affect them. Stuff that's happening in policy affects them, um, even if we don't see it every day. And I think, um. Again, it's, it's something I wish a lot more people had awareness of.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:46] And if you become a human rights, international human rights lawyer, you'll be knee deep in all of that, right?

TAYABJI: [00:53:53] We'll see. Knock on wood. But yes, hopefully.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:56] Where are you going to go to law school?

TAYABJI: [00:53:57] I'll be at Boston University.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:58] Oh, great. So you'll be home as well.

TAYABJI: [00:54:00] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:01] Sounds, sounds good. My daughter's a lawyer. My husband's a lawyer. One of her best friends is an international human rights lawyer.

TAYABJI: [00:54:08] Oh, really?

GANZGLASS: [00:54:09] So lots of lawyers.

TAYABJI: [00:54:10] Unfortunately, there's a huge need for those, those types of lawyers too, but.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:14] Unfortunately.

TAYABJI: [00:54:15] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:15] Yeah. Okay. It was a great interview. Thank you so much.

TAYABJI: [00:54:19] Thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]