

Charles Forbus Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Charles (Charlie) Forbus served as a Peace Corps volunteer in five different countries: Nepal (1997), Ukraine (2002-2004), Honduras (2011-2012), Madagascar (2013), and Armenia (2015-2017). He also served as a Peace Corps Response volunteer in Georgia (2014). Most of his projects were in the community development sector.

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Oral History Interview

with

Charles Forbus

August 3, 2019
Elkridge, Maryland

By Julius Sztuk

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

SZTUK: [00:00:02] Today is August 3rd, 2019. My name is Jay Sztuk, RPCV Fiji 1974 through 1976. Today I'm going to interview Charles Forbus, who was a Peace Corps volunteer on six different occasions. First Nepal from February 1977 [1997], working in youth development. Ukraine, February 2002, community development. Honduras, January 2011, community development. Madagascar, February 2013, food security. Georgia, May 2014, community development. And in Armenia beginning in August 2015, also in community development. Charlie, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed today.

FORBUS: [00:00:56] Sure.

SZTUK: [00:00:57] Let's start off by telling us a little bit about your background, where you grew up, and how you got interested in joining the Peace Corps.

FORBUS: [00:01:04] Well, I grew up in Dallas, Texas, and I joined the Air Force when I was 17, right out of high school. And I was in the Air Force when John Kennedy and Richard Nixon had their debates. And I really, of course, everyone liked John Kennedy and he was my first president that I voted for, I just turned 21. So that'll tell you how old I am. That was in 1960. And after he was elected, he started the Peace Corps. And I had just gotten out of the Air Force. I got out in December of 1960. And so I thought, that's a great idea. However, I was on my way to having three kids, so I got started early with children. So I had to wait till they were grown until I could retire, which I did. I went, after I got out of the Air Force, I went to work for U.S. Steel, and then I went to work for Southwestern Bell, AT&T, and I got an early retirement in 1992. I went back and I did some traveling. My wife had died in the meantime, and so I was kind of footloose. And I remembered after I did some college courses, I decided it was time to fulfill my dream of being a Peace Corps volunteer.

SZTUK: [00:02:43] So for all that time, over 30 years, 37 years, you.

FORBUS: [00:02:47] Still had it on my mind.

SZTUK: [00:02:50] Still on your mind. That's amazing. So then how old were you when you applied in '97? You would have been?

FORBUS: [00:02:58] In '97, I was 57.

SZTUK: [00:03:00] 57, OK.

FORBUS: [00:03:02] So it's easy for me to remember my years because they coincide with the year. Anyway. Yeah. Yeah, so I was 57, went to Nepal.

SZTUK: [00:03:14] What did your family think about you joining up? What did your kids think?

FORBUS: [00:03:17] Well, I think the first one, Nepal, was kind of a shocker to them. But I'd been, since like I said, I retired in '92, so I'd been kind of floating around. So they were kind of used to me being on the move. They didn't, uh, they weren't really excited about me being gone for two years, which I

wasn't, because my daughter, like I said, my wife had died and my daughter had some emotional problems, so I had to early term [terminate] in Nepal.

SZTUK: [00:03:49] How long were you there before you?

FORBUS: [00:03:51] I was there about three months.

SZTUK: [00:03:53] Oh.

FORBUS: [00:03:54] She was, yeah, she was really in, um, after I left, she had no one to rely on.

SZTUK: [00:04:01] So was that all training or did you actually start your job?

FORBUS: [00:04:04] It was all training. I finished up right before swearing in. I said, I got to go home.

SZTUK: [00:04:10] Oh, that's too bad.

FORBUS: [00:04:10] And I was so reluctant. I wrote a nice letter about telling them it wasn't because of Peace Corps, it was because of family matters.

SZTUK: [00:04:17] Yeah, well, that happens.

FORBUS: [00:04:18] Yeah. And it was one of those things and I've thought about this. Anyway, it was very distressful that I had to leave but.

SZTUK: [00:04:27] Was that your first time overseas or your first time in Asia?

FORBUS: [00:04:31] No, I was in the Air Force.

SZTUK: [00:04:32] Oh, right.

FORBUS: [00:04:33] Yeah. I had done some overseas stuff. I'd been through Europe and some other places, so.

SZTUK: [00:04:39] But going to another country in Peace Corps was a little different than going in the Air Force, isn't it?

FORBUS: [00:04:49] Yeah, it was a little different. Yeah, actually, I really enjoyed the people in Nepal. They were great. The country is fantastic. It's beautiful. Very, very poor. But just incredible people. And I lived with a family, actually I lived with a Gurkha family in Nepal. And he had been, he retired from the British Army. The Gurkhas are the soldiers that guard the British embassies, as you probably know.

SZTUK: [00:05:29] Right.

FORBUS: [00:05:30] And he was about I'd say five foot six and about five foot six wide. He was just solid, solid as a rock. In fact, he was the mayor of Pokhara and I was living with him. And it was my introduction to cricket, which I still don't understand totally, but it's a great. It was great. He had come to my room and he'd knock on the door and say, time for us to have a drink of Scotch and watch cricket. Great. So he was really a great guy. And then he had three little kids and his daughter would knock on my door every morning and say, your milk chai is ready. Super. Anyway, as I said, I was very reluctant to leave, but it was best for my daughter. And now she's, after a couple of years, she was doing fine so.

SZTUK: [00:06:30] Oh good. That worked out. Any memorable experiences there in Nepal, before we move on to the next country?

FORBUS: [00:06:36] Well, yeah, we did. We did hike the Annapurna Trail, not all the way, but we all know when we had time off in Pokhara, we would hike up the Annapurna Trail and see some really fantastic sights. I remember, we got there in February and it was overcast. You couldn't see the Himalayas. And then in, I guess it was March, the clouds cleared and it was, it's hard to describe.

SZTUK: [00:07:09] Really.

FORBUS: [00:07:10] I mean, it's like, it's like trying to talk about the Grand Canyon. You've got to go see it and you've got to go see the Himalayas too. It's

totally different from being able to, actually even different from looking at a photograph, seeing it in 3D with being right there. It's just fantastic. Anyway, that's about all I got for. The food was great. I got real vegetarian.

SZTUK: [00:07:41] Yeah? Was it mostly vegetarian diet?

FORBUS: [00:07:44] Mostly.

SZTUK: [00:07:44] And were you, what did your training consist of, was it Hindi language?

FORBUS: [00:07:49] Yeah. Yeah. And Sanskrit. Their alphabet is Sanskrit and the language is extremely difficult. But I did pick up some of it. I was going, I was doing pretty good.

SZTUK: [00:08:06] Were you?

FORBUS: [00:08:06] Yeah, I was because I was only 57 at the time. So my brain was still working pretty good then.

SZTUK: [00:08:12] And you lived with the family full time?

FORBUS: [00:08:14] Yeah. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:08:16] That's pretty, pretty good immersion there.

FORBUS: [00:08:18] Yeah. Yeah, it was great. Oh, we did go to a wedding which was, uh, the Gurkha took me there and his name was Sanjay of course. But yeah, we did go to a wedding. It was very interesting.

SZTUK: [00:08:40] All right. So it must have been hard to leave. But then it was a few years later, about five years later, you decided?

FORBUS: [00:08:49] Yeah. But after the Nepal experience, I did some consulting back with AT&T and did some traveling overseas, went to China and a few places like that. And then I decided it was time to do Peace Corps again and do it right. My daughter was fine, all my kids were doing good. So I

actually applied for the Caribbean, Central or South America. And they said, how about Nepal? I mean, Ukraine. I said, sure, why not? So I always wanted to see if it was really an evil empire, as President Reagan had called it. So I went to, I went to Nepal.

SZTUK: [00:09:42] Ukraine.

FORBUS: [00:09:43] Ukraine! I'll get it straight here.

SZTUK: [00:09:44] That's understandable. So you were willing to go anywhere then?

FORBUS: [00:09:49] Yeah. Yeah, sure. Anything. Yeah, I was on my own and ready to go.

SZTUK: [00:09:54] Was the application process any more difficult a second time, or were they understanding about the first time?

FORBUS: [00:10:00] Yeah. About a year. Just like the first time. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:10:05] And then so you applied for Ukraine and then your kids must have thought you were going crazy again.

FORBUS: [00:10:13] This time they, I had been, like I said, I'd been doing some consulting work for AT&T and so I'd been traveling a lot. So they were, uh, they weren't as reluctant as the first time.

SZTUK: [00:10:27] And now what about your peers or your friends and so forth? What did they think about you doing this?

FORBUS: [00:10:34] Well, they were kind of, I'd like to do that, but they never would have. So you know, we'd get a lot of that.

SZTUK: [00:10:45] So supportive?

FORBUS: [00:10:47] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:10:50] And then did you, was your training in country for Ukraine?

FORBUS: [00:10:54] Yeah. All my training has been in country. Yeah. Yeah. So we trained in a small town called Zhytomyr that's just outside of Kyiv.

SZTUK: [00:11:05] Yeah.

FORBUS: [00:11:07] And it was the Russian language. And I had gotten survival skills at Russian language so, which I've forgotten most of it. But I pick up, I can remember. I hear a word, I know what it means. I was in, I was a community developer in Ukraine, and I went to work for the DPOUU, which was the Disabled People's Organization Union of Ukraine. And, great organization. There's like, at that time, they told me, and I have no reason to doubt it, that there were almost 600,000 disabled people in Ukraine. A lot of them were disabled from the Afghan war.

SZTUK: [00:12:01] OK.

FORBUS: [00:12:02] There were several people there that had lost limbs and were disabled. And after the fall of the Soviet Union, all the social services had evaporated.

SZTUK: [00:12:18] So these would have been Ukrainian soldiers that had been?

FORBUS: [00:12:21] No, not all, just a variety of people in every kind of disability, mental and physical disabilities, and they supported them all. Actually, we went and it was a great organization. Anyway, the guy I met was the leader of the DPOUU, the director. He and I were, had served in the different air forces at the same time.

SZTUK: [00:12:53] Oh.

FORBUS: [00:12:54] And we got, we were talking one day, and my plane. I was an aircraft mechanic in the Air Force and I was a crew chief on our planes were the C-121 Super Connie Radar Picket planes. They had ray domes on the back, on the top and the bottom, and they flew up and down the West Coast from the DEW Line, which was the Distant Early Warning Line

in Canada down to Mexico and further on down than that. And we flew up and down the West Coast and we were. His plane was the version of the, Russian version of the B-29, which was a bomber. And he said, we would fly up towards your territory and then we'd veer off. I said, yeah, I know, we got you on radar there, buddy. I said, I'm glad you never crossed that line. He said, yeah, I am too. Anyway, actually he was disabled too. He had lost a leg in Afghanistan.

FORBUS: [00:14:00] And then I got, I was working with the people there and my counterpart, he helped us get a, uh. Everything they did was manual recordkeeping. They had file cabinets out the kazoo and everything. It took them so much time to find a record and then try to get people in some kind of support. So I managed to get them some computers for their, uh, with the help of my counterpart, mostly with his help. But we got some computers to automate and put a database in so that they could access their records faster. And then after that, we got another grant for. They had, I think it was ten or 12, I can't remember right now, but ten or 12 remote locations. The headquarters in Kyiv, and then they had remote locations around the country.

SZTUK: [00:15:11] So you lived in Kyiv?

FORBUS: [00:15:12] I lived in, yeah, I was the last. Actually at the time I was the last volunteer that they let serve in Kyiv, the Russian Kyiv.

SZTUK: [00:15:23] Oh OK.

FORBUS: [00:15:24] They didn't let anybody else serve in Kyiv and put them out in the country like this.

SZTUK: [00:15:29] So you were in an urban area and everybody else is out.

FORBUS: [00:15:32] Oh, yeah. Right there. Beautiful city.

SZTUK: [00:15:36] Yeah.

FORBUS: [00:15:37] Anyway, we got computers and internet for all these computers at the different remote locations, so we had to take them down and set them up. And then they would have a big party for me and my counterpart, and the director and I got to see the whole country.

SZTUK: [00:16:02] Oh.

FORBUS: [00:16:03] It was. I got to go to the Crimea, got to see Sevastopol where the Russian navy base was. Then we went over to where they had the conference with World War II with Churchill and Stalin and FDR. What's the name of the town and the city? Anyway, I got to. I'm trying to. Can you stop it just a minute. Let me let me think. Anyway, yeah, it was in Yalta. So we got to go over to Yalta, and the director of the palace where they had held the conference let me see, took me to one of the library that the Roosevelts had sent all the books for their library. He said, we don't let everybody see this, but since you're a Peace Corps volunteer and all that. And so I got to see the library that the Roosevelts had sent. It was enormous. They had sent thousands of books over for that library, you know, quite a scene.

FORBUS: [00:17:31] But the funniest thing was, there in Ukraine, almost every place you went there was a McDonald's. So at the end of the pier in Yalta was a McDonald's. And so we were walking there and I said, you know, they've got pretty good coffee. And they said, yeah, let's go get a cup of coffee. So we went to McDonald's and got a cup of coffee. And I looked out the window. There was a park right next to the McDonald's and I saw the statue over there and I said, that's Lenin. Yeah, yeah, that's Lenin. And he's pointing right at McDonald's. And I'm thinking, he's probably thinking that's capitalism. Anyway. That was quite a little thing.

FORBUS: [00:18:25] And I also got to see where the Charge of the Light Brigade, you know, they had the Crimean War and that's where that poem, The Charge of the Light Brigade, was. And whoever the British officer was that sent his 600 valiant men into the jaws of death, he was not a very bright man. I'm sitting there thinking, they're going down to this little, little funnel. And whoever's on it above them is going to be able to cut them up. And they did, so. But anyways, it was interesting. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:19:01] So you got to see most of the country then.

FORBUS: [00:19:03] Got to see a lot of it, yeah. Got to see a lot of Ukraine. It was a beautiful country. The people were great.

SZTUK: [00:19:11] Now tell me a little more about your job as community development, but you're working for this agency that takes care of handicapped people. So were you, what did you actually do for them?

FORBUS: [00:19:22] I was working with them to help.

SZTUK: [00:19:23] Develop facilities or?

FORBUS: [00:19:25] To help develop their ability to serve their people, their disabled counterpart or compadres. Yeah, their comrades.

SZTUK: [00:19:38] Help get them better organized?

FORBUS: [00:19:40] Yeah, helping them get organized and helping them make better, faster ways to get information and get their people served and things. So it was my second. My first site was with an ecological organization. But the guy that, the country director, Karl Beck, said, this guy is a con man, at the ecological society.

SZTUK: [00:20:13] The head of the agency?

FORBUS: [00:20:13] And I said, I agree. I was there about two days and I said, I agree with you. He said, let's go. Let's go find you something else to do. So that's when they got me to the job with DPOUU. Karl Beck was a great guy.

SZTUK: [00:20:25] And were you the only volunteer in that organization?

FORBUS: [00:20:30] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:20:30] The only Peace Corps volunteer assigned to it.

FORBUS: [00:20:31] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:20:31] So all of your coworkers were Ukrainian?

FORBUS: [00:20:34] All my coworkers were Russians or Ukrainians, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:20:38] And you probably had to speak Russian. Did you get pretty fluent?

FORBUS: [00:20:42] Ah, it was survival. I knew how to order food and I knew how to get a taxi.

SZTUK: [00:20:47] But they knew English?

FORBUS: [00:20:48] Oh, yeah, they knew English. Yeah, they were good. Yuri was my counterpart, Yuri Oblagin. And he told me he learned how to. I said, how did you learn? His English was excellent. Then how did you learn to speak so well? And he said, well, I listened to Beatles records.

SZTUK: [00:21:11] Ah.

FORBUS: [00:21:12] And I would ask my friends who spoke English and said, what is that? What does that mean? And they'd tell me, or my friends would tell me what they. And he said, I don't think so. He said, I'd investigate it and found out that they were wrong. And so he learned how to speak by listening to the Beatles.

SZTUK: [00:21:28] No kidding. Yeah.

FORBUS: [00:21:30] Right. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:21:34] All right. So what were your, what was your living situation like? Now you were in the city, so did you have pretty good living quarters?

FORBUS: [00:21:39] Yeah, I had an apartment. I lived with, in Zhytomyr I lived with a family. And then in Kyiv, I had an apartment. I lived in one of the old Soviet Union apartments. I'll say this for Khrushchev, he built a lot of apartments.

SZTUK: [00:21:59] Yeah.

FORBUS: [00:22:00] And from what I heard, no one was homeless during the Soviet Union. Everybody had a job, so they say, whether they worked or not was another matter. But everybody had a job and everybody had a place to live and everybody had health care. So. Of course, after the fall, none of that existed anymore.

SZTUK: [00:22:31] Did you make friends in the community there?

FORBUS: [00:22:34] Oh, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:22:34] Was your social circle mainly the people at work or did you also make friends with your neighbors?

FORBUS: [00:22:38] No, I had, yeah, I had friends with my neighbors. I had a, I had met a schoolteacher. And she had three jobs. She was, actually she had been a, she had a PhD in, uh, not geography, but, uh. Oil. She was an oil developer. So she worked for a university and a high school and the Air Force Academy. So I would, she would get me to come out and talk about various things, about the Peace Corps and other things that I had knowledge of.

SZTUK: [00:23:39] She'd have you come into her classroom?

FORBUS: [00:23:40] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:23:41] And what age were the students? Were they high school?

FORBUS: [00:23:45] In the high school, they were high school students. At the geophysical university, they were graduate students. And then at the Air Force Academy, they were college students. It was. Actually the one I remember, the one speech or session I made at the Air Force Academy

was about the trash, the way there's an incinerator that will burn trash, that will burn trash for a whole city I think. They use it in Brazil. And it would leave, um, it would generate electricity. So I had done a little research on it when I was in the States. And so I discussed that with the people at the Air Force unit, at the Air Force universe. They were very interested in it. It was a recycling type of facility that it never went anywhere, but they were interested in it anyway. They like to hear about stuff like that.

SZTUK: [00:25:01] Yeah.

FORBUS: [00:25:02] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:25:02] So these were educated and worldly people. Do you think you had some, um, that you affected their perceptions of America?

FORBUS: [00:25:15] Yeah, I think so. They, uh. I was always getting invited to places. And actually I met the exclusion zone director of Chernobyl, and just happened to bump into him with a friend of mine. And they were always glad to have me come over and they were just great with me and we all got along great. They were always wanting to know about the United States and how we thought and everything. So, yeah, I think. I think I left, I hope I left a good impression.

SZTUK: [00:26:00] And did you have any kind of preconceived notions about the Ukrainian or Russian people before you went there that might have changed after getting to know them?

FORBUS: [00:26:13] Well, I realized that it didn't take me long to figure it out, that the people are people, you know, Well, the interesting thing was, on each floor we stayed. Our initial location was at the Zhytomyr Hotel, which was the class hotel. However, we didn't have hot water. This was in February, so it was pretty cold. And on each floor they had an operator station. I'd plug in. And I'm thinking, if they want to listen to what you're doing, all they have to do is plug into your room, you know? There's no privacy if you're worried about that. I was never worried about it.

SZTUK: [00:27:02] So they could be spying on you.

FORBUS: [00:27:04] I didn't care. But, yeah, I could see that they were spied on, you know? And, you know, we heard about, you know, they didn't have much freedom and everything. And I talked to some people. This one, the mother of the lady I stayed with in Zhytomyr had been one of the slaves during the Nazis. Now they made reparations. The Germans made reparations to the people that they had enslaved in Poland and in Ukraine. And she had gotten \$10,000 from Germany. And she said, that's more than I ever got from the Soviet Union. She was a.

SZTUK: [00:27:53] You stayed with her during training, when you were in training?

FORBUS: [00:27:55] Yeah, during training.

SZTUK: [00:27:57] In Ukraine again, did you live with a family during your entire training?

FORBUS: [00:28:01] No, no. I had my own apartment in Kyiv. I had my own.

SZTUK: [00:28:04] But I mean during training?

FORBUS: [00:28:05] During training, I stayed with, I stayed with my friend Tamara. She was there.

SZTUK: [00:28:10] So was each volunteer assigned to a family to stay with?

FORBUS: [00:28:18] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:28:18] So you didn't stay in a barracks or anything like that?

FORBUS: [00:28:19] No, no, no.

SZTUK: [00:28:20] OK.

FORBUS: [00:28:21] Well, the only time we stayed together as a group was at the Zhytomyr Hotel. We were glad to get out of there. It was, well, actually, and I was lucky. The lady I'd stayed with, Tamara, she had a kalocka. A

kalocka is a gas water heater. And when you turn the hot water on the water kicks on the kalocka and it heats the water up. So I got to take hot showers. So it was like, oh, what a change.

SZTUK: [00:28:57] So OK, so it's like an instantaneous.

FORBUS: [00:28:58] It was like, ooh, I'm in heaven. So, you know, it didn't take you long to appreciate the amenities that you had in the States that you didn't, that you had lost. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:29:09] Now did you stay in Ukraine for the entire two years?

FORBUS: [00:29:13] Yep.

SZTUK: [00:29:13] You completed your service there?

FORBUS: [00:29:14] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:29:14] And did you extend?

FORBUS: [00:29:16] No, no.

SZTUK: [00:29:16] Did you think about extending?

FORBUS: [00:29:18] My time was up. I said, it's time to go home. My kids were waiting for me.

SZTUK: [00:29:24] But you must have made some lasting friendships.

FORBUS: [00:29:26] Oh, I still have friends over there. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:29:28] Still in touch with them?

FORBUS: [00:29:29] Yeah, Yuri and Tamara and a couple of other people.

SZTUK: [00:29:36] And have you been back to visit since?

FORBUS: [00:29:40] Yeah, been back a couple of times.

SZTUK: [00:29:45] So you completed two years there. And how did it feel when you left? Well, let me ask you. Do you feel like you had a lasting impact?

FORBUS: [00:29:57] You know, I never. I never know. You know, they may have sold the computers the day I left, I don't know. But I think so. I think I feel good about it.

SZTUK: [00:30:15] At least on a personal level. Maybe with your personal connections with people.

FORBUS: [00:30:18] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:30:19] Made a good impression then.

FORBUS: [00:30:21] Yeah. And right before I left, we set up. I got three grants for them and one of them was, the last one was for a computer training center to train some of the disabled people on how to do Microsoft Word and Office and things like that. So they were. I think they were, I think it had a little impact on them. You know, I don't think it changed the world over there, but it may have had a little impact on them, you know. At least I think I left them with a positive impression of Americans.

SZTUK: [00:31:00] Yeah, that's the important thing. Was it a pretty big program over there? How many, do you know how many volunteers there were?

FORBUS: [00:31:07] There was, uh, I think at one time there was like 200 and, over 250 volunteers in country. So it's fairly good, fairly good sized. And USAID was over there. They were active. I got a couple of second, actually secondary jobs too. One of them was working with my friend at the university and the other one was I worked with USAID. I would go over and teach there. Most of their staff was Ukrainian.

SZTUK: [00:31:54] OK.

FORBUS: [00:31:56] So they wanted to learn business English. And so I would go over on Thursdays and we'd have a couple of hour classes on business English.

SZTUK: [00:32:06] OK.

FORBUS: [00:32:06] I retired, like I said, I retired from AT&T. I was a national account manager with AT&T, so I could explain things to them a little about business and how to write your letters and things like that. So they were very interested. Very smart people, very, very quick. And they all spoke English. Not perfect, but I left them with a Texas accent. So it was, that was my goal.

SZTUK: [00:32:38] Good. OK. So then you finished there in, it would have been 2004 sometime?

FORBUS: [00:32:43] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:32:43] Yeah. And you came back home.

FORBUS: [00:32:46] Came back home, moved to Huntsville, Texas, built a house in a golfing community. Then got elected to city council there in 2000 and. Let's see, I was there two and a half years on city council, so I think it was 2008. Also, I started teaching ESL at the local library and did that for about. When I go back, I'll probably do it and still do it. So I've been doing it since I moved there.

SZTUK: [00:33:28] So volunteering is kind of part of your makeup?

FORBUS: [00:33:31] Yeah, you know, it gives me something to do. Keeps me off the street.

SZTUK: [00:33:36] Do you think that the Peace Corps experience has something to do with that continued volunteering?

FORBUS: [00:33:41] I'm sure it does. Yeah. You know, I taught. You know, I didn't just do my primary job in any of my countries. I always had a secondary position teaching English to somebody Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:33:59] And what made you decide that you needed a third Peace Corps experience?

FORBUS: [00:34:03] Well, I was ready to go back right away. But my kids taught me out of it, so.

SZTUK: [00:34:08] Yeah.

FORBUS: [00:34:12] So I finally in 2010, I got unelected to city council and so I said, well, since I'm not going to have to do this anymore, which was kind of it's like, you know, I liked doing it. But whenever I lost the election, I went over with some buddies, like actually four of us on city council when they, the clean sweep. They got rid of all four of us at-large candidates and we all went over to the Stardust Ballroom and had a beer. And I said, now I'm feeling pretty good. So I got rid of, you know, I hated to lose, but it was, you know, it was time to go. And that's when I decided to go to Honduras.

SZTUK: [00:35:05] OK.

FORBUS: [00:35:06] I finally got to one of my, uh, I always put in for the Caribbean, Central America, or South America. And I got Honduras.

SZTUK: [00:35:16] You finally got it.

FORBUS: [00:35:17] I got it, I got one. Yeah, yeah. It was great. I worked in the mountains with, I call them kahalurales. It's a little, the little small villages would all get together and come up with a product of some kind to sell to make money for their organization in the city, the little towns.

SZTUK: [00:35:47] It was kind of a co-op?

FORBUS: [00:35:49] Yeah, it's kind of co-op, yeah. And I was working with Funder. Funder was an NGO that supported, uh, it was out of Spain.

SZTUK: [00:36:05] F-U-N-D?

FORBUS: [00:36:05] F-U-N-D-E-R. And they were supporting the farmers and small villages. A lot of these small villages were like cooperative farmers. And they were working with peppers, the peppers they use in hot sauces from Louisiana. And were trying to get them to be exported. Quality wise, the quality wasn't quite as good as they needed in the Louisiana hot sauce.

SZTUK: [00:36:44] OK.

FORBUS: [00:36:45] You know what, the hot sauce I'm talking about? The rich sauce.

SZTUK: [00:36:49] The Tabasco sauce?

FORBUS: [00:36:51] Tabasco, tabasco peppers. They were also trying to improve the quality of the cocoa that they had down there. And they were trying to get it to the quality that they could get, sell it to the Swiss. So but. There's also. That was something they were working on, but they were also working with the different villages that were selling mostly tamales. And so I was doing a SWOT analysis with these small organizations. And we were also doing the four P's, product, price, place, and promotion, for them. And they, the women were, the interesting thing was the women were more driven to make a success than the guys were, than men were. And two or three of these kahalurales decided that since we were talking, what could you do with your, with what you have? How could you expand your product line? And they decided, well, maybe we could use the same material and make tamales, or yeah, tamales. No, they were making tamales. To make tacos and sell the tacos on the outside or in our little of influence around their village.

SZTUK: [00:38:28] So they would be like.

FORBUS: [00:38:29] So they expanded their product line. So I was pretty happy about that. I was kind of like, that was a nice success.

SZTUK: [00:38:35] They would do like food carts, street sellers?

FORBUS: [00:38:37] Actually they would take them in trucks and they'd go down to the different markets in those little areas. And they'd set up and sell them there. Or they would take them to the little cafes that they supported too. There were small cafes, little fronts of houses that were where people would go in and buy their tamales. They were good, too. They always fed me. Well, really the cool thing was we were way up in the mountains. And the four-wheel drives would not go all the way up. We had to stop and they'd come down and pick us up on horses. So I got to ride horses up into the mountains.

SZTUK: [00:39:23] Were you an experienced rider?

FORBUS: [00:39:25] Oh, yeah, I'm good on a horse. It was kind of, it was cool. And we also worked with an HIV AIDS NGO in Puerto Cortes that was supporting the local HIV community. And there were. There were some really sad cases there, but they had a sewing factory and they were sewing, uh, gym equipment, gym, gym suits.

SZTUK: [00:40:06] Athletic clothes?

FORBUS: [00:40:08] Athletic clothes for different high schools around.

SZTUK: [00:40:12] OK.

FORBUS: [00:40:12] But they weren't making any money. They had priced themselves so low they couldn't, they weren't making any money. So I did the SWOT thing and the four P's with them, and they decided, well, we're going to, we need to raise our prices a little bit. Also their equipment was starting to run down. So I ran into an American from North Carolina who had a sewing factory in Puerto Cortes, and he sent his mechanic over and overhauled a couple of their machines for us so they were running better. They couldn't afford to get them fixed and he did it for nothing. So, yeah, that worked out good. I had a good time there. But we only lasted, we lasted a little over a year.

SZTUK: [00:41:06] Oh, you didn't complete two years?

FORBUS: [00:41:08] Oh, yeah, I did all I could because they took Peace Corps out. One of the girls, one of the ladies in Peace Corps, was on a bus and they robbed, some guys robbed it. It's a very dangerous country. Honduras is very dangerous. That's why they're coming up here.

SZTUK: [00:41:22] Right.

FORBUS: [00:41:24] And they had a Old West shootout on the bus and she got shot in the leg. And after all, there were so many people getting robbed. There were Peace Corps volunteers getting robbed going from the little hotel that they put us up with in Tegucigalpa, the headquarters of Peace Corps. There were people getting assaulted just going up to the headquarters there from the hotels. So when that girl got shot, that was the straw that broke the camel's back and they pulled us all out. They closed it down and got us all over to a hotel on the coast. I can't remember the name of the town, but we were there. We closed out service and they put us on busses and flew us out of Tegucigalpa.

SZTUK: [00:42:18] Wow, that's too bad.

FORBUS: [00:42:23] And I really, I was sorry because I thought everything was going really good. And I was, I felt very safe. I was in this little town on the coast. And I never had any, any kind of problems. But anyway, I was lucky that way.

SZTUK: [00:42:40] When you got to Honduras, they must have trained you in Spanish.

FORBUS: [00:42:44] Oh, yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:42:45] You had training there?

FORBUS: [00:42:46] I had to take Spanish courses before. I was pretty good at Spanish.

SZTUK: [00:42:55] Better than Russian?

FORBUS: [00:42:56] Than I was in Russian, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:43:00] But you went through the entire training. What was your training there in Honduras, three months?

FORBUS: [00:43:04] Yeah, three months. I lived with the lady there. She was the widow of a doctor and she had a big house. And her, she had two kids. Two of her kids still lived with her and her mother lived with her. So it was a real nice setup. And then, uh.

SZTUK: [00:43:25] So here again, during training they housed you with a local family?

FORBUS: [00:43:31] Yeah. And then that was the first. I think that was the first month. And then the second month was up in the mountains at a town that made Flor de Caña rum. And you could smell the factory was there in the city. And it was a cool town. So and we were there for about four weeks. Then they moved us back to the original town that we were in. So we finished up there at the original city.

SZTUK: [00:44:10] What town did you live in while you were there?

FORBUS: [00:44:12] A little town called Omoa. O-M-O-A. It was on the Caribbean.

SZTUK: [00:44:19] And that's a small town?

FORBUS: [00:44:21] Yeah, probably 1,500 or 2,000. Small town.

SZTUK: [00:44:28] And what was your living quarters like?

FORBUS: [00:44:31] I had a house. I lived with a family there for a while. And then I got a little house. It was a great family. She had run for mayor. Her name was, actually they were of Italian descent. There were a lot of Italian descendants in Honduras. And her name was Sylvia Sosa. And her daughter is, her name is Sylvia Sosa too. And she's a television

commentator. She just got that job here in the last couple of years. And her dad's name was Paulo. And Paulo was a great guy. He died, but I built a house on my spare time in his front yard for, uh, built a place for a business, that he would lease out to a businessperson.

SZTUK: [00:45:41] So you helped him out?

FORBUS: [00:45:43] I helped him out, yeah, because I got a background in, I can do a lot of different things. Carpentry is one of them. So yeah. So he and I built a house and, yeah, it took us about a month. I was there living with him for a month. And then I moved into the house and then, like I said, they shut us down, brought us home.

SZTUK: [00:46:03] Yeah, that's too bad. I'll ask you the same question here as about Ukraine. Do you think that you had some impact on their impression of Americans?

FORBUS: [00:46:16] Oh yeah, I think, they're still.

SZTUK: [00:46:18] Were they pretty favorable to begin with?

FORBUS: [00:46:20] Yeah, actually, they were. The impression in Honduras was, where I was, was positive. And because we'd been down there, you know, the Contras and all that Sandinistas stuff. But yeah, they were positive. And we still stay in touch, so yeah. He liked my carpentry work, so a good impression.

SZTUK: [00:46:50] OK.

FORBUS: [00:46:51] And there were some guys, had a guy from Iran. There was a guy from Canada who had a tiki bar. Like I said, we were on the Caribbean. And I would go down there and have a drink every now and then with the other expats. A lot of expats hung out there and they were always sitting around talking about, man, this guy, these people are so blah, blah, blah, this is a terrible place, and all this kind of stuff. And I said, when are you guys going home? I ain't going home. So you like it a little bit better? Yeah, oh yeah, yeah, yeah. We like it here.

SZTUK: [00:47:31] Yeah. They just liked to criticize.

FORBUS: [00:47:33] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:47:36] So you've made lasting relationships in all these places?

FORBUS: [00:47:40] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:47:40] Do you still keep in touch?

FORBUS: [00:47:41] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:47:43] Well, it's kind of, it must have been hard to leave in the middle of your service.

FORBUS: [00:47:46] I really, yeah, I really. I never felt threatened. And I know there were people who were threatened, so.

SZTUK: [00:47:53] So that would have been some time in 2012 that you left there?

FORBUS: [00:47:56] Yeah, I left there the first part of 2012, I think was end of January, 1st of February, or something like that.

SZTUK: [00:48:04] Came back home to Texas?

FORBUS: [00:48:06] Came back to Texas. That's when I went to Madagascar in, uh.

SZTUK: [00:48:11] OK, so it was only about a year later you went to Madagascar?

FORBUS: [00:48:16] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:48:17] OK. So you're ready for another?

FORBUS: [00:48:19] Ready for another one. It was half, you know, I only had a half tour in Honduras. I was ready for another one. Then I went to Madagascar. I wasn't there very long. I, uh, I didn't get through PST [pre-

service training]. I learned Malagasy, which is their language. And then I was living with a family. It was probably the most austere place I've ever lived. There was no running water, there was no electricity. But the people were fantastic. The family I lived with, they were really, really great. And I went out with a farmer. We were, like I said, it was food security there. So I went out with a farmer one day and I tripped and fell and busted my knee. And it's a rough country. You can't, if you can't walk, you can't get around.

SZTUK: [00:49:25] You can't get around.

FORBUS: [00:49:25] Yeah. So I got medevaced out of there, got my knee fixed. Knocked a big, the doctor said it was about the size, a piece of cartilage on my knee was about the size of a quarter that he got out there. And I tore my meniscus and I just had constant pain with it. So it was really constant pain flying back because it was like 36 hours on a plane with my knee being, so.

SZTUK: [00:49:52] So how long were you there before that happened, a few months?

FORBUS: [00:49:55] I was there a couple of months, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:49:57] Only a couple of months. Were you still in training?

FORBUS: [00:49:58] Yeah. Oh, yeah. Still in PST. And like I said, I was, after that I was, I thought, well, get my knee fixed. I got my knee fixed. It's good now. I still don't have any cartilage on my kneecap, but it just makes a grounding noise.

SZTUK: [00:50:18] Oh, you're resilient. So what? What's Peace Corps thinking all this time here? Now that was your fourth.

FORBUS: [00:50:26] I never had any.

SZTUK: [00:50:28] And then you decided to do it again?

FORBUS: [00:50:29] I never. Yeah. The next time was a Response.

SZTUK: [00:50:33] Oh, Peace Corps Response.

FORBUS: [00:50:34] I went Response in Georgia.

SZTUK: [00:50:35] Oh OK, so that was a short term.

FORBUS: [00:50:37] Yeah, short term.

SZTUK: [00:50:38] How many months was that?

FORBUS: [00:50:39] It was six, a little over six months. No PST.

SZTUK: [00:50:45] Pre-service training?

FORBUS: [00:50:47] No PST.

SZTUK: [00:50:48] Yeah, so with Peace Corps Response, do they do some kind of orientation?

FORBUS: [00:50:54] Yeah, we had a three-day orientation.

SZTUK: [00:50:57] Just three days?

FORBUS: [00:50:57] So yeah, when I got there at the Peace Corps headquarters in Tbilisi, I had about a three day and then on Friday. So I got in on Monday. So I guess it was four days, and then we left on Friday and I went to Batumi.

SZTUK: [00:51:19] Batumi?

FORBUS: [00:51:20] Batumi. And I worked with a organization that was focusing on motivating youth to get involved in the democratic process. So that was my job. I worked with them. I came up with leadership training and citizenship training and communications training for the organization We Sit. And we brought in different, from different parts of town, we'd bring in

groups of people and train them on all the different programs that I had developed.

SZTUK: [00:52:05] OK. So you developed those from scratch?

FORBUS: [00:52:07] Yep. Yep. And of course my counterpart, she and I worked together with it. It wasn't, I didn't do it by myself.

SZTUK: [00:52:17] Local counterpart?

FORBUS: [00:52:18] Yeah. She was very good, very smart. Yeah. And I also worked with the disabled, or one of the, one of my. I had three counterparts. One of them was, she worked with disabled people. So I had a background. So I worked with her some too. Then I lived with a family there the whole time.

SZTUK: [00:52:39] You did?

FORBUS: [00:52:40] And I'm part of their family. I've gone back to see them a couple of times.

SZTUK: [00:52:46] Yeah.

FORBUS: [00:52:49] And they're always asking me, when are you coming back? We wait you, we wait you. I'll be there. I'll come back again.

SZTUK: [00:52:57] And the language there, were you were able to use some of your Russian again, did you remember anything?

FORBUS: [00:53:02] No, they spoke. Yeah, I spoke a little Russian to them, but very little. And like I said, I'd forgotten most of it. Had gone through the, I'd gone through the Spanish, so I was better at Spanish. And but the lady I lived with, every morning she would fix my breakfast. One of my, I had another two counterparts, the one I worked, the real one. Then my secondary counterpart was the son of the lady that I lived with.

SZTUK: [00:53:36] OK.

FORBUS: [00:53:36] And he had an English club and he also worked with democratic process in his area too. So I worked with him. And every morning she would come and she had fixed my breakfast and then she would always give me a small glass of Georgia wine. Everybody in Georgia makes great wine, so. And then she say, she's ask me how, in Georgian, how was my meal? And I'd say, what? I don't understand. And she'd say it a little bit louder. Then she'd say it a little bit louder, then she'd say a little bit louder. And finally we'd start laughing together. She knew I couldn't understand her and she couldn't get me.

SZTUK: [00:54:25] And she didn't speak English?

FORBUS: [00:54:26] No.

SZTUK: [00:54:26] No? Well, that must have made it tough.

FORBUS: [00:54:28] She was great. No, we got along great. She was really a hoot. She was a funny lady. But she always did that every morning. She had, a little bit louder. A little bit louder. And then we'd start laughing together. Good cook. She was great. Yeah. And yeah, that was, I had a lot of fun there. It was right on the beach, right on the Black Sea. It was a tourist city. And the guy, one of the guys I became friends with was, uh, his name was Jim Bouley. I'm still part of his family too. So he was the, uh, he set up the performers that came to town.

SZTUK: [00:55:19] Like a promoter?

FORBUS: [00:55:20] No, he worked for the city. They would set up like a concert. He would set up all the concerts in. And they brought in a lot of interesting people. One of them was really cool. He brought in this one group of Black dancers from Houston, and they were, they did rap and they also did African dancing. And so I went to all of them free. He said, come on, let's go. Come on, come on, and we'll go down. So he took me down to introduce me to these guys. And they were, so I knew a friend of mine. His daughter was an, danced in the African scene, in the African American scene in Houston, and her name was Rachel Eckeroff. And I asked them if

they knew Rachel. And they said, yeah, yeah, we've danced with her. So it's a small world, man. I mean, the world is just, you know, you never know. You never know.

SZTUK: [00:56:22] Wow.

FORBUS: [00:56:23] It was, uh, it was very interesting. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:56:26] So you stayed there six months?

FORBUS: [00:56:28] Yep.

SZTUK: [00:56:29] And made some lasting friendships there. You're a friendly guy. And then you went to Armenia after that?

FORBUS: [00:56:36] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:56:37] Again, Peace Corps Response?

FORBUS: [00:56:39] No, no. Full two years.

SZTUK: [00:56:42] OK.

FORBUS: [00:56:42] Yeah. We went in August of 2015 and we came back in September of 2017.

SZTUK: [00:56:50] OK. And so tell me something about that. What was your training like there?

FORBUS: [00:57:00] It was, it was really good. I lived with another family in a little town called Azataban, and they're a great family. Funny thing is, her name was Nvard, N-V-A-R-D, and my host mother in Georgia, her name was Vardo. They both mean the same thing, rose.

SZTUK: [00:57:33] Oh.

FORBUS: [00:57:33] So and she was a sweet, great lady. She had two little kids. Well, she had three kids. She had a boy that was 15, and she had a little girl that was four or five. And then a little boy that was two and a half, three years old. He was a wild man. That's why I named him Tsunami.

SZTUK: [00:57:56] Oh, yeah.

FORBUS: [00:57:57] Yeah. They got a big kick out of it. And then the little girl, her name was Clatev, and she was, she loved to dance. She would just dance around all the time. And so, yeah, we all got along great. Her husband made, Ciroch, he made vodka. And there were, let's see, there was Nvard and Avard, her mother in law, and Goggek, the grandfather, Ciroch, Davit, and little Goggek. That was a two and a half year old kid and then Tatev. Plus me, and one bathroom.

SZTUK: [00:58:47] Oh.

FORBUS: [00:58:47] It was. So I was being, luckily I was an early riser so I'd get up real early so I got to take care of my hygienic needs before everybody else woke up.

SZTUK: [00:59:00] Yeah. Yeah. Otherwise you got to stand in line, huh?

FORBUS: [00:59:02] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:59:02] And this was during training that you lived with this family?

FORBUS: [00:59:04] Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:59:05] And what town was, that was in?

FORBUS: [00:59:09] Azadaban.

SZTUK: [00:59:09] Azadaban. And then language there?

FORBUS: [00:59:15] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:59:15] So you had to learn Armenian?

FORBUS: [00:59:17] Armenian.

SZTUK: [00:59:19] Was it pretty intensive, three months' training?

FORBUS: [00:59:21] Yeah. You know, I got, I got, I passed so I had survival language. You know, I never said I was. I could get where I was going and order food and find out where the bathroom was.

SZTUK: [00:59:39] So in all these places, it was pretty common to find people who spoke English that could help you out?

FORBUS: [00:59:44] Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. When I left Azadaban, I went to, uh. I've been living under a great star that gives me great places to go. Like I said, I was in Kyiv. I was in Pokhara and Nepal and I was in Kyiv in Ukraine and I was in this little town Omoa, right on the beach in Honduras. Madagascar was another story, but I was up in the mountains without water or electricity. But it was great. And it was super anyway. And in Georgia, I was on, like I said, in Batumi, right in a tourist town. City. And then in Armenia, I was in a town called Dilijan, D-I-L-I-J-A-N. It was called the Swiss city of Armenia.

SZTUK: [01:00:54] Oh, really?

FORBUS: [01:00:55] Up in the mountains, about a little over 5,000 feet. It was really a pretty little town.

SZTUK: [01:01:04] Was it?

FORBUS: [01:01:04] And they were trying to turn it into the tourist center of Armenia. Not just a tourist center, they had already moved the Ukrainian [Armenian] bank there. So it was the economic center. They had brought in the UWC, the Universal World College, which is a prep school. There's about 15 of them around the world, backed by some billionaires. It was their beautiful college, beautiful campus, brand new, brand new campus. And then they

were trying to make Dilijan the tourist center of Armenia. We worked on a lot of projects, but most of my success there was on secondary projects.

SZTUK: [01:01:55] So even though this was a pretty well-developed place with a lot of resources, they still felt they had a need for Peace Corps?

FORBUS: [01:02:03] They still do, yeah, economically. They are high unemployment. They need economic development for sure. They need economic development. Well-educated people, lots of potential. There in between Turkey, Azerbaijan. North of Iran and south of Georgia.

SZTUK: [01:02:38] Mm hmm.

FORBUS: [01:02:40] Landlocked. No resources to speak of, but highly intelligent, well-educated people. Everybody speaks at least two languages, mostly three.

SZTUK: [01:02:54] Right.

FORBUS: [01:02:55] They speak Russian, Armenian, and either English, German, or French. And some of them speak all of them. I worked with a woman that spoke all three and fluently, and she had worked with the United Nations. So they do need economic development. But it was a great, it was a great tour. In fact, I met some really great people in the Peace Corps there too.

SZTUK: [01:03:25] Were there quite a few volunteers?

FORBUS: [01:03:27] We had 42 in our group, 42 every year.

SZTUK: [01:03:34] Some in that same city that you were in?

FORBUS: [01:03:36] Yeah, there was. At the end, there were two besides me there. It's like 10,000 people.

SZTUK: [01:03:44] And you lived in an apartment there?

FORBUS: [01:03:47] I lived with a family.

SZTUK: [01:03:48] Oh, you lived with the family? For the entire two years?

FORBUS: [01:03:50] No, the whole time, that was more recently. I lived with Zoya and Goggek and they, she was great. She, you know, I gave her a little extra money. She washed my clothes. She had my breakfast ready every morning. She was a pretty funny lady. Great cook. And she was a nurse. She was also a great maker of vodka. So everybody in the neighborhood came to drink her vodka.

SZTUK: [01:04:32] So drinking vodka was a pretty common thing?

FORBUS: [01:04:36] All through Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia. Vodka is part of the lifestyle.

SZTUK: [01:04:43] So you acquired a taste for vodka?

FORBUS: [01:04:44] Yeah, you better get it. Now, they did make, Armenia does. Actually, this is a little interesting aside. Winston Churchill's favorite cognac, or not cognac, brandy, was Armenian brandy. And he preferred it over other brandies, and not that he wouldn't drink other brandies, but, you know, he was pretty good at drinking. But yeah, his favorite was Armenian brandy. And it's good.

SZTUK: [01:05:18] So you were in community development there as well.

FORBUS: [01:05:21] That's right.

SZTUK: [01:05:21] And tell me about your job and what you did and who you worked with.

FORBUS: [01:05:24] The project that I worked on was well funded. So I wasn't, it was, I had no need to develop grants or anything like that, just ideas. And they wanted more civic development information, how to go about bringing in the community to get behind projects. I had developed a plan to make sure that social impact was positive on any of the projects, and that was one of the major concerns that they had. That they would do a project that

would negatively impact the poor people, because there were a lot of poor people there. We had several big plans, like we were going to put in a farmer's market to help the locals. We already got the land. We were going to build a hotel for, to promote, for the city to promote tourism. We were going to set up a tourist center with guides that, there was a lot of hiking areas up in the mountains and into the forest. We're in a national forest there.

SZTUK: [01:06:45] OK.

FORBUS: [01:06:46] So we were going to set up a way, a tourist industry there to take people on tours into the mountains, and to the monasteries. Also, we were going to do renting camping equipment for the people that wanted us to camp like that. And it was going along pretty good. And then there was an oligarch who had a big influence on this project. It was the Dilijan Development Foundation, was the name of it, and there were two guys and they couldn't agree on what which way to go. But meantime, I had already developed secondary projects at the community center. I was teaching English to a bunch of high school kids after hours. And then I was also working with a guy named Albert who was a Rotary, a Rotarian.

SZTUK: [01:07:56] Rotarian?

FORBUS: [01:07:57] And he was a lawyer too. He had to be a lawyer to be a Rotary Rotarian in Armenia.

SZTUK: [01:08:07] OK.

FORBUS: [01:08:08] Albert was one of the best guys I ever met. He was great big. You know, we think Armenia, you think a big guy, that's him. He is a big guy. And he had his sister Narina worked, they were all three of them were lawyers, but he was the head lawyer, knew everybody in Romania. And so he was going to, and I'd been introduced to him by another Peace Corps volunteer who had left. And so I would go over to his office and we would have lunch over there, and I'd go over some English courses with him. So he was very interested and his English wasn't bad. It wasn't good, but it wasn't bad. And so he was going to a conference in Moldova. No,

no, no. Uh, Belarus. And they'd asked him to make a presentation. And he said, I'm very, I'm very worried. He said, I want to do a really good job. I want to do a good job. So I said, well, let's just start working on your presentation.

FORBUS: [01:09:25] So we wrote out his presentation and we worked on his English, and Narina was a refugee from Ukraine. She was Armenian, but she had lived in Ukraine. And so whenever the war started, she had been in Donetsk, which is where all the upheaval was with the Russians in eastern Ukraine. So she and her family had moved back to Armenia. So she was working with him on the Russian part and I was working with him on the English part. And so we decided, let's do a PowerPoint. And he said, I don't know anything about this. So we taught him how to do it. We built this PowerPoint, and so he was practicing. I'd go over about two or three times a week and spend an hour with him, and we were working on it and she was working with him. So he went on the conference and when he came back he was all smiles. He said, I was a hero. I am now celebrity in Belarus!

SZTUK: [01:10:36] Great, great.

FORBUS: [01:10:37] Yeah. So he was, he had a great. He was really a good guy.

SZTUK: [01:10:40] You really helped him out.

FORBUS: [01:10:41] Yeah, he was fun. He is a great guy. Yeah. I still stay in touch with all the people over there. And also interesting, a little aside here. At the community center, they were interested in hooking up with a university in the United States for a cross-cultural training of their people, the students there in Dilijan. I happened to know some people in Huntsville, Texas, at Sam Houston State University, and I knew the Secretary to the President and several other people who are professors there. And I'd met them, they were part of the Democratic Club, so we were the small blue dot in the middle of this big red dot.

SZTUK: [01:11:37] Yeah, OK.

FORBUS: [01:11:38] Anyway, so I called Judy Tilly and asked her if she could connect us with somebody there at the university. So a funny thing happened. We connected with the education department who already had done some stuff in China at the same cross-cultural training. The dean of the School of Education, his assistant dean, was a Armenian who had migrated to the United States and worked there. So it turned out great. They still got it going.

SZTUK: [01:12:16] Great, great.

FORBUS: [01:12:17] They're still going there.

SZTUK: [01:12:18] So there's some lasting impact.

FORBUS: [01:12:22] Believe me, I was just. I was just the middle guy that got him in touch with. I didn't have much to do with setting up the operation.

SZTUK: [01:12:28] Still, it wouldn't have happened otherwise.

FORBUS: [01:12:29] But, yeah, it turned out good. Yeah. And I think I have all the people over there. I think I've had a good impact on them. They liked me.

SZTUK: [01:12:45] It sounds like.

FORBUS: [01:12:46] And they like Americans.

SZTUK: [01:12:48] Are they generally favorable towards Americans?

FORBUS: [01:12:50] Yeah, very much so. Yeah. They also like the Russians, not as much as they like the Americans, but you know, they still have, they're dependent on Russians. All the business left. Like I said, there's, they have no natural resources, very little industry there. All the industry left when the Soviet Union fell. All the chemical plants in Vanadzor, which is a town about 40 kilometers from where I lived, all the plant after plant after plant's vacant. There's nothing there. They had thousands of employees in those chemical plants, and they sold those chemicals around the rest of the Soviet Union.

SZTUK: [01:13:34] OK.

FORBUS: [01:13:35] It was a closed economy. You know, if you made it here, you had to buy it there, you know. And the same thing in Dilijan. They had like an electronic plant that employed 3,000 people, open, going 24 hours a day. It's gone. It's a town of 10,000 people. 3,000 jobs were gone. And they're not going, they're not coming back. That's why we were trying to make it, turn it into the tourism sector.

SZTUK: [01:14:04] So there are other industries.

FORBUS: [01:14:07] And they had put some people to work in. But most of the people who had gone to work for the bank that had moved there came from the capital city, Yerevan. So it didn't really impact the local populace. It was more of an import of the people and they built the, they built apartments for the employees. So it didn't really impact the living conditions.

SZTUK: [01:14:33] Didn't help them out?

FORBUS: [01:14:34] No, not that much. Anyway, we were working on trying to get it going and then.

SZTUK: [01:14:41] And that wasn't too long ago. Do you think, do you get feedback from them now? Are things still going?

FORBUS: [01:14:45] Yeah, I hear from them all the time.

SZTUK: [01:14:46] The tourism industry is developing?

FORBUS: [01:14:49] Eh, not.

SZTUK: [01:14:51] Not that great?

FORBUS: [01:14:55] And then when I left, it was a sad day. I hate to see them, hate to say goodbye, but it was time to go. Yeah, I was glad to see my kids. I was lucky. Harvey, the hurricane that hit Houston.

SZTUK: [01:15:12] Yeah.

FORBUS: [01:15:15] International airport had been closed. I flew out. I flew in on September the first. They'd just opened the airport. I was lucky.

SZTUK: [01:15:23] Wow.

FORBUS: [01:15:25] It was open when I flew in, so.

SZTUK: [01:15:29] Well, you know, usually I interview people who have done one assignment and, you know, you ask about how Peace Corps has affected the rest of their life. But with you, Peace Corps has been kind of a lasting thing for the past, you know, 20, 20 some odd years, huh?

FORBUS: [01:15:50] Yeah. You know, that's always, it's always in the back of my mind. Right now, I'm working with Americorps.

SZTUK: [01:15:59] Are you?

FORBUS: [01:15:59] VISTA later, and my tour is up at the end of this month. So I still got that. I still like to do a little bit of volunteering.

SZTUK: [01:16:11] That's a volunteer position though?

FORBUS: [01:16:12] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [01:16:16] So if it hadn't been for that first experience, the first Peace Corps experience in Nepal, do you think these other volunteer experiences may not have happened or?

FORBUS: [01:16:31] Well, no, like I said it, it was cut short. I think the most important thing that keeps my interest is the fact that John Kennedy had a vision about the Peace Corps and that, like I said, I'd been in the Air Force,

which was, you know, I was young and I was a warrior. And then when I got older, I got to thinking, you know, maybe it's not all about being a warrior. Maybe it's about spreading a little bit of good news. And so I think John Kennedy was the catalyst that has kept me going really.

SZTUK: [01:17:13] All those years ago.

FORBUS: [01:17:14] Yeah. I think so. He was a visionary.

SZTUK: [01:17:23] Well, great. Any last words before we sum it up?

FORBUS: [01:17:29] I've had a great time, yeah. It's been great. I have very few regrets about my Peace Corps services, except a couple of times when I fell and hurt my knee.

SZTUK: [01:17:41] Right. Right.

FORBUS: [01:17:42] But, yeah. But no, it's been good.

SZTUK: [01:17:46] Well, great. Yeah. You've had a lot of great experiences, Charlie. Well, thanks very much. And that concludes our interview.

FORBUS: [01:17:52] Well, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]