

Courtney Columbus Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Courtney Columbus served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic from February 2012 to June 2015 on a community environmental development project.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Courtney Columbus

September 19, 2019
Arlington, Virginia

By Randolph Adams

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

ADAMS: [00:00:05] Today is September 19th, 2019. This is Randy Adams, and I'm interviewing Courtney Columbus, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic from February 2012 to June 2015. She worked in the Dominican Republic in community environmental development from 2012 to 2014 and was a regional volunteer leader from 2014 to 2015. Courtney, I've got a series of questions here, and please elaborate as much as you want to share your story of your service. First, I'd like to start about what was your life like before joining the Peace Corps. So education or other experiences relevant that you think may have influenced you to joining Peace Corp?

COLUMBUS: [00:01:11] So I grew up in a pretty small town outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, about a half hour drive northeast of the city. My family has been living there for a few generations, like my great grandparents had come through like Ellis Island and kind of ended up settling there. So like both of my parents are from towns really close by. My grandparents also.

So we have some fairly deep roots there. And I've always been really close with my family. Like I have one younger brother and then a lot of cousins. I've lost track of how many on both sides of my family. My grandma and grandpa on my mom's side both came from really big families. So I've always had that kind of like community sense of family, I guess, and like really strong networks with them, especially on my mom's side, which I think in a way kind of played into Peace Corps too. And I'm always looking for like community and like where like, you know, like looking to be bringing people together. I think a big part of that comes from my family.

COLUMBUS: [00:02:19] I went to college also in Pennsylvania, about two hours north of Pittsburgh, at Allegheny College and studied environmental science. I've always really loved the environment and nature and like being outside, so I kind of gravitated towards that pretty quickly after I started. And ended up focusing a lot on like international development, like environmental issues and like work being done in like developing countries. I did some service work in college with like helping college students get set up to do sort of like work study jobs with local nonprofits, like helping run youth programs and like working with kids with developmental disabilities, urban gardens, all kinds of different things. And so I had one of those work study jobs and then stayed on for like an extra year to help kind of like run the training in that process of helping other students get set up there.

COLUMBUS: [00:03:16] And I also studied abroad in college and had been studying Spanish, and I studied abroad in Ecuador. And it was sort of it was a program in international development with a focus on environment. So like immersive, like living with host families, taking classes out in Spanish, doing like a community based internship for the second half of the second half of the semester. Yeah. And so to me, it kind of felt like a baby version of Peace Corps because I was looking at what I wanted to do after college. It was kind of like the mini scaled down version of that. And I really loved it. It was the first time I had really been out of the country in any significant way, you know, in something like so different and in like a country where I didn't speak the language or it wasn't my

first language. And I was definitely still in the learning process and like stumbling my way through conversations and things like that.

COLUMBUS: [00:04:06] And so I was looking at like career options that kind of stood out to me like, I want to do this but more. And so Peace Corps kind of caught my attention like, from there, you know, because I would be able to do it for like a longer period of time. But having some similar experiences in terms of like getting to know like the communities and seeing like how I fit in and doing the kind of service work, basically. So that's kind of how I ended up getting to think that like Peace Corps would be a really good fit for me and how I think my like growing up and like education all kind of played into that.

COLUMBUS: [00:04:41] I'm also the first person in my family to have gone to college, and so in a sense, my family's had, like a lot of, you know, like blue collar jobs. Like my dad started like digging ditches with the shovel, he always says, you know, when he was like, like out of high school and ended up like doing an apprenticeship program to be like running heavy equipment. And now he like runs, the sort of training program like runs that apprenticeship program. And so I guess, like in a way, I've also been like the first person to have the opportunity to kind of think about those kinds of service opportunities on like a bigger picture scale. So yeah, that's kind of how I ended up getting to the point of doing Peace Corps, I guess, in a nutshell.

ADAMS: [00:05:24] Very good. How did you hear about the Peace Corps?

COLUMBUS: [00:05:29] Hmm. I actually don't remember the very first time that I heard about the Peace Corps. But there are two like really significant memories that I have of, that kind of like kind of solidified that this was something that I really wanted to and could really see myself doing. And one was like some people who had been Peace Corps volunteers, who'd actually been Peace Corps like several times, came to speak at like a training of that like work study service learning program that I was doing in college. And so being able, so I think had been aware in some way of Peace Corps before then. This was like right around the point where I had also done the study abroad program. Just being able to hear about it

from like someone that had actually done that. Like I didn't know anyone personally that had done Peace Corps before that. I was like, wow, this is really cool, and I would really love to, you know, try and see if I can do something like that or like, do Peace Corps. So that was a big one.

COLUMBUS: [00:06:26] And then, like a Peace Corps recruiter came to my campus. And so I went to the presentation that she did. She was also a RPCV. So, you know, I heard her story also of like her Peace Corps experience and then kind of just more broadly like what Peace Corps does in other places too. And she had served, I think, in Togo, so very different from where I ended up going, but still really interesting. So that was big. And then I talked about it with a close friend who ended up applying to Peace Corps also and served. We ended up serving at the same time. She was in Cameroon and I was in the D.R. So we kind of like talked about it as we were like working on the application and things like that.

ADAMS: [00:07:10] What was the process and timing on your part to do it as you were a senior?

COLUMBUS: [00:07:19] Yeah, I applied during my senior year. It was towards the end of my senior year. I want to say it was like March or April of my senior year. I'd also applied to Teach for America and made it like part of the way through the process but ended up not getting it. And so I was really hoping that Peace Corps would work out. And I applied, I think it was April of my senior year and I ended up getting an invitation that fall. I think it would have been like October. I had an interview at some point over the summer and then had, um, I think, another follow-up interview in like early fall in like October, November-ish. Got the invitation and then it started in February. So it was like close to a year from when I applied. So April 2011 to when I started like the end of February 2012. We started on the Leap Year Day in February 2012. So it's a fun anniversary when it comes back around. It's only come back around one since then.

ADAMS: [00:08:25] Did you have a specific country or project in mind?

COLUMBUS: [00:08:29] I definitely wanted to do like environmental work in some form. And I was really hoping to end up somewhere like in a Spanish-

speaking country because that was the language that I had like by far the most experience in. I'd taken some French classes here and there, but was like, you know, definitely nowhere near the point of even being able to, like, have any sort of like professional conversation in French. It was like very, very basic. Um, so I was really hoping to do Spanish, so I could kind of build on that and not have, you know, so much time to spend like learning the basics of the language. I could come in already having some. So yeah, I'm really glad that both of those things ended up working out, the Spanish and the environmental aspect.

ADAMS: [00:09:16] Did the application form let you put down a country or area or project?

COLUMBUS: [00:09:28] Yeah, at that time, I think they've changed it a lot since then. I applied in 2011, like I said. And at that point, you could kind of preference like regions of the world. So I could do like, oh gosh, I'm trying to remember exactly how they broke it down. I think sub-Saharan Africa was one. Um, and I think it may have been all Latin America as one, like including like Spanish speaking Caribbean. And like Eastern Europe was one and like some sort of like Asia, like South Asia, I think. So it was very big chunks, and I don't think at that point, I don't remember preferencing like specific programs.

ADAMS: [00:10:07] Did you have the opportunity to look on the website to see what they were doing in various countries?

COLUMBUS: [00:10:12] Yeah. Mm hmm. So I could see, you know, like which countries have like environmental programs or things like that. And I actually did, that reminds me. I did get an invitation. Um, I think they sent them to me at the same time. But that I could either do like the D.R. community environmental development starting in February, or I could wait a few months longer and go to sub-Saharan Africa to do, I think it was sustainable agriculture. So they kind of sent me two options at the same time. So I ended up picking the D.R. because like the Spanish. And I thought, I really, you know, like to make the most of the time there, it would be better if I already knew the language and I didn't have like the

French. And I could start sooner. And I'm not, you know, always the most patient person. So I was ready to go.

ADAMS: [00:11:06] What was your reaction when you were accepted?

COLUMBUS: [00:11:09] Um, I was really excited. Yeah, I remember being really excited. I was in like another sort of volunteer position at the time. I was a teaching assistant at a bilingual school in Costa Rica, K through 12, that had a connection with my college. And so I'd been able to go there like basically straight from graduating. So I was in Costa Rica at the time and I was really excited to have like the opportunity to go to Peace Corps so soon after that, you know, to keep continuing like that an international experience.

ADAMS: [00:11:42] And as your family or friends heard about this, what did they think?

COLUMBUS: [00:11:50] They were kind of, like I mentioned, you know, I didn't know anyone personally like before going to college that had done Peace Corps. So they were kind of like, what? Why do you want to do this? And what is it exactly again? Which I totally understood because it wasn't that long ago that, like, I didn't really know about it either. And so I just kind of talked through it. And my family has always been really supportive. So they kind of came around to the idea of like, this is what you want to do and we'll support you in that. I definitely didn't get some of those initial reactions of like, are you crazy? So, yeah, but my family, my mom, did end up coming to visit me like once a year while I was in the D.R. So that was really nice to be able to like to share that with her too.

ADAMS: [00:12:36] Did you prepare yourself in any way before you left?

COLUMBUS: [00:12:40] Um. In what way? Like any way, specifically? Or just?

ADAMS: [00:12:45] Read about the D.R. or look at what resources you had you might want to take with you or things like that.

COLUMBUS: [00:12:50] Yeah, yeah, I remember I think I joined a Facebook group slightly before, a little bit before leaving, where people talked about, you know, like what things were good to bring. Peace Corps sent me a packing list so I looked at that. And I read up on the D.R. I've never been there. And so I think I had stopped once in the Bahamas on a cruise, but that was like my only experience of being in the Caribbean even at all. So read up on like the region and like Dominican history and culture and environmental stuff and things like that. Um, you know, like trying to get a sense of what it might be like and things like that. I remember buying a few things like hiking boots, headlamp, things like that too.

ADAMS: [00:13:41] Let's talk a little about the training, how it prepared you for your assignment. Who did the training and what did it cover?

COLUMBUS: [00:13:53] So we had, I'm not sure how much. Honestly, this has changed over the years. I mean, a lot since the sixties, since we weren't doing like calisthenics or anything like that. But so we had like a few weeks, like two or three weeks maybe, when we first got to country. We were in Santo Domingo in like a kind of suburb of the capital called Pantoja, where Peace Corps has like a kind of permanent like training facility that's separate from like the main headquarters office of Peace Corps in D.R., which was also in the capital, but in like a kind of more central place. And so I remember having some initial kind of like there's a lot of like presentation, presentation, presentations. Some presentations about like culture in the country. Um, I remember getting a batch at the lesson from one of like the Dominican staff. You know, sort of like overview of like politics. Yeah, like those kinds of like more general stuff that wasn't specific like to any project, but just about like setting up life in the D.R.

COLUMBUS: [00:14:55] Some basic health stuff. I remember getting a few vaccines. I'm not great with needles, and so I remember that. And then it was done by like some Peace Corps staff. Like Jennifer McGowan for one, she has kind of like run the training program for a while, I think, in Peace Corps D.R., and I think she still does. She did a lot of the kind of more general stuff. The doctors like the PCMOs did like the medical stuff. Um, like some Dominican staff did, like a lot of the language we would have like, I

remember having really long language classes too, you know, like three hours or so a day. Maybe not every day, but definitely like throughout the week, there were some like long sessions and we would be in like really small groups, which made it great for like practicing conversation and learning like Dominicanisms and things like that.

COLUMBUS: [00:15:48] And then we did like, I think they called it, the acronym was CBT, community based training, for I think a little under two months, in a little mountain town in the D.R. like a half hour or so outside of Santiago. We were kind of like strung out among host families like in these few neighboring communities like La Cumbre, Arenoso, that's where I was, and Allanyo. It was on the road between, the old road between Santiago and Puerto Plata. And so then we started doing the like environmental specific stuff. And I remember like learning to identify like Dominican trees that come through species and like how to make compost and like start seeds. We did like a little painting project like mural painting project with like a local school there. And I remember having to do like as an assignment for Spanish class, we kept doing Spanish class like intensively, to interview older people in the community about like what life was like in the past. And this is still like older people remembering like the times of Trujillo. So that was really interesting too.

COLUMBUS: [00:17:01] So it was mostly about training. And pretty soon after we came back from that training, I think it was just like a week or so in the capital after that. And then we got like our site assignments and like, did some volunteer visits, like going out to visit a current volunteer. And then, yeah, pretty soon after about doing like swearing-in and then the cutting out to our sites.

ADAMS: [00:17:27] The training out in the field, how many were in a class or in a presentation? Did they reconsolidate you once you were out there?

COLUMBUS: [00:17:40] Oh, like in the environmental, like the program specific training? I think there were about. I remember there were like 34 of us in our whole starting cohort and that was split up between like a few different sectors. I think in environment that were like 12-ish. There may be more than that. I may not be totally on base. But so we would have all

of our environmental training sessions as like a whole group. There was just one trainer, Tim Keefer. I think he's done some work with the business volunteers also. And so we would have all of our like sessions with him and then our language sessions would be split up into, like our language classes would be split up into smaller groups of like three or four.

ADAMS: [00:18:25] But this was out at the training sites when you were in the communities?

COLUMBUS: [00:18:28] Yeah.

ADAMS: [00:18:28] So did they do it in the community or?

COLUMBUS: [00:18:30] Oh yeah, it's actually kind of strange things that they would have, um, sort of, like more lecture or presentation focused. And I remember doing something like tree identification stuff there too, would be at this old like they called it, La Mansión de Trujillo, which was like right in that community of La Cumbre. And so it was, yeah, it was very strange, like having classes in this building that has this like hugely complicated history, you know, being like owned by a dictator and now having like Peace Corps classes there. So we would have some classes there. And then we did work like directly with the school to do like the painting projects. So we did some like mural like I think we painted like an alphabet, like an environmental alphabet, environmental themed alphabet, at a primary school in that group of communities. And so we worked, that was like to build our skills in working directly with the community partners.

COLUMBUS: [00:19:35] And then some of the hands-on stuff like composting and like the seedling planting things we would do in like just a little outside area. I don't remember honestly if it was part of like the Mansión or if it was just like some other like space that we had been allowed to use.

ADAMS: [00:19:53] What about the language? You had studied in Ecuador. Did you see a vast difference or a comparison?

COLUMBUS: [00:20:01] Yeah, there's definitely a difference between like the Spanish that I was familiar with from Ecuador and then like the Dominican Spanish. And it was fun, honestly, like getting the hang of it. And I definitely messed up a lot of things, and I had to ask people to repeat themselves pretty often, especially in the beginning. It was also really fun getting the hang of it and learning like where these words come from. Like, they have a lot of like kind of words adapted from English, which is fun. But yeah, definitely some differences. The Dominican Spanish tends to be like more like faster than Spanish from other countries that I was familiar with. And also they tend to drop out like some letters or even like whole syllables. So like *como estas* becomes *como tuta*. *Consado* becomes *consao*, comes out like cutting out the D so that A and O kind of just like almost blend together. Kind of like dropping the S off of like the middle or ends of words.

COLUMBUS: [00:21:01] And our community training site was really interesting, actually, because it was in a part of the D.R. called the Cibao. And so that region has kind of their own specific accent of turning like some R sounds to I sounds. So saying like *poi qué* instead of *por qué*. Yeah. And like the middle and ends of words, I remember that. And then also speaking really quickly even by like compared to other regions of the D.R. Like getting the hang of like the more *capitaleño* accent too, where like Rs turn, can sometimes be pronounced more like Ls. Not so much of like that rolling of the R that is really common in Spanish. So yeah, it's really fun getting the hang of Dominican Spanish, and I still love it.

ADAMS: [00:21:45] What would you say would be the strengths and weaknesses of the training?

COLUMBUS: [00:21:50] Hmm. I think language was definitely a strong point. I mean, we spent so much time and a lot of it was in really small groups. So you could really, you know, be like actively participating all the time and having back and forth conversations and getting like really in depth on specific topics. And we were in like groups of our kind of same levels of Spanish. So I think that made it like really outstanding. I've never had anywhere near that level of like language instruction anywhere else. So that was great. I think in my experience, like on the environmental side,

we ended up doing such like different projects in so many different areas of the country. You know, like eco-tourism for some people. Like building, like helping communities build like aqueducts for some people. Like the Brigada Verde, like environmental education groups that were like pretty, that was pretty common between like all the environment volunteers. And spread out in all different regions of the country.

COLUMBUS: [00:22:55] I don't feel like I got a lot, because I ended up going to the south, which is like, very arid. So it's not a place where people are like, you know. The trees that I learned to identify like weren't really in the region, you know, so I kind of wished I'd had more preparation in like the specifics of like that region, what the environmental issues there and like what people were doing about them. Like what was really important to like the people living in that region. I kind of just got like, you know, plopped into the middle of that area of the country even like, you know, like the basic infrastructure, like water, like people being able to irrigate their crops and stuff like that were issues. So it's kind of like different than like what people were working on in like the more mountainous areas or like eco-tourism projects. So yeah, I wish I'd had a little more in that specific stuff.

ADAMS: [00:23:46] Yeah, I can see that. I remember there's I think six micro climactic regions in the country that are vastly different, from arid desert to almost rainforest.

COLUMBUS: [00:23:58] Yeah, it's really amazing how much it varies even within the size of the country.

ADAMS: [00:24:03] Yeah. Makes training difficult.

COLUMBUS: [00:24:05] Yeah. Yeah.

ADAMS: [00:24:08] Do you know if any volunteers were asked to leave during the training process?

COLUMBUS: [00:24:13] Asked to leave during training?

ADAMS: [00:24:14] Or did some decide to leave?

COLUMBUS: [00:24:16] An older couple had left, like a couple who were both retired. One was a retired teacher. I can't remember off hand what the other one did. Um, but they'd end up leaving because they had, one of them had like kind of recurring like health issues and ended up thinking, you know, like, it's not worth it for me to be like have my health failing like this when they don't have to stay here. And so they ended up ETing, I think, like within a couple of weeks after moving out to site because they just weren't getting better. But yeah, that was after training. I don't remember anyone leaving during training.

ADAMS: [00:24:56] OK. What were your initial reactions to the people and the physical environment?

COLUMBUS: [00:25:10] I remember so we first got to like Pantoja, which is part of the capital, and it's like very loud, you know, it's like an urban environment, so there's like motorcycles zooming all over the place, like busses, like the people who are, you know, like the *cobradors* who like take people's bus fare, you know, yelling like, all kinds of things and there's music blasting from the cameras. And so that's all like part of like the atmosphere of the D.R. But at first I was like kind of taken aback and like, wow, I think this place is crazy. But it was also really beautiful. You know, like getting to like especially like, you know, getting outside of kind of like the concrete jungle of Pantoja. And the Peace Corps training facility is really beautiful, actually, and has like a bunch of mango trees and like very quiet. And so it was kind of getting that contrast of like the crazy suburbs of Pantoja and then like the really calm Peace Corps training place.

COLUMBUS: [00:26:08] But I loved my host family. My host mom was like always cracking jokes and so funny, you know, like a grandma who was like, always like keeping everybody in line. And so she was kind of the first like Dominican that I got to know really well. Like outside of like a Peace Corps training staff.

ADAMS: [00:26:26] Was this the host family during training?

COLUMBUS: [00:26:28] Yeah, during training. Yeah. And so that was really fun to get to know, you know, kind of like more about what it's like to live in the D.R., kind of that inside perspective. And she was always like super warm. And yeah, like always cracking jokes is what I remember about her. She was so cute.

ADAMS: [00:26:44] Let's talk a little about your site now. What was the Peace Corps staff role in facilitating your entry into the site?

COLUMBUS: [00:26:54] Um, so at that time, there had been like a few meetings before I went out. There were like a Peace Corps stuff like the APCD, like the program director, had like met with the community members and I like, filled out us like a kind of volunteer solicitation talking about like what they wanted to work on. And then at some point, like soon after that I think, a third year Peace Corps volunteer had come to like meet with my host family and talk about like, you know, like make sure they wanted to do it and, you know, like kind of train them in like the Peace Corps, the basics of Peace Corps basically and like having a volunteer like live with them. Which they were very gracious to do.

ADAMS: [00:27:42] So you live with the host family as a volunteer?

COLUMBUS: [00:27:47] Yeah, I think they've made it slightly longer since I was a volunteer. At the time it was three months. It was you would live with the family for three months that was like assigned by Peace Corps. And then you could like get your own housing approved, like within the community. If you found a place, if you wanted to move out, and found a place that would be like a good setup, you could have someone from Peace Corps like, you know, kind of sign off that that was OK. I think now I've heard that it's four months, but I'm not totally sure, but I think they've made it like slightly longer. Yeah. And so Peace Corps had like kind of arranged all of that. So I just kind of. They had us go out individually to our site. So like, I just went by myself and I could talk with my community partner and like host family ahead of traveling about like where to meet them, when they would be coming, and things like that.

COLUMBUS: [00:28:35] And we did like a visit. I don't remember exactly how many days, but it was like maybe three or four days, in our new sites or like in our sites. And then like went back to the capital for swearing and then like, went back and like, really moved like fully moved into our sites. So, yeah, so that was just like each volunteer went out on their own. It wasn't like accompanied by anyone from Peace Corps or anything like that.

ADAMS: [00:29:00] So were you in a small community, a town?

COLUMBUS: [00:29:03] It was a small community, roughly like fifteen hundred people, not very far from like a bigger town. Like probably, if you were driving, like a half hour or so from like Barahona, which was like a big town, like small city, big town. And in an area that was like a really major like sugarcane growing area of the D.R. where like *bateyes*, like communities of descendants of Haitian sugarcane workers and people who still work the sugar cane fields, lived. So a lot of poverty, because that work still to this day pays like very, very low wages. You know, like a few dollars a day for like the people who are like in the fields, like cutting cane with a machete. Um, and yeah, there were several other volunteers like from the youth program, like in this kind of some of those neighboring *bateyes* doing like community development work too.

ADAMS: [00:29:57] What was the name of your community?

COLUMBUS: [00:29:59] El Palmar.

ADAMS: [00:30:08] Can you talk about the people in El Palmar?

COLUMBUS: [00:30:12] Yeah, so it was like traditionally like an agricultural community, not so much the sugar cane, but people would have like *conucos*, like their little farms, generally not super big scale. You know, something like one family can manage, just like on their own or with like a little bit of help here and there, like hiring other people. So growing plantains was really common. Also, some people had cows and some other like fruits and vegetables like people would have. But that was generally more like not like industrial scale, but more just kind of like people planting trees like in their yards, like a tree here and there, like in

their *conucos*, in their farms or gardens. So a lot of that, yeah. And then some people would have jobs like in the sugar cane fields too.

COLUMBUS: [00:30:58] And it didn't have, like that community doesn't have like the kind of Haitian descendant connection, you know, it wasn't founded like as a *batey*. So it tends to be more like strictly Dominican. And so a lot of people would get sometimes like slightly higher up jobs or like higher up jobs in the sugar cane, you know, like to be not cutting a cane, but like to be like a mechanic, like helping to fix like some of the machinery that was breaking and things like that. And so that was also like an income source for people in the community. Yeah, generally very relaxing. It wasn't like urban community or anything like that.

ADAMS: [00:31:37] Was there a town center?

COLUMBUS: [00:31:40] They have a central park. Yeah. And so that's probably like the biggest town center. The school tends to also be like a big, like an important place in the community. There's a primary school and a high school.

ADAMS: [00:31:58] What were the specifics of the job?

COLUMBUS: [00:32:02] So mine, I ended up doing. They wanted me to work with like a women's group that was getting like a cheese project up and running. They were like making cheese and like selling it locally. So I did a little bit of work with them and they showed me how they make their cheese. They were also looking to do more like environmental stuff with youth in the community. At that time, it was like a few years before the *Tanda Extendida*, like the extended school day, started in the D.R., so kids were still in school like for only half of the day. So like the elementary students would go in the morning and then high school students would go in the afternoon, or like some sort of similar setup. So kids had a lot of free time since they were only in school like generally half of a day. So we ended up like through like talking with the community about what they wanted to do and things like that, thinking that *Brigada Verde* would be a pretty good fit. And so we ended up doing some environmental groups with kids, and I would kind of run them with like another facilitator

sometimes or have like the kids practice doing some of their own presentations to. Do like some groups in the morning for those kids who didn't have school then, and some groups in the afternoon for kids who were who were free then. So it was a lot of that.

COLUMBUS: [00:33:16] And then I also ended up doing some like improved cookstove projects because a lot of people in that community cooked with firewood instead of like a gas stove. And so the stove the Peace Corps was making had, you know, like a sort of, you could still use firewood to fuel them. And so they didn't have to get any kind of other fuel source, but they would have a chimney that would kind of take smoke up away from the family and like out of the house. And so that ended up being something that community members were really excited about.

COLUMBUS: [00:33:47] And then some other volunteers near me had also started kind of working on like education programs and like training promoters about the process of getting like Dominican birth certificates because it can be really complicated. And, you know, it's really easy for like some small thing that's like totally insignificant to like trip up someone's whole process of getting like a birth certificate, which then holds them back from, like, you know, being able to finish high school, for example, and then go on to university, like all of the public services. So I ended up getting really involved with that too, and working with some of those volunteers who were close by and living in the *bateyes* who had gotten really into that kind of work too just because of the needs of the communities.

ADAMS: [00:34:32] Could you describe, was there anything called a typical workday?

COLUMBUS: [00:34:35] Oh yeah. Yeah. It definitely varied a lot. But say maybe the most typical one would be kind of like getting up in the morning and like making sure I had like enough water and the basics covered and things like that. Saying hi to my neighbors and then like collecting everything for like the environmental group that we would have that day and like getting things set up. Talking with like whoever I was working with. And then, yeah, sometimes like doing the group and then maybe like visiting my

host family over lunch. My host mom was an amazing cook, so I would eat with lunch with them a lot, and that was really great. And then doing like another group in the afternoon. And then maybe like visiting with someone else in the evening, or just kind of like relaxing and taking like some time to just hang out and not have to be, you know, like focused on a specific project. Just hanging out with neighbors or friends, things like that.

COLUMBUS: [00:35:39] In D.R., there's a big emphasis on just like *compartir*-ing, just like literally to share, just kind of like spending time with people. And yeah. And so try to take advantage of that. But it definitely varied a lot. You know, sometimes we might be like traveling for like an environmental conference. I did some like volunteer interpreting for medical missions that were visiting. So like here and there, I would be doing that. Also I was like an hour or two from the south coast. So like on R&R days, would just take a beach day and just go like hang out with a few other volunteers and relax and things like that. So, yeah, definitely varied a lot, but there were some kind of common threads.

ADAMS: [00:36:24] Did your time with the host country, the volunteer staff, the change over time? I mean, you were there for three years. So how did your interaction with different types of people maybe change over time, if it did?

COLUMBUS: [00:36:43] Yeah. One thing was like I was in the last group of environmental volunteers to go to the D.R., which was really sad, and we didn't find that out until, like we had actually arrived in country. And so that was kind of depressing from the outside of, you know, like there's not going to be anyone to follow up our projects necessarily.

ADAMS: [00:37:03] Was there a reason for that?

COLUMBUS: [00:37:04] All that we ever knew was like Peace Corps, like, oh gosh, I think they called it something along the lines of like "focus in, train up" is in my head. And they kind of, which like, you know, just like jargon. They'd also like ended up ending like, I think at least one other program, maybe two, that were in the D.R. that were kind of like winding down at

that time. One was called the appropriate technology, just things like trains, some water stuff I think also fell in that bucket. And also like, I think they had a separate information technology sector too for a while. And so those were also kind of like at the same time as environment, kind of like winding down. Um, I'm sorry, I'm not really sure exactly why, other than just like consolidating programs and having fewer sectors active in the D.R.

COLUMBUS: [00:37:53] So then after my first two years, there wasn't really like a dedicated like environmental person because all of the environmental volunteers had COSed. And one other environmental volunteer from my group, from my cohort, ended up extending for a third year too and working up on an eco-tourism. He had been working on an eco-tourism project. So he ended up being like the volunteer leader of the business volunteers because he had kind of been in the both worlds of like environmental and business. But yeah, so that definitely changed because I didn't, there weren't really, you know, environmental staff working for Peace Corps anymore.

COLUMBUS: [00:38:29] In terms of like host country nationals. I think I got more, I got more comfortable and like better it kind of navigating like the cultural, like the ways of working in the D.R. You know, like getting more accustomed to like the pace of the work there, which is very different. Very different dynamic in the D.R., like things might get started later. People often have, you know, like lots of other just basic life things they need to deal with before they can get to like, you know, like their other work responsibilities. Like if the water is running that day in the town and you don't know what it might be back then, then you got to go fill up your tank. You know, so it's like kind of adapting to like the conditions there too. Um, and also learning to like work to people's strengths more instead of, you know, kind of just like. Yeah, I guess, getting better at finding things that would work and like helping support those.

ADAMS: [00:39:26] What about language, how did your language change over time?

COLUMBUS: [00:39:31] I definitely got more of the hang of like Dominicano Spanish and Dominicanisms. And I learned a bit of Creole. Definitely not fluent, but Peace Corps at the time, I'm not sure actually if they still do it or not, but I had the option for like volunteers who were going into areas like near the border or like with like pretty high Haitian populations, to take like a Creole class right around the beginning of service, you know, like soon after moving out to site. And so I got to do that and that really helped, I think, because it can kind of help like break the ice a little bit with people in this community so you can talk in their language, you know? And then, yeah, I'd also later in service done like another week of training of like a little bit more advanced in Creole. So yeah, that wasn't something I had like expected, you know, to be able to learn. And so that was really cool. And I loved being able to connect with people in that way too, like through Creole.

ADAMS: [00:40:37] What did you do during vacation time?

COLUMBUS: [00:40:41] We had, like some of the volunteers close, who lived close to me. We would often go to San Rafael Beach on the south coast. It's pretty like relatively small scale, like there aren't really like big hotels or anything like that down there. I think there are some projects in the works now which might really change things, like international projects. But there was a little house that we would often like pull our pesos together and rent that has like a view of like the sunrise over the ocean, just like a big shared kitchen, so we wouldn't have to spend a lot of money, and just like pile a bunch of us into this house. And just hang out and relax at the beach and then cook something for dinner. And yeah, watch the sunrise in the morning if we were feeling ambitious and make some coffee. And so that was like a really common one.

COLUMBUS: [00:41:28] And then I tried, I really wanted to like, explore, you know, like different areas of the D.R. to especially like the south is so different from a lot of the rest of the country. I got scuba certified at one point, like up near Las Terrenas. Um yeah, here and there I would visit other volunteers too that were living in different parts of the country. So yeah, and I did go home, I went home. I think it worked out to about once a year. I think I went home three times, including like a month between my

second and third years of service. So, yeah, I think that helped in the end of being able to like, readjust to life in America, that I hadn't spent like such a long time away.

ADAMS: [00:42:10] You stayed for a third year.

COLUMBUS: [00:42:12] Mm hmm.

ADAMS: [00:42:13] Why did you extend it and how did your role change?

COLUMBUS: [00:42:19] I really loved living in the D.R. I mean, definitely lots of challenges, you know, kind of comes with the territory. But I felt that like I hadn't gotten really settled in the country, you know, like settled into the work and felt like, you know, there's kind of like a learning curve in figuring out what works and what doesn't and building relationships, all that stuff. And I had really, it had taken me probably about a year to get, like really, really settled. So at that point, I was like, now I want to stay, like now that I've gotten settled. And I had grown to really love the south, too, and there were still lots of volunteers in that area. And so it was great. I thought it was a great opportunity to be able to stay in that area and help support like new volunteers and like the volunteers who are already there. So I guess that's kind of why I wanted to stay. I was really happy.

ADAMS: [00:43:10] You were based in the southwest as part of your regional role?

COLUMBUS: [00:43:15] Yeah.

ADAMS: [00:43:16] And you're working with all the volunteers.

COLUMBUS: [00:43:18] Mm hmm. Yeah. Not like sector specific.

ADAMS: [00:43:22] Talk a little more about how you interacted with them. What was your principal role or what did you see as your?

COLUMBUS: [00:43:31] Yeah, some of it was like, I thought a big part of what I was doing was kind of like helping people and kind of learn to navigate the area like new volunteers. You know, like this is what's around and these are like things that other volunteers have found helpful. These are like some programs that other volunteers nearby like already have up and running. So like, maybe there are ways you can collaborate with people in your community or like bring trainers over to, like, help train the people in new volunteer's communities. And then I would do some stuff here and there, like helping with like site development stuff for like communities that wanted, like, you know, heard about Peace Corps or the Peace Corps had visited and were interested in getting a volunteer to go and talk with the community about, like what their priorities were like, what they wanted and like why they're interested in having a volunteer and visit with host families and things like that.

COLUMBUS: [00:44:19] At one point, I ended up going on like a really long trip to visit like a bunch of different host families when they were short on people to do that. Like all around, like a big loop around the country practically, like all kinds of places that were really remote. And so that was that was really fun because I got to go to a lot of places I hadn't been to before and it was. I liked that like being able to help kind of like lay the groundwork, I guess, for volunteers to be able to move in there and get started and like work with the community. So yeah.

ADAMS: [00:44:53] I didn't ask you, but had there been volunteers in your community before you got there?

COLUMBUS: [00:44:58] No, I was the first one.

ADAMS: [00:45:00] Really?

COLUMBUS: [00:45:00] Yeah, they had somehow gotten in touch with the environmental APCD at the time. And through that, they kind of worked out that they would like to have a volunteer. And so, yeah, so I ended up being the first one sent there.

ADAMS: [00:45:15] Is that Alberto Rodriguez?

COLUMBUS: [00:45:18] Yeah, mm hmm. Yeah.

ADAMS: [00:45:26] Let's look back at your service now. What do you think were your main accomplishments?

COLUMBUS: [00:45:33] Hmm. That's a good question. In the beginning of my last year of service, I had like led like a regional environmental conference, and I really loved like that whole experience of being able to pull like the different threads together. It was in the southwest, like the region that I was in, or like south, in San Cristobal. So not necessarily like southwest but heading south out of the capital, slightly south. But it was like people participating mostly from like the southwest and like the region where I was living. And so I thought that was a really cool kind of culminating experience of like time together, like environmental work in a lot of different communities and like the environmental youth groups. And it was at the time when like all the environmental volunteers were leaving. So like kind of this hopefulness that like things could still be happening, you know. Just because the volunteers were leaving didn't mean like everything had to end and hopefully it would keep going. So, yeah, I really loved that.

COLUMBUS: [00:46:41] Um, I'm not sure if this is actually an accomplishment, but one thing that I'm really happy that happened is that like my main project partner, the person who kind of ended up like working with me the most, really loved like that sort of community development work. And was like in the process of studying, you know, it can take a really long time in the D.R. when you're in a public university, like the classes might not be available. And so you've been studying for like several years. I'm not sure how long, he still like had a long way to go. So I've been kind of like struggling to find work that would like, allow him to keep studying and also, you know, like, make a decent living. But he ended up applying for and getting like a full-time job with an NGO in Barahona. And so I thought that was really cool. But like he was able to say, you know, like these things that he had done like with Peace Corps could then help him like get kind of full-time job and he was still able to study. So that was

something that I was really happy, that our kind of working relationship ended up like leading to that I thought was really awesome.

ADAMS: [00:47:47] Anything you tried that didn't work? Did you think about why?

COLUMBUS: [00:47:53] Oh, yeah, that's a good question. I had done some English classes when we were first starting out. We didn't end up continuing those because it was like attendance would be like all over the place. So we didn't end up sticking with that. It might also be too like I didn't necessarily have a background in like I was kind of cobbling together materials and didn't really, asking other volunteers, but didn't really have like a background in English teaching as a foreign language, so I probably could have done a lot better job of the teacher too. And then it was like something that attendance like wasn't really consistent. And I mean, people don't really have that much, you know, had a lot of other things to do too. But yeah, that's one thing that didn't work.

ADAMS: [00:48:40] To sum up, what are some lessons learned that you think you gained?

COLUMBUS: [00:48:47] Yeah. I think definitely like letting the community lead the way is like super important and like, you know, just coming in as like people from another country, you know, trying to like working in a developing country. I think that's definitely something we have to be sensitive to. You know, like, this is not our country and it should be the people that live there, you know, like leading the way on projects and things like that. So I think that's important to know and like always keep relearning all the ways in which that is like kind of played out. And really having the community and the country as a whole, like lead the way and like the direction that the work is taking and like the projects that are prioritized and things like that can be really complicated to put that in practice. Because obviously there are lots of different priorities and it depends who you talk to. But yeah, I think that's definitely like a really big lesson.

COLUMBUS: [00:49:43] I think also like I think Peace Corps does a pretty good job of this as a whole, but like putting a lot of value on like relationships, you know, things that may not have like a specific, you know, data output, for

example. But yeah, I think that is a really, like Peace Corps is in a really unique position to be able to like to have people build relationships across cultures and international boundaries and like all kinds of different things. And so I think like keeping a big focus on that is definitely like a lesson learned. Yeah.

ADAMS: [00:50:20] You filled out the volunteer report form as part of your service?

COLUMBUS: [00:50:25] Yeah.

ADAMS: [00:50:25] It was quarterly, annually, biannually?

COLUMBUS: [00:50:28] Oh gosh. I remember doing it multiple times. I want to say it was quarterly. I should know off hand, but I think it was quarterly if you ended up doing it, yeah.

ADAMS: [00:50:43] Did you find it useful?

COLUMBUS: [00:50:45] Yeah, I really liked that it was detailed and I think I'm not remembering a lot of the specifics, but I think it did even kind of take into account some stuff that isn't kind of traditionally counted as like data. You know, there's more kinds of like community relationship focus values. And I remember like liking that it was really, really in depth. You know, I was like counting how many students have participated in groups and like things like that. I thought that was really good. It's been a while since I filled it out. But yeah.

ADAMS: [00:51:19] Were you able to keep a copy for your own records?

COLUMBUS: [00:51:23] I think so. I remember filling it out and definitely sending in a copy. But I think the way that we filled it out at the time, I'm not sure if it's changed, like you downloaded like a blank copy and then filled it out. And so I could keep it and then I could use it to, you know, like build off of for like future things too. So I could see, you know, like, well, it's kind of like helped me also, you know, like take a look at how things had

changed over time. So yeah, I'm pretty sure that I probably still have the copies on my computer.

ADAMS: [00:51:58] You know, it's both quantitative and qualitative. A lot of it was trying to have volunteers express, you know, their own feelings about what was going on, not just the task orientation.

COLUMBUS: [00:52:12] Yeah.

ADAMS: [00:52:13] So it was almost like a diary in many respects. It'd be interesting to go back and look at what you had written.

COLUMBUS: [00:52:23] Yeah, might be, yeah. I haven't looked back at that whole thing since. I remember, I mean, I looked at them often while I was a volunteer, but since I don't think I have. It would be really good to go back and look now.

ADAMS: [00:52:38] How did your Peace Corps experience influence your plans for the future? I know it's only been a couple of years and you're still trying to figure it out. But do you see the influence in your thinking?

COLUMBUS: [00:52:55] Yeah, for sure. One way that I think is I'd always really liked writing before Peace Corps. And then I was in Peace Corps, I would like write emails that come to family and friends. And, you know, kind of like, I had some internet, you know, I was generally on the internet like at least once a week. So I wasn't, you know, like super super remote. But I would try to send kind of like batch emails to people so I could still like keep in touch with like friends and family back home and like former coworkers and professors and people like that. And so I kind of really loved that, like telling them the experience, and also like, you know, you see a lot as a volunteer in like the, you know, like social justice realm, like environmental stuff, like racial discrimination. And so I kind of like got hooked on the idea of like going into journalism and like writing about stories like that. Um, so yeah, Peace Corps definitely influenced that. And I did end up going to grad school for journalism and doing some like journalism internships and fellowships and things like that. I'm kind of looking now to get more back into the sort of like direct service world, but

I hope that I can still tie in that like storytelling aspect in some form into my work in the future.

ADAMS: [00:54:19] In terms of Peace Corps' three goals, have you thought of your service in terms of those goals?

COLUMBUS: [00:54:26] Yeah, it's been a while since I thought, like broken it down into the goals like that. But um, I know like third goal, which is the one about like sharing Dominican culture with the U.S. Yeah. Um, the one, definitely the one about, if it's not third goal, the one about like sharing Dominican culture with the U.S., is the one that is probably been like most in my mind. You know, as I come back and then like living in the U.S. for the past few years in terms of like, you know, talking with people about like what life is like in the D.R. and things like that. That one's been most on my mind.

ADAMS: [00:55:12] What about your understanding of the host country?

COLUMBUS: [00:55:17] Of the host country, of the D.R.? Yeah. And I mean, it's really complicated and I think I'm always, you know, there's always like more to learn, especially as things are changing. I think being able to live there for a few years is definitely like there's no other way to really get that kind of knowledge, I think, than think actually living in a country. So I definitely like learned a lot over time. Something that's tough to see, like not changing, like conditions in the *bateyes* are pretty much the same as when I started, for example. But it's been really cool to have kind of like, you know, the benchmarks of like to compare, to see the country changing over time. Always learning more about like what's going on.

ADAMS: [00:56:05] Given you were the first volunteer in your community, how was their reaction to you? You are the American, so did they ask you questions that you were surprised about?

COLUMBUS: [00:56:21] Sometimes I think. I was like kind of all over the board because like the people that Peace Corps had been talking with, like kind of like, you know, they knew like what kind of programs Peace Corps normally does and things like that. And like some about

volunteers, but for people in the community, that hadn't been a part of that process. You know, it was like, I'm kind of like the first American that's like lived in the community. So it's like, you know, they have lots of questions. Definitely. I remember at one point someone like kind of someone in the community kind of like expecting that I was going to build a bridge to connect them to another town, which I was like, in no way. Like, I know nothing about engineering, you know. And that was really soon after I got to the site. So I was kind of just like, oh no, this is what they expect of me, like this is going to be really hard. I think that is a part of, that definitely is part of the Peace Corps experience is like, you know, there's some stuff that's like not going to change in the community, like because of us, you know?

COLUMBUS: [00:57:23] So I remember getting that kind of like question or like assumption that like I was going to build the bridge as being the one that kind of like most stuck with me. People asked me like if I were if I was friends with kids, the kids in the community would ask if I like knew Justin Bieber. He was really popular at the time and things like that. So that was cute.

ADAMS: [00:57:40] You might want to look up a book, I'm sure it's out of print now, but it's called Do Good. It's about a volunteer in a South American country where the community asks for a bridge. And it doesn't go anywhere. It's just the bridge to get to the other side for picnics. But it was sort of the perception of what a volunteer should do, why are you here type experience.

COLUMBUS: [00:58:03] Yeah, sounds pretty similar.

ADAMS: [00:58:05] You might enjoy it.

COLUMBUS: [00:58:07] Yeah.

ADAMS: [00:58:14] You've only been out three years now, three or four years. Have you maintained a connection back to the D.R. in this time period?

COLUMBUS: [00:58:23] Yeah.

ADAMS: [00:58:24] Who do you stay in touch with?

COLUMBUS: [00:58:26] I have been in touch with my host family and my site pretty regularly. I just recently got back in touch with my host family from my training, like our community-based training, too. So that was really great. Also like the project partner that I most worked with, Darbin, is like working in an NGO now. I stayed in touch with him a lot. A few other folks that I had met in my same community too. Yeah, a handful of people that I was closest with in my community, I still stay in touch with.

ADAMS: [00:59:02] And since you've been here, I know you've joined the RPCV-W program and the mentor program. Are there other third goal activities that you've been involved with since you've returned?

COLUMBUS: [00:59:16] Not that I know of. None that I can think of offhand. I don't think. I'm really glad to have participated in those. I got kind of like bogged down in like grad school and job searching and things like that for a while. So it's been great to be able to reconnect in that way and definitely would like to do more.

ADAMS: [00:59:44] Few other questions here in terms of other things you want to talk about, like you noted on some of the questions that could be asked. Did you send photos or videos home or post them online?

COLUMBUS: [01:00:06] Yeah, I also had like a little blog while I was a volunteer. It was like pretty similar to the emails I would send. And so that, yeah, I tried to do that like pretty regularly once a month. And I got paired up, I think, pretty early in my service, with a school in Pennsylvania, like near to where I had gone to college, where we would kind of do like some pen pal exchanges.

ADAMS: [01:00:31] What local school was it?

COLUMBUS: [01:00:34] They were. It was a middle school. I can't remember exactly which grades, but I think it was like seventh and eighth grades off the top of my head. Yeah. And so we would talk like here and there, set up like

Skype dates. And like the students, I would kind of be like the interpreter and the students could ask each other questions, like the Dominican students in the youth group could ask questions of like the students in the classroom, like in the 7th grade classrooms.

ADAMS: [01:01:03] Was this through the Paul Coverdell World Wise Schools program?

COLUMBUS: [01:01:06] Yes. Yeah, it was through that. Yeah. And so that I thought was really, really rewarding to be able to connect with students like that.

ADAMS: [01:01:18] Did that continue after you left or were you the critical link?

COLUMBUS: [01:01:23] It did not continue. It would, I think it would have been really cool if we could have found a way like to keep that going. But as far as I know, I don't think that they have.

ADAMS: [01:01:41] Any other summary statements you'd like to make?

COLUMBUS: [01:01:46] I'm actually now that I'm moving back down to the D.R. in like a month or so for a job for a year. I've been talking with like the Friends of the D.R. about helping them do some work. That's like supporting the Brigada Verde programs that are still being run as kind of like a secondary option for volunteers to do if they want. So I'm really excited. I mean, I'm not sure exactly what I'm going to be doing yet or like what might work or not, but I'm really excited about that, to kind of come back to be able to still help support that work in some way. So, yeah, like looking towards the future, that's something I'm really excited about that's connected to Peace Corps.

ADAMS: [01:02:34] I think we pretty much covered the framework that we're trying to elicit from you. So unless you have any other things, we've talked about other things that you've already noted here, so I think we've covered what you particularly wanted to bring up.

COLUMBUS: [01:02:55] Cool. I'm definitely glad I did it. Hopefully, Peace Corps continues for a while to come.

ADAMS: [01:03:02] Well, thank you for your time.

COLUMBUS: [01:03:03] Sure. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]