

**Sarayu Adeni Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Sarayu Adeni  
**Interviewer:** Kelli Haynes  
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**Biographical Note**

Sarayu Adeni served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic from 2010 to 2012 in a youth, family, and community development program.

**Access**

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### Oral History Interview

with

Sarayu Adeni

June 21, 2019

Austin, Texas

By Kelli Haynes

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

HAYNES: [00:00:02] Hello, this is Kelli Haynes. I'm a returned Peace Corps volunteer who served in Botswana and in Guyana. I'm here with Sarayu Adeni, who served in the Dominican Republic in the youth sector. And what years did you serve?

ADENI: [00:00:19] I was there from 2010 to 2012.

HAYNES: [00:00:22] Great. So I wanted to ask you what led you to join the Peace Corps?

ADENI: [00:00:29] Well, I was at the time that I met my first Peace Corps volunteer, a student here at the University of Texas, and I just happened to meet through a friend of a friend, a graduate student who had done Peace Corps in Mali. And it sounded interesting to me, and I kind of kept it at the back of my mind for a while. But I was also studying journalism and international studies here at UT and was looking for a really engaging way

to get out into the world travel, meet people. And my parents are also immigrants from India, and so I was looking for a way to sort of renew my respect for the immigrant experience and also just learn more about the world at large. And so didn't really relish the idea of going back to school as soon as I graduated from undergrad. So really, Peace Corps was kind of my only option, and as I explored it more, the more I fell in love with it.

ADENI: [00:01:33] That was also the time that Barack Obama was running his campaign for the presidency, was dropping the Peace Corps name all over the place and really energizing our generation to do something active. I heard him speak a couple of times here in Austin and at UT in person and just saw this as the real way to be part of all of that, to demonstrate being a global citizen. So, yeah, by the time I graduated from UT, the Peace Corps application was pretty much my only option. And by the time I walked at graduation, I still hadn't heard back yet. But then finally, at the end of May, I think early June was when I finally got my letter.

HAYNES: [00:02:16] Wow, wonderful. So I should also say we are at the Peace Corps Connect annual conference in Austin, Texas, on the campus of the University of Texas, where Sarayu works and graduated from. Yeah. So you were talking about your application process. Can you tell me a little bit about how that went?

ADENI: [00:02:39] Yeah, I mean, I think it's a lot shorter and more straightforward and faster now. But I at the time was not allowed to choose where I went. You could put down regional preferences, I think, at the time, but you couldn't specify actual countries. And so I was interested in either going someplace where I could speak Spanish, which I had been learning since fifth grade, or a Hindi speaking country. And at that time, the only Hindi speaking country with Peace Corps was Fiji. So I don't know what my odds were of going to Fiji, but going through the whole application process, it was pretty likely it was going to go to somewhere in Latin America. And so, yeah, but the application process took a while.

ADENI: [00:03:27] Health, I think, was the part that took the longest. Mostly because I think they were worried about vegetarian stuff, like what your

definition of being vegetarian is. You know, they ask you all the questions, like if you are presented with this very, you know, special dish in a country and how do you say no if you're a vegetarian? What do you do? It's kind of trying to test your sort of intercultural acumen. And I suppose I passed because I got that letter. And yeah, when I remember opening that letter and realizing, yeah, the Dominican Republic was a part of Latin America that I never considered. It wasn't really on the map for me, as weird as that sounds. But yeah, a place where you can definitely get vegetarian food.

HAYNES: [00:04:14] Good. So what, uh, is there anything like growing up, and you had talked about your parents coming to a new country, but were there any other things that you think might have led you to join the Peace Corps?

ADENI: [00:04:33] I, you know, it was also at the time, you know, the economic situation, people coming out of college with degrees that weren't necessarily resulting in jobs. I was majoring in print journalism.

HAYNES: [00:04:47] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:04:48] Which now looking back is sort of laughable because at the time that I was even in school, they were telling us that, you know, the times were changing. People aren't really referring to print reading as much as often, as much as they did previously. And international studies was kind of an area that I really was interested in going into. I was at the time also looking at like Foreign Service and, you know, those careers later on down the line. But yeah, I think Peace Corps just sounded appealing to me for so many reasons, not just because of the aspect of getting to go out into the world and try something different, but also because of the training that they give you, everything that's embedded in there. It was all very different from anything that anyone in my family had ever done.

HAYNES: [00:05:38] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:05:39] And so, yeah, even though I said that my family, they're immigrants from India, and they very much appreciated the fact that I

wanted to go and live in these situations that they are more familiar with in India. I still had to sit down and talk to my mom about what the Peace Corps actually was because it wasn't something that was on her radar either. So, yeah, it took a little bit of convincing, I think. But in the end, I realized that that was probably the only logical path for me after college.

HAYNES: [00:06:10] Yeah, wonderful. So you completed your application and finally got your invitation and you left in?

ADENI: [00:06:20] August of 2010.

HAYNES: [00:06:23] OK. And so tell me what happened when your plane landed?

ADENI: [00:06:29] Well, when the plane landed. So the airport in Santo Domingo is, you know, we didn't know this until later. But the Peace Corps volunteers in the Dominican Republic have this tradition of going to greet the newbies as they're landing.

HAYNES: [00:06:46] Aww.

ADENI: [00:06:46] So as soon as we landed the Peace Corps director, country director himself, his name was Romeo Massey, and he was this adorable, grandfatherly type. He was there the moment we stepped off the out of the gate and gave each one of us a huge hug and welcomed us personally to the country. And then as we kept going, carts and luggage and going out the door, all like the entire space of what you could see in the doors going out was Peace Corps volunteers with signs, and they were cheering.

HAYNES: [00:07:21] Oh!

ADENI: [00:07:22] They, yeah, they make a party out of coming to the Capitol to greet the new batch of volunteers. So we were just greeted with the screaming crowd of, like, you know, paparazzi like so. And I think I remember someone, because there's a Peace Corps volunteer magazine in the Dominican Republic called the Gringo Grita. And someone took a picture of me walking out into that screaming excitement, and that picture ended up in that issue of the Grita. So I have a picture of my own face like

looking so excited and also exhausted with my glasses and my hair in a bun. So, yeah, I have an actual photograph of myself stepping out of the airport.

HAYNES: [00:08:04] That's wonderful.

ADENI: [00:08:08] I ended up writing for the Grita for at least three issues after that, on the staff.

HAYNES: [00:08:16] Right, journalism.

ADENI: [00:08:18] Yeah.

HAYNES: [00:08:20] So after you got there and were greeted, what was your training experience like?

ADENI: [00:08:26] So training in the Dominican Republic was held in a sort of outskirts of Santo Domingo, an area called Pantoja, and they had a big training center there. And it was very, you know, very lush and garden like, there's lots of little sort of, what do you call it, gazebos. We called them, alas, all sitting around all these lawns and gardens. And it was very quiet, strangely, even though it was in the middle of this busy city suburb. And our trainings were very intimate, broken off into small groups. The trainers were, of course, all Dominican, with lots of experience working with Peace Corps volunteers for years. And so it felt very welcoming. It felt very at home. Peace Corps volunteers would come from their sites to also participate in the training, which also helped, because then we had a visual on, you know, different people that were out there doing the work that we were going to do.

ADENI: [00:09:38] And it was also just a great way to be embedded in this neighborhood because the host families that we were staying with initially were around the training center. So we all walked to training together every morning. And, you know, being in the capital, we were able to do a little bit of exploring, some cultural sites and things like that since Santo Domingo has such a rich history in the Caribbean. And so, yeah, it felt like we could get out there and start experiencing the country, but also have

our quiet reflection time to come back and talk with both Dominican and American staff and, you know, sort of help ourselves process as we were getting started.

HAYNES: [00:10:24] Yeah. Tell me about your host family. Did you have a host family?

ADENI: [00:10:27] I had three host families throughout my whole service.

HAYNES: [00:10:33] OK.

ADENI: [00:10:34] So should I tell you about all three of them or just?

HAYNES: [00:10:36] Tell me about training and we'll come back to the other ones.

ADENI: [00:10:38] The training host family was, like I said, they were out in Pantoja, and really it was just me and this older lady. And for older women in the D.R., you refer to them as *doña*. And so my *doña*, her name was Belkis, B-E-L-K-I-S, and she was this really lovely lady who was just as nervous as me on the first day because she had never, she was one of the few families that had never hosted a Peace Corps volunteer before. She just heard about it from other friends who said it was a wonderful experience, and so she signed up to do it. And so most of the time, I mean, she had a husband, she had a grown sort of foster son, and then she had a biological daughter who didn't live in the house with her, but would come to visit every once in a while.

ADENI: [00:11:31] But for the most part, it was just me and Doña Belkis and three tiny little chihuahuas that would come running to greet me every time I came in the door. And it was like a matter of trying to, like, unlock the two gates as well as like, make sure the Chihuahuas don't get out. So it's like this sort of balancing act. But she was lovely and she was just so solicitous and so concerned. I had my own room at the front of the house and she was very careful about the vegetarian food thing. She had been warned in advance by Peace Corps. And so she was constantly worried about that. She was so worried, in fact, that at one point I was sort of reacting to the pollution in the city. People burn trash in Santo Domingo.

And so I think I developed just like this odd little cough that I didn't think too much of, but apparently it worried her so much that she called the Peace Corps staff at the training center to report that I was ill or something.

ADENI: [00:12:35] And so then they called me into the medical center and I was like, what's happening? And they're like, your host mom, she's concerned about you. So she was just so lovely and wonderful. And I, every once in a while when I was checking in with my own mom in the U.S., she would say, oh, can I say hello to your mom? She didn't speak any English. She would want me to translate and say things to my mom that I would translate in English. And yeah, it was just nice to kind of build that rapport with this lady. And it was nice also because a Peace Corps volunteer that I ended up being really close friends with, her host family was right next door. So she and I could see each other and hang out. All of our families hung out together and we walked to training every day.

HAYNES: [00:13:23] Was there any kind of ceremony to meet your host families?

ADENI: [00:13:30] There was, and that was super nerve wracking, I remember that. They held it at the training center. And, you know, it's obviously an awkward thing to meet a host family that you're in a new country, you're still trying to like, get a grasp on Dominican Spanish and all of that. I remember seeing Doña Belkis' face and seeing like noting how nervous she was. But, you know, very quickly, like, we both overcame it and she, yeah, it was. There's always that moment of awkwardness after that ceremony is over and you're actually going home with them. There's that moment of, oh, this is. But yeah, you know, day by day, I think the important thing is just showing up, right? That's how you get over the awkwardness, even if you're sitting in silence. Somehow, that's more powerful to breaking awkwardness.

HAYNES: [00:14:29] Yeah, absolutely. So tell me about like what your actual training was like.

ADENI: [00:14:36] So training, if I remember correctly, was broken into three parts or three sort of components. There's a language training, there's the



technical training. And then there was like, I think it was like community based cultural integration that everyone kind of got. And so language training, they tested us all for Spanish. And I ended up placing into the highest level Spanish speaking group, but confidence wise, they sensed that I wasn't really there, so they dropped me one level. Which was fine because then I was like, you know, written and reading like, that stuff was fine with me, but orally, I was able to build up more confidence in a lower level group. Plus, there were some people who were starting completely from scratch. So I did have a head start. I turned out to be fine.

ADENI: [00:15:30] But it was those little Spanish speaking groups were really great for helping to build that confidence because it was essentially just like us sitting in a group, maybe doing some things out of a workbook that they gave to us to carry back to our sites eventually. But for the most part, it was just sitting around with a Dominican teacher having conversations in this tropical ala. And, you know, taking a break to go stretch out on the lawns in the sunshine and occasionally doing little field trips with our teachers out in the city. So like practicing ordering in a restaurant and going to a market and things like that. So that was Spanish.

ADENI: [00:16:09] The second part of training and the sort of the third part, which is the community based thing, that kind of extended beyond just the capital and into the sort of field placements, not necessarily places where we would be serving, but out in more of a rural setting. And so my technical training, because I was in the youth, family, and community development sector, that involved not only learning like facilitation techniques to work with related to youth and at risk youth, but also understanding the context of youth and families in D.R. You know, trying to understand the education system, the legal system, what issues young people encounter in the D.R. You know, it is a poor Caribbean country that has a lot of history around European influence and lots of multiracial groups and lots of tourism. And so and it is, of course, a beautiful country. There's beaches and things like that. So there's a lot of interesting opportunities and also challenges for young people. So they gave us a lot of context on that.

ADENI: [00:17:25] And then a lot of it was also playing games and singing songs. And you know, those ways that would help us kind of build what we called *confianza* with Dominican youth and their families. And that part was really fun because it kind of helped us to, like, let our guard down. You know, you're singing and jumping and running and dancing. And really, that's part of the culture in the D.R. Even adults participate in things like that. And so that was something that we, as Americans had to kind of like, you know, adults are not going to do this. No, that's not the way. Like, everyone has to sing, everyone's going to dance, everyone's going to participate in some way. So that's culturally one thing that I think I loved about training was that interactivity. And yeah, and that those kinds of things when I came back even after training, I was like, can I go to a training now where we sing and dance and play games before we get to the, you know, hard concrete work?

HAYNES: [00:18:22] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:18:23] Because in a strange way, learning to facilitate and learning to train in that way, it's actually more effective, I think, than just jumping straight to business.

HAYNES: [00:18:34] Absolutely.

ADENI: [00:18:34] Yeah.

HAYNES: [00:18:36] So did you ever get to see your site before you moved there?

ADENI: [00:18:44] I did. Part of training, and that was where the sort of community-based thing was. We were not just out in a site, in a rural area together as a team, but then they also included a weekend where we had to go visit another Peace Corps volunteer in their site. That was part of the sort of training that we got. And then the other part of that was later on when they assigned us our sites, we were sent there for a weekend to check it out and then come back for our swearing in ceremony and then go back to our sites to actually be there.

HAYNES: [00:19:19] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:19:19] So I think I visited my site for like a day or so because it's really not far from the capital. It's like maybe an hour and a half drive from the capital. So I was one of the lucky ones that had that sort of convenient access to the Peace Corps office. And so, yeah, I remember going to my site, checking it out, meeting people. And my site was on the beach, so they did take me to the beach. They did walk me around, show me the school, all of that stuff. And yeah, and they really, I think Peace Corps had done a lot of work. Our APCD, Adele Williams, had done a lot of work for the youth volunteers to cultivate that *confianza* with the community, so they were ready and waiting for me. They were like, as soon as you're finished your ceremony, you'll be back. We're so excited to have you. Already, they were treating me like a member of the family, and I was there for a couple of days.

HAYNES: [00:20:20] Yeah, awesome. So tell me about swearing in.

ADENI: [00:20:24] Swearing in was great. It was also held at the Pantoja training site, so lots of good opportunities for pretty pictures. I dressed up and the thing that you know, Dominican women like to do is get like really outrageous nails done at the salon. So I went and did that for the first time, which is fun. Got it to match my dress. And Dona Belkis came, and she also brought her husband. So that was really nice. And most of the Peace Corps volunteers host families came to that, host families in the capital, I mean, came to that swearing in ceremony. And yeah, it was really great. I remember how profound it was to like, raise your hand and say, and everybody swearing in together. We elected one of my friends, her name is Phoebe Sunflower, and she had just this wonderfully warm, inspiring personality, and we elected her to give the address on behalf of our cohort at the swearing in ceremony. So that was really nice. Romeo Massey, our director, gave each one of us this pen as we walked across the stage. And so, yeah, it was a really inspiring day, and I think we were all ready to get out there. But it was also sad to be like, oh, this part of it's over. Now we have to kind of build camaraderie in a different place with different people.

HAYNES: [00:21:57] Yeah. So then you moved to your site. And you stayed with a host family at your site also?

ADENI: [00:22:07] Yes, the requirement was three months.

HAYNES: [00:22:11] OK.

ADENI: [00:22:12] I stayed for six months with my host family.

HAYNES: [00:22:14] Oh, wow. They just asked you to stay longer?

ADENI: [00:22:18] Well, yeah, I mean, I had a really good relationship with my host family in my site, in Carlos Pintos. They were, I mean, not very rich, but they wielded a lot of influence. The mother of the family, her name was Nancy. She was the president of the local health committee, which was the organization that the Peace Corps volunteer has been partnered with. So they were my sort of host organization, and she was also very. Both her children were police officers. Her husband, my host dad Julian, was also very influential in the community. They were just known as a very respectable family, very hardworking family, very invested in the community and invested in their neighbors. So when they took in this Peace Corps volunteer, me, I got to enjoy the respect that this family had already built for itself, and I continued to feed into that.

ADENI: [00:23:23] So, you know, a lot of the work that I did, I think, you know, I'm so eternally grateful to them for helping me with that because Peace Corps volunteers come in with zero context. And so to have the backing and the trust of this wonderful, powerful family really helped my work along, I think. And so, yeah, I stayed with them for the required three months, but my relationship with them was so good and they were just like, you stay as long as you want. You can stay the whole two years if you want.

HAYNES: [00:23:59] Aww.

ADENI: [00:24:00] And I said, I will stay for six months, but I do want to try the experience of living on my own here, having my own house, all of that. And they helped me find my own house just around the corner from where they lived, with a distant relative of theirs, who had a giant plot of land.

And they helped me set up everything for that house and I still did my laundry with them. I still ate meals at least twice a week with them. And so I saw them every day.

HAYNES: [00:24:30] That's so lovely.

ADENI: [00:24:31] So, yeah, it was they were very they were very powerful and very potent in my Peace Corps experience.

HAYNES: [00:24:39] So tell me about your new house.

ADENI: [00:24:42] So the new house that I had in Carlos Pintos was actually a new house. It was, like I said, on the property of a distant relative of Nancy and Julian's, and that family had their grown children and their families also living on that property, in different little houses. And so on that giant piece of property was a sort of ruin of a house that they hadn't worked on or lived in for a while. So I told them that I would like to fix up this house and invest in making it nicer and all of that stuff. And they agreed that I could do that and in exchange, they would not charge me rent. This was a deal that again, Nancy and Julian helped me broker, so they helped pull together all the people to come fix the house, put on a new roof.

HAYNES: [00:25:39] Wow.

ADENI: [00:25:39] Help me with the wiring of electricity. They even put in an indoor toilet that hooked up to the latrine on the property so that I could have my own indoor bathroom.

HAYNES: [00:25:50] Wow.

ADENI: [00:25:51] Put in like a little bucket shower area. Helped me to procure like all my furniture and like a gas tank and a fridge full of stuff. They helped me. All I did was basically pay for it with the Peace Corps, like, you know, stipend that they give you.

HAYNES: [00:26:07] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:26:08] So I paid for it and they basically set up this house for me.

HAYNES: [00:26:11] Wow.

ADENI: [00:26:12] My host brother even surprised me by painting it ocean blue inside, and my host dad made me curtains to separate the rooms because there were no doors inside. It was a two-room house with an added sort of lean-to bathroom area where the toilet and the bucket shower and my giant water tank was. But one of the two rooms was basically my kitchen and sitting area. And in the other room was the bedroom. And I loved that house so much. And even though my American family, when they came and saw it, and my Dominican host family and they were like, why are you living like this? This is not like a fancy house at all. You should be living in a concrete block house. But I liked my little wooden house with the tin roof. And you know, it was not sealed. So at night fireflies would come in and I could see them from underneath my mosquito nets when the power went out. Sometimes, you know, little critters would come in, like lizards, and climb across the maps that I tacked to the wall and the dogs on the property would come hang out on the front porch. They put the cattle behind my house at night, so like I could sort of feel their presence on the other side of the wall.

HAYNES: [00:27:31] Sounds like a very loud living situation.

ADENI: [00:27:34] It was, yeah. The chickens in particular drove me crazy, like I can't stand the sound of chickens. I was like, maybe I should not be a vegetarian, just so I can get rid of these chickens. Because it just went on and on. And some people say that like after a while, you stop hearing the chickens. But for me, I could not stop hearing the chickens. But yeah, there were animals and little kids would come in and hang out with me. I had like a Saturday or Sunday night coloring group for all the little girls in my compound. My host mom would drop in every once in a while and mostly the young people that I worked with would drop in and come find me every time they needed me. This house was really my responsibility to maintain. The power would go out every five hours. I had to bring water every time the power, the water came because it was controlled by the aqueduct in the community. You know, when the power came on,

everyone dropped what they were doing to go fill the water tanks. So I had my giant water tank and all of that.

ADENI: [00:28:35] And I cleaned the whole house. Dominican women found it hilarious that I was living in my own house because, you know, they're very fastidious about cleanliness and there's a whole process. You have to clean the house this exact way every morning. And so they were all very amused to see me attempting to do that too. But yeah, my mom like when she came to visit me from Texas, she was mostly concerned about the the openness of the doors and the windows. Because Dominicans don't have, well, they usually just leave doors open during the day in the campo, in the country. And so my mom was like, what about the mosquitoes? We have to buy screens, we have to put all this stuff. And I was like, people in wooden houses don't do that here. If I had a block concrete block house, then maybe. But like, don't buy me anything that's going to make this house even more suffocating.

ADENI: [00:29:29] But yeah, I mean, it had its struggles, you know, tarantulas and rats and things like that. But then it had its nice moments, like the ocean was just a ten minute walk away. I could hear it at night. And when the power went out, everyone in my community lit candles and pulled their chairs outside their houses to sit. So having my own house allowed me to participate in all that. But I could also go see my host family if I wanted to, or if I was bored of cooking at home. Peace Corps volunteers would come visit me when they were going to the beach, so I loved having people come hang out. Yeah, I think part of my experience was definitely that house. People called it Sari's treehouse. But yeah, I just loved that house so much.

HAYNES: [00:30:19] Oh yeah. So you said you had a third host family?

ADENI: [00:30:24] Yes, the third host family was during training when they take you to your community based training, CBT.

HAYNES: [00:30:30] Oh, OK.

ADENI: [00:30:31] Yeah. And that host family we only had for like, I think, a month and a half or so, something like that. It varies depending on Peace Corps country. But our youth development training took place in a city called Constanza, which is in the middle of the country, and it's cooler in the mountains. So we got a little break from the heat. And so my third host family was there, and there was a *doña* and then there was a dad and there were two small children. And this was a relatively wealthier family. They had ranch land. They bred horses. They also participated in cockfighting, which was a questionable activity, especially for Peace Corps volunteers. They warned us to stay away from that. But my host father was apparently a breeder of cockfighting roosters. And they lived in a very fancy house, probably the fanciest house of all those host families in Constanza that were selected for the Peace Corps volunteers. And yeah, it was in stark contrast to what my eventual host family in my site would be like. But you know, it was, I think, good for me to see that sort of range of family and income in the D.R. And they were very nice. But yeah, I think the family that I became the closest with was obviously the one in Carlos Pintos.

HAYNES: [00:32:04] Yeah. And then you mentioned a couple of times your actual biological family came to visit you.

ADENI: [00:32:12] Yes. Yeah. And that was really fun. My family in the U.S. came to visit me twice. The first time it was my parents and my brother and sister. The second time was my mom and my aunt. And so the first time they came to visit, they stayed in my community. There was a hotel on the beach, a very small, locally run hotel that they stayed at. But then they came to my little house. They walked around with me to the school and met all the kids. Were introduced to everyone because of course, the whole town knows that Sari's family is here, so they all came running to meet them. My family doesn't speak Spanish, and really no one in my community spoke English, so I was the centerpiece for everybody. And that was really fun. I didn't know how much I was going to enjoy that, but I really did, to have everyone looking at me and being the bridge for these two worlds.



ADENI: [00:33:12] It was just the most fun ever, and there was one point. So as I was saying Dominicans, when the power goes out or when people are just hanging out in the heat, they pull plastic chairs out to the porch and get something cold to drink, like a fruit drink, like cherries or mango or something, and just share it around and everyone hangs out. Maybe a beer, depending on the audience. And so my family did that with my host family in Carlos Pintos. And so we were all just sitting around sweating on the porch in plastic chairs and everyone got like a *jugo de limon*, a lemon juice, and just telling stories and sharing photo albums and asking questions about each other through me. Which, yeah, it was exhausting, but it was actually really fun. And I think my family got a real sense of understanding of what my life had been like and what I've really gotten myself into.

ADENI: [00:34:18] Because it's one thing to describe it, and then another for them to actually come walk through these, you know, streets that don't have paving and, you know, talk to the kids who are working in this tiny little school. The teacher that has like all of these students and, you know, my host family who's been taking care of me. And then likewise, I think for my host family, it gave added context to me as a Peace Corps volunteer, like coming in and actually having a back story. These are the people who raised me to help me become this person that ended up with you. So, yeah, they had fun. My mom, my biological mom, claims that I don't eat enough, which is typical of most Indian moms. They'll have that complaint. But then she and my Dominican mom had the same complaint. They talked to each other through me saying, oh, this girl doesn't eat. She doesn't, she doesn't listen to me. She just, yeah, so that was.

HAYNES: [00:35:20] From both sides.

ADENI: [00:35:22] Yeah, exactly. So that was a really warm moment for me.

HAYNES: [00:35:26] Yeah. Oh, that's wonderful. So I don't think we've talked about your projects at all yet.

ADENI: [00:35:32] No, not yet. So youth development projects are interesting because they kind of spread into all the other sectors. I had three

iterations of Chicas Brillantes, which is the Dominican version of GLOW. And then I also had Escojo Mi Vida, which was the HIV AIDS teen health promoter program. It was a multiplier course in which you teach one and then they become certified to do another. You can do it in other styles, too, but that was the way I chose to run that program.

HAYNES: [00:36:12] Can I interrupt you really quick?

ADENI: [00:36:13] Yeah, yeah.

HAYNES: [00:36:14] Can you translate the names of those?

ADENI: [00:36:16] So Escojo Mi Vida means I choose my life. And Chicas Brillantes means bright girls.

HAYNES: [00:36:21] Oh, OK.

ADENI: [00:36:22] Yeah. And yeah, so I had an Escojo Mi Vida team. I had Chicas Brillantes. There was a little sort of after school program in my community, run by a totally different nonprofit, that was doing like supplemental education work for the kids that were at dropout risk. And so I would go there a couple of times a week and do literacy exercises with them. I would do just drop in homework and tutoring there. And so that was the little school. I also had done an English class, two different sections of an English class, that worked for a while. But of course, no one learned English. But it was just entertaining to share something of my language with other people.

ADENI: [00:37:14] I also participated in more of the family initiatives that Peace Corps Dominican Republic has. They had what are called family camps, where they would bring in parents and children from the communities to kind of learn family communication techniques, nutrition, health, find ways to sort of build trust and understanding between different generations within families. Educate the mothers, you know, things like that. So I participated in family camp, also brought people from my community to do that. Deportes Para La Vida, sports for life, was the Peace Corps' program sort of offshoot program of Grassroots Soccer, where you're essentially

using sports to teach HIV AIDS awareness and prevention. And so I became a trainer for that, participated in the training. I brought a girl from my community to also be trained to do that too.

ADENI: [00:38:18] What else was going on? I also had a group. So my two project partners, one was the health committee in Carlos Pintos. And so they were the ones that Nancy was the president of. And they were very much community based and they were promoting the sort of health-related projects that they had going on. The San Diego Padres, the baseball franchise, had a training complex just outside my site. And so they were my other partner and they were mostly the money. Every time I needed like a nice place to host a graduation, or if I needed funding for a smaller project, or if they had a group of Americans that were doing some sort of exchange thing and they needed a local translator or something, I would be working with them on that. So they brought in like a medical mission at one point that I was translating for. They brought in a couple of groups of American college students that I connected with the local school to do things. They also facilitated a group of Engineers Without Borders to come in from Arizona to work on the aqueduct and try and fix that. So I was the local liaison on that and also finding engineering college students that were in the community studying engineering to sort of go with them as the local liaison and just kind of participate in that project.

HAYNES: [00:39:41] How did you get connected with them?

ADENI: [00:39:44] With the San Diego Padres? So the San Diego Padres had a community outreach coordinator, like this is a person that they have at every training complex in the D.R. supposedly. And this lady had actually filled out the application jointly with Nancy and the health committee in Carlos Pintos to solicit a Peace Corps volunteer.

HAYNES: [00:40:07] Oh, wow.

ADENI: [00:40:07] So it was really through them that I, that that site was made available to Peace Corps, because they had never had a Peace Corps volunteer before me.

HAYNES: [00:40:15] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:40:16] So I was shared between this local and this international organization, which is really kind of weird. But the complex was open to me any time I needed to. I would have to like trek through the, you know, the dry creek bed and through the jungle, or to pay for a motorcycle to get there. But they also had baseball games at the diamond there, because a lot of American recruiters were going to find players. So I would go with the kids to watch baseball games for free, which would be fun.

HAYNES: [00:40:48] Cool.

ADENI: [00:40:48] And then, of course, my graduations for my various youth groups, we got free run of that beautiful space so that it was a really special occasion. For example, when my Escojo Mi Vida group graduated and became multipliers of that HIV AIDS and sexual health training, we held the graduation there. And so the families dressed up, they took it very seriously. I presented certificates, there was a cake. And yeah, it was just an opportunity for them to have this sort of professional experience and really enjoy the celebration of it, not just something we were doing in like a random classroom in the community. This is something to be recognized. So, yeah, so there was a lot going on.

HAYNES: [00:41:37] Yeah. You called them youth groups. What age counts as youth?

ADENI: [00:41:42] So my groups, I think the youngest were like 11 and the oldest, the oldest one was 23. But the 23 year old, I mean, she was exactly my age at the time, and she really helped facilitate more than. She participated in the classes as the student for a while. And then later on, I brought her in as my sort of co-teacher. So I think once people leave for university, it gets harder to reach them. But the teenagers, particularly, were the ones who most easily clustered around me. So that was.

HAYNES: [00:42:22] If you had to pick a favorite, what would you say was your favorite project?

ADENI: [00:42:26] Probably Chicas Brillantes, the girls groups.

HAYNES: [00:42:29] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:42:31] Because that was a really robust program in Peace Corps Dominican Republic. You know, you're building youth, these little girls groups in your community. But then there is a wider national network that exists now. It's basically GLOW, what the rest of Peace Corps would consider GLOW. But in the D.R., it includes a sort of professionals conference in which the girls can, select girls can come to the capital alongside the Peace Corps volunteer, and participate in professional development training, go on site visits to see a different Dominican women in their workplaces. Talk to them about careers and stuff. I remember participating myself as an actress in a little sketch we were doing on professional behavior during interviews.

HAYNES: [00:43:20] Uh huh.

ADENI: [00:43:20] And so, yeah, teaching them about preparing for college, preparing for the workforce, you know, big conferences like that. And then of course, there's the big Camp GLOW. That's like a five-day long thing, and that's annual. And then there are the mini regional GLOWS that you could hold with other Peace Corps volunteers in your province. There were the, you know, different ones across the country. And for me, I mean, I loved it just because I enjoyed working with young women, but also because these girls were getting an opportunity to travel across their own country.

HAYNES: [00:43:52] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:43:53] You know, that was not really an option for a lot of girls from my village. But they were getting to meet other girls like them from the complete other end of the Dominican Republic, wear the T-shirts and participate in these activities and learn something about their own body and present to each other. And I think in a lot of ways it was empowering for them because I noticed a change in their behavior when they came back. They were a lot more active in the groups after I had taken them to

an external exchange. And the Dominican Republic GLOW program, or at the time that I was there, they set up a national advisory committee of girls, and one girl from my community was chosen to be on that. So they were actually advising Peace Corps on how to shape the GLOW program. So that was fantastic. I loved being part of that.

HAYNES: [00:44:49] Yeah. And you mentioned something about those camps being in phases where they started to kind of take it over as their own.

ADENI: [00:44:59] Yeah. It was really interesting actually. Towards the end of my Peace Corps service, I had this really sort of long view of the girls program in the D.R. I mean, as Peace Corps volunteers, we know that these groups are not going to last forever, especially in the youth program. We can't tell what kind of impact this is going to have later, like if they're going to remember anything that we taught them. So the way that I sort of approached it when I was starting out was, I'm not going to teach this whole class to the girls because we have a manual on Chicas Brillantes and all the lessons that are in it. I'm not going to teach this. I'm going to teach the first one and then we're going to pass the manual around to each other, and each person has to lead a lesson in the next meeting. So the class really did belong to them. And so in the first cohort, that's how I did it.

ADENI: [00:45:57] And then we held a graduation ceremony for them, and I made it clear in the graduation ceremony that all of you are now perfectly capable of teaching the next course. So that group assembled a new group of girls and taught the course in the same way that I had done it and then held a graduation. So that second group of girls told the rest of the community, OK, we're going to assemble a third group of girls. So the third group of girls met for the first time, and I was really sitting in the back of the room, observing now the third generation of Chicas Brillantes like launching, and just feeling really excited that this is, you know, I've made myself obsolete like this is what I wanted.

HAYNES: [00:46:40] Worked yourself out of a job.

ADENI: [00:46:41] Yeah, and they were giving kind of a difficult lesson at first, and the third group was actually much younger than what I had originally aimed for. I had been working with like 16, 17, 18 year olds in the first group. The third group they were talking to like, you know, 10, 11 year olds. And the first lesson was on, you know, the female body. What are the parts of the female body? What do you know about your own body? And I remember there was one little girl who I think was like 10 years old. I didn't know her. She raised her hand and she said something that was anatomically correct. She had correctly identified something that was on the diagram. And a lot of the other girls kind of giggled. And the second group of girls who was teaching the course, they looked around and they said, we didn't hear a joke. She said it correctly. It's good that she knows.

HAYNES: [00:47:33] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:47:33] It's go that she has this knowledge, and soon all of you will too. And I was just like, this is fantastic. Like, this is exactly the sort of attitude that, you know, young women should have. We're not ashamed to talk about ourselves, and we're not ashamed to encourage others to speak up. It just made me so happy to know that at one point I was part of that, but now that it's still going in the right direction on its own. They were all wearing their T-shirts. They're all so proud to be part of this, Chicas Brillantes, to have this association and have hope that they could participate in things outside their community in the future. So I loved that. I think Chicas Brillantes was probably the project that I loved the most. It definitely came with drama, because it is teenage girls, but it was all worth it.

HAYNES: [00:48:25] Yeah. Oh, that's so amazing. What a wonderful project.

ADENI: [00:48:31] Yeah, it was great.

HAYNES: [00:48:32] Yeah. OK, so I want you to talk to me about like sort of the progression over the first year and the second year, of how your work changed and how your relationships changed. And maybe I know there's some kind sometimes kind of a dip in confidence somewhere in there.

ADENI: [00:48:56] Yeah. Well, I mean, despite how, I mean, I started learning Spanish when I was in fifth grade, but for some reason I still never feel a 100 percent confident in it, which is ridiculous because by the time I took the TEFL, like I was at a nine. So I knew that I was able to conduct business and do everything well in Spanish, but my confidence in Spanish was just not great. So I always, um, that never wavered. I always got nervous speaking in front of people, even people I knew. And the thing that became sort of apparent is that year one you're really like not doing a whole lot and you just have to come to terms with that. You have to just sit back, accept invitations, absorb as much as you can. Don't even try to do anything, even like the one tiny little English workshop that like some kids were begging me to do, I tried to do it. And even then, that was too much, because there was still so much that I needed to learn.

HAYNES: [00:49:55] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:49:58] Namely, there was this older woman who was walking around at the back of the room insisting that every kid in the community attend this English workshop. And she was like, I'm going to beat you all with a stick if you don't come to class. I never got an education. This woman was completely illiterate, and she said, I never got an education, which means all of you should be sitting here in front of her watching, taking this English class. And I was like, yeah, no one's going to learn English here.

HAYNES: [00:50:22] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:50:23] But I want to learn from all of you first. Like, I don't really want to, it takes a little while to explain that to your community. Like for an entire year, you're basically sort of absorbing and understanding. As things sort of start getting going, the community starts to put more trust in you, which is really fantastic and very delicate. And so I felt a lot more comfortable in the second year. But there was a point that I remember being uncomfortable where I was questioning like, can I really do this for another year? And it was after my family came to visit me the first time, which happened somewhere around that one year mark. And it's just, I think the exhaustion of it. Like you're not only mentally resetting your routines, trying to think and operate in another language, trying to figure out how



this country works and what people expect if you manage those expectations. And then also like living in the heat and trying to wash your own clothes and like hauling your own water and the power goes out. All this stuff, like, I think it becomes exhausting after a while.

ADENI: [00:51:43] And so I remember right after my family left, they went to the airport and I came back alone and I was like alone in my house. And I was just like, man, can I do this for another year? Like all of this stuff where you're physically handling your own life, trying to ward off the men making advances? Because this is Latin America, you know. Trying to get these projects, however small, going. This is going to take some stamina. Do I have this? And so I think there are always moments where you still doubt, but Peace Corps volunteers still keep going anyway. Like, if you sit down next to them, I feel like with all of my Peace Corps friends like we'd all sit down and be like, I don't know what I'm doing. OK, I'm going to get up and now lead this class.

HAYNES: [00:52:32] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:52:33] And so, yeah, I think that kind of fluctuated for me. But I did feel more stable in the second year, to the point where I actually extended my service by a couple of months.

HAYNES: [00:52:44] Really?

ADENI: [00:52:44] Yeah. Or not, not a couple of months. I think it was like a month and a half because, yeah, the projects weren't done yet, and I wasn't ready to go.

HAYNES: [00:52:54] That's wonderful. So tell me about the other Peace Corps volunteers that you served with and like ways that you were able to connect. I know you said you hosted them sometimes.

ADENI: [00:53:08] Yeah. In my province, there were, um, I was one of four Peace Corps volunteers that were in the youth sector in our particular swear-in group, and we became really close. One of us was in the city. One of us was in the mountains, the one that I became close to after training. I was

the one on the beach. And then there was another one of us that was close to a campsite where Camp GLOW was usually held. So every time we needed like a change of place or if we needed to go buy groceries or whatever, we would go to each other's respective sites and just kind of have that personal connection. And, you know, on a personal level, we were able to connect with each other. But then also professionally, a lot of our work overlapped because we all had girls groups. We all had Escojo Mi Vida groups. We would sometimes help motivate our groups by playing bad cop for each other.

ADENI: [00:54:09] We would bring, you know, youth and families from our communities to each other's communities so that they could see the work that was going on, meet each other. One of them had relatives in my community, so she would come back and forth with them all the time. And we all, we met each other's host families. We, you know, everyone knew our names and it was kind of like an extension of host families, which was cool. But yeah, there were a lot of Peace Corps volunteers. I think there was something like 200 in this tiny country at any given point, and I'm sure there were more in San Cristobal. But I was particularly close to these three. And yeah, we saw each other at camps and we were also more than once consolidated because of hurricanes.

HAYNES: [00:54:58] Oh.

ADENI: [00:54:59] And so basically, what that meant was Peace Corps would put us up at a single hotel in the nearest city, and so it would just be this mass of Peace Corps volunteers who haven't seen each other in a long time and just reconnecting. The Peace Corps office was also a great place to see Peace Corps volunteers. And for me, like I said, it was like an hour and a half from my site so I could go there in a day and come back if I needed to. And then also Peace Corps issued us cell phones, so we would check in with each other, get advice, email, when there was internet in whichever place we were. And yeah, I mean, there was that was a huge community support right there. I'm still very close to a lot of my Peace Corps friends. And yeah, I think those really are lifelong friendships.

HAYNES: [00:55:51] Yeah, that's wonderful. OK, so tell me about your close of service conference.

ADENI: [00:56:00] Close of service conference was interesting. It didn't feel real because there was like a lot of just logistical paperwork and things that needed to be done. You know, your final stool samples and all that. So things like that, that you're just like, OK, we're doing this, but it's not registering that it's for going back.

HAYNES: [00:56:22] Yeah.

ADENI: [00:56:24] But it was held in like a really relatively nice hotel and close to the capital. So we all had a chance to take clean showers and like do all of that. But they also talked to us a lot about professional opportunities after Peace Corps and we all got a flash drive with all these resources. And, you know, lots of different closure activities, particularly within sectors, to just kind of remember that all of this was real and that we're now going to have a life after this. What to do with yourself after that. So having that time together, I think ours was like three days or something like that. Having that time together did bring closure. However, I was one of the few that, well, no, they were actually quite a few in my cohort that ended up extending their service. And again, I didn't extend for very long. But for me, it didn't feel like a full closure because everyone else was going to be leaving at the end of October, and I was still going to be there. So, yeah, it was nice to have that, you know, extended time to share resources and all that. But yeah, it felt like yet another Peace Corps event for me. I didn't feel like fully closed.

HAYNES: [00:57:46] Yeah. So tell me about coming back home.

ADENI: [00:57:49] Yeah, coming back was a little harder. I came back around Thanksgiving. And it's, you know, of course, my family had seen my context there. They understood what I was leaving behind. They understood who I was leaving behind, like all the families and the students and the work and the life, you know, in the Caribbean, all of that stuff. And so they were very understanding and listened a lot. But adjusting to life in the U.S. after that was really hard. I had a hard time just because it feels

like your entire sense of purpose and identity is just snatched away and no one gets it. No one's asking the right questions. No one wants to talk to you for long enough.

ADENI: [00:58:37] And so my mom gave me a really useful piece of advice when I was going through that moment of I don't even want to leave the house, like, what am I going to do out there? She said, when you're communicating yourself to other people, you do have to go in with some forgiveness because Peace Corps is a really profound experience for a lot of people. Good or bad, because everyone's is different. But you have to forgive the people who are listening to you because they're not going to get it. Even we don't get it, even though we came to see you. You know, so forgive us for not fully understanding, but tell us anyway and don't take it personally. And so that helped a little bit to try and have empathy for people who might be listening to these long rants about Peace Corps because I couldn't help myself.

ADENI: [00:59:29] But then it also kind of reminded me because my background is in communications to tailor my story, right? Find the important things, find the broader picture, find the big lessons that you can share with people that they'll get. Having a long story about yourself and how you were sick on a bus without context is going to mean nothing. No one's going to know what to say after that. So you've got to have like a point. And so it kind of lit a fire under me as far as how to refine the Peace Corps story, wanting to share it, but finding new ways to do it as much as possible.

HAYNES: [01:00:09] Yeah, wonderful. Um, so if you were speaking to someone who was thinking about joining the Peace Corps or maybe had just started their Peace Corps service, what advice would you give them?

ADENI: [01:00:25] Oh my gosh, that's so good. We had to write this in paragraph form in the Gringo Grita upon COS. They do like a COS interview with you, and so everyone has like the same set of questions that they have to answer. And I think one of the final questions is advice to a new PCV. And my list was long, but it was more like kind of, you know, stream of thought poetry written like, you know, be sure to shake out your shoes in the morning and say yes to invitations and don't be so hard on yourself if you

mess up in the language. You know, listen to people. Sometimes the only way you can help someone is to listen, even if it's completely outside of your scope of understanding, still listen. Pay attention to what little children and animals and old people are telling you. Be careful about washing fruits before you eat them. You know things like that. It was all like sort of practical little advice. But I think for the most part, listening is the. And listening and being present are the two pieces of advice I would give. Even if you have no idea what you're doing, if you're sitting in the room paying attention to whatever is happening, that can actually be more powerful than anything else.

HAYNES: [01:01:51] That's wonderful. Well, thank you so much for speaking with me right now.

ADENI: [01:01:57] Thank you.

HAYNES: [01:01:57] This was wonderful.

[END OF INTERVIEW]