

Edwin L. Blanton III Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Edwin L. Blanton III served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Dominica from January 2004 to January 2005 on a youth and community development project.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Edwin L. Blanton III

June 16, 2019

Austin, Texas

By Christeen Pusch

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

PUSCH: [00:00:01] Today is June 16th, 2019. This is Christine Pusch, and I am interviewing Edwin Blanton, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in the eastern Caribbean, Dominica, from January 2004 until January 2005, as a youth and community development volunteer. So let's start with asking. I'll ask you, why did you decide to join the Peace Corps?

BLANTON: [00:00:32] Well, I first got the idea of joining the Peace Corps, actually when I was in third grade. And so I had this wonderful teacher, Mrs. Wilcoxon, who her daughter had just returned from being a Peace Corps volunteer somewhere in Africa, and her daughter came into our classroom and showed a slide projector of her adventures with the Peace Corps in Africa. And so right then was when it kind of planted the seed for me to join Peace Corps. And so fast forward after college, some I had thought about perhaps joining the Peace Corps and had started my application, but hadn't really done anything, and I went to graduate school instead. And when I was finishing up graduate school, I thought, you know, if I'm

going to go to the Peace Corps, maybe I should just go ahead and do it now. And so I did the application process and the interview. And yeah, that's it. So inspired for a long time and then finally got around to applying.

PUSCH: [00:01:42] So two questions. What about that presentation really inspired you? What do you remember about that? And then also, what did you study in grad school or in undergrad as well?

BLANTON: [00:01:50] Right. So in the presentation, I just remember it being very tropical and for it just being extremely different than where I grew up, which was southeast Missouri. And I had always had like this volunteer spirit in me. So like my parents always had the whole family volunteering at numerous things. And so I always had the volunteer spirit in me. And I think it was just part of the thinking about the adventure that Peace Corps would allow, as well as the opportunity to contribute was part of that. And in college, I studied marketing and hotel restaurant management. And after a while, I decided I wanted to do something different and went back for my master's in public administration. And so it was the master's of public administration when I was running, you know, finishing that up, I decided, OK. Peace Corps is going to be the next thing.

PUSCH: [00:02:53] Did you work for a while between college, grad school, and Peace Corps?

BLANTON: [00:02:58] Right. So I worked for a while between college and my graduate program, and that's when I really realized I'd kind of gotten myself burned out on the hospitality industry, and I had almost really gotten burned out even while I was still in college. But I had a go of it after college and then with college, you know, studying public administration and then really applying for Peace Corps. So about six months after I graduated with my master's is when I went into the Peace Corps.

PUSCH: [00:03:31] So what was that application process like?

BLANTON: [00:03:34] So it was an online process, which I remember that.

PUSCH: [00:03:38] It was?

BLANTON: [00:03:39] It was. So I was very, I was very happy with that. So the application that I had started right out of college was still visible online, like two years later when I decided to pick up the application again, so I didn't have to start from step number one. But, yeah, that application process. My recruiter was in Chicago. I was in southeast Missouri, so I only met my recruiter once. Otherwise, everything was by phone. And after I received my invitation, I also got notification that I needed to have my wisdom teeth removed. And so just how timing was probably about three or four days before Christmas in 2003, I had my wisdom teeth removed. So then in January of '04, I could leave for the Peace Corps.

PUSCH: [00:04:37] OK. And you said you had started an application right after college, but you had stopped. What made you stop?

BLANTON: [00:04:44] I had just gotten distracted by other things. And also I had received just a really good opportunity for graduate school where my tuition would be covered. And so I didn't want to turn that opportunity down.

PUSCH: [00:04:59] OK, great. And then you said you were in touch with your recruiter for a bit, I mean, how was that process? Was it pretty straightforward? Was there any fear that you wouldn't get accepted?

BLANTON: [00:05:11] Right. I don't think I ever had any fear that I wouldn't be accepted into the Peace Corps. I will say I went in there with a lot of confidence, probably even more confidence than I had with the same jobs that I was applying for at the same time. Because I was also doing, you know, just to hedge my bets, also applying for some other employment as well. But I was pretty, pretty confident in that. And in fact, he asked me if there's anything, you know, if we accepted you and it's going to be a few months before you leave, is there any life circumstance that might happen that would persuade you not to go? And I said, no, absolutely not. And there wasn't and I went.

PUSCH: [00:06:01] So if you had gotten any of those jobs, you would have said no to those jobs and taken Peace Corps.

BLANTON: [00:06:05] I was, yes, I was pretty confident by then. Yes. And in fact, when I, as soon as I pretty much got accepted, like everything stopped, like I stopped looking whatsoever.

PUSCH: [00:06:19] And then how long did it take from your acceptance until you left the country?

BLANTON: [00:06:25] So it took longer than expected. And so I was accepted sometime around May, even though I didn't have an official invitation yet, I was told one would be coming. And so since I was graduating from graduate school, I decided, well, what else in my life will I have some downtime where I can just do whatever I want? And so I put most of my furniture on the front lawn, including my car, and I packed two bags and I sold everything in a yard sale and I packed two bags and I got on a Greyhound bus and went to New York City. And originally that was supposed to be really like early June through October. But then the October departure for Peace Corps got delayed till January. And so it ended up being six months in New York City, where I did everything from, from waiting tables and cooking at a restaurant to having a nonprofit job where I did some marketing and some really neat projects. So I had about six months of the Big Apple before I went into the Peace Corps.

PUSCH: [00:07:42] And what caused the delay?

BLANTON: [00:07:45] I'm not really sure. All assignments, apparently, in late 2003 were delayed. And so it wasn't just folks coming to the eastern Caribbean. In fact, a lot of volunteers that I went through training with, they were to go to the South Pacific, but they got switched fairly late to also come to the eastern Caribbean.

PUSCH: [00:08:09] Did you know you wanted to go to that area? Did you know what you wanted to do in Peace Corps?

BLANTON: [00:08:14] I knew I wanted to go somewhere that was warm and somewhere politically stable. And it just happened that ended up being the Caribbean, which, um, you know, Dominica. I'd never heard of Dominica

before I went there. And it was, um, it really opened my eyes to a lot of things. Yeah.

PUSCH: [00:08:39] How so? Or do you want to get back to that?

BLANTON: [00:08:41] Yeah, I mean, I was just really unfamiliar. I'd never traveled in the Caribbean. I think I had like the stereotypical thought about, oh, it's going to be, you know, just like beaches and drinking a lot of rum and just really having a very relaxing, enjoyable like time and really unaware of the history of it. Like I said, really unaware of really a lot of not only Dominica, but the neighboring countries and really how they function. So it was something totally I hadn't read about in history books or anything of that sort.

PUSCH: [00:09:22] So I guess one of the questions too is just like, what did you expect? And yeah, and then I guess maybe we can transition when you got the acceptance, like, how did you feel?

BLANTON: [00:09:32] Mm hmm. Right. So I think I always had like this vision for the Peace Corps that I would I would use like my cooking skills for like an orphanage or something of that sort.

PUSCH: [00:09:47] OK.

BLANTON: [00:09:47] And I just had this vision of just feeding like a lot of children every day. And actually my assignment was nothing close to that. And it was just very different than what I had expected in that regard.

PUSCH: [00:10:05] OK, I guess we can get back to that later. So then when you started, do you have training here in the U.S., did you go straight to your country?

BLANTON: [00:10:16] Right. So we had a staging in Miami for about three days. And so that was an opportunity. I think there was roughly, uh, in the upper fifties, around 57 or 58 volunteers that went to staging in Miami. And then we all went to Saint Lucia. And so Saint Lucia was also a country I hadn't heard of before, and I didn't pronounce it correctly for probably the first

several days. But so we all went to Saint Lucia and we all had host parents, host families, where we stayed, and then we would go to a school and that was about a three to three and a half week process for that, where we just learned a lot about the eastern Caribbean and a lot about just international development in general. We had volunteers, Peace Corps volunteers, that were actually working as trainers for us that had also come from different countries in the eastern Caribbean, so they'd come to to Saint Lucia to train us.

BLANTON: [00:11:26] And so after the three and a half weeks or so, we had just this big day where it was like a celebration and you found out what country you were actually going to. And so and then most of us had about three days then to get ready to leave Saint Lucia to go to whatever that country was. For Dominica, we had a few more days just because it was during the Carnival season. And so Dominica really celebrates the period right before Ash Wednesday. And so they thought it probably wasn't the most appropriate for us to go to Dominica and our first few days in Dominica to be during Carnival. And so we got to we got to stay on Saint Lucia a few extra days before leaving. But out of the 57 or 58 volunteers, then 10 of us went to Dominica. Six women, four men. And yeah, we went to Dominica.

PUSCH: [00:12:29] And then I don't even know what language, do they speak English or?

BLANTON: [00:12:33] So English is the official language. But then there's also Creole. And so but it was it has some differences from Saint Lucian Creole. And so even though I had learned some in Saint Lucia, I learned that some of what I learned is not the same in Dominica. And so in Dominica, we had a few other lessons on that as well. But by all means, English is the official language and that's how we communicated most of the time.

PUSCH: [00:13:03] And then, I mean, did you have extra training when you went there or did you go straight to your site?

BLANTON: [00:13:08] Mm hmm. So we were given a few days of training where we stayed a like a retreat house in Dominica, and then we went to different host families. And so my host family was a woman whose her kids had

already grown and left the house. And so, um, so that was my host family. And about once a week or so, we'd go to the capital city for further training, and that seemed to take place for maybe another month or so. But a lot of that time was just then spent around my village and trying to figure out what's going on.

PUSCH: [00:13:53] And you guys were separated. So it was just you with this host family?

BLANTON: [00:13:57] Correct, correct. There was another volunteer that was close by. Her host family was my community partner, and so I would see her a lot, you know, pretty much daily, just because we were easy walking distance to one another.

PUSCH: [00:14:13] And so at that point, you already knew kind of what you would be doing too? You knew who your counterpart would be?

BLANTON: [00:14:19] Right, right. Yeah. So we learned who our community partners would be at that point and mine was the village council.

PUSCH: [00:14:26] OK.

BLANTON: [00:14:27] And so the village council met just once a month. And so most of the interaction would be with the village clerk who was, an the village clerk was the one that was the host to another volunteer. And so. So I got to know right away, kind of like what the job was.

PUSCH: [00:14:47] What was the job? What does the village council do?

BLANTON: [00:14:51] Yeah. So the village council oversees a lot of the management of the village as far as like trash collection or property tax collection, big events such as having a sports day. And this village council in particular, they were starting a community center, and so they'd received funding from the government of Taiwan to build a community center. And so construction had begun on that. And it was really working with them some to think about what how they will use the community center and how they could also use it as a revenue source. But also many other things. So they

planned on it being not only where the council could meet, but it would also be the post office of the village. It would also have a fellowship hall where different groups could rent it out or use it. We could also do something like home economics classes in there or after school tutoring. And it was also designed to be the village hurricane shelter, which is really important in the eastern Caribbean.

PUSCH: [00:16:07] So let me just go back. You mentioned host families before. Did you stay in touch with any of the host families from your training?

BLANTON: [00:16:15] Mm hmm.

PUSCH: [00:16:15] And then I'd like to. Yeah, yeah, go ahead.

BLANTON: [00:16:16] So, my host family, so the woman that, so I stayed with her for about a month or so before the volunteers were allowed to get their own housing. And she ended up moving out of Dominica. And so I've kind of lost touch with her, but my community partner, I'm still in touch with on a regular basis.

PUSCH: [00:16:37] How do you guys maintain contact?

BLANTON: [00:16:39] So thankfully, I've been able to go back to Dominica multiple times over the years. So myself in that same volunteer that had stayed with my community partner, her and I started a nonprofit organization when we finished our time with the Peace Corps. And the nonprofit works in Dominica with children with disabilities. And so that's allowed me to go back to Dominica several times and pretty much my former community partner kind of treats me like a member of the family and we are also able to stay in touch with each other by WhatsApp and email and Facebook and that sort of thing. So a lot of modern technologies allowed that to happen a lot better than it could have. Even back when I was in the Peace Corps in 2004, which was dial up internet in Dominica and that sort of thing.

PUSCH: [00:17:40] OK, but you don't work with your counterpart anymore, right?

BLANTON: [00:17:43] Correct.

PUSCH: [00:17:44] You just have like a friendship with that person.

BLANTON: [00:17:46] Right. I just have a friendship with her and which is great to see, you know, her and now she has grandkids and everything. And so it's wonderful. Yeah.

PUSCH: [00:17:57] OK. So I want to ask you more about that later. But when you got to site, you said you were working with this community center. So what was, you said your role was to kind of give input on what was going to happen with that.

BLANTON: [00:18:11] Right.

PUSCH: [00:18:11] Yeah, what do you feel like? What did you do with that?

BLANTON: [00:18:13] So the actual structure was already decided upon and there was already workers doing that. So I wasn't needed for any physical work for that. But it was to figure out really what sorts of events would happen there and also try to get some corporate sponsorships of that. And so really, just talking with a lot of businesses in the capital city, Roseau, the capital, you know, trying to talk with them about sponsoring the community center and that. And so that was mostly what that part was and that really didn't take a lot of time. And so I ended up getting a lot of secondary projects, which took up, you know, more of my time and actually probably gave me more energy than just working on the one project.

BLANTON: [00:19:12] So there wasn't a school in my village, and so the kids went either to the town to the north or, excuse me, the village to the north or the village to the south. And so I visited both primary schools and both villages, and definitely the one in the south was a lot more receptive to having me there.

PUSCH: [00:19:38] Why do you think that is?

BLANTON: [00:19:41] I think the principle of the village to the south is an extremely innovative educator, where the typical school day goes from 8:00 to 1:00 and then the children go home and have lunch and then they do not return to school. Whereas this principal decided, no, children will go home and have lunch, but then they'll come back to school for afternoon programs. And so the afternoon programs ranged from raising chickens or goats, or making pottery, sewing, just a wide variety of these programs. Some were sports programs. And she was looking for someone that could teach public speaking. And I, as a kid, I had gone through public speaking in 4-H. And so she actually told me, she's like, you were sent here by God to lead our public speaking program. And so that's how I ended up with public speaking at a primary school. So that was one day a week that I would do that.

BLANTON: [00:21:04] In my village at church one day someone approached me and said, you know, we had Peace Corps volunteers coaching Special Olympics like years ago. It's like, I think you should do that as well. And so and I talked to another Peace Corps volunteer into coming with me. But that's how on Sunday, on Saturday afternoons in the capital, in the botanical gardens of the capital, Special Olympics would meet. And so I'd coached that some. And most of that was around bocce ball or running. And occasionally we would do tennis, though we didn't have a tennis court, we just had rackets and tennis balls. And then also somewhere, somewhere along the way, someone talked me into doing a youth development program with teenagers, also in the capital city. And so I did that as well. So I had several secondary projects that gave me plenty of other things to do.

PUSCH: [00:22:16] Cool. And then I mean, I'm just curious, how was this program seen by the village? You know, did the parents like that the principal kind of forced or encouraging people to come back or? And then how were you seeing it as well?

BLANTON: [00:22:30] Right, right. Yeah. So the parents actually really loved the principal. I mean, the principal is very well loved, having all these additional opportunities for the children to do. And I was kind of seen as a little bit of a novelty. And so especially that first term, the kids really

enjoyed coming in there and giving the speeches in the class and at the end of the semester, then the project was then to give a speech to the entire school. And so having the whole school out on the courtyard and then having students do their speech. And some students, you know, got complete stage fright and then wouldn't at the last minute. But overall, it was a good experience. Thankfully, I've been able to go back to Dominica and I've been walking down the street and I'd hear, Mr. Edwin!

PUSCH: [00:23:38] Oh, really, still?

BLANTON: [00:23:39] And see, yeah, like former students that are, you know, adults now. And it's like, oh, OK, you know, like early, you know, see how they turned out.

PUSCH: [00:23:49] Nice. Anything where you really feel like you made an impact on any one person in particular?

BLANTON: [00:23:56] Mm hmm. Right. Well, I think, you know, I'm not quite sure like one person in particular, that much of an impact, but I will. Like some things like, uh.

PUSCH: [00:24:11] General impact?

BLANTON: [00:24:12] Yeah, when I was a Peace Corps volunteer, the school had asked different community members to come in and read a book. They were having a week that was really focused on reading and asked different community members come in. And so I said that I would go in and I read a story about a rabbit that had a basket of fruit. And part of it was that I had cut out different fruits on construction paper, and that was part of the story, was to show different things as I went along. And so that was sometime in 2004. And I went back in 2014 and I had completely forgotten all about this because it was just an hour-long experience of reading a story. And the teacher saw me walking through the school talking with the principal, and she came in and stopped me. And she's like, she said, you know, I still read that book. Because I'd left the book behind. And she even pointed out my construction paper was still on the wall ten years later. And so that was, that really just kind of warmed my heart, that

something that I'd even forgotten that I had done, you know, she mentioned. And how then she reads, you know, whatever class she has that year, they learn that book.

PUSCH: [00:25:40] I mean, you mentioned a few projects already. I mean, it's quite a bit. Is anything else you were working on that you're really proud of?

BLANTON: [00:25:48] You know, I will say one thing that I was really proud of, was that I was asked to lead the project design and management training for other Peace Corps volunteers. So the ones that came in six months after us. And so not only in Dominica, but also from other parts of the eastern Caribbean. Came into to two-day training on project design and management that I was able to develop and facilitate. And I will say I was really, really proud of that because that gave me an opportunity to kind of share some of my knowledge with other volunteers that didn't use it in whatever kind of projects they were focused on.

PUSCH: [00:26:35] What kind of knowledge or insights did you share?

BLANTON: [00:26:38] Yeah. You know, I really wish I remembered a lot of it now. But it was all through the design process of like working with community partners and thinking about what projects the community needs and thinking about those needs and how those might be addressed and then how to really make it come to life.

PUSCH: [00:27:01] OK. And then I mean, what about your day to day? What did you do for fun? Did you hang out with other people in your village?

BLANTON: [00:27:13] Yeah, so my village was about maybe 10 minute drive south of the capital, or I could walk to the capital maybe in about 20 minutes or so. But transportation was pretty common. And my house, so I lived downstairs from a family. And so I think in the U.S., we'd call it a duplex, where a family lived upstairs. And then I was downstairs in a small, but still plenty of space, two bedroom, one bath unit, where outside my back door, probably about 12 feet beyond my door, was the Caribbean Sea. And so I was right on the water. So I spent a lot of time and there was a seawall there, which most of the time kept the Caribbean Sea out of my house.

PUSCH: [00:28:15] Most of the time?

BLANTON: [00:28:15] I did have a storm once where it started to come in and we had to board things up. But I spent a lot of time, especially in the evenings, just sitting on the seawall, just like watching the sunset. I'd fish some. I'd do my laundry by hand and hang it out there. The village council office was also because we were still working on the community center and so it wasn't done yet. But where the village council met at that point was just three houses down from me. So it was a very short walk to get down there and I spent some time with the village clerk to see what was going on. I spent a lot of time just there and waiting for different people to come in. And they would come in and get their mail and chat for a while because it was also the village post office. So they'd come in and chat for a while. And that was, you know, that was it.

BLANTON: [00:29:15] My landlady. She asked me when I was moving in if I, um, she told me she was going to get either a television or a washing machine for the apartment before I moved in and I thought, oh, I hope she gets the washing machine, so I don't have to wash things by hand, but she got a television instead. And I didn't think I'd really watch it at first, and then I ended up, you know, kind of getting homesick and we got American television. And so I was able to watch, you know, some television in my downtime as well.

PUSCH: [00:29:55] OK. So you had said you expected it to be very relaxing, but you know, lots of time by the sea or the ocean. So you did get to spend time by the ocean, right?

BLANTON: [00:30:06] Right.

PUSCH: [00:30:06] But it wasn't quite as laid back as you thought?

BLANTON: [00:30:08] So it wasn't, yeah, probably wasn't quite as laid back as I, it definitely wasn't quite as laid back as I originally thought of the Caribbean.

PUSCH: [00:30:17] How so?

BLANTON: [00:30:17] You know, I hadn't under, um, just the stereotypical thought of the Caribbean. We don't think about the social problems of the Caribbean or the poverty that exists there. And so I think with working on so many projects, it wasn't that I was hanging out at a resort, you know, drinking pina coladas all day. I was actually like in the villages and doing a lot of other things.

PUSCH: [00:30:47] You mentioned social problems. What kind of social problems did you see?

BLANTON: [00:30:50] Mm hmm. So a lot of, I think a lot of problems revolved around unemployment being 25 percent was difficult. A lot of broken families, where a parent has left the country for work. And so the parent may be in Canada or the U.S. or in Europe and sending money back. So maybe, so families kind of split for that reason.

PUSCH: [00:31:34] What was the impact of that on the families left back in the host country?

BLANTON: [00:31:38] Well, I think part of that is just, you know, you might only see your parent like once every couple of years, right? And so a lot of grandparents or aunts then like raising, you know, children that aren't their own children.

PUSCH: [00:31:59] Um, then other things, what did you miss the? Oh, well, yeah. What did you miss the most when you were there?

BLANTON: [00:32:07] Hmm. What did I miss the most? Air conditioning probably.

PUSCH: [00:32:11] Was it really hot?

BLANTON: [00:32:13] So it was really hot. There were some areas in the mountains that kind of cooled down at night. But since I was right on the coast and my house basically just soaked in the sun all day long. And then at night, the heat just came back out of the concrete to the house. That was really, really hot. Once a month when we would get paid by the Peace Corps, I

would actually look forward to going to the bank because the bank was, the bank always had like a really, really long line. And so I knew that I could at least stand in line for half an hour. But I was standing in line for half an hour in air conditioning and it was going to be wonderful. And so I would look forward to that. But you know, some of the little things, like I missed going into like a bookstore and just like browsing books. And one of the downsides I think about having American television was that also I got American ads, and so I would see restaurants or stores advertised on television and knew that I couldn't go to any of those. And so it was kind of like a reminder about, oh yeah, you're not there.

PUSCH: [00:33:36] Do you know, like any particular ads stand out, taunting that you couldn't go there?

BLANTON: [00:33:42] You know, I do remember, because I had worked for a while actually when I was in New York at Red Lobster, and so I'd see Red Lobster ads and be like, oh, I wish I could go there. And even though, of course, I had all kinds of seafood around me, but yeah, I was just thinking about, oh, it'd be great to have that. Well, you know, not there.

PUSCH: [00:34:03] I didn't even ask, I mean, you kind of talked a little bit about your housing, it was somewhat of duplex. Did you guys have running water? Did you have electricity? What was it like there? Did you guys have restaurants in your town?

BLANTON: [00:34:14] Mm hmm. So we did have running water and we did have electricity, and most of the time those worked. There's occasional power outages and sometimes the water was out. It was common in my village to actually go up the mountain and collect water and so save your plastic bottles and then go up there and actually collect water directly from a spring that was up there.

PUSCH: [00:34:41] Did they always do that even when they had running water?

BLANTON: [00:34:43] Yes.

PUSCH: [00:34:45] Fresher?

BLANTON: [00:34:45] And because, yes, it was fresher, and it probably did taste a little different.

PUSCH: [00:34:52] Could you drink the running water?

BLANTON: [00:34:53] Yes, we could drink the running water and we could drink the water from the spring. And so we never had difficulty with that. The family that lived above me, they had two dogs that were always outside, and so there were two wonderful dogs that also would bark at anyone that came by. And so that was always a, you know, a good alarm that someone was coming. But also, since I lived so close to the capital, I had a lot of Peace Corps volunteers just visit. If they'd have to go to the capital for something, then quite often they'd either stop in and see me either coming or going, or also just overnight at my place before heading back to their village. So I saw a lot of the other Peace Corps volunteers on a fairly regular basis throughout that. My village had a few small little shops and bars, but almost everything was in the capital city, but not too far.

PUSCH: [00:36:00] Yeah, and there you could probably get almost anything. Do they have, like a lot of just, did they have American restaurants?

BLANTON: [00:36:07] So at that time, they did have a Kentucky Fried Chicken, but it closed down. Well, actually, actually. So I had avoided going there for the longest time, and I first went to Dominica by the time we got our training down in Saint Lucia, went there in February, so I was in Dominica in February, and I waited until my birthday, which is in late August. And finally, myself and another Peace Corps volunteer, we decided, OK, we're going to go to an American restaurant for your birthday. And we went to, so we went to KFC.

PUSCH: [00:36:42] For your birthday.

BLANTON: [00:36:43] For my birthday. And it wasn't anything like KFC is in the United States.

PUSCH: [00:36:54] How so?

BLANTON: [00:36:55] They didn't have fountain drinks, and the soda they did have was from Trinidad.

PUSCH: [00:37:01] And how is that different?

BLANTON: [00:37:07] It's just, it's not Pepsi, right? You know, it's not like what I was expecting, right? And they didn't have the biscuits and they didn't have the original, all they had was the spicy, and the air conditioning wasn't working that day. Because that was the other thing we were looking forward to was air conditioning. And shortly after that, KFC closed down in Dominica. But that was really like the only American place.

PUSCH: [00:37:37] OK, any other restaurants you like to go to or things you'd like to do in the capital?

BLANTON: [00:37:42] Yeah, yeah. In the capital there was a, uh, a Chinese restaurant that.

PUSCH: [00:37:51] Was it authentic Chinese food, do you think?

BLANTON: [00:37:53] Somewhat. It was different than what I've had in the U.S., but it was good. Some Taiwanese ran it. And so I got to know them, which was good. The Venezuelan embassy offered free Spanish classes, and so I went to and I enrolled in Spanish classes, which was also interesting to be in a classroom with Dominicans and we're all learning Spanish together.

PUSCH: [00:38:29] How so?

BLANTON: [00:38:30] And so I think just different. For one, was just being in a Venezuelan embassy when the U.S. and Venezuela may not necessarily talk to each other on the best of terms at times. So for as an American to be there. And then to be in the classroom with other students, but different ways that we would approach the lessons. But it was a great experience. The ambassador, the Venezuelan ambassador, came and we all wrote different poems in Spanish and recited them and everything. And so I think that was a really good experience where it was outside of my village

and the students in the classroom were not from my village. So I was getting to know a lot more, uh, several more Dominicans in that way.

PUSCH: [00:39:31] What made you want to take Spanish classes? Is it learning Spanish or was there something else?

BLANTON: [00:39:35] Yeah, no, it was just learning Spanish. You know, one of the things I'd mentioned to my recruiter for Peace Corps was, you know, be open to learning Spanish and that I wanted to go somewhere, as I mentioned, warm and politically stable. And he said, well, you'll probably have a wait list if you're going to any Spanish speaking country. And so I ended up in Dominica instead, but still tried to learn some Spanish while I was there.

PUSCH: [00:40:02] OK, cool. What did you do for fun or did you go on a vacation while you were there?

BLANTON: [00:40:07] So I didn't go on any vacation, but thankfully, you know, would make some time for fun. Dominica is the nature isle of the Caribbean, so a lot of hiking. So a lot of hiking in the rainforest and a lot of just spending time on the beach as well. And so some of that was with friends from the village and sometimes that was friends from Peace Corps. So different volunteers would go.

PUSCH: [00:40:36] So what was your favorite thing about the island?

BLANTON: [00:40:41] I think definitely friendly, friendly people. You know, like walking down the street, you have to say hello to everyone and everyone's going to say hello to you. It's just a really friendly atmosphere and wonderful food. I think, you know, ate a lot of seafood and a lot of fresh fruit during my time there. A lot of different dishes as well, so it was really, it was really good, but I'd say definitely the people were number one and then the food as well.

PUSCH: [00:41:18] OK, cool. And then let's see. And you said what you miss the most. You've already covered that, right? Or did you?

BLANTON: [00:41:31] What I missed the most from the U.S.? Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I think just really.

PUSCH: [00:41:36] The AC. Yes. I guess changing subjects then. How would you assess your service in light of the three goals of the Peace Corps, the ones to provide technical assistance where requested, to promote better understanding of Americans, and to promote better understanding of other people by Americans?

BLANTON: [00:41:55] Mm hmm.

PUSCH: [00:41:56] I guess that's a lot to cover.

BLANTON: [00:41:57] Right. Yeah. Well, I think, you know, technical assistance. So I did have a master's in public administration and I was working with the municipal government. But I think when it came down to like what technical assistance I was actually providing, it wasn't. It wasn't, you know, it wasn't rocket science that I was providing. However, I.

PUSCH: [00:42:23] Can I ask you, what were the expectations? Like being an American, how did people see you and what did they expect of you in terms of technical assistance as well?

BLANTON: [00:42:31] Right. So the interesting, I guess what made it so interesting was my community partner was essentially this council that was elected for two year terms, and so I did not report necessarily to one person. And expectations were never really given.

PUSCH: [00:42:53] OK.

BLANTON: [00:42:53] And so things were very, very loose and open. And so it was really a lot of it was like me taking the initiative to present things and try to move things forward.

PUSCH: [00:43:06] Yeah, I think that's common.

BLANTON: [00:43:10] And so, um, so I'm not quite sure they knew what to expect from a Peace Corps volunteer.

PUSCH: [00:43:18] OK.

BLANTON: [00:43:19] And I think that was a was a bit of a challenge. On some other things, such as like the leadership program or the public speaking, I think there was some technical assistance that I was able to give where, OK, this is part of my background. I can actually.

PUSCH: [00:43:35] So you feel much more proud of that work you did there?

BLANTON: [00:43:38] I think so. I think that work probably had more of an impact than what I was able to do with the village council.

PUSCH: [00:43:46] OK.

BLANTON: [00:43:48] Even though we did make great progress, part of that community center was a library that started to. had a start on before I was able to, before I left. But the third goal of really having Americans understand like where I've been as a Peace Corps volunteer, I think that's where I've actually had the greatest, where I've shown the greatest. And that's through a lot of things. One is just coming back and like talking with a lot of people about Dominica. And it's not a country many people, even though geographically the U.S. is pretty close, but they haven't heard about Dominica. And then starting a nonprofit with a former Peace Corps volunteer, another returned Peace Corps volunteer, and talking about the needs of children with disabilities in Dominica has given me a lot of opportunity to talk to people from all over about.

PUSCH: [00:44:57] All over, what do you mean?

BLANTON: [00:44:58] So talking about, you know, I've had the opportunity, one, to write and publish a children's book so I can talk with elementary school kids about what the experience is for children with disabilities in a country such as Dominica. To also up through educators and senior citizens on what life is like in Dominica.

PUSCH: [00:45:30] OK, cool. I just want to go back to the one question about do you feel like you were able to promote a better understanding of Americans while you were there? Do you feel like people in your village really got to know you? Do you think they saw who you are as a person?

BLANTON: [00:45:48] Right. Yes, I think so, on a few different levels. You know, I think one thing that comes to mind right away is the during the summer when I was there, a woman stopped me at the local little village store, kind of like a general, like an old fashioned western general store, I think, is how it could be characterized. And she mentioned how she had a few missionaries at her church, which was not the church that I attended in the village. And she mentioned how a few missionaries, one was from, I think, somewhere on the East Coast of the U.S. and one was from California, and she asked me if I knew them.

PUSCH: [00:46:38] OK.

BLANTON: [00:46:39] And just explaining, you know, like the size of the United States was something that I think always, always came up. And things like that or when, because there was American television, sometimes it was explaining.

PUSCH: [00:47:02] That's not reality.

BLANTON: [00:47:03] Right. So yeah, sometimes it was really explaining what they saw. Like, um.

PUSCH: [00:47:11] I mean, like, what do you mean by that?

BLANTON: [00:47:12] So one instance in particular was the, which, you know, comes from Australia, but the Crocodile Hunter, Steve Irwin, would have a show where he would look at, you know, it's a very informative educational show where you look at different wildlife and that sort of thing.

PUSCH: [00:47:34] Yeah.

BLANTON: [00:47:34] And then he also did a movie where I think it was like poachers. He was trying to catch some poachers and they were coming after him and shooting him and that sort of thing. So it was like a live action movie. So one was an educational show and one was like a live action movie and actually having a conversation that one of them was scripted and one of them was not.

PUSCH: [00:48:01] Oh, wow. They wouldn't have known that.

BLANTON: [00:48:03] And so in that particular conversation, no. And so it was just different. Different things would come up on American television that I would get asked about.

PUSCH: [00:48:15] Were there any stereotypes that you noticed about Americans down there? Do you feel like that impacted you?

BLANTON: [00:48:24] Yes, yes, for sure. Because even though Dominica doesn't have a lot of cruise ships, there were kind of weekly a cruise ship would come in. And so on those days, one, I would avoid going to the capital.

PUSCH: [00:48:41] OK.

BLANTON: [00:48:43] But also tourists on the cruise ships typically dressed in a very stereotypical way of cargo shorts and a flowered shirt, and they have a camera around their neck. And as Peace Corps volunteers and most men in Dominica, it's common to wear long trousers even though it's hot. And so I'd almost always wear long trousers unless I was at the beach or hiking and but occasionally still I would be stopped and someone would just yell out "tourist" at me and kind of expect me to turn around and answer. And so even within the village, it took a while for everyone to understand that I wasn't a tourist, that I was just kind of there to stay for a while.

PUSCH: [00:49:44] Do you feel like gender played a role at all, do you think? Were there certain gender stereotypes and also? Yeah. And differences in roles? And then also, I mean, like for, I guess, for female Peace Corps

volunteers, do you think it was the same thing where you just was, oh, they're going to be seen as a tourist?

BLANTON: [00:50:03] Right. So, yeah, for the women, it was the same, the kind of the view of being a tourist, but also the women Peace Corps volunteers got harassed by the men, much more so than men got harassed by the women. And so in fact, I can only think, well, no, I can think of maybe half a dozen times where it's kind of common to go psst psst to someone like on the street. And so occasionally women would psst psst to me.

PUSCH: [00:50:41] Oh, really? OK.

BLANTON: [00:50:43] But, um.

PUSCH: [00:50:46] Would the women do that to other men, like other people from?

BLANTON: [00:50:51] I don't think they would do it to Dominican men. Um, but I do know among like the Peace Corps women, it was pretty common to have Dominican men psst psst to them.

PUSCH: [00:51:06] That's interesting, though, that the women would do it to you.

BLANTON: [00:51:09] Uh huh. Yeah.

PUSCH: [00:51:11] OK, cool. Um, let's see. I guess kind of moving on again. You talked a lot about just all that you've done. Do you have any regrets? Do you have any feelings of like failure from your time?

BLANTON: [00:51:31] You know, I don't know, any like a failure. I mean, it had a lot of frustrating moments.

PUSCH: [00:51:39] What were some of those?

BLANTON: [00:51:40] Yeah, where I felt like, you know, it just wasn't making a difference whatsoever. You know, it goes back to really not have any expectations laid out on what the village council wanted done. Or if a meeting starts at six o'clock, it might be 7:30 before it actually really gets

going. So it was a lot of waiting around at different times, which would just be frustrating, you know, for me. I think failures, not necessarily just disappointments from time to time. Yeah, I think that definitely happened.

PUSCH: [00:52:24] Like what kind of disappointments?

BLANTON: [00:52:27] Disappointments that things would just not happen with the speed that I think they could have happened, or that, you know, trying to get different people to speak to each other. And so I know one of the village projects was to build a bus stop. And so we agreed that we would meet on Friday evening and we would all bend the rebar that would be used in this. So it's a concrete structure. And so we would all meet at this certain time and bend it. We were going to use someone's shop. He had agreed that we could use his shop. And so when the time came, I was the only person that showed up, and the guy that had the shop showed me how to do that. And no one else showed up.

PUSCH: [00:53:25] Wow.

BLANTON: [00:53:25] And so I bent the rebar myself for a bus stop that, and it was actually a bus stop I didn't even use because it was on the other. It was on the other end of the village, not close to my house. But it was just kind of frustrating, you know, like it would be anywhere where folks agree to to meet and work on a project and then not show up to do it.

PUSCH: [00:53:55] Right. I mean, one of the things you mentioned, you were just in the Peace Corps for a year. What happened? Why did you leave early?

BLANTON: [00:54:02] Yeah. So probably like seven, about seven months or so, I woke up one morning and I felt like I'd been hit by a train. Like it was miserable. Like everything ached and my head just ached so bad, including my ears, and I went to the Peace Corps medical officer. So we did have one in Dominica. And she was a Peace Corps medical officer, I think, for a couple of other countries as well, but she was stationed in Dominica. So I was able to see her and started on some medication. And then when I continued to have the ear pain, I was like, OK, well, what else

needs to happen? And so one of the things was, well, we need to probably X-ray your head.

PUSCH: [00:54:55] OK.

BLANTON: [00:54:56] And so there was one X-ray in the country in the hospital, which was an air-conditioned room. However, it was broken, so I had to wait a few weeks for the X-ray machine to get fixed. And when it got fixed, went in and had an X-ray and then that didn't show anything. And then the thought was, well, you need a CAT scan or an MRI, so we might send you to Saint Lucia for that. And let's try some other medicine. And so it was like a long, drawn out process of having an earache every day, in both ears, for months and months. And I know Christmastime came around and country director even called me, who he was stationed in Saint Lucia, the country director called me and said, OK, what's the latest? And I'm like, oh, just, you know, I even wake up in the middle of the night and I have like ear pain and that sort of thing.

BLANTON: [00:55:56] And working with the Peace Corps medical officer and figuring, OK, well, probably you probably need to go to D.C. for a while where we'll have some doctors check you out and then you'll come back. And so it was already the process of figuring out like, OK, what goes with me to D.C. and what stays here and that sort of thing. And New Year's came along. And then a week right after New Year's, the Peace Corps medical officer told me she'd call me. I remember it was a Friday, and she told me she'd call me, and here it was like getting pretty late in the afternoon. It's like 3:00 or 3:30 and she calls me and she says, are you sitting down?

PUSCH: [00:56:41] Oh no.

BLANTON: [00:56:41] And I'm like, and I'm figuring she's telling me that I need to go to D.C. for a couple of weeks to just get checked out and whatnot. And she calls me, and she says, are you sitting down? I'm like, yeah, what is it, Rose? And I wasn't sitting down because I didn't think I really needed to. And she said, you know, I just got a fax from D.C. It's your resignation. And I said, what? And she repeated it and I said, Rose, are you going to be in your office, you know, for a while? And she goes, yes. And I said,

well, let me just come in and talk with you about this. And so I left my house and then the village council office was just like, I said, three three houses down. I went and told the clerk, I said, you know, I got to go to town, which is what we called the capital. I got to go to town real quick, but I'm going to stop by your house tonight and fill you in on what's going on.

BLANTON: [00:57:54] And I went out and some folks I know were driving down, and it's not uncommon to kind of get a ride from other people in Dominica. And so thankfully they took me to town and I met with her and it was kind of like, yeah, it's, you know, it's just like a done deal, like this is what's going to happen. And so where the X-ray and the other evaluation that I'd gone through in Dominica had been reviewed in D.C. and it said, you know, even if I'd gone to D.C., chances are I wasn't going to get, this probably wasn't going to be cured within a certain amount of time.

PUSCH: [00:58:37] OK.

BLANTON: [00:58:38] And so they were right. I still have occasional ear pain to this day. And so I had, you know, I talked to my associate Peace Corps director. I said, well, it's not getting any worse. And you know, it's not getting better. It's not getting worse. And so at least instead of like putting me on the next plane to leave Dominica, at least I got a few more days in there and was able to really hang out with the other Peace Corps volunteers and my village threw like a celebration for me and that sort of thing. So at least I was able to do some things. You know, there was a lot of projects that were kind of up in the air that I tried my best to wrap them up and that sort of thing.

PUSCH: [00:59:29] Was there another volunteer who came and helped start it up, kind of took your place?

BLANTON: [00:59:33] So, yeah, so there was another volunteer that came probably with less than a year after I left, another volunteer came to be in the village.

PUSCH: [00:59:46] OK, and did they pick up any of the projects you were working on?

BLANTON: [00:59:51] Somewhat.

PUSCH: [00:59:52] OK. It's relative.

BLANTON: [00:59:53] They probably did, somewhat. And uh, but yeah.

PUSCH: [00:59:59] OK. And then did they ever figure out what was going on with your ear?

BLANTON: [01:00:03] For the most part, yes, it was something that we're able to treat. Like I said, I still have occasional pain, but I know how to treat it now.

PUSCH: [01:00:13] OK. Did you have any other health issues while you were there?

BLANTON: [01:00:17] Not really. Thankfully, you know, I was pretty healthy throughout my time there.

PUSCH: [01:00:24] And then leaving, I just, I guess you, I definitely want to get back to that nonprofit you started. But when you came back, what did you miss most? How was it coming back?

BLANTON: [01:00:37] Right, right. So I like to plan. And so I'd always had this thought that towards the end of my two years in the Peace Corps, you know, I would start sending out resumes and put a plan together and everything. And in just such a short amount of time, I went from being in Peace Corps to not being in Peace Corps.

PUSCH: [01:01:02] Yeah.

BLANTON: [01:01:02] And so of course, the number one thing when I returned back was that I wanted to make sure that that I was able to take care of the ear pain and everything. And so, um. So that was a real, um, kind of a struggle coming back. And I'd built so many friendships with folks in the village as well as other Peace Corps volunteers and just not being there. So that was really a struggle. And then I think a lot of what a lot of Peace

Corps volunteers have is the frustration of trying to make sure your story gets heard, but finding people that will listen.

PUSCH: [01:01:48] OK.

BLANTON: [01:01:50] And so I think that was also something that was just kind of a challenge, folks that really wanted to hear about Peace Corps. But I was also kind of heartbroken in a lot of ways because I left there, you know, with such short notice.

PUSCH: [01:02:11] So I mean, almost immediately you really wanted your story to be told. I mean, what is it you wanted people to hear?

BLANTON: [01:02:18] Yeah. So I really just wanted folks to know about Dominica and really what life was like there. And you know, what I've been up to for a year. And I think that was the biggest, the biggest thing. But then also more and more and also talking with another RPCV that I'd worked with, was thinking about the kids that came to Special Olympics at the botanical gardens on Saturdays. How many of them didn't go to school throughout the rest of the week, like other kids, and they didn't go because they had a disability. And so that was really what led us to think about, well, let's start a nonprofit that works with providing education for children with disabilities.

PUSCH: [01:03:15] So there was no opportunity for these kids to go to school? There's no education, like special ed education there?

BLANTON: [01:03:23] Right. So special ed is extremely limited. And so there was a small school for children with mental disabilities. But many other services that, like you would find, such as in the U.S., as far as special education, were just nonexistent. And so we decided that we would, and that was actually probably about five months after I returned or so, that we would do that. And about a year after that or less, we'd formally, you know, become a 501(c)(3) and incorporated. And we're already working in Dominica with different NGOs to address education for children with disabilities.

PUSCH: [01:04:17] OK. And what kind of stuff have you done since then? And the nonprofit still exists?

BLANTON: [01:04:22] Yeah, the nonprofit still exists. "Ready, Willing...Enable!" is still going. E-N-A-B-L-E. And with Ready, Willing...Enable!, we've done a summer camp pretty much every year since 2007. And it's become more and more sustainable. Each year some of our first campers become older and take on leadership duties of the camp, as well as parents and just other people came on board. And so it's not nearly as hands-on as it was in 2007. It's become more and more sustainable where we approached it with kind of a model coach fade approach. And so we modeled it for a few years and then coached leaders for a few years and then faded. So the summer camp still exists. We don't go to summer camp anymore because it's going fine without us being present and doing that.

BLANTON: [01:05:30] But also side projects such as making sure the wheelchair accessible van in the country is able to take, you know, pick up kids and take to the one school for children with intellectual disabilities. And so partnering with them, partnering with Special Olympics, kind of where it all started, and many, many other projects that we've been able to do since we started.

PUSCH: [01:06:02] With that, I mean, what do you think some of your biggest accomplishments are?

BLANTON: [01:06:04] Mm hmm. So some of our former campers have, you know, completed secondary school and are at university.

PUSCH: [01:06:15] Oh wow.

BLANTON: [01:06:16] Some of them have found full time employment.

PUSCH: [01:06:18] So, I mean, if they're special needs or special education, were they able, I mean, do they go through school? Or I mean, are they able to take some classes there and go to a normal school? Or how were they able to get all the way to college?

BLANTON: [01:06:31] Right. And so, you know, working with our NGO partners on advocacy and making sure they do have the opportunity for secondary school. And sure, they're allowed to take the test, you know, maybe, you know. For instance, one student, it was his first, his ability to take the common entrance exam for students to take it in Braille. You know, so just making sure they have the opportunities and so.

PUSCH: [01:07:05] Cool. So I mean, I asked you before about making an impact or having an impact on individuals, but it seems like with this nonprofit, you've definitely had an impact on individuals, and it seems like you can even tell stories about individuals lives you've changed?

BLANTON: [01:07:19] Right. Yeah, yeah. And that's something that was that work started as Peace Corps volunteers, right?

PUSCH: [01:07:27] Right. Yeah.

BLANTON: [01:07:28] It continues.

PUSCH: [01:07:29] That's great. And the nonprofit is Ready, Willing...Enable!

BLANTON: [01:07:34] Yes.

PUSCH: [01:07:35] Great. So I think we're going to kind of wrap up. Is there anything else you want to share with us? I mean, I'm going to ask, yeah.

BLANTON: [01:07:47] Just that, you know, even though my Peace Corps experience, it didn't turn out the way that I thought it would. You know, I wasn't feeding like a long line of orphans every day, and I wasn't, you know, I didn't have the ability to stay the whole two years. And um, and that sort of thing. Still, I wouldn't change anything because I think it really helped develop me into who I am. And I think the nonprofit that I started with another RPCV would not have happened if things hadn't gone the way they did. And so I think it was definitely an experience that I wouldn't change.

PUSCH: [01:08:39] OK. What advice or what is there anything you want to share about the Peace Corps with someone who might be interested in applying or just someone who's interested in learning more?

BLANTON: [01:08:49] Mm hmm. Yeah, I would say definitely to go for it. You know, really look into it. Do some research, dig deep within yourself and, um.

PUSCH: [01:09:04] What do you mean by that, dig deep within yourself?

PUSCH: [01:09:06] You know, think about like your own comfort level and how big or small your comfort zone is and how tight you want to hold on to that. I think so much of the Peace Corps was outside of the comfort zone a little bit. It was a little bit more into the risk zone and thinking about the unknown. But I think that's when the greatest amount of learning happens for a person is when you step outside of your comfort zone.

PUSCH: [01:09:51] How did you step outside your comfort zone?

BLANTON: [01:09:54] Yeah. And so I think so much of my comfort zone was, you know, just living so much of what we think of as kind of the standard, the standard American life, you know, like work and school and gym and shopping and whatnot. Whereas the Peace Corps really just changed things a lot, where time, uh, time has a different meaning, you know. You're not as rushed and you have to really think about, um. You have to really think about what success looks like. Just so much of how you define your day to day changes.

PUSCH: [01:10:55] So one of the things I picked up on this interview is that you like things planned.

BLANTON: [01:11:00] I do like things planned.

PUSCH: [01:11:01] So is that kind of how you stepped outside of your comfort zone? When the meetings didn't start exactly when you wanted, stuff like that?

BLANTON: [01:11:08] Totally, totally.

PUSCH: [01:11:09] OK. And then I mean, how do you think it's changed you? Do you think you are the same person? I don't think you are.

BLANTON: [01:11:16] Right. I mean, right, no, I'm definitely not the same person. I think it's allowed me to really pause and think about just different, different ways of going about things that I wouldn't have thought before. I think before, definitely a lot more linear step A, B and C, but now it's a much more crooked roundabout way sometimes to get from one point to another.

PUSCH: [01:11:51] Can you give an example?

BLANTON: [01:11:54] Sure.

PUSCH: [01:11:55] Interesting.

BLANTON: [01:11:56] So I think patience is the one thing that I may have learned more than any other lesson in the Peace Corps, and the amount of different perspectives. So, a specific example. Probably not. One's not necessarily coming to me right now, because it probably happens all the time, where I believe I'm just a lot more, have a lot more patience than I used to.

PUSCH: [01:12:33] OK. All right. Do you want to end it on that note or anything else?

BLANTON: [01:12:37] That's good. That's a good note to end it on.

PUSCH: [01:12:39] Thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]