

**Brian Cohen Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Brian Cohen served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin from October 2001 to August 2004 in an environmental action program.

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Oral History Interview

with

Brian Cohen

December 11, 2019  
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:02] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. Today is December 11, 2019. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968, and today I'm interviewing Brian Cohen, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin from October 2001 to August 2004. Brian, let me start by asking you, why did you join the Peace Corps?

COHEN: [00:00:36] I was maybe a little bit different from most of the age of most Peace Corps volunteers when they joined. It wasn't straight out of college for me. I had had about five years of professional experience. And yet even with that professional experience, I was at a time in my life, I'd say to me, mid 20s, maybe 26, when I was, I was a bit of a crossroads. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. My problem, I'm a personality where my problem in life was not so much that I nothing interested me. It was that everything interested me. And so and that was reflected in the circuitous way in which I did my undergraduate

degree and also reflected in the career choices I made right after my undergraduate degree. I was a community organizer for about three years with the Sierra Club running grassroots campaigns in various states around the country. But it got to a point where I wasn't I was really more keen on seeing what else was out there. I've always been artistically inclined, so I took up a job with as a guard in an art museum at the Phillips Collection and Dupont Circle to really try to tap into my love of art and love the visual arts. I've always been a draw painter. And so looking at the both of these things all the while trying to figure out what I was, what I was interested in, I knew I was interested in cultures having had having lived abroad in Kenya at an earlier time in my high school years, I knew I was interested in the arts.

COHEN: [00:02:26] I knew I was interested in international development and trying to do something service oriented with my life and Peace Corps. And the other thing was really was wasn't a difficult decision to make because I had my, in fact, younger brother Duncan, who had opt for the Peace Corps three months before I had. So he'd gone in to the Peace Corps or he'd started the application process a few months before. I hadn't really that just planted the seed. Peace Corps seemed to me to be an awesome opportunity to advance my career. Were also buying me time, giving me some time to really crystallize a vision for what I wanted to do with my life. It gave me language. It gave me, which is what I learned. I learned French. It gave me some technical skills and it gave me overseas experience. I think those three things, if you look at any job application today for an international development job, those three things typically pop up on those application of those recruitment advertisements. So for me, it was an excellent way of advancing my career, but really, to be quite honest, an opportunity for me to have some time to think about, to figure out specifically what I wanted to do. Exactly.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:52] So where did you grow up?

COHEN: [00:03:54] I grew up in Silver Spring, Maryland, born and raised in Silver Spring, Maryland, in the same house I grew up in for the first 14 years of my life. So quite sedentary, the product of a British mother and an American father. But then in high school, my parents, my father got a job with USAID and he took his family over to Kenya to work for him to be the deputy director of an agricultural USAID project. And for the mother, myself and my brother to be in Nairobi and attending the International School of Kenya. So did the last part of my growing up there. And I well, the last I would say a year and a half, I think in Chicago, after that project ended for him, he decided to relocate his family to North Shore Chicago. So did the last part of me growing up there.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:48] So you had some international experience before that as well?

COHEN: [00:04:53] I did, which I think certainly. In, you know, especially the time in Kenya bumping around in in Land Rovers on safari with my family really planted that seed of wild, really instilled in me a love of nature and nature, desire to protect it and a love of cultures. I think that's really what I got from my kids.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:15] Well, can you tell me about that later on?

COHEN: Sure.

GANZGLASS: As long as we go through all of this. So you applied for the Peace Corps. How long did it take to get into the Peace Corps?

COHEN: [00:05:25] I think it took me about a year. I think maybe, maybe a little shy of a year. We were about nine or 10 months. But I applied, I think, in the fall of 2000, I think by summer of 2001 and received acceptance. It wasn't a fluid process or a quick process necessarily, because they offered me initially the opportunity to go to, I had initially wanted to go to Latin America. I had grown up with Spanish as my second language

and in formal, formal school. But they didn't have any slots in Latin America. And I said, well, OK, well, the next best thing is maybe Francophone. I knew that I wanted to use the Peace Corps as an opportunity to get some language skills. And so they said Francophone Africa.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:25] But they, where had they offered before?

COHEN: [00:06:28] The first one that they offered me, they weren't able to offer me anything in my first choice, which is Latin America. But so the second one was Francophone Africa, sub-Saharan Africa somewhere. And the one that they offered me was Morocco, first Mauritania. And I said, I think I would early terminate if I went to MIT, but then Morocco. But in that case, I felt I really wanted to I was concerned that I would learn more Berber and less French because the French had spoken mainly in the cities of Morocco, whereas the Berber and Arabic are spoken more in the hinterland. So I felt like it would be enough for me to come out with some solid skills that would translate well into a professional context. I wanted to go to more of a black African sub-Saharan African country. So then the third choice they offered me was Benin. And I said, absolutely.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:30] And what kind of a program were you in?

COHEN: [00:07:33] It was an environmental action program. The program itself was called Environmental Action. It was a bit of a catchall and I think maybe said a little bit more accurately was more a program that was focused on natural resource management. Environmental action, I think was coined to connote volunteers in the field working to spur some sort of change in the local population as to how they managed their natural resources. Environmental action typically took the form through the stage, through the three month training period. A lot of emphasis was placed on environmental education. So working with high schools, working with secondary schools, middle schools, elementary schools to, you know, develop curricula to, to deliver

lessons on how to start a tree nursery, how to take care of the environment, how to take care of your soil and this kind of a thing. And really started at that young age. That was the main emphasis of the three month training that we had. There were other trainings, though, of course, there was trainings on how to start tree nurseries, how to build fuel efficient mud stoves also was a big emphasis in the environmental action program. Funny enough, I ended up not doing I ended up not doing the main thing, which is environmental education. I ended up doing my own thing. And I think as I've talked to other Peace Corps volunteers as well, it's not all too uncommon for volunteers to improvise when they get to the field, to be resourceful enough to realize that, well, maybe while this is the training that I received in the three months. Once you've had a few months, three months to be in your community and really have an idea as to their real needs, then you're able to tailor a you're the way that you can help. The best you can, and that's that was my case.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:59] Well, we'll talk about what you, what you ended up doing, but where was where did the training actually take place? Was it in country at that point or was it still?

COHEN: [00:10:10] It was in country there was a two day staging, I think is what they called it in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, an opportunity for us to get together and really just go around the room and introduce ourselves, I believe, and get some basic nuts, bolts things before we boarded a plane. And then from there we boarded a plane. We went to Cotonou, the commercial capital of Benin, which, by the way, was a country I'd never heard of before. I was invited to go to this country. I had to look it up on a map when I went. But we landed in Benin and spent a couple of days and then, well, perhaps maybe more than a couple of days, about a week, I would say. And then before we were we were divided into our groups. And then we had different trainings based on different programs in different parts of the country for the environmental action.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:08] Which group were you in?

COHEN: [00:11:11] I was in the environmental action program and that one.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:14] Not education. But you were.

COHEN: [00:11:16] It was yeah. It was not education. Most of the education, as I recall, there was an education program in Benin was English education.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:28] When you said you were diverted, divided into your groups, what group were you part of? Was it just dividing you in different sections, different concentration?

COHEN: [00:11:39] No, what was actually just still it was still everybody in the environmental program. But in my case, a number of programs went in at the same time. So we had volunteers who were small business enterprise volunteers, volunteers who were education volunteers, mainly English education and community health, and then us, which is the environmental action, many of which were there. And there was, I would say, about 40, 40 or 50.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:08] For environmental or education?

COHEN: [00:12:09] For the environmental it was much smaller. It was about, I would say thirteen or thirteen of us in that. But as a as a class, as an entire class that was then divided into various programs, it was about 50 people, I think at the time. Benin enjoyed the distinction of being the country in the world with the highest per capita concentration of volunteers in the world. Yeah, it's a very small country, Benin, but there are well, it was relatively peaceful and open to receiving US foreign aid and assistance of any kind. And so I think because of that, we there was always a robust Peace Corps presence in in Benin. But so we flew into Cotonou. We can continue. And then for the Environmental Action Team, we then splintered off and did the remaining three months

training in a city called Parakou, which is about smack dab in the middle of the country in the north.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:11] And what was the training like there?

COHEN: [00:13:15] We were paired off with families, we just got the first opportunity for three months to living with a host family. We had a small room and it was sort of a nice easing into what we would eventually come to find was our home for the next two plus years. And for me, it was a lovely family, husband, wife to two young boys. I had a small room, a small mud room connected to the house in a compound with a number of other structures in the compound. And the mother would dutifully and lovingly serve me my lunch every time. And we would always have an opportunity to go back to lunch after lessons in the morning, lessons in the afternoon and.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:12] And you spoke French with them? Did you speak French?

COHEN: [00:14:15] Exactly. And so. Well, at that moment at that time, during the training, we were all learning, we were learning French, we're learning French and also a little bit of the local dialect. Would we have a few lessons specific one on one or two on one lessons of teaching us about the local dialect, depending on where we were going to be located after the training. But, yes, a lot of intensive French language learning and then practicing with the family and a lot of awkward hand gestures. And I.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:57] But your Spanish must have helped?

COHEN: [00:14:59] Spanish definitely. That did help. And, you know, as I say, I think for me, the, it takes a number of intelligences. I think, in my view, to learn a language, one of which is, you know, structure and rules, which I'm not so good at having a kind of a rote memory of learning how to structure a sentence. But the other skills are intelligence, as I'm quite good at, which is, number one, a fearlessness and a, you know, a

lack of consideration of making a fool out of yourself so that when I had down, which was very helpful for me, I had no problem with doing that. And then also I felt like I had a good ear. So try to parrot what they were saying. Didn't know what I was saying back to them, mind you. But I had a good ear to remember the pronunciation. And so through a lot of that and awkwardness and hand gesticulations and so on, it started to come. I mean, of course this wouldn't come naturally and easily into the maybe about the end of year, number one, maybe even into the second year. But I was on my way and through the basics, I could, I could make, I could communicate.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:13] Was the environmental training good? Did it prepare you for the work you did?

COHEN: [00:16:21] It did it. It was, the environmental education. Peace Corps had just, had had recently produced this fantastic compendium, a book of many different lessons, in fact, that you could, as a as an instructor share with class with, with pupils. So that was served as the as the basis of our training. We would take a chapter in the book and learn whether it had to do with recycling. There were lessons on recycling, lessons on soil amelioration and aeration, and lessons on establishing various plants that would fix nitrogen into the into the soil. Lessons on tree nurseries. As I mentioned before, all of these things I think we touched on briefly. You know, it was never really a deep dove. The training wasn't, you know. And we also learned about fuel efficient mud stoves, we learned how to make them and so on. So it was a real it was covering all the bases, but quite later.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:45] Which was, I guess, enough. And what about your cultural orientation?

COHEN: [00:17:51] We learned we learned the language for sure. We also did it was the cultural cross-cultural training was also quite significant. I mean, I have to hand it to the Peace Corps for really putting an emphasis on that. There was quite a lot of attention on the kinds of

things that we might expect or might be coming up with and might be confronting when we got to our sites. It was, you know, from religious rituals to knowing how to greet people to, you know, how important small talk is in certain contexts to how you eat and which hand you eat it with, you know, eat with and all of these things. So there was there's quite a lot of emphasis and rightly so, on cross-cultural training.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:45] Good. So you finished the training. Did everybody in your group finish and did some people drop out, leave?

COHEN: [00:18:55] Everybody in our group did finish. Yes, everybody was successful in that regard. Maybe there was one person who decided to ET and terminate early. But we Benin and we were certainly a good example of this. Benin did not have a of a high rate. Most everybody stayed their term. And for us, I think that was the case, that there's one person who dropped off.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:29] So what happened after training?

COHEN: [00:19:33] So I got to my village, my village was a village called Toucountouna, which I like to say was the most colorful that's the best name for a village in all of Benin.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:48] And talk a little bit about this village.

COHEN: [00:19:51] Yeah, it was a village of probably three thousand people. It was in the Atakora region in the northwest part of the country, Benin, as a tiny sliver of a country that has a small amount of coastline on the underbelly of West Africa and then just goes up into the Sahel, is very typical of many of those countries along that along that in that within the same sort of latitude, namely that on the on the in the south, it's very it's more lush, it's greener. And as you go north, it gets increasingly drier and drier. And so I was in the dry kind of semi Sahelian region of Benin in the north, a little bit more hilly, a little bit more mountainous. And I got there, I would say, in the north also as

characterized by, again, not just Benin, but many of those countries, the south tends to be a little bit more Christian. The northern areas tend to be a little bit more Muslim. And that was the case for me. So it was, I would say, about a even split half of the community was Christian, half of the community was Muslim. And they'd cohabited and lived together in in harmony for four for years and years. So there was never any problem. The community was also characterized by a strong pool or Fulani population, a nomadic population similar to the Maasai or the Turkana of East Africa, and who would, who would wear a cattle based grazing people. And so this was the environment in which I found myself. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:49] So the Fulani population, you said, was about a third?

COHEN: [00:21:53] No, I would say it was very, Fulani population existed in the margins of the of the town of to continue to continue to was a settled area in a basin area on where the main road going through it on its way from the south or from the north south road that went all the way down from Cotonou in the south, on the coast, all the way up to Tanguieta and to the border, to the Burkinabe border, the border with Burkina Faso. So it was a thoroughfare. It was a main route that was plied by many trucks. It was dirt when I first arrived and paved when I left. Wow. So that sort of speaks to the, to the quickness of, of development there in that region. But the but the poor were usually on the outskirts of this of the town. It was it was inhabited for a long time by Christians and Muslims, mud huts, mud huts as sort of the typical structure of the village, a mosque, a church and lots of millet, the kind of the staple crops, the cash crops, if you like, were millet, sorghum, cotton. Those were the main ones. And this is how most of the men and women, frankly, made their living and provided food for their and subsistence for their households.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:23] So were you the only volunteer placed there?

COHEN: [00:23:26] I was. There had been previously. I wasn't the first. There was somebody who had been there before I was. And somebody I think two volunteers. It was one long ago and I think in the 60s, 70s, and there was a period of time where there was no volunteer. And then another one came a few years before I had he had gone off and married somebody from the village, actually, no. And so he you can imagine the big shoes I was had to fill if the first person or the last volunteers was Marinus, it was regarded in high esteem. And everybody knew him by his both his Anglo-Saxon name, but also his local name. About two months in, I also was given a local name, and that is Yakupov, Yorta.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:26] Yorta? Yorta.

COHEN: [00:24:28] Yorta, it translated roughly to something like he for whom no one else can talk, can speak or something like this, that he who speaks well or something like this. It was it was an honor to have been given a local name. He was even more of an honor to have been given the name Yata ApoB, because the person who gave it was the super he was the mayor of the town. And guess what? His name was Yakupov. So it was sort of it was quite an honor to have been, you know, bequeathed the name of the person giving it. And very few people are called Yorta Yorta by.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:14] The well-spoken one.

COHEN: [00:25:15] Well-spoken one, something like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:18] How did you where did you live?

COHEN: [00:25:21] In the town. I lived in the sort of on the outskirts of town near the mayor. I had my own compound. I was given my own compound.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:30] A mud hut?

COHEN: [00:25:31] In my case, I was considered a VIP. And so they had actually constructed a cement block house for me, a you could say there was one big room, there was a small kitchen, a bedroom and a very and even smaller bathroom, just really just some place where you could put a bucket for a bucket shower and a colobus, you know, a gourd for the pouring mechanism. And that was my, and then when, when I got there, I realized there was no source of water point source for any water that I might need. So they had said that I could have a young girl bring massive Beadle's, massive pitchers of water on her small little head and drop them off in a cistern by my by my house every day. And I said, forget it. No way am I going to have some small girl do that for me. So I. I actually spent some of my own little money. I had the Peace Corps allowed us to have as a as a stipend to build a well on the property. So I helped to build the well on the property.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:55] So there was water.

COHEN: [00:26:57] There was then then after that there was a point source for water and a small latrine near there as well.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:04] So that was had fancy digs,

COHEN: [00:27:07] Fancy digs, comparatively speaking. But I think compared to many of my other volunteers, you know, some sort of I got, you know, living, living, hard living compared to I think what I heard the other volunteers had, you know, I mean, remember, no electricity, no running water. And so those were two handicaps, if you like. But compared to I think there's other volunteers who had those sorts of amenities.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:38] So let's talk a little bit about what your job was. What were you intended to do when you got there? And then what did you end up, in fact, doing?

COHEN: [00:27:49] I was paired with the local forestry officer of Toucountouna superfecture, and I, to be honest, quite honest, I. We didn't connect,

we didn't click. He was drunk 90 percent of the time and seemed to not be doing that much. So the other thing that happened was that while the other the other thing that I was charged with doing was to try to do environmental education in the classes.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:33] In high school and secondary?

COHEN: [00:28:34] At the secondary school level. Yes, but. I mean, these were the things you could say I was equipped to do, that the three month training had prepped me to do, but actually the first thing that we were also we were asked to do as volunteers was to really take the first one month to month, three months of your service and really. Listen to what the needs were of the community without being so prescriptive at the beginning, and this was another thing we were trained in training as to how to conduct a participatory rural appraisals piara, which was a set of sort of interactive diagnostic tools that one could use with illiterate or low literate adults using maps, mapping exercises and sitting under a mango tree with sticks in the dirt and drawing diagrams and trying to sort of tease out what are the key, what are the real main assets and also challenges. It wasn't just challenges, it was focused on assets is sort of like a. It was sort of an asset, what you call asset mapping, yeah, asset mapping sort of thing. So that's what that's what I did. And I quickly realized on the asset side, there were mangoes, mangoes proliferated there. There were in abundance. And no matter how many mangoes, fresh mangoes the women could sell at the weekly market, many more would still rot on the ground for lack of having the capacity to sell them or the market to sell them in and the demand. So that was on the asset side and also on the asset side.

COHEN: [00:30:42] I quickly realized that women are the real engines for economic development in the community in two in my village to continue, they were on the challenges side. I quickly observed that cotton was by far and away the. The cash crop that more and more farmers were pivoting towards as a as a source of income, generation and employment. Now, cotton in and of itself is nothing wrong

inherently with cotton, but what I was observing also was that with all of the pesticides and insecticides they put on the cotton and with this new approach to farming, monocultural approach to farming, and she's sort of laying bare an area of ground to make way for a mono crop of cotton, it was actually doing a lot of harm to the quality of the soil. The soil was seeming to suffer. And in the area certainly is an area that's in need of water. The area was becoming even more arid, more, more barren and more, more just, you know, cotton for as far as the eye could see. So I pitched this idea of trying to pivot away from cotton and more to mangoes and what I considered to be an underutilized resource to me, a grove of mangroves. While you could argue it still is a mono crop grove of mangroves, it's slow growing plant. Of course it's a tree rather than a plant. It is more, is better for the environment than a mono crop of cotton. And so the question was, if we can find a way of making it financially lucrative for the for the for the local households to invest in it, then it would be a win-win.

COHEN: [00:32:54] And so we I, I convened a meeting with some of the women leaders and really realizing again, going back to the women, the women, really the movers and shakers of my village and convened a meeting with women, women leaders, to gauge their interest and their capacity to take up this type of a project, a project that would ultimately the results of which would be a modest sized factory where you could dry mangoes and transform them in a very simple way from being fresh fruit to dried fruit and then sell them in plastic bags at market or to the tourist consumers who were coming up on that same road because the same road that pass through to continue would go all the way up to the northern part near the Burkinabe border, where there's Park Pendjari to see the wildlife. And so if you could make it a pit stop on the way for tourists to stop over, buy some snacks as they were, you know, gazing at the lions and the hippos, then it could it could work. And the business model was one where I tried to make it so that the more we organically tried to make it in such a way that the women would be the proprietors, they would be the business owners. And really you working on the downstream side of the business where but

the men would be the ones who would be taking care of the mango groves, who would be the farmers tending to the to the to the mango trees, pruning and coppicing and aerating the soil and so on.

COHEN: [00:35:01] So that was the idea and this idea was also fueled by another discovery at that time at that or those early months that I was first there in my village, and that was that in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, the capital city of Ouagadougou, of Burkina. There was a an organization called the Centre Ecologique Albert Schweitzer, the Ecological Center of Albert Schweitzer, that was focused exactly on this on the same thing that is the use of appropriate technology and in this case, butane tank, gas dryer, fruit and vegetable dryers as the as the appropriate technology. But the application of appropriate technology to for for wealth creation and job creation. And so I think maybe about six, six months to nine months in, we applied for a grant, we applied for a grant, I applied for a grant really from the U.S. embassy and another local NGO to give us some seed funding that would permit us to, number one, send a couple women up to Ouaga to be trained in the use of and management of this appropriate technology, these gas dryers, but then also some simple capital investments, a number of plastic bags, butane tanks, the gas dryers themselves, some bricks and mortar to create a small building to house them and so on. And we got that funding.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:59] From USAID?

COHEN: [00:37:00] From the U.S. embassy. It was an embassy small grant and a another local Dutch NGO whose name escapes me now.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:13] Doesn't matter. Yeah, that's great.

COHEN: [00:37:15] Yeah, it was awesome.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:17] And Peace Corps was fine with your switching off from environmental education.

COHEN: [00:37:23] They I mean, yes, absolutely. I mean, they you know, you do check in with them not often, mind you, but, you know, in the few times that you check in with your supervisor or in my case was the Associate Peace Corps director APCD for environmental action. You know, you, you report to them what, what you've been up to. And I think it was quite clear that I wasn't as if I was sitting on my desk the whole time. I was I was quite active. I was one of the more active volunteers. So they were quite happy with what I'd done. And in fact, so much so that the ambassador came up to inaugurate and this was after my service. But the ambassador came up after the building had been constructed. The ambassador came up to cut the ribbon, as it were, to open up the small facility for Furminger Dry.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:19] So how was the building built, where you involved in building it or who did the building?

COHEN: [00:38:24] No, in fact. Well, I was. The local, local masons were the ones who, who did the building. I was not involved in.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:34] What did what was your role? What you got the funding which clearly helped, but what did you do to help the people?

COHEN: [00:38:42] My role really was as a, as a catalyst for the idea for the for the germination and the development of the idea, the grant writing by far I did not. Frankly, this is a skill, understandably so, that it's sort of a unique skill. And nobody had enough of a command of the French language or even the language of proposal writing to put together something like this and then know who to talk to. Yeah, my job was proposal writing. It was also I mean, in doing this whole thing, we there were a number of women's groups that were already set up within the in the village, but there was not an overarching group. For me, it was a challenge, but a strong desire to make what I was helping to do benefit as many as I could and not just identify one of the many women's groups in the in the village. So what I ended up doing with my

time is for helping to form a new women's group, an umbrella organization that would have, you know, a treasurer, a chair, and to be led by a group of women leaders on a rotational basis who would who would be able to administer the day to day action activities of the of the microenterprise. And so trying to register this this new. Small microenterprise get articles of incorporation, so you help them write the bylaws and all of these things, I helped them with that with that aspect of setting up this enterprise. And then once it unfortunately, this is the big reason why I re upped for another year, because by the time that I was scheduled to go, things were really just getting cooking. And so I signed up for an additional period of time so that I could kind of get this this idea across the finish line. But, you know, this is the this is my I must say, the unfortunate, sad story of all of this is that I got it up to a time it really started, but then it never took off.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:24] It never took off.

COHEN: [00:41:26] It never took it took it took off for a period of time, I guess, after my departure. But my understanding is that it failed because of a lot of fighting, infighting within the organization. And it never it never really took off. I mean, if, as I say, the silver lining of this is that I like to say, at least to myself, to maybe make myself feel better about it, that I gave them an idea, I gave them an idea for something. This was sort of the a little seed for them to then, you know, go off and learn from and do different things with that idea. But that was my that was the main thing that I did from the period of time that I was with the Peace Corps was this mango tree.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:15] And so did they ever produce any dried mango?

COHEN: [00:42:18] They did. They did. I mean, they did. They did produce an initial crop. I mean, I was I was there at the very end when they were actually beginning to produce it. And I saw them, saw them doing it. And it was delicious. Here's the thing is also I like to say this was not only good for the environment, but it was also good for health, public

health reasons during the dry season, because mango is a seasonal fruit. You don't have mango the whole year round. And oftentimes, you know, vitamin C is something that's in in short supply. And so when you when you dry it, this this served as a sort of staple and supply of vitamin C all year round. So for me, it was also beneficial from a public health point of view that that these women, whether they sold the mangoes or not, sold the dry mangoes or not, they could actually eat them and, you know, nourish their families and provide, you know, some sort of supplemental nutritional value to their families during those lean months when there was no rain. So for me, it was a real it was a fantastic project, a fantastic experience, the success, as I say, the carry on thread was the idea. Unfortunately, the enterprise itself, it died I think it died on the vine largely because I think it needed somebody there for maybe another year or so to shepherd.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:59] So maybe another volunteer could have a?

COHEN: [00:44:01] To take it on. And that's what I strongly lobbied for before I left. Was that somebody I hand the baton off to somebody else and that didn't happen. That didn't happen. I think I don't I'm not that I'm aware of. I don't think that anybody came in at least immediately after. I think a few years later they put somebody else there in that village. But that was long after the building was vacant and nobody was there.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:32] So let me ask you a little bit about just life in in the town. Did you make any friends there or what did you do in your spare time?

COHEN: [00:44:43] Well, I did. I made I made lots of friends in the town. Church was a big thing, a big socializing force in the town. And so and having grown up in quite an ecumenical background coming from, I felt a little bit awkward to do it, but I did it. I actually went to church a number of times, not regularly, but every so often I would go. And I think people appreciated that. People did appreciate that. And it was really, I think, just an effort for me to speak their own language for them to see that I'm not sort of detached that weird yovo, which is what they call a, you

know, foreigner. Why over your vote by that weird yovo on the outskirts of town? But actually, somebody who's engaged in is very much a part of the town. Drinking was a big thing in the village. They would drink this locally brewed beer from millet and sorghum called chuke, this millet beer called C-H-U-K-E. And so on Market Day, you'd have all these stalls set up where people and calabashes, you know, these, these gourds, these half cut gourds would, would dip into this, this liquid of the sort of resembles muddy water. It was a sort of this deep red color, African covered earth color. I didn't do so much of that, so much of the drinking. But that was always a big pastime. And, and again, another way of sort of breaking the ice. So if ever I did want to engage with somebody, that would oftentimes be the best way to bring myself to the same level and show myself as to be their equal is to have a bowl of chuke this this this beer, this millet beer. But in terms of other pastimes, lots of reading, lots of you know, lots of reading, lots of writing, lots of drawing, lots of. Lots of day trips. It was a wonderful pleasure.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:16] Well, I hope

COHEN: [00:47:17] We have the Peace Corps gave me a bike, so I had a bike to go to go round. And the nearest provincial capital, Natitingou, was about a two hour bike ride for me one way. So if ever I needed to get some exercise or get a treat, which would in my case be, let's say, a Snickers bar or something like this or something along these lines, or to see other people more a more populated area where there were more volunteers. I would do this trip down south, two hours on bicycle to the north by the same distance was Tanguieta, and there was two volunteers who are based in Tanguieta. And I would go see them sometimes. And there were being a mountainous area. There were waterfalls. So I would be able to sometimes I would just go on by myself or with a group of volunteers who I'd invited out to come with me to go on a bike ride to see some of these amazing waterfalls. So those were some of the main trips around the area, just around there.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:37] Did you travel to other countries? Did you go visit your brother?

COHEN: [00:48:41] I did. I did travel quite a bit. You know, for some R-n-R when I went to go to Spain for a wedding in at the end of my first year wedding of a dear friend that I went to go see, I went to go take the GRE actually in neighboring Ghana. So about again, maybe toward the end of my second year I, I went down and I took a Bush taxi, by the way, is the main fast way to get around these beat up Peugeot 5-o-4s station wagons. And so Bush taxi down from Toucountouna to Cotonou, Cotonou to Lomé, Togo, Lomé, Togo to go to Accra, Ghana. All by Bush Taxi, which you know that I two days, two and a half days if you're doing it fast. So, you know, not easy to do, but I went there to take the green because that Accra was the closest place for me to actually take the GRE because I knew I wanted to go to grad school after the Peace Corps, just go straight into grad school up to the Peace Corps. So I did that. And then, yes, I visited my brother in Guinea because my brother was also a Peace Corps volunteer at the same time in Guinea, Conakry. And he was, he too had extended for a year. And he too, he was a, he was a teacher. He was a teacher. But he had become a House leader, a leader of one of the regional, regional houses. There was Peace Corps would keep in some countries regional houses that would provide facilities for volunteers as sort of a way house, a sort of a stopover on their way back to post or from post. And so Duncan, my brother, was a leader in one of these houses for his third year.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:00] So you went to visit then?

COHEN: [00:51:02] I went to visit him. He also came to visit me, too, before. So we had a great time visiting him in his area to see what the differences were, seeing what the similarities were between experiences. And he was it was very interesting to see his world, his corner of the world at that time.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:28] So you stayed three years. And let me ask, you said you traveled with other volunteers. So have you stayed in touch with any of those volunteers?

COHEN: [00:51:40] Absolutely. We've had a very close group. We call it stodge and French, that kind of a group or class. We have a very close class. There have been a few reunions over the years since we since I was a volunteer, what, almost 20 years ago now. Unfortunately, I haven't been to any of them because I've because of what I've been doing with my career since the Peace Corps. But we're a very close group of reunions. We stay in touch through the normal means now, Facebook and emails and phone calls and things like this, but a very, very close group of people.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:26] So to think back on and experience you joined so that it would help you figure out what you wanted to do in life to that. Did it do that?

COHEN: [00:52:37] Absolutely. I, I knew that I was very much interested in. In devoting myself to a career working on international environmental matters, you know what I think? What I think happened was that before the Peace Corps, I was working on environmental issues, but at a domestic level. But all the while in the back of my head, having had that rich experiences in Kenya growing up for as a small time, also coming from a multinational background myself, it in the back of my mind, I always wanted to be focused more on environmental issues of a global nature. And what Peace Corps did was really slam that desire home and really helped to. You know, solidify that that interest in in doing that, so that's what I did. I ended up enrolling in graduate studies in sustainable international development with a concentration in environmental governance, focusing on how countries can put in place measures to. To create, you know, sort of enabling conditions by which environmental behavior is instilled and in the people of a country, Market-Based levers, but also regulatory based levers of behavior

change to help them really regulate the environment and make sure that it's not swept under the carpet. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:29] Where did you go to grad school?

COHEN: [00:54:31] I went to Brandeis University, uh, Brandeis University, Heller School for Social Policy and Management and. In that school, it too emphasized a lot on field and experience based learning. Whereby the second year in the second year of the program, Brandeis would encourage you to go overseas to do a sort of some sort of a field practicum, an internship by another word. And so I went to Kenya for four for that second year of my master's and applied many of the skills that the Peace Corps had taught me in that year in doing and conducting participatory rural appraisal techniques with Kenyan farmers to protect the Mau forest complex in in Kenya. That's what I did with my graduate studies.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:32] So you went back for a whole year in Kenya?

COHEN: [00:55:34] I just wish for a school year. So being about nine months. Yeah, that's in September to May. Something like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:44] Ok. And you then have continued in that have you continued in that field after graduate school?

COHEN: [00:55:51] Yeah, absolutely. So I've always nature, protection and conservation have been of paramount interest to me as a topic of interest and as a as a as a as a career of interest to me. But how I how that's manifested the kinds of jobs that I've received have varied. I was working for USA for a year as their senior commercial forestry advisor, helping them to resuscitate the, um, the large-scale commercial forestry sector after about a decade of civil war post-conflict. And I was in Liberia, in Liberia, in Liberia. I worked for the FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations in Thailand for a year working on forest policy, a very different job than the USA job, but one

that was, you know, equally relevant and exciting for me. And for about five years, I would say five or six years, I was working with different employers. But on the same subject in various African countries, on forest governance issues related to the use of big forest reform program that they call the flagship program, the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Program, working with tropical timber producing countries in Africa to help them get to help them export sustainably harvested timber to European Union member countries.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:36] So you clearly stayed in the field?

COHEN: [00:57:38] Clearly stayed in the field. And most recently, I'm back from two years from a two year contract in China as the director of the global program of the International Bamboo and Rattan organization, or as they call it for short INBAR, which is a multilateral intergovernmental organization similar to some U.N. agencies. That is, as the name suggests, it's focused on promoting bamboo and return for sustainable development, bamboo and retainers and non timber forest product and as an alternative to timber so that you might at the same time keep trees standing, keep forests intact while using this fast growing grass to manufacture a number of goods that would otherwise be manufactured by timber or plastic or another less renewable resource.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:37] So clearly it's had a major Peace Corps, had a major impact on your life

COHEN: [00:58:42] A major impact, major springboard.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:45] And you've talked about disappointment with the impact you had in that community and I guess this sustaining it. But do you think your experience of having been in that town had any, any other influence and in that town?

COHEN: [00:59:05] Well, absolutely. You know, one thing I, I, I hadn't said, but is it the first project that I was doing? It is not something that takes up all. It didn't take up all of my time. And so there were many other smaller projects that I was doing on the sidelines or one one. One one. I couldn't do anything on one project. There's you know, it's not like you're going to a job nine to five work break for lunch. And then there's a there's not like that, of course, you know, so. I was really quite proud at the fact that I think on the aggregate or in the aggregate, the community really saw that I had done a lot in having done not just the mango things, but there are many of the I started up, for example, a mushroom, mushroom cultivation project. This is something that I learned from what another Dutch based development agency called S.V. was doing at the time there in other city and other parts of Benin, which is to cultivate mango mushrooms, developing spore bags of mushrooms, spore, and then training women to make a, you know, a place or to develop build a ramshackle hut in which it would be dry and dark conditions to put these mushrooms to really thrive. So I did that in my spare time and people love me for that. And it was again, it was another supplementary source of nutrition for the women. It meant that, you know, it's also sort of you could see mushrooms sort of like a substitute to meat.

COHEN: [01:00:49] It's got a meatiness to it. So it would be something that they could use in their in their cooking that would maybe require that they went less out into the fields with the baby on the back and required that they work less if they had something immediately in the house compound that they could draw from as a source of nutrition, as a source of food. So that was great. I also did the mud stoves. I built about 15 or helped to train people to build 15 mud stoves in the village, which again reduces for the woman, especially reduces is a much more efficient means of making food. It reduces the demand on wood supply and concomitant demand for them to go into the field or into the forest to cut the wood. So really reducing their workload. Yeah. And then tree nurseries as well. I set up. Twenty tree nurseries with the farmers, with the farmers groups, and this was, you know, worked to

engage with them to determine which trees were most desirable cashews, was it mangoes, was it neem tree, was it acacia? All of these different species that were prevalent and popular at the time and working with them to sow a sort of in the aggregate, there was a lot many, many things that that I was able to look back on with pride and say, OK, you know, this one I got this far, this one I got this far this. And I think in the aggregate, it was really great. So, you

GANZGLASS: [01:02:34] And let me ask the kind of the last set of questions around Peace Corps' third goal, which is bringing the world back to the United States.

COHEN: [01:02:48] Absolutely. Well, in my case.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:49] Have you been involved in any of that?

COHEN: [01:02:51] I mean, not in a structural way, not institutionally with Peace Corps. I would be happy to. I mean, sort of, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:59] Just in your own life.

COHEN: [01:03:01] Absolutely. And in my case, more often than not, the years that since the Peace Corps, I've been overseas. But without a doubt, I'm always quick to seize upon the starry stars and some young person's eyes. And if they're if they're in a place where they're trying to figure out what their next step is, I'm always help them to plant our help, to try to plant the seed, to suggest that there will be Peace Corps could be an option for them. And I mean some something that sounds a little bit maybe pat or cliché, but I always oftentimes will say I say to people, if I were president tomorrow, if I had that sort of power, one of the first things I would mandate would be to ensure that every young person has a mandatory and seriously mandatory obligation to go overseas and do some sort of service. I don't know if it has necessity. The Peace Corps is, could be, the Peace Corps could be something else. You could work on a grape farm. You can work in a vineyard. You

can do. But to do something that exposes you to a world beyond the borders of the United States, I think will be forever valuable. You know what? No one to that person, it will make them a better person, but for number two, for everybody else in the world, because they're that much more externally oriented. And I think for me, that is the biggest thing that I feel like I've gotten out of the Peace Corps is that third value of making people really realize that there's another world out there or multiple plural, you know, plural worlds out there. And that, you know, this sort of my myopia or of thinking of this is this is all there is in our own country, I think will be our downfall. So I think that for me, that's always on the top of my mind. It's never whenever I engage with anybody, it's in trying to make them see that there is more a whole and other side to something else. That was, I think, the biggest lesson I learned from the Peace Corps.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:39] That's probably a really good place to end. But I, I always ask the people I'm interviewing whether there's something else they wanted to talk about that I didn't ask you about. So this is your opportunity to kind of go outside or have covered most of what you're thinking about, talking about.

COHEN: [01:05:59] Only just a thought and not so much, just, just a wish that that the Peace Corps, you know, enjoys another, you know, 50 years or another 150 years of being around. I think it's one of the best things that the United States has ever come up with as a program. And, you know, long, long may it live well.

GANZGLASS: [01:06:24] Ok, thank you.

COHEN: [01:06:25] Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]