

**Melissa Loffler Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Melissa Loffler served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Georgia from 2013 to 2015 as an English teacher.

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Oral History Interview

with

Melissa Loffler

September 10, 2019

Dallas, Texas

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:01] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. And today is September 10th, 2019. And I'm interviewing Melissa Loffler, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Georgia from 2013 to 2015. And I will start the interview with my usual question. Why did you join the Peace Corps?

LOFFLER: [00:00:28] I think there's a lot of reasons. The main reason is I just wanted to help people. Whenever I was young, I saw the movie Dirty Dancing and Baby's character talked about joining the Peace Corps. And I asked my mom, what is the Peace Corps? I was pretty young, I think, whenever it came out. And so she told me about it. And I was interested and in college, there was a recruiter that came and talked to us, but I'd already accepted a job for after college, so I decided to go ahead and postpone that dream. And then I was flying and I was flight attendant for American Airlines. They declared bankruptcy in 2012. So I decided to take a voluntary furlough and try to join the Peace Corps.

And it was just perfect timing. My apartment lease was up and my car was paid off and I'd wanted to do it for so long. And so I just decided to go.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:19] Great. So where did you go, where did you grow up?

LOFFLER: [00:01:22] I grew up in Dallas area, all in North Texas, but pretty much in the Dallas area. So from the time I was born until I went to school in Lubbock, Texas, which is about 6 hours away, and I went to a semester abroad in Mexico when I was in college. But until then it was all basically right here in North Texas.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:42] What did your family and friends think about you joining the Peace Corps?

LOFFLER: [00:01:48] They were excited. They were really excited. Some were a little scared about me going all the way to Georgia. In fact, whenever I had my interview, my initial interviews, my recruiter thought for sure because I spoke Spanish that I would go to South America. And I was a little disappointed. I really had my hopes on Africa. I was hoping, I don't know.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:06] Did you apply for Africa?

LOFFLER: [00:02:07] I didn't, at the time that I applied, you couldn't really choose. I definitely put it as my first choice. And I said on the little essay that we could write that I would obviously go anywhere they wanted to send me that they thought was best, because I thought they knew best. But I really hoped to learn another language. And Africa was like my top choice. And I said, if you, if there's any choice in the matter, I would definitely prefer a much warmer climate than a cooler climate because I'm a big wimp for cold weather. But whenever I got my invitation, it was to the country of Georgia and I was like, what?

GANZGLASS: [00:02:43] Georgia's not warm?

LOFFLER: [00:02:44] Not warm at all. But it ended up being a really great time. I would have never, ever thought to go to Georgia on my own. So I'm so glad that I was sent there.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:52] What was your education background?

LOFFLER: [00:02:54] Well, I had studied Spanish and hotel restaurant management in college. And I did have a little bit of experience working as teaching. I did substitute teaching for the past four years before I left for Peace Corps, and I did a lot of volunteer work teaching English as a second language. So I guess that's what they needed in Georgia at the time.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:16] So you were in an English language, a TEFL program?

LOFFLER: [00:03:20] Exactly, exactly. My primary project was teaching English.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:24] And so you were applied, you applied, you were accepted. And how many people were in your group?

LOFFLER: [00:03:32] There were 30 of us in my original cohort. Yeah. And we, we all, but well there was a couple in PST that did not make it through the entire training.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:45] What is PST?

LOFFLER: [00:03:45] Pre-service training.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:45] Oh.

LOFFLER: [00:03:46] Sorry. And then one had to be medically evacuated. She would have been there the entire time had she not, but the rest of us all made it through together.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:54] So in 2013 was all of the training overseas at that point?

LOFFLER: [00:03:58] It was, it was. All of it was there in Georgia.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:01] So where did you all meet to?

LOFFLER: [00:04:03] So we met in Philadelphia and we were there for, I think, just one evening, and then we left. The next day we took a bus from Philadelphia to JFK, New York, and left from there. And we were, we went through Turkey and Istanbul, and then we went straight to Georgia. And then we were in Georgia in like a little compound area for about three or four days, learning the basics and trying to figure out which cluster they would put us in for our training for the three months of training. And then we left for our villages.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:36] So you were in Georgia's Tbilisi?

LOFFLER: [00:04:39] Tbilisi is the capital, yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:40] So you were in Tbilisi for the first couple?

LOFFLER: [00:04:44] For the first three or four days, yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:46] And then, explain that you were divided, how were you divided up?

LOFFLER: [00:04:50] So we were divided into groups of about five or six each. They kept all of the education volunteers together and all of the IODs, so like individual. I'm not sure what that acronym even stands for, but it's basically like the NGO type volunteers together in their clusters. And then we were each. The main town that we were around was called Khashuri, and we were each in clusters around that town in little villages. And my village was called Kvishkheti and there were six of us there. And we'd have language classes Monday through Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., would break for lunch and have, we would alternate at different people in my, uh, different volunteers in my cluster's homes' for the lunches. And that way we could alternate and not have to be too much of a burden on each family, you know, every week, every day.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:47] Each one lived in a separate family?

LOFFLER: [00:05:49] Right. We all had different families. Two of them were relative families, but they had different homes. And then in the afternoon we'd have our technical training in Khashuri. And so we would go take a bus, a marshrutka, which is a bus, to the town of Khashuri.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:09] So talk a little bit about your home stay. What was the family like?

LOFFLER: [00:06:13] It was amazing. My family was a really beautiful family, very sweet family. I had two little brothers and sisters. Dachi was three and Anano was seven, six at the time. She turned seven while I was there. But the family. So in the homes there, whenever a son gets married, his wife comes to live in the house and their family ends up living there as well. And then the daughter, when they get married, they go and live with the husbands of their family. And it was. I had a great grandmother, a grandmother, grandfather, mother and father, and the two siblings.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:54] Wow.

LOFFLER: [00:06:54] Right. It was a lot of, a lot of people in one home, but their homes are huge. They're not very warm, but they're huge. They have one petchi, which is like a wood burning stove, to keep the entire house warm. So that's where everyone kind of hangs out.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:10] When you say it's a big house, are these big old houses?

LOFFLER: [00:07:14] Very old, yes. So they all started out probably like a very like moderate size. And just people add on there. There's not Home Depot type things, so there's a lot of like DIY type additions onto their homes, which again explains.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:31] Oh, each family, as the family grows.

LOFFLER: [00:07:33] Right, as the family grows, they'll just add more rooms so.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:35] I see.

LOFFLER: [00:07:35] Yeah, and a lot of the homes end up adding addition of a bathroom because most of the bathrooms are outdoor in Georgia. And so eventually those will come indoor as well. So they're interesting to say the least. My bathroom at my permanent site was an addition onto the house. And during the winter, a whole side of the, one side of the bathroom would freeze and have a block of ice on it the entire winter. And the condensation, whenever you took a shower. We had warm water, which was amazing. So the condensation from the steam would freeze in between showers. And so, like once you finally get the room warm enough to take off all of your clothes and take a shower, these ice pellets would fall on you about the same ratio as the warm water was coming out of the shower. So it was definitely interesting during the summer.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:32] You mean during the winter.

LOFFLER: [00:08:35] During the winter, yes. Exactly. The families were so amazingly warm. The word for guest in Georgian is *stumari* and it literally means gift from God and they definitely treat you as such.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:49] Did they speak English at all?

LOFFLER: [00:08:51] My host mother spoke a little bit of English. She had been practicing whenever she got married and she was studying. She actually has a dream of becoming an LCF, which is a language coordinating, coordinator facilitator. Language? No, language and culture facilitator for Peace Corps. That's her dream is to help do that in the future. So hopefully she will get there one day. She had another baby since I left so the dream is slowing down. But yeah, she's, she speaks English. She definitely at that time, I thought, spoke English amazingly well because my Georgian was so minuscule that it was very helpful to have her speaking the English that she did speak. And

then after I think I realized that, you know, it wasn't quite as advanced as I had thought it was. But at the time since I.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:44] Compared to your Georgian.

LOFFLER: [00:09:45] Right, exactly, compared to my Georgian and the amount of English I was able to speak with most people in the village, yes, she spoke very well.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:51] And so each one. And then you said you had meals.

LOFFLER: [00:09:55] At all of the families' homes. So it was really nice. So yeah. So each volunteer, you know, we would rotate around at their homes and again they treat. These people don't have a whole lot. Like whenever Russia left, pulled out of Georgia, they took a lot of the infrastructure and jobs with them when they left. I mean, factories they just completely gutted and took everything with them. And so a lot of the people that were very prosperous in Soviet times, now were left with nothing and no real skill sets because whatever they had done in the factories were not useful anymore because they didn't have those same jobs. So a lot of people just live off their land and some people work for the railroads and people will work for or they'll teach or they work in little shops. But other than that, there's not much work.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:48] What did the husband in the host family do?

LOFFLER: [00:10:51] My host dad did not have a job at that time. Now he works for the police department. He started training and worked for the police department now. My mom wasn't working. My grandmother, she just worked at the house, and my grandfather worked on the railroad. So.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:08] And during Soviet times, what did they do?

LOFFLER: [00:11:11] One worked in a, um, like a material factory, like making textiles and stuff like this. And the dad was working. When the government changes there, a lot of people will lose their jobs because they're affiliated with that type of government. So when the government



changed, I'm not even 100% sure what he was doing prior, but he lost his job because of the change. So he kind of just had to like wait until there was a different change, until it went back to the other.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:41] So it's all patronage, you get the job through the party.

LOFFLER: [00:11:43] Right. Exactly. And so but he's happy working for the police department now. So that's good. And my grandfather, I guess, was the breadwinner because he worked for the railroad. But like my host grandmother, great grandmother, I'm sorry, she would make cheese and butter and she would sell that in the bazaar in Tbilisi on the weekends so they could make a little bit of extra money here and there if they needed to.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:12] What was the training like? So you lived with the family and you had language instruction.

LOFFLER: [00:12:18] Right. So language instruction was in the morning.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:18] What else was going on in the training?

LOFFLER: [00:12:20] We learned a lot of cultural and technical stuff too. So the afternoon, like obviously a lot of us did have education background, but teaching in Georgia is completely different than teaching in the United States, so they would just go over a different. They would have current volunteers give trainings along with Georgian counterparts. So that way we could get an idea of like what both people, what they expected and what the expectation versus reality might be as well. So, uh, and then we like language, the cultural type stuff, we had like dance classes. We had one Saturday where we just got to make all kinds of Georgian food. And that was really fun. One where we did like dance classes, because dance is a huge part of their culture as well.

LOFFLER: [00:13:04] Each region of Georgia, it's a very small country, but each region is very proud and very distinct. And so they each have their certain like typical dance and even khachapuri, which is like the most delicious thing on earth. It's a cheese filled bread. Each region of

Georgia had a different khachapuri, so that was neat. We got to learn how to make all of those.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:27] So this was all during training?

LOFFLER: [00:13:29] All doing training, right. All during those first three months. It was a lot of fun. PST, I hear a lot of people talk about how pre-service training is not fun. But it was one of the highlights of my service for sure. Just because you form such good bonds and your families are so, to us, were so vital and so important in our, and our LCF as well. Our language cultural facilitator was just such an integral part of our service, our happiness in our service in Georgia. So.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:00] That's great.

LOFFLER: [00:14:00] Yeah, it was really great.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:02] And after training, where were you then placed?

LOFFLER: [00:14:04] I was placed in the booming metropolis of Khashuri, which was about 20 minutes away from where I was, where our hub city was, where we had our technical training in the afternoons. And originally I was slightly disappointed in where I was placed because Georgia is an amazing, beautiful country with mountains everywhere, and Khashuri is basically in the middle of the country with not many mountains around. And I just knew Khashuri and I was like, why did I get placed here? I thought it was not the best thing in the world in the beginning, but luckily a few of my friends helped me see. They were like, of course they put you there, Melissa, because Khashuri was where the next training would be and they wanted to put someone there. Well, I don't know that this is true. This is what people have said. That would be able to make good contacts and good relationships, and that way there would be more families that would want to host.

LOFFLER: [00:15:00] And it just turned out to be really lucky because everyone would always come back to her Khashuri or a village close to there, because that was where they had done their service, their pre-service

training. And again, these families were so important and so special to us that everyone would always come back to visit their families. So I had visitors all the time, so and I was right in the middle of the country. So it was very easy to get to the capital. It was very easy to get to the Black Sea. It was very easy to get to the mountains. So it ended up being like a really great location, actually.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:28] And what was your living arrangement there?

LOFFLER: [00:15:31] There I lived with the family as well. I had a brother and sister. My sister got married almost immediately after I got there. We arrived in July and she got married in September.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:43] That must have been fun.

LOFFLER: [00:15:45] But it was fun but it was a very interesting, uh, it was hard on the family at first. So Georgia is very, um, very conservative country. And she had had this boyfriend for three years and she couldn't kiss him. She couldn't go on vacation with him. She couldn't do any of these things. And she was quite rebellious. She was 15 years old, and she just wanted to be with her boyfriend, her husband now. And so she, in Georgia, if you want to get married, you just run away in the middle of the night. So that's what she did. So one night I woke up and I hear my family all crying in the living room. The living room was right outside of my room. And I mean, even my brother, who was 17 at the time, was crying, which for a 17 year old boy, pretty much anywhere I imagine, but definitely in Georgia that's very uncommon.

LOFFLER: [00:16:47] And I was like, what happened? And they were like, Magda run away. She's gotten married and she's not our girl anymore. And his, the groom's family also came over to the house because when everyone finds out, everyone is like, I guess, devastated at first and, um, but once.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:06] In the same village?

LOFFLER: [00:17:07] In the same village, yes. And so they, what they did is actually. So my family, every family pretty much in Georgia has a plot of land somewhere, and that is called their village. And this is usually within like 20 or 30 minutes away from where they live. And that's where they have like their beans, their potatoes, like all of the plants that have huge, they need a huge amount of space. And so they share this with like their whole extended family and they usually have a home there. And so he had taken her to his village home to stay the night and that's basically getting married. And then later, like about a month and a half later, there was the actual ceremony. And that was fun because by that time everyone is like kind of like, OK, come to grips with it.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:00] How old was he?

LOFFLER: [00:18:01] Dito was also 15, so very young as well. They're happy, they have two kids now. I mean, it was really hard for me at first because she was such a smart girl and she had such. I don't, I saw such hope and promise for her future. And in the beginning, whenever she got married and almost immediately became pregnant, I was just like.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:23] I assume she dropped out of school.

LOFFLER: [00:18:25] She didn't finish school. Yes. But she does have a job now and she has like gotten pretty much what, like an equivalent to a GED is. You can finish classes. As long as you take your exams, you can finish school. So she did eventually and she's taken some classes in college. She hasn't finished college yet, but she has a good job and she seems happy. So I hope that everything will continue this way for her. And I think, I mean, they definitely love each other. It's just I can't imagine being with the person I was with when I was 15 years old. So it was really hard for me in the beginning. I was like, how am I supposed to make a difference? And I can't even make a difference as my own sister. But, you know, everything is relative.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:09] Had she spoken to you about that?

LOFFLER: [00:19:12] Yes, beforehand. And I told her, I was like, just wait. And I had told her, you know, the person I thought I loved when I was 15, I'm very happy I'm not with him now, you know, but it's different. It's completely different. And that was really hard for me in the beginning too. I mean, you know, they tell you to go in it with no judgment and no, uh, what's the word they use? Just with a completely open mind. And that's so difficult even though you think that you have an open mind, you think you have no judgments. You're thinking, what are you doing? That's not smart. And that's, it's just different, you know? So I'm happy for her now.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:50] I guess her family didn't think it was such a great idea either so.

LOFFLER: [00:19:52] Yeah, they were very sad in the beginning. And I figured if they had let her do more things, then I think that it would have been. Because they let their son go on vacation with his friends and it wasn't like she was going on vacation alone with him. She was going 4 hours away. It wasn't like she was going somewhere crazy, and they were going to be with a lot of friends. And in Georgia, people are very well behaved, so like it would have been fine. But Dito said, like, if they don't let me take you to the Black Sea, then I'd have to take you as my wife. And he did that so. Crazy but interesting.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:29] OK, so that was your living arrangement.

LOFFLER: [00:20:32] Exactly.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:33] What was your work arrangement?

LOFFLER: [00:20:35] So I worked my first. I don't remember if it was the first year or the first semester. I worked every day except for, well, not every day. I'm sorry. Every school day except for Friday. So I had Fridays off, which was really lucky.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:46] But where did you work?

LOFFLER: [00:20:48] I was at a school. I was at Khashuri school number five.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:51] And this is an elementary school?

LOFFLER: [00:20:53] It's, um, so in Georgia, all of the schools go first grade through 12th grade. So I taught almost every grade level. That first year I didn't teach 12th grade because a lot of times in Georgia, when you're in 12th grade, the kids don't come to school very often. And they, a lot of people have their own private tutors and if they're interested in studying, then they'll go to these private tutors to pass their exams. And if they're not interested in passing the exams or going to college, then they just don't come to school in general unless they want to see their friends every once in a while. So I just taught first through 11th the first year. And the second year I taught 12th just because the 11th graders, I loved them. And so I wanted to follow them to 12th as well. But it's all in the same school building, which is quite interesting. But we had about 400 kids in our school throughout each grade.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:47] And boys and girls together?

LOFFLER: [00:21:49] Boys and girls together, yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:51] Very good. And let me back up to training. How good was your Georgian and what is Georgian like? Is it like Russian or?

LOFFLER: [00:22:00] And it's completely different than any other language. They have their own alphabet. There's about 4 million people speak it in the world. So it's super obscure. But it's a really, I think it's a pretty language and it's definitely looks beautiful written. It's kind of symbols, not like letters, like we have.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:16] Cyrillic?

LOFFLER: [00:22:17] It's not Cyrillic, it's its own alphabet. The Georgian alphabet is very unique. There's 32 letters. And there's several ta, ca, and there was one more. Ca, ta, and. Well, you know, I'm not 100% sure what

the other letter was, but there are several of these letters that are very repetitive. They just slightly change the accent or the pronunciation is slightly different, but they all sound very similar to me. And then you're missing a few of the letters that we have, like the F and the W. But my Georgian was really pretty decent. I mean, obviously there was, like I said, like the ca and the ta, there are some of these that were like maybe a little bit off. But when we did our LPI, our language proficiency interviews, I believe I scored moderate high. So I think that's pretty good. And I felt like I was able communicate.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:25] This is after training?

LOFFLER: [00:23:26] After training, correct. And I was, I continued to learn. My host family was really great about wanting to teach me and they were very patient. So it was really helpful. They loved to learn English too, so it was really good. In fact, every time I made like a visual aid, whenever. My coping mechanism during Peace Corps was, when I would get frustrated, I would make a visual aid for my classroom because it just helped me get some stress out, I guess. And every time I made a visual aid for my class, my host would be like, oh, can you make one for the house as well? We can hang them up here and I was like, OK.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:58] And what were these visual aids like?

LOFFLER: [00:23:59] Just different ones. Like one was like a boy and a girl and like he, she, him, her. And you know, so like pronouns and stuff like that. So you could get those. And then one was like, "today is" and it had like Velcro where you could move like Thursday, Friday, whatever. Yesterday was, tomorrow will be. The weather is, and whatever. And they're different. I had tons like for the seasons of the year. I had ones for like tying, all different kinds. It was a lot of fun. My family.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:30] Your Georgian got good enough so that you could talk with people?

LOFFLER: [00:24:33] Oh, for sure. For sure. In fact, people in Georgia, they call you *kargi gogo* no matter what, and *kargi gogo* means good girl. And they would just see you. And if you smiled at them, they're like, oh, *kargi gogo khar!* Like, you're such a good girl. And but when they heard you speak Georgian, they would go crazy. They were super excited. They couldn't believe someone from the United States, from America, that's what they would say, was there speaking in Georgian. In fact, I remember at the close of service, I went on a long trip around the country and we were at a canyon. And I saw a man taking a picture of a family and I was like, oh, do you want me to? I asked him in Georgian, like, do you want me to take a picture of all of you? And he looked at me and he was like, are you American?

LOFFLER: [00:25:17] And I was like, oh yes, I'm from the United States. And he was like, I don't understand. He was like, I'm a tour guide. This family is from Russia and they don't speak any Georgian. And you came all the way from the United States and you're speaking Georgian? And I was like, well, it's different. I've lived here for two years. It's, you know, a different kind of situation than these people coming for the weekend or whatever. But they, yeah, people were very impressed. So it's neat. And whenever I ever meet anyone from Georgia after that, I get very excited because I can use my Georgian still. And I went back in March. So I left the country in July of 2015 and I went back in March of 2018. No, no, March of 2019. Sorry. And was able to see most everyone that I missed and able to still speak pretty well. I was actually a little bit impressed by myself.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:09] You have to keep practicing.

LOFFLER: [00:26:10] Right. And my written Georgian is much worse than my spoken Georgian. So people will always write me on Facebook and then I use the little voice message app to answer them back, because if I write it I will make so many mistakes. But if I'm saying it, I still speak it more or less well. They understand me, so that's good.



GANZGLASS: [00:26:32] You mentioned that in training, they talked about the difference in teaching in Georgia versus the United States. What are the differences?

LOFFLER: [00:26:41] Whew. So many differences. Well, first of all, like rules are very different there than they are here. I teach, I substitute teach at a school here in the Dallas area. And, you know, when we're walking the halls, we have to have bubbles and tails, which is like a bubble in your mouth so you're quiet and your hands behind your back in a tail so you're not touching things. There between classes it's chaos. People are running through the halls and there's little kids and big kids and nobody is at all worried about it. They have mandatories, which is like a police officer, to like make sure everything is running well, but they do nothing because it's normal. This chaos is complete normalcy to them. And you go into a classroom and everyone is screaming and hollering and that's normal. And so just getting used to like little things like that and not being just completely overwhelmed was time consuming or whatever to just try to get used to it.

LOFFLER: [00:27:40] But then, then there's other things to that. Respect for me as a teacher in the United States is to be like listening and to be attentive and to answer questions when asked. And their respect is to not speak and to, as soon as the teacher comes into the room, to bring her a chair to sit down. And I'm not used to that. I don't want to sit down whenever I'm teaching. I want to be moving around the classroom and talking. And the kids would feel, they're just not comfortable with that because they thought that I should be sitting down.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:13] So the classroom was quiet though?

LOFFLER: [00:28:16] Eventually. Eventually. It would take a little bit, but usually the teacher comes in quite after the bell. I would always stay in the classroom, because I would want to be in there if the kids came in during, you know, like their breaks or whatever. If they're having questions about homework or whatever, because this is kind of what we do here. And that's what I was used to. And the kids started to get used to that as well, and they liked that. They wanted to come in and

talk during the middle of, you know, the changing periods. But there the teachers are always in the teacher's lounge until a little after the bell rings. They give the kids a chance to get to the classroom. And then once the teacher walks in, it is silent and a chair is brought to the front of the room for her. And to me that is just not what I want to do whenever I'm teaching in a classroom. So it's quite different, but I mean, obviously.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:05] Was the teaching technique different as well?

LOFFLER: [00:29:07] Very much so. I think it was probably similar to how things were done here long ago, where it's a lot of just, um, talking in front of the class and, you know, they would repeat things, but they were not thinking on their own. They weren't. And so and obviously this is an English, this is the second language class. So it's not like maybe this was different in a different type of environment or a different type of setting, but there was not much interaction. There was only, the only interaction that the kids had with the teachers, for the most part, was just repeating things back to them, things that they had memorized. And that to me is not learning another language. I mean, that's great that you can say this whole spiel, like I learned the Gettysburg Address when I was in sixth grade, but that didn't really help me learn very much. I just was able to repeat it.

LOFFLER: [00:29:56] And so for me, I wanted the kids to be able to have a dialog, to be able to talk to each other. And my counterparts were both amazing and they were super open to different ways of teaching.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:07] They were?

LOFFLER: [00:30:08] Extremely open to different ways of teaching. Of course, it was something new for them. They had had a TLG volunteer, which is Teach Learn Georgia, which is similar to, well, it's not actually similar, but it's basically like there was a volunteer that was there for a year. And he was a great volunteer as well. But it's a very different type program than Peace Corps. And it's basically just having another person in the room that speaks English. And so like, you know, I'm

sure that he had kind of like made some suggestions but they didn't have the same type of training that we did as Peace Corps volunteers. So they didn't have all these resources that we had which were so helpful. And I was also really lucky because I had had so much training, well, not really training, but just experience as a substitute teacher here. So I was able to bring different things that I had learned from teachers in the United States over there, which was great.

LOFFLER: [00:30:58] And Peace Corps Georgia was such a small post then and it's grown a little bit, but I think it's still pretty similar, that we were able to share so many things as volunteers, as a group together. And like we had several conferences where our counterparts came with us and so we were able to share these things together, which was really nice to get ideas from other volunteers.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:20] How many volunteers were there?

LOFFLER: [00:31:21] In the language, there was probably about 20 of us. I'm not 100% sure. Or maybe 19 were the English language volunteers. And then the other like ten or 11 were the NGO volunteers.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:35] So did the students react well to this much more open, engaging way of teaching?

LOFFLER: [00:31:41] In the beginning, I think it was difficult for them to get used to. They were still very, and the kids that weren't as advanced. So a lot of times in Georgia, unfortunately, I mean, it's very similar, I think, to how things were in the United States beforehand. You know, the kids that did well were sitting in the front of the class and the kids that didn't want to learn or were not considered smart were in the back of the class and not really called on, not really paid attention. Not really. And they'd be back there playing and I didn't like that. So I'd move them to the front because to me that's where they needed to be. They need.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:14] Yeah.

LOFFLER: [00:32:14] And even if they weren't necessarily participating as much as I had hoped, they were looking at my visual aids more. So I'm like, they're getting something out of this classroom, you know what I mean? So and out of me being here. But it was really great. I saw this one beautiful, like, well, there were several things, but there's one thing that made me the most proud was my counterpart. I had talked to her because this was now my second year and I had had, it was the sixth grade class, now the seventh grade class. And there were three boys that always were, like if they came to class, they were cutting up in class, they were not paying attention, they never did their homework, and they weren't really worried about it. And the first year, I think, you know, I was still observing so much and trying to get things implemented that we didn't really come up with a plan. My first counterpart. They switched the grade levels. So one of my counterparts was with them when they were in sixth grade, and the other counterpart was with them in seventh grade.

LOFFLER: [00:33:13] But Nino, the counterpart that was with them in seventh grade, I told her, I was like, you know, these guys like not last year, and this is only maybe their third or fourth year of having English classes mandatory in the school anyway. So they were very new to the English language and it had only been like since they were like second or third grade. So I was like, they don't have a basis at all. Like they can't build, they can't get ahead, they're not going to do their homework because, you know, they're, they don't feel comfortable, and no one's ever thought they could, so they don't feel like they should. And so she came up with this awesome idea to ask any of the kids that had their very first year of English books to bring those. And we would take turns and, you know, one of us would work with the kids that work a little bit higher and do what we were already planning to do in our lesson plan. And the other one would work with those three boys, and they started doing their homework.

LOFFLER: [00:34:09] I mean, it wasn't obviously perfect and it don't mean like that by any means, but it was just neat to see them like react. Because that's the thing, as long as you give kids a chance, for the most part, they're going to want to do well. But if they see no hope or no light,

then of course, like, how are they going to have any kind of confidence in themselves and want to do it right or want to try? So it was really neat.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:33] And your counterpart was an English teacher as well?

LOFFLER: [00:34:36] Correct, correct. So we worked directly with the English teachers and, you know, I guess like people think like the main reason that we were there was to teach English to the kids, but a lot of it was just to transfer our skills to those teachers. So it could still be, you know, going long after we were gone, or at least their desire to keep learning long after we were gone is still there, right? And to keep improving their teaching. And it was really cool too, because we would do different games and different things. And then I noticed, like other teachers from different subjects would come and be like, Melissa, we're playing this game. What do you think? We're going to do this. And they would. And it was so neat to see like, and maybe they were already coming up with these things on their own. Maybe they were from different trainings, because Georgia was really starting to take education seriously, a lot more serious than it had. I told you, like a lot of times people would go to these private tutors instead of actually coming to school, especially once they got older and in certain subjects. So it was just really neat to see all of that like in these like beginning phases start to come to fruition.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:40] So you went back in '20, in uh, just now?

LOFFLER: [00:35:44] Right, in March, yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:45] Did you go to the school?

LOFFLER: [00:35:46] Oh, for sure. Of course.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:48] Do think any of these techniques have taken hold?

LOFFLER: [00:35:50] Yeah, for sure. There was a Peace Corps volunteer after I left as well.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:54] Was there one before you were there?

LOFFLER: [00:35:55] Not a Peace Corps volunteer, just this TLG, the Teach Learn Georgia volunteer. So she was amazing as well. And she was much more, um, I guess. She had them like in shape. So I think I laid a really great foundation for what she was able to do later, because I think she was a much more take charge and like, let's get this ball rolling from day one. I was much more like kind of timid, I guess, in the beginning. I wanted to make sure like I didn't step on any toes or do anything like this.

LOFFLER: [00:36:27] But I think she got there and felt so comfortable that she kept a lot going. And my counterpart, one of them is now teaching in Tbilisi in the capital, because she moved with her family. But the other one is still doing so many different trainings. And Ketí, the one that moved to the capital, is also, keeps doing trainings. In fact, one of the Peace Corps coordinators from whenever I was in PST, in the training, she does a lot of English TOTs, like teacher, training of the teachers. And she was recently, Ketí, my counterpart, was recently in one. The day that I went and went to visit this school and then had a supra, a big meal with the teachers afterwards, Ketí came in town. And she was like, I'm sorry I'm late. I was with Kvensah who was doing this TOT for us for English teaching. So I'm really happy that they're all still super active and super motivated. It's just really cool to see.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:25] That's great. Did you make other friends in town?

LOFFLER: [00:37:27] Oh my gosh, I made a ridiculous amount of friends. People in Georgia are so nice and they're so like ready to get to know you. And I was really lucky because I received like a lot of care packages. So like everyone at the post office was like a very good friend of mine. And then where the post office was located was right across from a dentist office. And one of the ladies that worked in the dentist office was a neighbor of mine. And so then like I would visit them at least once a week and they would always make me open my care package. They want to see what all was in there. Brown sugar was something

they didn't have in Georgia, so I would show them and they'd be like, what is this? So I'd make them cookies and bring them. And they were like, oh, we have to have this sugar in Georgia. And I'm like, yeah. So like, you know, I became friends with them, people at the bazaars, and at the.

LOFFLER: [00:38:14] There was also grocery stores like where you get bananas and things that we couldn't get from my family's yard because we didn't have bananas in Georgia. They were all imported. And so I would visit those places pretty often. And I worked at, or not worked, I volunteered at American Corner, which is a USAID funded library, and we did a lot of different things there. And so I met a lot of people through that as well.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:40] Did you get to travel around the country?

LOFFLER: [00:38:42] Yes, extensively. The country is gorgeous. It's, like I said, it's a very small country. It's about the size of South Carolina. But it is amazing, gorgeous. There's the Caucasus Mountains mountain range to the north and to the south, and the Lower Caucasus and the Greater Caucasus. And it's just amazingly gorgeous. And I think it's like ten of the 14 climates in the world as well. So, I mean, you have like the rocky beaches by the Black Sea and then you have this like desert, Davit Garedja, near the capital and then you have like really lush areas as well in Guria and a region that has like all kinds of trees and rolling hills. And then of course, you have the beautiful mountains. So I was able to travel.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:28] Sounds like you really liked Georgia.

LOFFLER: [00:39:28] I love it. I love Georgia. It's a very special place in my heart because of obviously the beauty of the country and everything, but more because of the people.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:38] Georgia is known for wine as well.

LOFFLER: [00:39:38] They are. If you ask anyone from Georgia, it is the birthplace of wine and the cradle of wine, they call it. So according to Georgians, and everyone I guess has a different view, but according to Georgians, that is where, it has, I guess, like remains of the oldest human. And there are these *qvevris*, which is, um, which are these containers that they had underground to store the wine. So like I said, Georgia has, like everyone has their villages. They have a thing called Rtveli in October, I believe? I think it's October maybe. No, I think it's October for sure. October, where you go and pick all the grapes and then you, every, every house has their own house wine. So it was not as delicious as going to the, I shouldn't say that, scratch that. It was definitely delicious. It was quite different than the wine that we have in the United States but um it was.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:36] How is it different?

LOFFLER: [00:40:37] Much more like vinegary. So I guess just the way of distilling it. So in Georgia, they keep all of the stems and the skin of the grape on whenever they're fermenting. So they have different colors. They have like a kind of like a pinkish. It's not like a rosé. It's more, I guess more of an amber type of wine. But they have so many delicious ones as well. But every house has their own wine. And my home, we had three different wines. We had dark red, a red, and then we had a white. And probably the white and the dark red were my very favorite. But they have many different kinds of grapes there and it's a really cool.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:20] I'm glad I asked about it.

LOFFLER: [00:41:21] Right? Me too. I would almost skip that, which would have been a horror for any Georgian if they had heard this later. Like, why did you not talk about the wine?

GANZGLASS: [00:41:30] When you were there, did you stay in touch with your family back in the United States?

LOFFLER: [00:41:34] Yes, I was really lucky. So when I was in the training, we were in a much smaller village, in much more modest circumstances.



And my host family, we had Wi, no, I'm sorry, we had internet. But sometimes the computer worked and sometimes it didn't. So like we were able to keep in touch, but it was basically how I imagined the entire service would be, and how I imagined it before I left as well. So it didn't really bother me in the beginning because I figured that it would be very sparse, my communication back with home, but you know I would still like write my blogs. And whenever I did have like access to internet, I would post them or whatever, but, um, and then obviously talk with my family. My mom got a lot of phone cards and would call me with those, so it was nice.

LOFFLER: [00:42:25] Peace Corps provided us with a cell phone, but if we wanted to call the United States, obviously we had to pay for that and it was really expensive. So that didn't happen very often. But usually if I even just called my mom and like hung up, she would call me back. So that way I didn't have to, I think it might have charged a tiny bit, but not very much. But then once I got to my permanent site, we had internet pretty much all the time, like it was. Unless there was something weird with the electricity, which it was pretty, uh, what's the word? Pretty?

GANZGLASS: [00:42:57] Regular?

LOFFLER: [00:42:57] Pretty regular, yes. Pretty reliable. And then when I was there, I found out I could get a modem. And so with the same internet, the same price they were paying already for their internet, I paid for this one modem that cost like less than \$20, which at the time seemed like a lot because we were living on our stipends. But in the grand scheme of things was not much money.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:20] Yeah.

LOFFLER: [00:43:21] And I was able to have Wi-Fi. So I could, from my smartphone, like look at things or from my iPad or from my. Yeah, it was great. I was like, what? I have Wi-Fi. I'm in like Georgia and like since I had been in this very tiny remote village and now I'm in the big city of Khashuri I had Wi-Fi, so it was pretty awesome to be able to be that connected.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:43] And are you staying connected to your family and friends now?

LOFFLER: [00:43:46] For sure. Back in Georgia?

GANZGLASS: [00:43:49] Yeah.

LOFFLER: [00:43:49] I mean, the world is so much smaller now than it used to be.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:52] So using Facebook?

LOFFLER: [00:43:54] Facebook is probably the biggest. But we also do like Facebook Messenger. We'll like call each other or leave voice messages.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:00] Oh really?

LOFFLER: [00:44:00] Yeah, because to call is very expensive. But you can call in like the Messenger app on Facebook. My friends in Mexico and I always use WhatsApp and that really hasn't taken off in Georgia yet, which I'm surprised. But Facebook Messenger is pretty prevalent there. So yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:18] It's very different than when I was in the Peace Corps.

LOFFLER: [00:44:21] So different. So different. I can't imagine like.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:24] Yeah.

LOFFLER: [00:44:24] Yeah, I was very, very lucky.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:26] Very different. So you spent two years there.

LOFFLER: [00:44:30] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:30] And as you reflect back, what do you think the impact of Peace Corps has been on your life?

LOFFLER: [00:44:37] I mean, I think it's immeasurable the impact it's had on my life. And it's, I mean, definitely just like made me grow as a person. You know, I had so many great experiences there and there are so many times that I really thought about leaving and coming home. And my friends convinced me not to because there were times when it was really hard. And I think being there, and there's such an importance of family. And I left when I was 33. I turned 34 when I was there and 35. And then I had my 36th birthday right when I left. And I thought, you know, like there was times when I would really question like the reason I was there and if I was making an impact. And I thought, I just need to go home and start having children, like what am I doing? And I'm so glad I didn't do. Not that I didn't want children or anything like that.

LOFFLER: [00:45:33] But I'm so glad I didn't leave because every single day that was there was important to the whole journey there. And the amount of relationships that I made, both with people in Georgia as well as like my other Peace Corps volunteers, our government issued friends. Those are relationships that are still such a huge part of my life and that make you thankful for all the things that you have here.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:59] Everybody says that these are such deep relationships. Why do you think they're so deep?

LOFFLER: [00:46:05] You know, I think it's because. I remember, this is probably going to sound really mean, but I remember when we got there and I was talking with one of my friends. And we didn't make a list, but we were just like vocalizing, I guess, a list of people that were in our cohort that we were like, you know, this guy is kind of weird. Like, I would have never been his friend in the United States. Not that I wouldn't have been his friend, but we would have probably seen on the street, said hello, maybe smiled, because that's what people do in Texas. They smile or whatever, even if we don't, whatever, care for you. But, um. But then we would have kept walking. We would have never had a chance, like really get to know that person. And it's so. I think I knew

this before I left, but it's so eye opening and so, I don't. It makes you realize, well, number one, we were all going through such similar things, right? We're all far from home. We're all, even though all of our experiences were so different, we were all going through the same thing in the same country and like experiencing a lot of the same things.

LOFFLER: [00:47:02] And we're getting to know each other on such a deep level that we wouldn't have given ourselves a chance to had we just, you know, met on the street here. And so I think that's a lot of it, you know, and just realizing that you can learn something from every person, even if you think in the beginning, what, this person's crazy or something like that, you know what I mean? There's just something, there's something unique about Peace Corps I think that really, and maybe it's just because you're so far from home and you're so homesick and you're so all of these things. And so many of you guys, even if you're not experiencing it the same day, you're experiencing it at some point. I remember they gave us this calendar, like a timeline, and it was like a chart of like the roller coaster of your emotions and like how you come in so high because you're like, I'm in a new country, everything is beautiful, blah, blah. And then like the honeymoon period kind of fades and you're like, whoa, I still have two more years. Like, and it was so weird.

LOFFLER: [00:48:01] I kept that that poster or that page up in my room on the inside of my armoire, because I wanted to make sure I focused on it. And whenever I started feeling like one of these like low points, I would look and I was like, OK, that says that. This is why. This is because the honeymoon phase is over. This is because I'm at the mid-point of my service and I'm not sure I'm making an impact yet or whatever. So it was really interesting to me that they were able to like give us such good resources, but also explain so much of like these things you're going to feel.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:32] And it felt better that you were not abnormal.

LOFFLER: [00:48:33] For sure, that you're not just crazy. And other people were also feeling similar things. So. And we were able to like luckily, even though we were maybe in that same slump, we would feel those lows and those highs at different times. So we were able to like lift each other up. And I don't know if this is in every post, but Peace Corps Georgia had free calling and messaging between any Peace Corps members. So if we needed to contact someone like in Peace Corps headquarters, or not headquarters, but Peace Corps Georgia, like any training or managers, any type of anything, we could call them for free as well as volunteers. So we had some hot ears at the end of the day sometimes because we would have that phone on for until it was dead, because we were talking a lot to our fellow volunteers though.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:20] How close was the closest volunteer to you?

LOFFLER: [00:49:23] So in the first year I was the only one in Shida Kartli, which was my region. So I didn't have anyone very close, about 40 minute marshrutka ride away, which doesn't seem very far, but it's not the same as like 40 minutes away here. So really and truly, those two that lived in about 40, 45 minutes away, I didn't see them very much at all. And then a lot of the times I would see people when they would come through Khashuri going to the capital or going back home, or I would see them in the capital whenever we went to visit. So the capital was only about an hour and a half away from me, so.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:57] So that wasn't bad at all.

LOFFLER: [00:49:58] That was probably the closest. And I tried to go there often because I also loved the Peace Corps Georgia staff. They were all amazing and, gosh, they were just wonderful people. So I visit, my thing whenever I was in Georgia. People, it's really funny. They would know me because of my cakes and cookies and everything, but so I would make them for everyone in the town and everyone in the capital I would go to and make brownies and whatever. And one time a friend of mine who was the volunteer the next year. So my second year I had two people in my town and then a lot that were very close, like maybe 20 minutes away. One was in Kvishkheti, which was my training

village. And Hannah, who was in Kvishkheti in my training village, she went to help across the country, probably about 3 hours away from where we lived. One of our fellow, her fellow cohorts with a summer camp. And while she was there, the grandmother, the host family let all of them stay there. All the people that were helping with the camp, stay with them.

LOFFLER: [00:50:59] And the grandmother there was asking all of them like, oh, where are you living in Georgia? Where are you living in Georgia? She was very interested and Hannah told her, I'm in Kvishkheti, it's a village of Khashuri. And she said, Khashuri? She was like, do you know the American that makes cakes? And this lady had never met me and she lives like 3 hours away. But everybody knows everything in Georgia. It is a very, very close knit. And she was like, yes, I know the girl that makes cakes. That's Melissa. She's my friend. And she was like, oh, can you tell me about her cakes? And she wanted to know all about it.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:31] You should have made a cookbook for everybody.

LOFFLER: [00:51:33] I should have, I should have.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:34] You could still do that now.

LOFFLER: [00:51:36] I could. But unfortunately, a lot of the things you can't get here, like even like vanilla there is a powdered form. It's not a liquid form. So that makes a huge difference in how things taste and they are much more into, um, not so moist. So like they would make cakes and they were delicious as well, but much more dry than we are here, so than we have here. And like cookies, they're pretty nonexistent there. They did have some things, Britannia, which is like a Russian cookie, but it's much more less flavorful and much more hard and.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:06] Hmm.

LOFFLER: [00:52:06] Yeah. So they. Snickerdoodles to them, which snickerdoodles is one that's not so hard. My host family, they have all

of my recipes written down and they love them. But I don't know how often they make them.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:16] You could have a Melissa Bakery.

LOFFLER: [00:52:18] Right? No, one of the language coordinating, language cultural facilitators, when I was there in March. She was like, Melissa, I have this business plan. You have to come and we have to open this, a bakery in Tbilisi. And I was like, OK, Ana, if I ever get like, you know, enough money and enough like excitement to come back here and live across the world again, that would be a fun job for sure. Because I loved baking when I was there. There was so much time. Even though we were working hard and doing a lot of things, you still had so much free time because you're not driving anywhere. You're not going to the movies, you're not doing any of these. In fact, I never went out to eat with my host family, not once. They don't go out to dinner or anything like that. They have dinner at home. That's just how it is. So we had lots of time to cook lots of things.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:07] So what do you think your impact was in Georgia or in your town?

LOFFLER: [00:53:14] I mean, I don't know. I think. A lot of people would always say you're so free. And I just thought it was [speaks Georgian]. And I was like, what? Like free? Like, I don't even understand this word. And I think a lot of it is, in Georgia they have been through so much. There has been so many people like, you know, invade Georgia and take things from Georgia. Like when Russia was there, they wouldn't let them practice their faith even. And so I think people are extremely open and want to know everything about you and will give you anything they have.

LOFFLER: [00:53:53] But when they first meet you, it doesn't seem, whenever they first see you, I should say. Because I would walk down the street and I'm used to smiling at people whenever you see them. And I did learn that you can't do that with men because they will take that the wrong way. But with women, especially old women, I can't see like a

*bebia* is what it's called in Georgian, like an old grandmother, and not smile at her on the street. And I remember like one time so clearly this lady, I smiled at her and I said hello. And she was like, I don't, I don't recognize you. Who are you? Where do I know you from? And I was like, oh, you don't know me. I'm from Texas. And she was like, from where? She was like, from America? And I'm like, yes, in the United States. And she's like, why are you smiling at me? And I was like, just because I thought you looked nice and that's what we do. And so I think that that probably was something.

LOFFLER: [00:54:42] Um, I remember at my exit interview with the school, with my program manager, my director for my school, and my counterpart, they, uh. Asmat, which was my program manager and such an inspiration the whole time I was there, whenever we were leaving, she said, Melissa, I don't know if you really understood what just. She was like, I know your Georgian is really well, really great. She was like, but I don't think you understand what they just said. And I was like, I think I understood like the majority of it. And she was like, I asked what your impact was here and what they think that, you know, the greatest thing that you left here was. And she was like, they said that your manners were one of the best things, that you would always remind the kids to say please and to say thank you. And she was like, and that they do that now, they do it and it's just customary. And that, and she was like, a lot of times whenever I interview people, you know, they'll tell me like what they think I want to hear.

LOFFLER: [00:55:40] And she was like, and then several years down the road, they'll come back and tell me, you know, Melissa really did this. But it takes a while for them to realize that just because once you're gone, they start seeing the things that you did. She was like, but for you to have made this impact and for them to recognize it before you even leave the country? She was like, I'm kind of nervous about the one that's coming in after you because I hope that, you know, but again, that girl was awesome as well and she did an amazing job and people love her just as much as they love me. So I don't know. It made me feel like really special.



GANZGLASS: [00:56:14] That's good.

LOFFLER: [00:56:14] Because I think it's something nice to have good manners and it's.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:17] More important than learning English.

LOFFLER: [00:56:18] Maybe so. You know, I mean, the thing is, is like if they want to learn English, they'll learn English. And like I remember too, my mom told me, because you know I said there were times where I had ups and downs. And then so many things, I remember, this is. I'm sorry, I get very distracted and all over the place. But I remember one day, three things happened. I talked to three women that I just, made my day. So I was walking to school and this grandmother, this *bebia*, comes outside and started rubbing my face and she was like, you're our girl, you're our girl. She was like, thank you so much for getting Luka so excited, blah, blah, blah. And I'm like, which one is Luka? Because again, in Georgia, everyone has very similar names. There's 15 Lukas in first grade. So, you know, anyway, I didn't know which Luka this would be, but she was like, he's so excited about going to school, blah, blah, blah.

LOFFLER: [00:57:07] And so I get to class and I tell him, you know, my counterpart, I was like, you know, like the orange house, the tall one on the left on the way to school, who lives there, which Luka? And she says, ah, Grigaleshpe. And I was like, OK, well, his mom, his grandma is so excited. And she was like, oh, that makes sense. Because for the Writer of the Week thing, he turned in like six entries. So like he had gotten really excited. And whenever I talked to Asmat that day, I had just like, she was just calling to check in. And she, I told her, you know, sometimes I get so discouraged because I think like, you know, this kid's not coming to class as much or this kid. But she was like, Melissa, you have to celebrate the small victories. You have to get excited about Luka writing these six Writer of the Week entries. And my mom, she said, Melissa, when I talked to her that night and I was telling her about my day. And she was like, think about it. She was like, that grandma is excited about Luka. She was like, Luka is going to want his

kids to be excited. And Luka is going to want his grandkids to be. And it'll just obviously, like, keep going, right? And like, the importance of education will one day be there.

LOFFLER: [00:58:06] You can't change everything in one day, in one, two years, and ten years. Like it's just like a slow moving process, just like it was in the United States for everything to come where it is. And we're still not there, right? So it's all about like, you know, celebrating the small stuff. Which everyone says, but it's hard to do whenever you're there and you want so much to be able to make a bigger impact or whatever so. I think I answered the question?

GANZGLASS: [00:58:31] I think you totally did.

LOFFLER: [00:58:33] And then I gave you more.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:34] So I asked about the first goal of Peace Corps and the third goal. Let me ask about the second goal, which is kind of bringing the world back to the United States?

LOFFLER: [00:58:45] So, yeah, so I am really lucky I'm able to do that. I think that that started happening before I even left for Peace Corps, because as soon as I got Georgia, I posted it on Facebook and told all of my friends and everyone starts looking and like, oh my gosh, like this is Georgia and blah blah blah, and oh, and that's where wine is from and you know, all kinds of things like that. So there was that. And then obviously when I was there I was doing a blog and, I mean, it was for my friends and family. It wasn't like I was trying to become this like famous blog writer because I have way too many grammatical errors for that. But it was just nice to like keep people abreast of what was going on and share pictures with them and that kind of stuff. Like I said, the world is so much smaller. It was really cool to be able to share that. And obviously pictures and things through Facebook as well and Instagram and whatever. And then now in school I'm able to like share it.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:38] So you're teaching now?

LOFFLER: [00:59:40] Well, I'm a flight attendant still.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:42] Oh.

LOFFLER: [00:59:42] I went back to flying. I've been back there about a year and a half, but I also substitute teach as well at the same school that I've been for about ten years. And so they are very kind and they will let me, every March, do a big presentation for Peace Corps and the kids go crazy because I'll write their names in Georgian. And in fact, I like have like a little piece of paper that I basically just Xeroxed and I put it on red because Georgia's color, Georgia's color, the flag is red and white. But I write the whole alphabet for them and its English letter translation. And so they're able. One little girl was like writing all of her, all of her like diary entries, journal entries for school, in Georgian letters. But English words, but with Georgian letters. And that to me is really cool. And they like, they learn the word *gaumarjos* and. Or not *gaumarjos*. *Gamarjoba*, which is hello. *Gaumarjos* is cheers. I did not teach them that one, but yeah. So it's really neat.

LOFFLER: [01:00:40] And I mean on the airplane as well. Like people will say, oh, you speak Spanish so well. I'm like, yeah, and they're like, that's so cool. You're bilingual. I'm like, actually, I speak more than two. And they're like, what other language? And so I'm able to share a little bit then as well. So it's nice. It's really nice.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:56] Excellent. Excellent.

LOFFLER: [01:00:57] Thanks.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:58] So it's a really good interview. Thank you.

LOFFLER: [01:01:00] Thank you. I appreciate it. I'm glad.

[END OF INTERVIEW]