

Beth Shearer Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

Beth Shearer served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from 1970 to 1973 as a secondary school teacher.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Beth Shearer

November 6, 2018
Arlington, Virginia

By Julius Sztuk

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

SZTUK: [00:00:00] When that red light comes on, we're recording. Today is November 6th, 2018. This is Jay Sztuk, and I'm interviewing Beth Shearer, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from October 1970 to March 1973. And Beth worked as a secondary education teacher. Beth, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed today. Let's start by talking about your pre Peace Corps experience. How did you originally hear about Peace Corps and what motivated you to join?

SHEARER: [00:00:38] When John Kennedy was running for president, he was still a senator. He announced the Peace Corps, I believe, at the University of Wisconsin. And as soon as I heard about it, I thought, wow, that sounds like such a wonderful idea. That's something I want to do. And so I heard about it when I was still a preteen, and luckily when I got engaged, my fiancé wanted to do the Peace Corps as well. So it was an easy do.

SZTUK: [00:01:11] So you were married when you joined the Peace Corps?

SHEARER: [00:01:14] Correct.

SZTUK: [00:01:15] And how did your family feel about you taking off and going to this strange, exotic country?

SHEARER: [00:01:22] My dad worked for USAID. He was a foreign service officer. So I grew up overseas. So Fiji was an awfully nice place. And, you know, it didn't seem strange to be going since I wasn't, you know, since I'd spent my whole life traveling.

SZTUK: [00:01:39] So you visited a lot of countries before, like? Name a few.

SHEARER: [00:01:45] Lived in Turkey, Guatemala, Libya, Korea, Pakistan. And then, of course, visited countries as we were traveling to and from. So I've seen quite a few.

SZTUK: [00:01:57] So when you applied, did you select Fiji as a destination or did it?

SHEARER: [00:02:01] We applied while we were still engaged. We applied as a couple and we specified, we said our first choice would be East Africa. Kenya seemed very romantic. Then the South Pacific, and I can't remember what our third choice was. So when Fiji came out, that was delightful.

SZTUK: [00:02:21] Yeah. And so you got the invitation to go to Fiji and I assume you accepted.

SHEARER: [00:02:28] Oh, immediately.

SZTUK: [00:02:30] So what the process after that? Did you do, um, did you have any kind of orientation? Or what was the process? From the time you were accepted, what happened until you actually started, got to Fiji or began your work?

SHEARER: [00:02:47] Graduated college, got married, was working as a clerk typist. Because that's sort of what choices were. You could be a teacher or a clerk typist, right, as a woman in 1970. At the University of Maryland that I graduated from. And we knew we would be going in October because it was quite a few months before we left that we got the news. And then we actually trained in country. We had a little bit of an orientation in San Jose. We stopped in Hawaii and then we went to Fiji and trained in country, dormed at the University of the South Pacific.

SZTUK: [00:03:29] Anything memorable about your training experience there? Did you spend a lot of time in language training?

SHEARER: [00:03:40] We spent a fair amount of time in Hindi training because we were going to Labasa, which is, it's got Indians, Fijians, part Europeans. So while we spent a lot of time in language training, um, it didn't, I never really used it. So I didn't learn a language like many did who had to use it.

SZTUK: [00:04:07] And you didn't use it why?

SHEARER: [00:04:09] If I would say something in Hindi to somebody, they would respond in English. It was pointless.

SZTUK: [00:04:17] So the level of English was pretty good with the Fijian population and your students?

SHEARER: [00:04:22] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:04:27] So in addition to the language training, did you guys do any home stays or anything like that?

SHEARER: [00:04:32] We did. We went and stayed a week with a couple. I think they were in Sigatoka or near Sigatoka, and they had a bure within walking distance of a beautiful beach. In Labasa, there was no such thing as beaches. We had lots of mangrove swamps, but no beaches. And I thought it was so funny because they said they never go to the beach. And I thought, how could you live here and not go to the beach on a daily basis? It seemed like a real waste.

SZTUK: [00:05:10] I want to back up for just a minute. So you had lived in other countries, so traveling wasn't anything new to you. But what was your first impression when you flew into Fiji, when you first touched ground there on the island? Do you remember how you felt?

SHEARER: [00:05:32] Yeah. You know, Nadi seemed very, having lived in India and Pakistan, Nadi seemed sort of typical to me. It didn't seem real strange. We traveled by bus from Nadi overland to Suva, and at the time the roads weren't paved. So I noticed that. But I think the funniest thing was we stopped on the bus to have lunch at some place, at a hotel I suppose. And for dessert, we ordered ice cream. And they said, would you like to try passion fruit? And I had never seen a passion fruit before. And when they cut open the passion fruit and out came these black seeds and yellow goo, I was like, oh my God, no. I mean, but then when you bit into it, it was just an amazing experience. And so I thought that was a pretty good omen for my stay that, you know, it might look a little different, but it sure is good and very welcoming.

SZTUK: [00:06:36] Yeah. Yeah, delicious. So did you think there was a big difference between you and some of the other volunteers in your group? You, having traveled a lot before, and a lot of other people, I would imagine, had never been out of the country and never been on a tropical island. Did you?

SHEARER: [00:06:59] You know, we didn't talk about that.

SZTUK: [00:07:03] And you didn't observe any anything?

SHEARER: [00:07:09] One of the wonderful things about Fiji is you never felt like an ugly American like you did some other places. The other thing, as a third culture kid, both Ben and I were third culture kids. We'd both lived overseas. Is when you go back to the States, you don't talk about it.

SZTUK: [00:07:29] Really?

SHEARER: [00:07:30] It's just something you keep and, well, because people. The reactions of people is not always. It's not always kind. As a third culture kid that you can. And anyway, I had some experiences where I just learned to keep it to myself.

SZTUK: [00:07:57] So you didn't share your experiences with other folks? They probably wouldn't really relate well anyway. Or understand.

SHEARER: [00:08:06] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:08:07] Yeah. That's an experience a lot of people have when they return from Peace Corps.

SHEARER: [00:08:11] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:08:11] Yeah. Yeah. So tell us. Tell me about this town where you were assigned, Labasa.

SHEARER: [00:08:21] Labasa. We were in, we were assigned to teach at All Saints Junior Secondary School, which was an Anglican school. And it was a little bit out of town. We'd have to take a bus there. And we lived in a, well, I wouldn't call it a hut. It was more than a hut, a house with a tin roof and the walls were woven bamboo. And we lived on the Anglican Church compound, so the Anglican priest was also there. I used to love walking at night with a full moon because you didn't need a flashlight, although other times you definitely had to have a flashlight because there were no streetlights so you could see all the stars. The town wasn't huge. There was one main street. The ritziest place to go was the Grand Pacific, I believe it was called, which I don't think we much went to. I mean, we went to movies and we went to the local Chinese restaurant and got fresh bread from the bakery. And I loved it. I really enjoyed it.

SZTUK: [00:09:39] Did you make connections there in the neighborhood? How long did it take before you kind of felt at home there or was it immediate or take a while to settle in?

SHEARER: [00:09:58] It didn't seem to take too long to settle in. And most of the socializing we did was with other teachers at school. And to this day, I've got some friends, a British couple, the Birches, who live in New Zealand. And so we spent a fair amount of time with them.

SZTUK: [00:10:21] So were the teachers, most of the teachers at school, locals or expatriates?

SHEARER: [00:10:27] Most were local, so both Indo Fijians and Fijians. The principal was from Australia.

SZTUK: [00:10:38] OK. And, um, so how'd you like your job? Tell me about a typical day there teaching at the school.

SHEARER: [00:10:46] So a typical day of teaching at the school. We would. I can't believe I did this but. We'd make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich every day for lunch and eat it at teatime with the teachers. And there would be, whenever Ben was away, I'd stop at the local store and get a, you know, what did they call them? You've got a chapati with curry inside.

SZTUK: [00:11:15] Roti parcel.

SHEARER: [00:11:16] Yeah. Roti parcel. I don't know why I didn't do a roti parcel every day, but what can you say?

SZTUK: [00:11:24] Peanut butter was a little bit hard to get and different things.

SHEARER: [00:11:28] I suppose, yeah. Yeah. Um, I hate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches now. Had way too many of them. So. You know, I taught English as a second language. I taught Fijian history, started up a library and trained the kids on how to do the library. Of course there was phys ed. And I remember, you know, sitting with the teachers for tea every day. Is that? I mean, I guess, I think that's a correct memory.

SZTUK: [00:12:06] So they would have a break?

SHEARER: [00:12:08] Yeah. I wonder what the kids were doing. Who was watching the kids?

SZTUK: [00:12:16] Well, how did you find the kids to teach? Did they give you a lot of trouble or was it easy or hard?

SHEARER: [00:12:24] No, they were incredibly respectful. I have a funny story of my very first day of teaching. So the school. They were building a new school. And so before the school was dedicated we were still on the Anglican compound, and I can remember my very first teaching experience. Nobody had books, and I had had been trained as a, I had a teacher's certificate from the state of Maryland. So I diligently put together my lesson plan, and questions I would ask. And so I knew I was going to be reading something and then I was, because this was comprehension that we were getting at. And so I set it up with, you know, with some talk. And then I read the item. And then there was complete and total silence. And I thought, this isn't quite right. So I said, does anyone have any questions? And finally, this part European young lady says, madam, we didn't understand a word you said.

SZTUK: [00:13:44] No kidding.

SHEARER: [00:13:47] It was like, OK.

SZTUK: [00:13:50] Because of your American accent?

SHEARER: [00:13:52] Or maybe I was talking too fast. Could be the American accent. But the kids were delightful and I really. They appreciated the fact that I didn't use corporal punishment. And it was interesting because that was what they were used to was, you know, if you didn't get the answer right, thwack, you know. But they got so that they expected not to have corporal punishment, not just from me, but from any teacher. I thought, well, that's certainly a culture change.

SZTUK: [00:14:28] Yeah. So, you know, to find out that it's not that way everywhere.

SHEARER: [00:14:33] Yeah. And the second year when I read something from Time magazine, the kids were skeptical. And I said, well, it's Time magazine, how can you not believe it? And then they'd tell me why not. And I thought, I've made huge progress here.

SZTUK: [00:14:48] So, um, how did you eventually get them to understand you? Do you remember?

SHEARER: [00:14:58] Luckily, we got books so that they could read along.

SZTUK: [00:15:04] So they could follow?

SHEARER: [00:15:04] And I think it was just, maybe it was just a matter of time, you know, slowing down, them getting used to my accent.

SZTUK: [00:15:13] So Labasa is on a different island from where you did your training, right?

SHEARER: [00:15:17] Correct.

SZTUK: [00:15:17] You trained in Suva?

SHEARER: [00:15:19] Viti Levu. Trained in Suva at Viti Levu, and Labasa is in Vanua Levu.

SZTUK: [00:15:24] So back then in 1970, how did you get from Suva to Labasa?

SHEARER: [00:15:30] Flew in a DC-3, and they weighed you before you got on so that they could distribute the weight.

SZTUK: [00:15:38] There were only like, what, six passengers or something?

SHEARER: [00:15:41] I think they were probably 14 passengers or so.

SZTUK: [00:15:44] And was there an airport in Labasa?

SHEARER: [00:15:47] Yes.

SZTUK: [00:15:49] What was that like?

SHEARER: [00:15:51] It was a dirt strip and a, um, like maybe one room. So it worked just fine. And when I went back in 2011, it was still the same strip. But the building was bigger.

SZTUK: [00:16:15] Really, in all that time they haven't improved the airport? Because I imagine the town is a little bit bigger now.

SHEARER: [00:16:22] Quite a bit.

SZTUK: [00:16:22] Quite a bit bigger. So your living arrangements there. You said you lived on the school compound. Did you get out into town much and interact with folks in town outside of school much?

SHEARER: [00:16:35] Yeah, sure. Because, you know, you had to get your food in the marketplace. There the only fresh meat was turtle meat. So if you wanted some other kind of meat, you'd go to the, what was the, the grocery store?

SZTUK: [00:16:54] MH?

SHEARER: [00:16:56] No, it's the one with two letters or something. Anyway, so you could get frozen hamburger there, which, we had cats at the time. And so you'd get the frozen hamburger and when they were grinding, when they're cutting it, you would have these little pieces of hamburger. That's what we would give the cats, whatever, because we didn't have cat food.

SZTUK: [00:17:24] Oh, OK.

SHEARER: [00:17:26] Um. But it was, so yeah. Going to market. And we went to the movies probably two or three times a week.

SZTUK: [00:17:37] Really?

SHEARER: [00:17:38] And we, yeah. And the movies were, you know, like a year late from the U.S. We ate at the Chinese restaurant, and there were other

volunteers in Labasa that we'd meet and eat at the Chinese restaurant. There are no Indian restaurants. I mean, you cooked a lot of Indian food, but.

SZTUK: [00:18:03] Right. Well, I think back then the Indians would eat at home.

SHEARER: [00:18:10] Right.

SZTUK: [00:18:11] So to have anything other than a place to get a roti parcel was unusual.

SHEARER: [00:18:16] And I love, you know, sometimes the baker, uh, getting that fresh bread every day was just an amazing experience, especially if it was hot from the oven. But, I mean, our refrigerator was very small. You just couldn't keep a lot of stuff there. But the fresh fruit was great. We'd make salads with passion fruit, pineapple, and bananas, and you'd get those little ladyfingers bananas. So you would stop, we'd stop almost every day on the way home to pick up what it was that we were going to fix for dinner that night.

SZTUK: [00:18:55] So was there a time when you would go to the market and people would not see you as a tourist anymore or a foreigner? It became like you became a regular fixture in town.

SHEARER: [00:19:16] I probably didn't think of myself that way because, I mean, Labasa was big enough that, you know, you wouldn't know everybody like you would in a village. But I think I can remember one time I went into Suva and I looked around and I thought, God, there's so many pale faces here. And I thought, oops, I am one. Because I forgot I wasn't. I was other.

SZTUK: [00:19:47] You felt like a local.

SHEARER: [00:19:48] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:19:48] Yeah. So did you feel comfortable from the time you arrived there then, you just kind of fit right in?

SHEARER: [00:19:57] It feels like it. And I can remember sitting out. One of our neighbors would show movies on this white wall he had, and we'd all sit there on the ground and watch it at night.

SZTUK: [00:20:09] Yeah.

SHEARER: [00:20:10] And we did that a fair amount. So there was no TV, which was just fine.

SZTUK: [00:20:20] So how did you spend a typical evening there? There's no TV.

SHEARER: [00:20:24] Reading books.

SZTUK: [00:20:24] Finished school.

SHEARER: [00:20:25] Listening to music. Correcting papers. There were daily, you know, daily tasks. I guess we would do the laundry once a week, but we didn't, of course, didn't have a washing machine and we had to hang the laundry out. And it only got a problem during the rainy season when you had to hang it all inside. Um. It was pretty nice.

SZTUK: [00:20:56] So you guys did have electricity in your house?

SHEARER: [00:20:57] We had electricity. And running water.

SZTUK: [00:21:01] No hot water?

SHEARER: [00:21:02] No hot water. Kerosene stove. And yeah, but we did have electricity, so no screens. The bugs would live in the walls and if we tried to exterminate them, they'd all scramble out and then they'd come back in when the coast is clear.

SZTUK: [00:21:21] Oh, right. Because you had the bamboo walls.

SHEARER: [00:21:24] Yeah. So you learned to live with a lot.

SZTUK: [00:21:28] Yeah.

SHEARER: [00:21:30] And we had these little toads that would come in and eat the cat's food. I guess when you look back on it, it sounds a little strange, but it seemed perfectly normal at the time.

SZTUK: [00:21:46] Who is the country director when you were there?

SHEARER: [00:21:49] Dan Cantor.

SZTUK: [00:21:53] And any memorable experiences with Dan or Peace Corps staff, local staff there, while you were there?

SHEARER: [00:22:08] Um, I know we interacted with Dan and, you know, there'd be times when we would be going in to Suva and there'd be parties. I always felt, uh. Dan Cantor was, I looked at him like a dad sort of. I thought it was a very supportive environment. One time one of our volunteers, we lost him. I can remember Ben and I were working with Dan and we did find him. He didn't realize he'd been lost.

SZTUK: [00:22:47] He just disappeared, out of communication for a few days? Was this during training?

SHEARER: [00:22:54] No. This was after. This was afterwards, sort of a. The training we all did together. And so it was, um. We lost Roger. He was a great big guy with blond hair. And I can imagine going into some small village. And I wonder what they thought, you know? It was because he was big. I think he must have been frightening.

SZTUK: [00:23:26] Yeah.

SHEARER: [00:23:26] But, no, I don't think he realized he was lost.

SZTUK: [00:23:29] He was just having a good time somewhere?

SHEARER: [00:23:31] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:23:34] And back then, if you were out of town, there weren't many ways to contact, right? You didn't have cell phones, didn't have internet.

SHEARER: [00:23:46] No cell phone, no internet. There must have been a phone in town because, there had to be a phone in town, right? Because I know one time, I called to get into Suva so I could get a tooth extracted. Of course they questioned me. Why do you have to come into Suva? Can't you get it done there? I said, there's one dentist at Labasa Hospital and he has no novocaine. It was like, OK. But yeah, no. I thought the Peace Corps staff was very supportive. They were there for us.

SZTUK: [00:24:28] So what are some of your most memorable experiences about living and teaching in Labasa?

SHEARER: [00:24:36] There's a couple. I think probably the one that I'm fondest of is since I had lived in Pakistan, I had taken classical Indian dancing. And when we opened up the school, we had a dedication ceremony and the Minister of Education came for the opening ceremony. Boy, that shows you how tiny Fiji was at the time. If you'd have the Minister of Education come for your dedication, that's pretty impressive I thought. And so I had taught a group of girls and I had the music for a classical Indian dance, and the girls were part European, Indo Fijian, and Fijian. And so here's this Indian dancing. And the Minister of Education was just really impressed that it was so diverse. And he said, and who taught them? Oh, an American Peace Corps volunteer. And I just thought that was a hoot.

SZTUK: [00:25:36] Yeah. And he was probably an Indian.

SHEARER: [00:25:39] I think, no, I was Fijian.

SZTUK: [00:25:40] Yeah. OK.

SHEARER: [00:25:43] Yeah. Um. We could go. There were some islands off of Labasa that we could go to and go snorkeling and stuff that actually had a beach. But the mangrove swamps are absolutely essential to the ecosystem. And I don't know that I appreciated them that much when I was there. One of the things that surprised me when I went back in 2011

is I went back to where our house was, and they have a new house there. There was sugar cane fields in back of us that had been cleared and the Labasa River was there. I had no idea there was a river there when I lived there for two years. It's, you know, you just walk from the compound out to the road to catch the bus and, you know.

SZTUK: [00:26:38] Never walked back to the river. Somebody's farm.

SHEARER: [00:26:40] Well, it was covered with sugar cane. It was. And there were rats in the sugar cane. No, I didn't go back there.

SZTUK: [00:26:50] So doing an activity like that, teaching the girls how to dance. I'm sure it was a lot of fun and probably a good bonding experience, and you'd probably get close to a lot of the students through that kind of activity, huh?

SHEARER: [00:27:05] You know, I suppose close. There was always, uh, there was always a respectful distance, the teacher student difference. Had they been older kids, because these were the equivalent of ninth and 10th grade. And maybe had it been form five and six, which is a little older, there might have been more closeness or less of a distance. But the kids were always respectful. And, you know, in a school setting, that's what you want to have.

SZTUK: [00:27:43] That's the way it is.

SHEARER: [00:27:44] Yeah. So we didn't live with a family to get to know a family like some of the single folks did.

SZTUK: [00:27:54] And your husband taught at the same school?

SHEARER: [00:27:56] Yeah, he taught math and science.

SZTUK: [00:27:59] OK. And then did you get time away at all? Did you get to travel to other parts of Fiji while you're out there and take some vacations?

SHEARER: [00:28:08] During the school breaks.

SZTUK: [00:28:08] As a teacher you must have had some time off.

SHEARER: [00:28:10] Yeah, during school breaks. But we would, I know during one long school break we worked at the office with Dan Cantor. That's when we lost Roger. And he was a teacher too. So we didn't travel, like some people went to Australia and New Zealand. We didn't do that but we did go to Savusavu. We hiked over the hill to Savusavu.

SZTUK: [00:28:38] How long did that take you, do you remember?

SHEARER: [00:28:40] It took a full day and there were no paths. There are now. I think there's probably a paved road now. And at one point we are in the middle of nowhere and Ben says, we're not lost. Look, we're here on the map. I'm thinking, we're lost. We ended up rappelling down a place.

SZTUK: [00:29:07] You're kidding.

SHEARER: [00:29:07] And we finally, we finally made it to the Savusavu side. And some Fijian women greeted us. And we got to Roger's place, Roger Ferry, the guy that got lost. He lived in Savusavu and he had not a stick of furniture in his house. He got all his meals from his family. Apparently, he. This is Roger. He'd gone on some sort of binge and broken all the furniture in his house. It was not the most comfortable place in the world, but that was Roger.

SZTUK: [00:29:42] Just mats on the floor.

SHEARER: [00:29:44] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:29:44] Well, probably worked for a lot of people.

SHEARER: [00:29:46] Yeah, that's true. You know, it wasn't, you know, newspaper and mats, not too bad.

SZTUK: [00:29:54] So I did that same walk in the opposite direction. I remembered parrots when you get up at the top of the hill there in the trees. And it was a different climate up there.

SHEARER: [00:30:07] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:30:07] So yeah. Any other memorable experiences that you want to share?

SHEARER: [00:30:13] We had an in-country service training up in the hills in Viti Levu. And it was, I was amazed that, you know, pine trees, and now they've got a whole forestry industry with the pine trees. And it was cool, cold. Yeah. It was like you were in a different country altogether.

SHEARER: [00:30:38] Um, fire walking. Now I know the Fijians do fire walking near Sigatoka. In Labasa, the Indians did the firewalking and we went to watch it. And they looked, we took pictures of some of the firewalkers and they put needles through their cheeks, long needles, and they looked kind of dazed. I mean, they went through all kinds of chanting and stuff. I bet, I mean, they looked like they were on drugs. But we took one picture of this fellow with this long skewer through his cheeks, and then we took a picture of him afterwards. And there was not a mark.

SZTUK: [00:31:24] Really?

SHEARER: [00:31:24] There was no mark. And they used embers as opposed to the stones that the Fijians used. But I'll never forget that, there was not a mark on his cheeks. And they didn't burn their feet either. I mean, it was a hot fire. I don't know how they did it.

SZTUK: [00:31:45] Yeah, I don't know how that works. You had never seen anything like that when you lived in Pakistan?

SHEARER: [00:31:53] No. Um. Did they do fire walking in Pakistan, you know, or did they develop it in Fiji? Who knows?

SZTUK: [00:32:07] All right. So you were in in Fiji for about two and a half years.

SHEARER: [00:32:11] Correct.

SZTUK: [00:32:12] Yeah. Was it hard to leave?

SHEARER: [00:32:17] In some ways, it was really hard to leave. In other ways, not so hard. I mean, it was a fabulous two and a half years. It obviously really influenced me and, you know, life outlook and so forth. It was a, Fiji was a fantastic country to be a Peace Corps volunteer in. It didn't have, I mean, yeah, it had some problems, but it was a welcoming country. The poverty wasn't extreme. And in fact, I mean, I never saw a malnourished Fijian. And I certainly in India saw malnourished. And I have to say that the people were extraordinary and so open.

SHEARER: [00:33:17] One of the other things that I remember from Fiji is they had a South Pacific festival and so we saw Australian, uh.

SZTUK: [00:33:30] Aborigines?

SHEARER: [00:33:30] Aborigines doing dances and they looked just like the animals and playing the didgeridoo and you know, and so the Aborigine culture was really different from the Fijian culture. But you know, New Zealand with their dancing and the mecces in Fiji, there are some similarities in the different Pacific countries and it was great to see that South Pacific festival. How did I get on that? It just, um.

SHEARER: [00:33:58] But I can remember coming back to, we stopped in Hawaii. We thought maybe we'd settle in Hawaii. It's kind of like Fiji, right? And walking into a grocery store and seeing like 50 loaves of different types of bread and they're sliced. It was all these choices that you had that, I mean in Labasa you had one type of bread. You got it at the baker and that was it. And you sliced it yourself. And it was, the cars were so fast. And because if you're on dirt roads or gravel roads, you're just not going as fast as you do on a paved road.

SZTUK: [00:34:37] Right.

SHEARER: [00:34:38] So the culture shock coming back to the U.S. was noticeable and having all those choices.

SZTUK: [00:34:45] Especially after that long a time, because you hadn't come back to the States during your service.

SHEARER: [00:34:51] Did you find that experience?

SZTUK: [00:34:52] Sure.

SHEARER: [00:34:56] Yeah. And I guess more than anything, sometimes I think it'd be a whole lot easier if we had fewer choices.

SZTUK: [00:35:07] You're probably right. Life would be a lot less complicated.

SHEARER: [00:35:13] You know, it was a great two and a half years, but it was time for the next chapter. And don't forget, I grew up every 2 to 3 years moving and going to a newer place. So the hard thing for me was when I actually settled down and didn't move.

SZTUK: [00:35:30] Right. So your post Peace Corps Fiji experience now, it's been 48 years since you went there. 48 years, coming up on 50 here. But you still remain connected. Do you think the connection to Fiji is maybe stronger than a lot of other places you lived?

SHEARER: [00:35:51] Oh, absolutely.

SZTUK: [00:35:52] Why do you think so?

SHEARER: [00:35:54] Because of the Friends of Fiji, no question. The Friends of Fiji is a 501(c)(3) and you, Jay, are currently our president and we raise funds for development projects in Fiji. I went back in 2011 when we did a Habitat for Humanity project. I would not have the connection to Fiji without the Friends of Fiji.

SZTUK: [00:36:22] But do you think it's got something to do with the people of Fiji itself?

SHEARER: [00:36:26] Oh, it very well could be. Like I say, I've never felt like an ugly American there and the Fijian community here in D.C. has been very active with us and they stay connected. The Embassy of Fiji I think has valued the Friends of Fiji and the Peace Corps, so I'm not sure I would. Yes, it has to do with Fiji, it has to do with the Fijian culture and a group of people that, returned volunteers that want to keep helping. I think it's interesting that we don't call ourselves ex-volunteers, we're returned volunteers.

SZTUK: [00:37:15] Right. Right. Yeah, that's a good point. So now you live this kind of life of world travel leading up to your service in Fiji. And so you may have had a natural tendency to be more of a world citizen than most people. But do you think that the Peace Corps experience, that volunteer experience, had an influence on the rest of your life?

SHEARER: [00:37:48] Absolutely.

SZTUK: [00:37:49] Shaped your future in some way?

SHEARER: [00:37:50] Absolutely. You know, people would say, oh, you're so brave. I'm thinking, there's no bravery involved in this. And, oh, you really gave up a lot. And I thought, no, I got a lot out of the experience. I can't, you know, I can't say I gave more than I got. I think I got a whole lot more. And I'm forever grateful for that.

SZTUK: [00:38:21] And you continue to volunteer.

SHEARER: [00:38:24] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:38:25] So it's probably shaped your worldview in some way?

SHEARER: [00:38:28] Oh, absolutely.

SZTUK: [00:38:31] All right. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything you want to go back and revisit?

SHEARER: [00:38:41] Hmm. I wish, um. You know, I lived there as a couple and I think single folks probably got more out of the experience than I did. We used to go over to Doug and Matilda Gibson's house. Matilda, Mattie, was a teacher at the school and we had some great times, but I don't think I cultivated those relationships enough. I mean, I'm still, I still see Mattie on Facebook, which we didn't have when I was there. But I'm not, I wish I had done a bit more because Ben and I were kind of quiet and we'd read a lot at night. And we're not extroverts. I think. I think we could have gotten more out of it.

SZTUK: [00:39:40] I've got something I want to question you on, this return trip in 2011.

SHEARER: [00:39:45] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:39:46] Tell me about that. You went back with a pretty large group of other volunteers.

SHEARER: [00:39:51] Yeah, I think there are about 30 of us.

SZTUK: [00:39:53] How was that?

SHEARER: [00:39:54] It was great. It was great. We worked on two different projects. So, you know, there were two groups in different parts, but we all stayed at the same hotel and we. Paul Milo had a thing at the school that he had taught at. And just being back there, having the *lovo* at the project, getting together was, um. Yep, it was great.

SZTUK: [00:40:26] Now these weren't people that you necessarily knew before. You probably knew some of them.

SHEARER: [00:40:32] Yeah, but not many. And some of them I've kept in touch with. So that's been great.

SZTUK: [00:40:38] Did you feel some kind of, like you guys all had some kind of commonality and?

SHEARER: [00:40:43] Mm hmm. Yeah. You know, I took my son and daughter-in-law with me, and some other people had their kids with them. And so there was, you know, there was an intergenerational sort of sharing as well. So it was really good.

SZTUK: [00:41:02] So on this trip, I'm going to make you try to remember a little bit. There must have been something memorable that happened in that, during that Habitat build, or something that.

SHEARER: [00:41:19] I'm thinking back to all the pictures. And, you know, the thing that surprised me was the torrential rains in Suva. I couldn't believe it. And then we had to cross over a bridge that was flooded out. And I can remember as I was there, one of the things that we've, Friends of Fiji has funded a lot of, are cement walkways.

SZTUK: [00:41:47] Right.

SHEARER: [00:41:48] And when I was there in 2011, I understood completely because of the rain and the mud which I encountered, how important those walkways were.

SZTUK: [00:41:59] Paved walkways.

SHEARER: [00:42:00] But I didn't, I wouldn't have understood without that experience.

SZTUK: [00:42:05] Well, great. All right.

SHEARER: [00:42:08] Thank you.

SZTUK: [00:42:08] Well, thank you, Beth. That concludes the interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]