

Peter Shaker Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Peter Shaker
Interviewer: Patrick Preston
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Biographical Note

Peter K. Shaker served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand from 1984 to 1986 as an English teacher and teacher trainer.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Peter Shaker

May 13, 1994

Danbury, Connecticut

By Patrick Preston

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

PRESTON: [00:00:03] Hello. Welcome to Danbury, Connecticut. It's a beautiful city on a beautiful day. This is the first tape of an interview conducted with Peter Shaker by Patrick Preston in Danbury, Connecticut, on May 13th, 1994. And it's about Peter's experiences in serving in the Peace Corps in Thailand. You know, just start looking at some of these. Now, these are letters that you have?

SHAKER: [00:00:39] Yeah. This is my description of Peace Corps volunteer service that explains what I did as far as my work. If you want to look at that.

PRESTON: [00:00:53] Sure. So you went to Thailand on March 1st, 1981. This is, now this is?

SHAKER: [00:01:00] That explains what I did as far as the teaching and the types of programs I was involved with.

PRESTON: [00:01:13] Now did they prepare this for you when you're leaving?

SHAKER: [00:01:15] Yeah. Yeah. That's part of a close of service document, I guess you can call it. I actually, the volunteers type it up and the, uh, the director signs it. Yeah. So each, each volunteer, I guess it might be even optional. I don't recall. But they recommend that we do it so we can take it back and use it like as a resume when we're looking for, for a job upon returning.

PRESTON: [00:01:45] So it says here you taught, you taught five classes from May '84 to March '85. Is that right?

SHAKER: [00:01:52] Yep. The first year. Yeah, the first year was '84-'85. And I taught several classes at a secondary school.

PRESTON: [00:02:03] You had a hundred students each year?

SHAKER: [00:02:04] Um.

PRESTON: [00:02:06] Was it all at the same time?

SHAKER: [00:02:07] A hundred students? Oh, that was two different classes. Yeah. So I had probably two classes of this, of this course. Two classes of this course. But each class had about 50 students.

PRESTON: [00:02:18] Was it difficult teaching 50 students English at the level? How far advanced were they in?

SHAKER: [00:02:26] Well, the level I taught was, um, was the basic, really the lowest level. If you notice here, the levels are broken into the, the grade levels broken into ten groups. So I had the ninth group and a 10th group. So they were like the bottom kids. And this was their first year in secondary school, which has six grade levels. It's a combination of middle school, junior, junior high school, high school, but it's one school. So they gave me the bottom kids thinking, thinking that I would be able to teach them some English.

PRESTON: [00:03:11] How'd it work?

SHAKER: [00:03:14] Um, they didn't really do too well for the most part. They would pick up some words, you know, like hello, goodbye. Thank you. Some simple stuff. But as far as grammar, writing, I don't recall that, that they did very well. They weren't too interested in learning English.

PRESTON: [00:03:35] Why not? Was it just a cultural?

SHAKER: [00:03:36] Well, they were, um, well, this was a, um, a village type of a school.

PRESTON: [00:03:42] Mm hmm.

SHAKER: [00:03:42] So they, uh, these kids were rather poor.

PRESTON: [00:03:49] How literate were they?

SHAKER: [00:03:49] And they, um, they probably didn't have any. They couldn't see into the future as far as having a need for learning English.

PRESTON: [00:03:58] So there wasn't.

SHAKER: [00:03:59] It's, all these, all the schools in Thailand, all the secondary schools in Thailand, must teach English as a requirement, so all the students learn English in the secondary schools. So they're there whether they like it or not, they have to learn English.

PRESTON: [00:04:16] Now, were these students fairly literate in Thai?

SHAKER: [00:04:21] Yeah, yeah, they were literate in Thai for the most part. Yeah. Yeah. But, um. And the kids that I had were, I had some discipline problems too with a few kids.

PRESTON: [00:04:34] What types of discipline?

SHAKER: [00:04:34] Um, well, nothing compared to what we experience in American schools, you know? But, you know, there were kids that would probably smoke once in a while, that would probably not do their work in class, would interrupt classes by talking, but nothing really that serious. But I mean, again, when you have 50 kids in a class, that presents a problem too.

PRESTON: [00:05:00] Right.

SHAKER: [00:05:01] And the classrooms are really rather small and the desks are small. I have some, I think I have some photographs we can look at that show the schools. Those are letters. The photographs are in here. But the, um, yeah, the schools were really. Well, the school, that first year school, the lighting wasn't that good either. Then you're talking about the heat. You know, it's, the temperature is really, really bad. So it's kind of tough.

PRESTON: [00:05:37] Uh huh. So this is, this is where. There's a picture, welcome to Thailand, is when they, uh.

SHAKER: [00:05:41] This is, uh, this picture here shows the hotel where we met during our first, first day in Thailand. We spent about two days there, I think, two or three days there to just to get an orientation.

PRESTON: [00:05:59] That says 1979. Is that when?

SHAKER: [00:06:01] No, no. That's, that's the group number. Thai 79. It was 1984. March 1st, 1984, was the date we arrived. Our group, which was number 79. The 79th group in Thailand.

PRESTON: [00:06:15] When did the Peace Corps go into Thailand?

SHAKER: [00:06:17] I don't know offhand. I really don't know. I presume it was early on, maybe mid sixties. Well, I don't know. I guess the library would know.

PRESTON: [00:06:31] Right. How many people were in your group?

SHAKER: [00:06:33] There were, um, I'm trying to remember now. Probably close to 30.

PRESTON: [00:06:41] 30 people, wow. Is that large for a Peace Corps group?

SHAKER: [00:06:46] Um, I guess it's about average. Yeah.

PRESTON: [00:06:48] Yeah. Boy, these pictures are wonderful.

SHAKER: [00:06:49] Yeah. I think I took those during the first few weeks I was there. Monks and Buddhist temples.

PRESTON: [00:07:02] So how did you do with the language? Was it, the language training, was it adequate? Did it get you through week two, week three?

SHAKER: [00:07:12] Well, the, uh. Of course they didn't, we didn't learn Thai until we got there. So it was, um, I know in one of my letters I describe the time period. But for the first month, we were focused on just learning Thai and the culture during our training. So we spent, I would say, about seven, seven and a half, 8 hours each day on Monday through Friday, learning, learning Thai for about a month. And just, and then we had some workshops in there regarding the culture. And then Saturday, I guess we had to go half a day or something like that. But it was pretty rigorous.

PRESTON: [00:08:03] Sounds like it.

SHAKER: [00:08:03] I was able to pick it up fairly quickly. But as far as being comfortable with the language, I think it took about six months.

PRESTON: [00:08:14] Six months.

SHAKER: [00:08:14] Yeah. Usually takes about six months to a year to be able to just go anywhere and use the language freely without being too self-conscious about it. But after a while I got, I was able to use it pretty, pretty freely.

PRESTON: [00:08:32] Now, where is this? It looks like a temple. Is that what it is?

SHAKER: [00:08:34] Yeah. This is an ancient, uh. Well, not ancient, but a rather old temple near the Cambodian border. I don't know, maybe if we pull this out we can read the name on it. This is Khmer architecture. And this, I guess, originally was a Buddhist temple. This is called Phimai.

PRESTON: [00:09:00] Phimai?

SHAKER: [00:09:01] Yeah. The area of Thailand is called Phimai. And I was there in 1985.

PRESTON: [00:09:07] Now was that taken on a vacation or is that?

SHAKER: [00:09:09] This was a, uh, let's see. I think we were visiting some schools in that area. The school that I was teaching at, uh, in. Let's see, this was in June, so I was already at my second school in the second year in the south. And they went on a trip. The teachers from the school went on a trip to visit some schools in a different location.

PRESTON: [00:09:36] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [00:09:36] That's often done in Thailand. A group of teachers will get together and go to another part of the country and visit schools just to exchange ideas and learn some new stuff. And while they're, of course, traveling, they, they like to go visit different places along the way. So we stopped at this, um, this old Buddhist temple built near the, uh. This was close to the Khmer border, the Cambodian border.

PRESTON: [00:10:10] And you said you were, you were in your second school by then.

SHAKER: [00:10:14] Right.

PRESTON: [00:10:15] Was that part of the, uh, the assignment, to teach in two different schools?

SHAKER: [00:10:19] Yeah. Yeah. Part of the program was to, was to teach the first year, just teach with students the first year and become comfortable with the, with the school system and learn how the school system, how the school system operates. It's kind of a training ground for your second year, which involved teaching teachers as well.

PRESTON: [00:10:46] Oh, okay.

SHAKER: [00:10:46] The second year in this program, we had to work with teachers and, and help them with teaching English, give them whether it be a demonstration class that they can come and visit, or running a class for them to learn some American idioms or English idioms, or to give them some, um, some methods, different methods of teaching English to the students. So that, that was part of the second year.

PRESTON: [00:11:16] How did you find their motivation to learn English?

SHAKER: [00:11:19] The teachers?

PRESTON: [00:11:21] Yeah.

SHAKER: [00:11:21] The teachers were, I would say, more motivated than the students I had the first year. But there are a lot of motivated students in Thailand. It all depends on where you're living and what your future, what, you know, what the prospects are for your future. If you're rather poor, you probably are not interested. If you come from a wealthy family, then you probably would be more interested in learning English because eventually you might go to a school in the United States or Australia or in England, and so you would need to know English. So as far as the teachers, they seemed to be very interested. What I also did during the second year was travel to different schools in that province. The province.

PRESTON: [00:12:10] Phimai province?

SHAKER: [00:12:10] No, not this province. I mean, the province where I was teaching, Nakhon Si Thammarat in southern Thailand. And I was assigned to a regional educational office which had jurisdiction over many provinces in southern Thailand. And so I was responsible for this province, Nakhon Si Thammarat. And I had to go to different towns whenever I could schedule them and set up workshops with teachers. So when I traveled around, I found that the teachers were, were interested in just, you know, being able to talk to someone from another country in English and maybe learning something at the same time. You know, whether they used the material or not, I have no idea.

PRESTON: [00:13:08] Right. Now, were there anyone else in your group that was going over at the time to teach English? Was it a pretty diversified group?

SHAKER: [00:13:16] No. Everybody in the group was for teaching English, teaching English as a foreign language. It's called TEFL, T-E-F-L for short. And so they usually, everybody in a particular group is usually on the same program.

PRESTON: [00:13:33] Oh, okay. So let's say group 79, it's.

SHAKER: [00:13:38] Yeah, it's a TEFL group, teaching English as a foreign language. But it may, it may be at different levels. I was at the, uh, the secondary school level. Some members of the group were at community colleges or teachers colleges, teacher training colleges, some maybe at primary schools. Mostly secondary school. But there were also some colleges and universities.

PRESTON: [00:14:01] What were your living conditions like? Where did you live? You lived in the north.

SHAKER: [00:14:06] I think I have a photograph here of the first place I lived. Somewhere in here. Okay. This is the second year. Maybe it's at the beginning here. I know I threw in some pictures. I was looking at this the other day. Oh, here it is. Okay. Well, what's interesting about ending up in this house here. After training was over and I knew where my site

was, I had to travel there, of course, by bus to meet the people from the school. And I was told that they would find a place for me to live when I, when I arrived there.

PRESTON: [00:14:51] You're told by?

SHAKER: [00:14:53] By the Peace Corps, right, that when I arrived, the principal of the school would have a place for me to live for the year. But what was comical, I guess, when I arrived, they were trying to figure out where to take me. The principal and, I guess he had one of his assistant principals and another teacher from the school. And, uh, and I had thought they had located a place for me. But they had, they hadn't.

PRESTON: [00:15:25] When you arrived?

SHAKER: [00:15:26] When I arrived. Right. So I think at the bus stop, they were just kind of discussing amongst each other.

PRESTON: [00:15:35] In front of you?

SHAKER: [00:15:35] In Thai, yeah, in Thai. As to where, where to take me and where I would be staying. So I guess finally they decided, well, let's take him to the school first. And I guess they thought there were some places in that village where the school is located, which is about, uh, I think a 40, 30 minute drive, about 30 minute drive from the center of town. And, uh, I think that, you know, they took me there first and thinking that they, there were some people there that would be able to give me a place. But as it turned out, I guess there wasn't a place available in that village. So finally, the principal of the school said, well, just come to my house. And so I, and I ended up staying at his house for the whole year.

PRESTON: [00:16:31] Did you really? Wow.

SHAKER: [00:16:31] Yeah, yeah. I mean, I could have. I was looking. The plan was I would stay there until I found a place in the town, my own place, in the town or in the village. So, you know, I looked at a few places and I just finally decided that if I'm going to learn Thai, if I'm going to learn the

culture, which was the reason I was there for, or one of the reasons I was there for, it probably would be better for me to live with a family. So it was basically my choice to stay there after maybe a month or two of debating whether I should move out or not. And as it turned out, I was able to learn a lot because I did live with a family. So I was able to use a lot of Thai and hear a lot of Thai. I learned about the family structure and get to know how the family members and I guess meet more people.

PRESTON: [00:17:30] Than if you lived alone.

SHAKER: [00:17:31] Yeah. I mean, I guess I would have had more freedom to some extent by living alone because I didn't have to worry about disturbing the family if I came home late or wanted to travel and they would be concerned about me and things like that. But I felt that I was there for a reason, and that would be the best way for me to learn something would be to live with a family. So it turned out to be okay. It was a rather new house, as you can tell.

PRESTON: [00:17:56] Yeah, it looks like it.

SHAKER: [00:17:56] This is a pretty modern house for Thailand. Most of the houses are made from wood. This is concrete. This is about a year old, I think, or less than a year old. So I lived on the first floor, they had a nice room in there. So it was pretty brand new. The only, uh, the only problem about living there, there was a pig farm right next door. Right about, right about over here.

PRESTON: [00:18:24] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [00:18:24] There was a large pig farm. And there was also the main line, the main railroad line behind the house.

PRESTON: [00:18:35] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [00:18:35] So I didn't need, I didn't need an alarm clock. So every morning I would either wake up to the pigs screaming as they were about to be butchered at the farm or by one of the loud trains passing by

in the back. So I finally got used to that. The other problem was there was a stench most of the time from the pig farm next door. So there were a lot of flies in the area and the stench was pretty awful sometimes. So I had to live with that for, for about a year. But I guess, you know, the, uh, what I remember the most, I guess, is the, is the screeching pigs every morning about to be butchered. You know, you hear, you hear the screaming pigs, then you hear a block, the sound of the block coming down or something, you know, happening. Either that or they were being castrated or.

PRESTON: [00:19:36] Right. Both could have caused them to scream I imagine.

SHAKER: [00:19:37] Yeah, yeah.

PRESTON: [00:19:38] What, what were the Thai people like? Did they, uh, this family?

SHAKER: [00:19:44] Oh, it's hard, it's hard to describe. I mean, it's hard to describe any kind of people. I mean, if someone went back to Thailand from here and they were told to describe Americans, um, I mean, how can you generalize upon a people?

PRESTON: [00:20:02] Right.

SHAKER: [00:20:02] It's tough but, um, I guess to generalize. I guess that's what we need to do when we're talking about people, which I hate to do. Generally Thai people are friendly, they're rather friendly. They don't like to, um, have disputes publicly. They'd rather, you know, keep things to themselves rather than cause an argument or a problem openly. You know, within the confines of a home, you know, I guess, you know, or when, when they're enclosed from the public, there isn't, uh. I guess anything goes on like anywhere else. But generally, you know, they're pretty friendly and open and generous, hospit-, hospitable. We'll have to cross that out. Um.

SHAKER: [00:21:06] Yeah, I found them to be, um. I found that I didn't feel isolated or I didn't feel much like a foreigner, and I felt that my values were similar. So, you know, I didn't have any run-ins with anybody.

PRESTON: [00:21:23] How do you think they felt about you as an American? How do they feel about America?

SHAKER: [00:21:28] I think most Thais don't have any negative feelings about America, although we did have a lot of, um, bases there during the Vietnam War. So I guess if you go, depends on where you go in the country, I guess. But generally speaking, you know, they, they don't have any open, uh, sentiments about, uh, about Americans. Although once in a while you might meet someone who will say something negative.

SHAKER: [00:22:03] For example, when I was there, uh, during the time I was between the first year and the second year. I was running a workshop and one of the teachers. Well, during that time Libya was bombed and it was broadcast on the news and the guy really felt that America was really acting tough, you know, by going to a small country and bombing them, you know. And he thought, you know, he was kind of putting Thailand, you know, in.

PRESTON: [00:22:43] The same category?

SHAKER: [00:22:43] In the same category as Libya, I guess. Yeah. And he felt that the United States was just showing off their power and taking advantage of a small country. So, yeah, you have some, some people who will come out and say some negative stuff about the United States. But overall, I didn't feel that there was any, um, any negative feelings.

PRESTON: [00:23:08] Let's take a look at some of these. It looks so green. Do you remember the country being very green?

SHAKER: [00:23:17] Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's, there's a lot of rain there, especially during the year. I have a picture of the inside of my room during the

second year, which might give you some idea of how I lived. Unless there's anything here that strikes you.

PRESTON: [00:23:31] I was going to ask you which river is this?

SHAKER: [00:23:33] This is Mekong.

PRESTON: [00:23:34] Oh, I see.

SHAKER: [00:23:35] The Mekong River. So this is Laos right here. This is the Golden Triangle area.

PRESTON: [00:23:40] Okay.

SHAKER: [00:23:40] That was another trip that we took. Um, I'm trying to figure, I'm trying to remember. Oh, I know why we went up there. One of the teachers. Okay, now I'm confused. I know this is the Golden Triangle area.

PRESTON: [00:24:00] Mm hmm.

SHAKER: [00:24:01] Oh, this must be the same trip. This is the same trip we were on with the teachers from the south. Right, right, right. So this is Laos here. And so we were just near the border.

PRESTON: [00:24:14] Is this fellow another teacher?

SHAKER: [00:24:15] That's, yeah, he was my housemate. And we shared the same house, not the same room, but we shared the same house.

PRESTON: [00:24:21] In the second?

SHAKER: [00:24:22] In the second school, right, at the second school. Right.

PRESTON: [00:24:25] With the screaming pigs.

SHAKER: [00:24:25] Yeah. This is in southern Thailand, right, where I met him. So this is the Mekong River and this is Laos, across the border there.

PRESTON: [00:24:43] [inaudible]

SHAKER: [00:24:44] Yeah, that's my, that's. Okay. Yeah. This is the house I lived in during the second year. Now, during the second year they had at the school where I taught, there were teachers houses on campus available. So they put me in this place. So the other gentleman teacher lived over here and I lived over here. I have my own room and we shared the bathroom, which was in the middle. And then we had some students and some other people living downstairs. As far as, you know, comparing it to the first house, you know, this was pretty sparse. I really, didn't really have, I didn't have a kitchen or anything like that.

PRESTON: [00:25:25] Where did you eat?

SHAKER: [00:25:26] Well, um, I ate breakfast and lunch at the school because they served breakfast and lunch, so I was able to buy it. The food was really reasonable and cheap, so it didn't, it didn't really cost that much. And for one person, it was worth, worth to buy it rather than to make the food. So I would eat, I would eat breakfast and lunch at the school, and then at dinnertime I would go to my, my neighbors would invite me over for dinner. One, there was one particular neighbor who lived right next door who had two young children at the time. Uh, so they just adopted me, basically.

PRESTON: [00:26:05] You were their tall American son.

SHAKER: [00:26:06] Yeah, yeah. So they adopted me. And basically that's where I ate dinner almost every day. So I felt kind of bad a lot of times because I guess they felt after a while obligated to give me dinner, but they were more than happy to do this. You know, every night, well, almost every evening, their young three year old or four year old girl would come over and yell my name to come over and have dinner. So it was a really good relationship with them. Then sometimes I would just go to the market in

town and get something if I didn't like, you know, what they were serving or something.

PRESTON: [00:26:49] How much did the Peace Corps pay? Now say someone wants to enter the Peace Corps and they're thinking of making a million dollars? How much, how much of that will the Peace Corps cover?

SHAKER: [00:27:02] Um, well, the Peace Corps, while you're there, they give you a, uh, an allowance. At the time I was in, which was between 1984 and 1986, I think was about \$200 a month American money. Maybe a little, maybe \$250 a month, which was more, a little bit more than what the Thai teachers were getting per month. So I had plenty of money to live on while I was there. And I actually was able to save, save up some money.

PRESTON: [00:27:40] Right.

SHAKER: [00:27:41] Not a lot, but I was able to save because I didn't really that. When you're in the Peace Corps, you don't have that many expenses and basically everything is taken care of except for your personal things like food and personal items and traveling. I mean, as far as business, Peace Corps paid for Peace Corps travel. But I wanted to travel to, you know, to sightsee or whatever or to go to another province. I would have to pay for that.

PRESTON: [00:28:06] So that, that picture from Phimai, you had to pay for that? A trip like that?

SHAKER: [00:28:11] Uh, a trip like that, well, actually, the school paid for that because that was a school trip.

PRESTON: [00:28:15] Oh, okay.

SHAKER: [00:28:15] They paid for the transportation. But if I remember, I don't remember clearly, but I probably had to pay something for, uh, for that trip because they probably pooled money together to, for the lunches and, I mean, for the food I had to pay for it. But as far as the

transportation and the living situation, I probably had to pay some money. Maybe the school paid some. I don't remember too clearly who paid for that.

PRESTON: [00:28:44] Now, you, you went with a BA, a BA in English, right?

SHAKER: [00:28:47] No, no. I, um, I have a BA in communication and theater arts from Western Connecticut State University here in Danbury.

PRESTON: [00:28:59] What did you do in, uh, which theater arts? What, did you do plays? Did you act?

SHAKER: [00:29:03] Oh, no, I mostly. Actually, I was more involved in the communication part of the program than the theater arts part. So I was basically a generalist as far as the Peace Corps was concerned. That means I, you know, I can do English, teaching English or doing something that involved a lot of technical training.

PRESTON: [00:29:23] Because I understand that they, uh, in some cases they really focus on sciences.

SHAKER: [00:29:28] Yeah, I guess nowadays there is more focus and then, yeah, and it depends on the program that you're going into.

PRESTON: [00:29:38] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [00:29:38] Or it depends on your, on one's background, you know, if I had a background in science or a background in engineering that I wouldn't be teaching English.

PRESTON: [00:29:45] Right. Right. So now tell me, what did everyone say when you said I'm going to join the Peace Corps?

SHAKER: [00:29:53] Um, well, that's, that's, that was a tough, I guess, thing to say for, for my family. And I guess it's tough for any family to know that, you know, someone in the family is going to be traveling to a foreign country for two years, especially if you don't know too much about the country.

You know, in my mother's case, um, she, she's from Lebanon. And, you know, not, uh, not too well educated. So obviously she didn't know, you know.

PRESTON: [00:30:32] About Thailand.

SHAKER: [00:30:33] Too much about Thailand. And, uh, and I didn't know too much about Thailand either actually. But, um, but the fact that, you know, when you're, when you're the child of immigrants, as I am, you know, the immigrants come to the United States because they want a better life.

PRESTON: [00:30:58] Right.

SHAKER: [00:30:58] And then, you know, someone in the family is going back to a third world, to a developing country to live for two years. It doesn't make much sense. It doesn't make much sense because, you know, you're, the, uh, you're supposed to be taking advantage of all the great things in the United States. So it didn't make much sense, uh, you know, from my family's point of view that I would, after finishing college and spending a lot of money on college, to go into the Peace Corps and not make too much money. They just, uh. And I can, I can relate to what they were thinking. But it's hard if you're, if you're not actually going through the process, it's hard for someone to comprehend why one would do that.

SHAKER: [00:31:45] You know, for me, it was basically an educational experience to go into the Peace Corps, and I wanted to just learn about a new culture and a different way of life because I had the rest of my life to work. You know, my reasoning. So it was tough and it took, it took a long time. I don't think my, my mother ever accepted the fact that I was going to the Peace Corps and never, never liked it. And it was tough because, of course, you know, she tried to persuade me until the day I left, until that day I walked out of the door, not to go. It was tough on her. Yeah, it was really tough. And of course, I wrote a lot just to make sure that they understood everything was okay and I was safe.

PRESTON: [00:32:44] Right. Is your father from Lebanon too?

SHAKER: [00:32:45] My father, yeah, my father was from Lebanon as well. But he wasn't, my father passed away before I was going to the Peace Corps. But of course, if he was living, he wouldn't be, he wouldn't. He wouldn't, uh.

PRESTON: [00:32:59] Just as unhappy.

SHAKER: [00:32:59] He wouldn't have been too happy about it either. So, yeah, it was, it was tough. Um. But finally, I mean, I was really committed to going. I really, it was the right thing to do. But because I had, you know, the opposing, um, you know, feedback I guess from my family, it made me question, you know, my own, my own decision. So I did have to consult with, with one of the deans at the college who I knew pretty well from, from the activities I was involved with at college. And I sat down with him one day and I sat down with some other people at the college, you know, and just told them, you know, what I was feeling because I had to talk to someone.

SHAKER: [00:33:55] I said, listen, I want to go into the Peace Corps. You know, my family's really against it. Um. You know, where does that leave me? I was really confused. But from my discussions and by talking to people that I knew from college or at the college, I finally determined that, you know, it's, it's, it has to come down to what I want, what's good for me. So I had to be very selfish in that decision. And I'm glad I, I made that right decision. It was the right decision.

PRESTON: [00:34:33] Let me ask you.

SHAKER: [00:34:33] But I think a lot of families, as you probably talk to other people, you'll find the same thing.

PRESTON: [00:34:38] I think there's a sense that two years is a long time, especially in a young person's life, being without them. But I want to ask two big questions. What did you know about Thailand? What did you think about Thailand? And when did you find out you were going to Thailand? And

we'll start with those questions and just. You find out you're going to Thailand. Did you, did you sign up to go to Thailand?

SHAKER: [00:35:00] Okay. Um. First of all, I did not want to go to Southeast Asia. That was a request that I made on my application in fact. My first choice, I believe, was somewhere in the Middle East, either Morocco or Yemen or some Arabic speaking country.

PRESTON: [00:35:23] Do you speak Arabic?

SHAKER: [00:35:24] Yeah, I know a little Arabic, because my parents, like I said, are from Lebanon. So Arabic was spoken at home. And so I learned, um, I understood it for the most part. I couldn't, I mean, I still can't speak it very well, but I understand more than I can speak. So I thought by, if I had a chance to go to an Arabic speaking country, I would be able to learn to read and write Arabic much better. And I thought that would be good for me. So that's what I indicated on my application, that I wanted to go to an Arabic speaking country.

SHAKER: [00:36:00] I didn't want to go to Southeast Asia because I had a lot of fears about Southeast Asia because of the, uh, the political problems that were going on between Cambodia and in Laos and in Burma, you know, the border skirmishes that they have and the problems within the countries. So, um. So I just had this fear that it was a dangerous place, Southeast Asia was a dangerous place to go. And for the most part it is, except for Thailand, which I didn't know. I mean, there were problems at the border so I had the fear of what if they placed me at the border near Cambodia or at the border near Laos? You know, there's bombs that cross the border several times and shells that crossed the border.

PRESTON: [00:36:42] Still?

SHAKER: [00:36:43] Well, at that time, yeah, when I was there, it was happening. Yeah. But I wasn't in any danger because I was never near the borders. So, yeah, I, I had no, no understanding of, of the life and the culture of Southeast Asia. But then after waiting nine months, as I graduated in May of 1983.

PRESTON: [00:37:10] From?

SHAKER: [00:37:10] From Western, yeah. And so my application was in already at that time and I was working part time while waiting and, um. I don't know if I had gotten other requests before Thailand. I don't think so. I think I was just waiting to hear from them for a placement. So finally they called and said, well, we have a position in Thailand. They said, well, you know, this is all we have right now. You know, and, you know, you either take this position or you're going to have to wait a little bit longer, basically, is what they told me. And so I thought about it. And I told them, you know, give me about three or four days, you know, or a week. I don't remember how long I told them I needed, but I said, you know, I need to think it over and learn something about the country.

SHAKER: [00:38:05] So as soon as I found out that that I could go to Thailand to teach English, I went to the university and spoke to several, several professors who were in Thailand, who had visited Thailand and had some photographs. So I spoke to them, learned something about Thailand. I went to the library, got out some books, learned about Thailand. And after doing quite a bit of research, I, you know, I concluded that it's not a bad place to go. It wouldn't be a bad place to go. It would be relatively safe for the most part. Excuse me. And I would probably do okay with the training and so on, although I still had fears until I got there. I mean, you always have those fears of not knowing, not really knowing what, what to expect.

SHAKER: [00:39:01] So I finally decided. People encouraged me to go. They said, you know, people told me it was a beautiful country. You know, the food is great. And so I started eating Thai food whenever I could just to get the taste of it and so on. So I finally made the decision to go, you know, after a lot of, uh, a lot of thought and a lot of discussions with people.

PRESTON: [00:39:27] Are you from Connecticut?

SHAKER: [00:39:27] Yeah, I'm originally from Connecticut. I'm from Waterbury.

PRESTON: [00:39:30] Waterbury, okay. About a half hour away.

SHAKER: [00:39:31] Yeah, yeah. I was born in Waterbury and then I went to school here in Danbury. And from here I went to Thailand and then from Thailand back to Waterbury. Now, now I'm working back in Danbury. So I've gone, I guess, around.

PRESTON: [00:39:50] Full circle. What did you do in Waterbury after the Peace Corps? Did you, where did you work?

SHAKER: [00:39:56] I worked at Waterbury Adult Education, teaching English as a second language. And at the same time, I was working on my master's at Southern Connecticut State University, and I received a master's in adult education from there.

PRESTON: [00:40:18] Now what I want to know is, this is. Why the Peace Corps? When did you decide? Was it a poster that you saw and you thought, yeah, that's for me? Or was it an ad on television? Was it? Did you know anyone going into the Peace Corps?

SHAKER: [00:40:33] Okay. When I was close to graduating, I made the decision that I wasn't going to look for a job. I wanted to travel.

PRESTON: [00:40:43] Yeah.

SHAKER: [00:40:45] Something in me clicked. You know, I don't know. You know, what makes one want to do something? But whatever. I decided that I wanted to travel. I wanted to do something different for a few years, as opposed to working a full time job. I didn't feel that I was ready to work and settle down to a job.

PRESTON: [00:41:09] Right.

SHAKER: [00:41:09] So I checked out several programs and then I think at the school there were some signs up for the Peace Corps. So I start going through their brochures and I guess I sent for a brochure and I started getting information about the Peace Corps and realized that that would

be the right program for what I want to do, because I, I did want to travel. I didn't want to pay because I didn't have any money.

PRESTON: [00:41:40] Right.

SHAKER: [00:41:40] So I couldn't pay to travel. And I wanted to learn something and I wanted to give something at the same time. And the Peace Corps was the perfect program for me to fulfill those goals that I had. And then I just pursued the Peace Corps from there on.

PRESTON: [00:42:01] Had you had a good perception of the Peace Corps coming in when you saw it, or was it?

SHAKER: [00:42:06] I didn't know, I didn't know too much about the Peace Corps. No. I mean, I had no idea of the various programs and the various countries. So I had to do a lot of reading and research on the Peace Corps itself too. Yeah. So it was just the right program for what I wanted to do at that time, basically, is what, is how I decided to go. And again, it was a selfish, you know, a lot of people may say they go into the Peace Corps for purely altruistic purposes, but for me, honestly, going into the Peace Corps was a selfish, uh, reason. I wanted to get something out of the Peace Corps more than, probably more than, than I wanted to give. I wanted to learn. I wanted to have a new experience of living in a different country.

SHAKER: [00:43:00] And I knew I would, I knew I would have to give something in return and so that didn't bother me. But that wasn't why. I didn't, you know, I didn't have this thought, wow, I want to go out and help some people and give, give myself to people and, uh, and change their lives, you know. Nothing of that nature.

PRESTON: [00:43:25] You actually hear that quite frequently from, uh, returning Peace Corps volunteers, is that they always feel that they got more than they were able to give, you know, for a variety of reasons, that they just walked away with.

SHAKER: [00:43:36] Yeah, you always, yeah, usually you, Peace Corps volunteers receive more than they actually give. Yeah. And that works I guess with any, you know, with many programs. Yeah.

PRESTON: [00:43:48] So now, what did you do for entertainment? Where did you go, you know, what sort of things would you do? This is the bedroom I guess.

SHAKER: [00:43:55] Oh, yes. Yeah. If you want to just go over that quickly.

PRESTON: [00:43:59] It looks like a college student's place.

SHAKER: [00:44:01] Yeah. During, during the, uh, I'm glad I took these pictures. During the second year, like I said, I lived in that little teacher's house and this is the room. Basically, it was one room and this was my desk near the window here. Had a little fan in there, a little garbage pail, and some racks for storing books. Some shelves for storing books.

PRESTON: [00:44:30] So you're saying these are the shelves for the books?

SHAKER: [00:44:33] Yeah. Yeah. Basically that's, and this is where I kept my clothing. So it was really, you know, very, very few items that I had in my room. And I enjoyed it. I mean, I always, you know, tell people that this was probably the best time that I've ever experienced as far as being free of burdens, you know, like paying bills and worrying about clothing and how you're dressed and all the esthetics and material stuff. You know, it was great. It was fine, you know, just living freely without having to have that many concerns. I can just focus. I was focused. You can focus on language, focus on the culture, rather than focusing on, you know, accumulating material things.

SHAKER: [00:45:26] So that's, yeah, I bought this desk actually when I was there the first year and I bought it, brought it down to me, brought it down with me to the south for the second year. And if you notice on the desk there, there's a little bag.

PRESTON: [00:45:40] Yeah.

SHAKER: [00:45:41] Those are very popular in Thailand. And that's how you carry your books. So you just throw it over your shoulder and you.

PRESTON: [00:45:47] Like a satchel.

SHAKER: [00:45:47] Like a satchel, right. It's pretty, pretty convenient. It was nice. I wish I can have one, I'd wear one of those here but people would think, you know, strange things.

PRESTON: [00:45:55] It would have to have Gucci on it before you could wear it.

SHAKER: [00:45:57] Right. Right. Um. There are a lot of, um. This is where I slept on this mat on the floor. We didn't have a bed. Although, I mean, you could get a bed in Thailand, but I didn't bother. You know, why buy a bed for one year?

PRESTON: [00:46:09] Right.

SHAKER: [00:46:10] But I did have, I did have to sweep out the floor every day because there were little, um, I guess they're called geckos, these little lizards.

PRESTON: [00:46:19] Oh.

SHAKER: [00:46:19] House geckos, I guess they're called, and they're like small lizards. And they just.

PRESTON: [00:46:27] How big are they?

SHAKER: [00:46:27] Um, I don't know, about half, half a foot.

PRESTON: [00:46:29] Half a foot?

SHAKER: [00:46:30] Yeah. Or less. You know, well, I mean from head to tail, yeah, I guess it's about, about six inches. And they would just, they're not harm, they're not harmful in any way. They just, you know, they leave a

mess. Yeah. You know, eating and their droppings and so basically they just. Actually they were very nice to have because they ate all the insects.

PRESTON: [00:46:53] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [00:46:53] So I didn't mind having them crawling around on the walls. They didn't crawl around the floor. They crawled, crawled on the walls and on the ceilings mainly. And they ate all the insects that were around. So it's nice having them around. But you had to sweep up the droppings every day. And every night I had to sweep sometimes because there would be spiders crawling on the floor and roaches. And actually in the, in the bathroom, which you can almost see in here, there's a, um, this here is a like a container for water. And you just picked up the water with a small plastic container like a bowl, a plastic bowl, and you just threw the water. You know, I would throw water on myself to wash.

PRESTON: [00:47:43] That was your shower?

SHAKER: [00:47:44] That was my shower, right. Right. So there was a, um, there was a, um, there was water coming into the home from a well that the school has. And so it's pumped. They have a large pump and it goes to all the houses. So we had every morning, I guess the pump would be on so you can fill this container with water and then you would just splash yourself with water and rinse off after washing. But there were spiders in there because it was wet in here often, so there would be spiders living in there. And again, what I liked about the spiders was that they ate the, they ate the roaches. I'd rather have the spiders than the roaches. So I never killed the spiders. They never bothered me. And so I never bothered them. But I would sweep them out sometimes if they were there at night.

PRESTON: [00:48:32] It looks like this towel says S for Sheraton. Is that right?

SHAKER: [00:48:37] Uh, yeah. Well, actually, I brought that over.

PRESTON: [00:48:42] A souvenir of home or?

SHAKER: [00:48:44] I just had it, so it was a nice big towel.

PRESTON: [00:48:47] Yeah.

SHAKER: [00:48:48] And I just took it over with me because it was just nice to have. It was nice. I didn't know if I could get a nice big towel there.

PRESTON: [00:48:54] I thought that was your nod to, uh, to Americanness, you know, in a.

SHAKER: [00:48:59] No, it wasn't, it wasn't planned that way. No, no.

PRESTON: [00:49:03] [inaudible]

SHAKER: [00:49:03] Sure. What was really super about Thailand was all the fruits and vegetables available, especially the fruits. I mean, that's what I really miss is the variety of fruit that was available, the fresh fruit that was available. And actually, I was pretty healthy there, I think more healthy than I'm probably, I'm probably right now because of all the fruit I had available.

PRESTON: [00:49:34] It was all very fresh I take it?

SHAKER: [00:49:35] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PRESTON: [00:49:40] Now, what are these right here?

SHAKER: [00:49:41] Okay.

PRESTON: [00:49:42] They're burning something?

SHAKER: [00:49:43] Yeah, yeah. This was a house next to mine which had a nest, a bee's nest in the wall. So what this guy is doing is pulling the wall apart, and you can see has a torch to keep the bugs away from him, the bees away from him. And basically he's just tearing up the wall there to kill off, to pull out the nest. He's getting the nest out of the wall. That's a

very common problem. A lot of nests, you know, because of the tropical weather.

PRESTON: [00:50:15] Are they, uh? There's pictures of monks everywhere.

SHAKER: [00:50:19] Yeah. The most, the, I guess 90 percent of the people in Thailand are Buddhists.

PRESTON: [00:50:23] Buddhists. Uh huh.

SHAKER: [00:50:24] Yeah. And they do have Christians there. They have, in the south, um, the, I guess the main religion is Islam.

PRESTON: [00:50:34] Islam.

SHAKER: [00:50:35] Yeah. In most of the south, in the southern part.

PRESTON: [00:50:40] Was this a picture of a wedding ceremony?

SHAKER: [00:50:42] This is a wedding. Yeah, yeah. I was in, I was able to go to several weddings. This gentleman taught at my school. He taught French. So usually in Thailand, if a teacher is getting married, they usually invite the whole school to the wedding. I'm glad that's not the case in American schools. Would be pretty costly to have to, to have to invite everybody. So yeah, all the teachers from my school were invited to the wedding, so I was able to go to that wedding. That's a more traditional wedding. You see the bride wearing a traditional Thai outfit as opposed to a Western gown.

PRESTON: [00:51:24] Which some of them do?

SHAKER: [00:51:25] Yeah, yeah, many do. Yeah. So that was, that was nice to attend. Actually, we had, we had to get to this wedding, as you can see here, we had to travel through a large area of, uh, you can see another area here. This is, I guess we were led off at a road and then we had to walk for about a mile, I think. And you can see that a lot of people have umbrellas to keep the sun away because it was really hot. So I guess we

had to walk a mile to this village or almost a mile to get to the wedding. I was pretty, I was pretty tired. You know, I didn't have any hiking boots or any type of walking shoes, so I was in my dress shoes. So it was pretty, pretty tough. But again, it was, you know, it's worth the trip sometimes because you get to learn quite a bit.

SHAKER: [00:52:25] Now, also in this village, you can see this is really a sparse type of living. This is a barber's place here. This is outdoors. I guess he lives in this house here, but he has his barber shop outdoors. And you can see his wooden chair here.

PRESTON: [00:52:42] So it's very much like a Western style barber shop.

SHAKER: [00:52:44] Yeah, yeah, yeah. And these are the huts that they live in, the wooden huts here.

PRESTON: [00:52:49] Why are they off the ground?

SHAKER: [00:52:51] Because of flooding probably. And to keep snakes and insects and animals out. It was pretty, uh. These, this photograph here shows all the teachers, the English teachers. This woman here was my neighbor that gave me my dinners. And the rest of the ladies there are English teachers. A lot of, a lot of the English teachers are females in Thailand, for the most part.

PRESTON: [00:53:21] She, now, she's wearing a Western.

SHAKER: [00:53:23] I guess they changed. Yeah. This is the same wedding, so they must have changed clothing after one particular ceremony. Okay. These are, this is the girl that would wake me up every day. This young girl here.

PRESTON: [00:53:36] What's her name?

SHAKER: [00:53:39] Um, it's a good question. Oh, Ming.

PRESTON: [00:53:42] Ming.

SHAKER: [00:53:43] Ming. Yes.

PRESTON: [00:53:43] She must be how old now? Should be about 13.

SHAKER: [00:53:47] Let's see. Well, she was about three or probably four years old when I left in '86. Yeah. So about eight years now. Yeah. Um, yeah. It'd be interesting to see what she looks like now.

PRESTON: [00:53:58] Have you kept in touch with anyone from Thailand, that experience?

SHAKER: [00:54:01] Well, after, after I left Thailand, I kept in touch regularly, you know, regularly. But after a while, you start slacking off when you get more. I got involved with school and involved with working and a lot of things that I just never had the time recently to, uh, to sit down and write a letter. Or the interest, I should say, hasn't been there, but I could easily write to them and, you know, and they would probably write back and remember. I mean, I'm sure, you know, they, they, they, uh, they still think of me and I still think of them, but we just, I just don't write. I haven't written that much recently, but I should, you know, because I know if I eventually go there, it'd be nice to go back and see them.

PRESTON: [00:54:53] Would you like to go back?

SHAKER: [00:54:55] Yeah. Yeah, I'd like to. Yeah. It would be nice to go back and visit the people that I worked with and the places I visited. Yeah.

PRESTON: [00:55:07] Tell me what it was like coming home to America after the, uh, having been in Thailand for two years. Was there was any kind of culture shock?

SHAKER: [00:55:14] Yeah. After two years, I, Thailand felt like my home. It felt like, I felt at home there. And the idea of coming back to the United States was as if I was traveling to another country. That's the feeling I had. I was going back to, I was going, I would be going to a foreign country, not my own country. So I wasn't, actually I wasn't happy about coming back

to the United States because I knew what was facing me. Basically, you know, I had to come back, look for a job, buy a car. You know, I would have all the, uh, the things that I left behind, you know, facing me when I got back. So I wasn't too thrilled about returning. But of course, I knew I had to return eventually. So I thought, you know, the sooner the better.

SHAKER: [00:56:10] Um. So it was tough. It was really tough leaving. Yeah, it was really tough. I had a lot of anxiety about leaving because I was pretty comfortable there.

PRESTON: [00:56:18] Yeah.

SHAKER: [00:56:20] And I had a lot of friends there. You know, Peace Corps took care of me pretty much. Um.

PRESTON: [00:56:29] Let me ask, did you have a sense that the Peace Corps itself, the organization in Thailand was, it was very active and, active and involved in your group? They knew where you were all the time?

SHAKER: [00:56:40] Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. There was a lot of communication. And they always knew, yeah, they always knew. But they, they made the assignments, of course, where you would go and they would send out letters and Peace Corps magazines and Peace Corps newspapers to our sites. And then we would get site visits from people from the Peace Corps. Mostly Thais though. You know, there are only a few Americans that worked at the Peace Corps office. Most of the employees were Thais.

PRESTON: [00:57:12] Is that is that standard for?

SHAKER: [00:57:13] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Which makes a lot of sense to do something like that.

PRESTON: [00:57:19] The regional office is in Bangkok, is that right?

SHAKER: [00:57:21] Yeah. Yeah. There was an office in Bangkok, I guess it's, yeah, it's still there in Bangkok. Yeah. So, and then upon returning, I

landed in Hawaii because what I decided to do upon returning was to travel across the United States by bus to get home. So I stopped in, um, in Hawaii first and spent some time there. Then I flew to Los Angeles. And then from there I just went from site, from place to place by bus and stayed at places probably two or three days, for two or three days. Then I traveled on until I got back home. Took about a month, I think, a month or month and a half. But when I got to Hawaii, yeah, there was a culture shock. You know, I felt out of place.

PRESTON: [00:58:16] Did you?

SHAKER: [00:58:16] Yeah. Um. I didn't feel very, um. I don't know. It's hard to explain, I guess, the feeling. But it's, it's, they call it, it's called reverse culture shock, you know, basically is what it's called. So what seemed normal two years ago seemed abnormal. Seems abnormal after you've lived somewhere else for a few years, you know. So just seeing the clothing, you know, the language, the food, the lifestyle, the behavior. All that was strange, you know? And I had to, you know, get used to it. It took me some time to get used to it.

PRESTON: [00:58:57] How long do you think it took to get used to it?

SHAKER: [00:59:00] Um. Probably 3 to 4 months.

PRESTON: [00:59:04] Wow.

SHAKER: [00:59:04] I would say.

PRESTON: [00:59:08] Yeah.

SHAKER: [00:59:08] To get back to feeling comfortable, to accepting American behavior and American culture. One thing that really struck me when I got back home, um. You know, I live in a location where there are many homes around where I live, you know, close by. But I didn't, um, I didn't see a lot of people communicating, like neighbors communicating and talking and, and visiting. Because I was so used to the way of life in Thailand where people would, you know, for the most part, if you had

people living around you, you know, you would be visiting them or just communicating and so on.

SHAKER: [01:00:00] So I felt that it was a strange, the isolation, you know, of people in, back here was probably the most striking event that I experienced upon returning. You know, that people are pretty much isolated into their own homes, you know, or busy. I mean, at least in this part of the country. I mean, things might be different in other parts of the country. But, you know, we go to work and we don't really socialize and try to get along with the neighbors a lot. And that's a little different from what I was used to in Thailand.

PRESTON: [01:00:41] When you, when you were over there, were you able to keep abreast of what was happening here in United States? Was it something that interested you?

SHAKER: [01:00:48] Well, I did, yeah, I did listen to Voice of America. I had a little short band, I guess it's a short band. The radios? Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:00:58] Shortwave?

SHAKER: [01:00:59] Shortwave, yeah. Shortwave radios. Yeah. So I had a little portable shortwave radio, and I would listen to Voice of America almost every day just to keep in touch with the news and what was going on here.

PRESTON: [01:01:11] What, what did, what did you, uh. What sticks in your mind as the America, what was going on in America while you were not here? What do you remember from, say, '84, '86? When you thought of America, what did you think?

SHAKER: [01:01:25] I'm trying. I don't, I don't remember if I even thought much about it. You know, I don't think. I mean, I just, I heard the, I listened to the news just to see what was going on, but I never processed anything. I wasn't, to be honest with you, I wasn't really interested in what was going on.

PRESTON: [01:01:41] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:01:41] You know, I was interested in what was going on back in Connecticut because my family was living here, maybe. But as far as politics and whatever was going on in the news, basically I wasn't very interested.

PRESTON: [01:01:56] Right.

SHAKER: [01:01:56] I didn't care much to, to think about it because I was, you know, I was just so involved in my work there and learning, you know, learning about Thailand that I just decided that I wasn't going to spend a lot of time thinking about the United States.

PRESTON: [01:02:16] Right.

SHAKER: [01:02:16] Except for my own family and things that involved my family. Um.

PRESTON: [01:02:23] But while you were there, did you, uh. When you came home, did you have any idea of translating the Peace, the Peace Corps experience, having been abroad for two years, into any kind of related field, maybe like a foreign service field or any kind of, you know?

SHAKER: [01:02:39] Well, I think I've been doing that since I started working. Um. Because when, like I said, when I returned from the Peace Corps, I got a job as a, as an English teacher, English as a second language teacher, with Waterbury Adult Education. And having, having lived abroad for two years and, you know, understanding the way of life of people in a developing country, you are more sensitive, more sensitive to the needs of foreign people here.

PRESTON: [01:03:15] Mm hmm.

SHAKER: [01:03:16] So I thought that I was able to understand the people I was teaching, who were from all over the world, much better because I had

been in the Peace Corps. You know, I was able to be more culturally sensitive.

PRESTON: [01:03:36] Having been in their position.

SHAKER: [01:03:37] Having been in their position. Right. And it came across to a lot of the students. I mean, they knew that I, I can understand them or sense or be sensitive to their, to their needs. You know, they didn't, they didn't see me as a white American, you know, the, you know, the typical average American. So I think, you know, because of that, I was able to be a more effective teacher because I was able to get across better to them. So, you know, in that sense, you know, I was able to translate my Peace Corps experience.

SHAKER: [01:04:18] And then after, after teaching English as a second language for, for about three and a half years, both at Waterbury Adult Education and at a few community colleges. I taught some courses there too. I worked in a program for about two and a half years that helped homeless people. So I went from teaching English as a second language to working with the poor, the homeless in, in helping them with employment and housing. It was a program in Waterbury that was funded by the federal government, which I was able to work for full time.

SHAKER: [01:05:13] So, and in that job again, I was able to, of course, I was dealing with mostly Americans in that job, not foreigners, but, you know, knowing what it's like to start from the bottom, you know, or not having much and then being, you know, what the process involves of getting somewhere from nothing to something. I was able to help a lot of the people that were homeless either get a job or find housing or go to school. So, you know, in that job, it was very, very helpful.

SHAKER: [01:05:54] And then, of course, right now, as a middle school teacher in a culturally diverse middle school in Danbury, I think I'm doing a lot in this school to help students better understand or to better tolerate cultural diversity, because we have, you know, we have kids from Asia here, we have kids from South America, we have kids from Europe. And there could be a lot of tension, a lot of ethnic tension. And one thing that

I, that I've been doing since last year, this is my second year here at Rogers Park Middle School. We have a week, which is actually coming up on June 13th. Last year was called Spring Activities Week. This week, this year it's called Peace Week.

SHAKER: [01:06:51] And what we try to get across during that week through activities and fun activities is multicultural diversity. So we have programs set up where kids can, um, can see programs. Like we have storytellers from, uh, storytellers that are able to do activities from like South America or from Africa, from the Caribbeans. And also we have ethnic festivals every day. Like one day we have an Asian festival where the students themselves bring in the food and they can dance and they can dress up in clothing from their country, that represents their country. So my focus is to give the students here some pride in their, in their ethnic background.

SHAKER: [01:07:49] And having been in the Peace Corps, I guess, has allowed me to do this effectively with the students, because I know that they need to feel some pride in coming from another country. So I think I'm translating the Peace Corps experience quite a bit as a middle school teacher as well.

PRESTON: [01:08:09] Do you have any little Thai kids in the school?

SHAKER: [01:08:11] Yeah, yeah. We have kids here from, uh, from Thailand. Not, not many. Most of the kids here that are from Southeast Asia come from Cambodia, Laos. And we have a few, I guess a few Vietnamese kids and, but a lot of them, many of the Cambodian kids can speak Thai because they might have come through the border, you know, lived in a camp. So I can, yeah, I can, I can, sometimes I get to speak Thai with some of the, some of the, some of the students. And I can translate to parents sometimes, for parents. You know, on a few occasions I've translated because we had some parents who didn't know too much English, so they were able at least to speak some Thai.

PRESTON: [01:09:01] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:09:01] So that's helpful.

PRESTON: [01:09:02] How active do you stay involved with, uh, and I know your Connecticut group meets. Actually they're meeting Sunday night?

SHAKER: [01:09:09] Yeah. Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:09:10] Do you stay involved with a network of returning Peace Corps?

SHAKER: [01:09:13] Yeah, we have, all over the United States there are returned Peace Corps groups.

PRESTON: [01:09:21] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:09:21] And there's a national group, of course, a National Peace Corps Association. Then we have each state, almost every state has a group, and we meet on a regular basis to, um. [phone rings]

PRESTON: [01:09:40] There's something, you know, in the transcription itself or the tape that, you know, you think, well, you know, but what we'll do is.

SHAKER: [01:09:45] Well, are you going to go back and, uh? Are you taping right now?

PRESTON: [01:09:50] I'll just kind of get us back into it. Like a telephone ring. There's something, you know, people reading the transcript will know that it's normal, everyday.

SHAKER: [01:09:59] Okay.

PRESTON: [01:09:59] Kind of whatever. I wanted to ask you about some of these postcards you have.

SHAKER: [01:10:03] Sure.

PRESTON: [01:10:03] I'm saving the picture of Egyptian pyramid climbing for the last. That's, that's very.

SHAKER: [01:10:09] Oh, I forgot that was in there too. That was.

PRESTON: [01:10:13] What, who took that shot? That is beautiful.

SHAKER: [01:10:15] Oh, I did. Yeah. I was in Egypt, not with the Peace Corps of course. I was there in 1982, I believe, when I was at Western here in Danbury taking a course in ancient Egypt. And part of the course was to travel in Egypt for about 12 days. So I was able to climb the pyramid.

PRESTON: [01:10:39] Which pyramid is this?

SHAKER: [01:10:41] This one I'm looking at? This is Chephren, which is, the pyramid I'm on top of is Cheops.

PRESTON: [01:10:49] Cheops. All right.

SHAKER: [01:10:50] And this is Chephren, who is the son of Cheops.

PRESTON: [01:10:54] Is this taken at dawn?

SHAKER: [01:10:55] This is taken at dawn, yeah, yeah.

PRESTON: [01:10:58] That is beautiful.

SHAKER: [01:10:58] Yeah. I was there, like I said, with a group of students from Western. So, yeah, I have a lot of pictures on Egypt, so if you want to do an oral history on Egypt. That'll be another project.

PRESTON: [01:11:11] I've actually found in this postcard, you're saying the Arabic language is spoken differently than the Lebanese way, but I was able to understand it.

SHAKER: [01:11:17] That's Egypt too. Yeah. Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:11:21] So the Arabic, uh.

SHAKER: [01:11:22] Oh, yeah. The Arabic that's spoken, and Arabic is a, is a major language in Africa. Northern Africa, mostly Northern Africa, the Middle East. And the dialects vary tremendously from place to place. The Lebanese that I know, I mean, even in Lebanon, you have variations in the Lebanese Arabic. So, yeah, it's, it's very different. It's, you know, it's similar to English spoken here and spoken in Jamaica. It's very hard for us to understand each other.

PRESTON: [01:11:56] Right, right.

SHAKER: [01:11:56] Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:11:57] Let me just go through some of these postcards. And this one, the English teachers here like to make cake, cookies, and other kinds of sweets. They asked me if I can get some recipes from home, if you can find me a small book of small recipes. Were you able to get the book of recipes?

SHAKER: [01:12:12] I think so. I think my, uh, my brother sent some recipes over. Yeah. Yeah. I don't know if they made anything out of using those recipes, but I think I had my brother sent some over. Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:12:26] This is from October of, this must be '85. It says, uh, nice bit of. It says, um. I heard on my radio that a hurricane was heading toward the northeast in the U.S.

SHAKER: [01:12:36] Right. That was Hurricane Gloria, I think, wasn't it? Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:12:41] Yeah.

SHAKER: [01:12:41] It was Hurricane Gloria. I heard on the news that, uh, I guess on Voice of America, I must have heard it, that it was, it hit the Northeast. Yeah. So I was a little bit concerned about that. Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:12:56] Junior. Are you named after your father or?

SHAKER: [01:12:59] Junior, yeah, my father is also Peter. Actually, I'm not Junior, technically, because my middle name is not the same as my father's name, just my first name.

PRESTON: [01:13:06] It just seems so much easier just to call you.

SHAKER: [01:13:08] Junior, yeah. Yeah, I'm still called Junior by my family members.

PRESTON: [01:13:12] This is great. I'll just show you some of these.

SHAKER: [01:13:15] Sure.

PRESTON: [01:13:16] All right, now, this tells us the town. It says the training is over. Tomorrow I move to the town where I'll be teaching. That's about an hour and a half by bus west of Bangkok. Is that right?

SHAKER: [01:13:25] Oh, right, right. Uh. I guess I was done with training. And I'm going to Nakhon Pathom, which is one and a half hours by bus west of Bangkok, is what I wrote. Yeah, right. And, uh.

PRESTON: [01:13:46] That's where the principal lived?

SHAKER: [01:13:47] Right. That's where I, that's. That's the town where I lived at the principal's house. Right.

PRESTON: [01:13:53] So how did you feel when the training was finally over? Were you ready to get started? Were you?

SHAKER: [01:13:57] I was again, anxious. It was, it was, you know, because during the training, you're with your fellow Peace Corps volunteers and so there was a lot of support. But once the training is over, it's like now, now it's the real thing. Now you're going out. We're all going out on our own to our sites. And now we, now we're going to be really tested to see if we can perform.

PRESTON: [01:14:22] So you're all assigned separately?

SHAKER: [01:14:25] Yeah. Yeah. Although in the town I was working at, there were a few Peace Corps volunteers. One was at a teachers college.

PRESTON: [01:14:32] Mm hmm.

SHAKER: [01:14:33] And it might have, there might have been one or two not too far away. But I, um, I tried not to socialize too much with the other Peace Corps volunteers because I wanted to learn as much as possible from the Thais.

PRESTON: [01:14:53] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:14:53] I preferred to travel with the Thais rather than with the, with Americans. Although I did, I did on occasion, which was, you know, when I really needed to get away from Thais, I had my American friends. But I did not, like I said, socialize too much because they, they probably would be doing things that were more American and which I didn't really want to do because I wasn't in America and I wanted to learn about Thailand. So I noticed something here. I noticed I wrote I ate breakfast at Mr. Donut.

PRESTON: [01:15:28] Yeah, I read that.

SHAKER: [01:15:28] So I guess there was a Mr. Donut in Bangkok at the time.

PRESTON: [01:15:36] How was the coffee?

SHAKER: [01:15:36] Excuse me?

PRESTON: [01:15:37] How was the coffee?

SHAKER: [01:15:38] I don't, I don't remember. I don't drink coffee, so I probably didn't have any coffee. I probably had a donut and something else, but uh. Yeah. I mean, at the time there were many, many familiar places. Pizza Hut, McDonald's, and some other Western food chains. But I

didn't, I mean, I only went there when I was in Bangkok and just to get a treat once in a while.

PRESTON: [01:16:03] What was the city of Bangkok like?

SHAKER: [01:16:05] Well, yeah, Bangkok is, um, is very spread out.

PRESTON: [01:16:11] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:16:11] And it takes a lot of time to travel around Bangkok because of the traffic. A lot of traffic, a lot of cars, a lot of pollution. Especially, I mean, it's, I guess it's more serious right now from what I hear from people that have been there recently and from the news. But it was pretty bad when I was there too. Sometimes it takes 2 to 3 hours to get from one end of Bangkok to the other end of Bangkok. So it's, it was pretty bad. They don't, they didn't have any, they still don't have any underground transportation or rail, you know, subways or trains that go through Bangkok. As far as public transportation, you pretty much had road traffic busses and taxis. So.

SHAKER: [01:17:00] But as far as activities and places to go, Bangkok is a great, you know, a great city. Like a lot of great restaurants, a lot of super hotels, you know, big name hotels, and a lot of theaters, a lot of great food. You can buy anything almost. You know, a typical international city. It's, it's dirty in some areas, smelly, but it's generally, I guess it's generally clean, but it's crowded in many places and very hot. But there's so much to see, so much history there. You know, the, the palaces, the old palaces, the new palaces, you know, the, uh. There have been so many kings and rulers throughout history that you have a variety of styles of, of architecture from one family to the next family. So, yeah, I mean, I didn't see everything. There's just too much to see. Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:18:05] Getting back to this, uh, Egyptian pyramid climbing, you said that you can climb a pyramid if you haggle with the tour guide and give nods to the police and that sort of thing?

SHAKER: [01:18:19] At that time, yeah. I don't know if they still allow it, but at that time, yeah. When I think back about it, to be honest with you, I don't think it's, it's a good idea for people to be climbing pyramids because just because it's an ancient, um, a very old and invaluable piece of architecture, you know, that every time someone climbs it, you're destroying, you're destroying it. You know, things start to crumble, you know, the stones and so on. So I wouldn't do it again. I would never climb it again. I was young then and it was a challenge.

PRESTON: [01:18:55] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:18:56] But, you know, I, I couldn't see myself doing that, something like that again.

PRESTON: [01:19:01] I want to ask you something about Thai culture here. This is, this structure here called a chedi? Chedi?

SHAKER: [01:19:08] Jedi, yeah, jedi. Yes. This is a Buddhist temple. And this is one of the largest structures in Thailand, if not the largest. I don't know if it's the largest, but I think it's one of the largest.

PRESTON: [01:19:25] What you're saying is that.

SHAKER: [01:19:26] This is Nakhon Pathom, right. This is, this is very interesting. I'm glad you picked this, this postcard, because a lot of my social life from day to day revolved in this area because this is right in the center of the town, of Nakhon Pathom, where I first taught the first year.

PRESTON: [01:19:47] Right.

SHAKER: [01:19:47] And, um, like I said, this is a temple. So a lot of people come here to, uh, to pray and to just sit around and relax or, you know, go for a stroll or go for a walk. It's a very, very beautiful structure. But every evening around 4:00, there's a, in the parking area in the front, there would be set up an outdoor market, like an open, open air restaurant type of thing. So you would have a lot of vendors coming in and setting up their little tables and chairs and their stands. And they're open until,

maybe, I don't know, late into the evening. And you can go there and have your dinner and you can buy all types of food and desserts and you can just, it's nice and cool. It's relaxing.

SHAKER: [01:20:48] So I went there often, actually, after school sometimes I would go there with some friends from school and we would sit around and have some soup or some type of Thai light meal and just chat and have some ice cream or some sweets. But it was great. I mean, this is, this is one place I really miss because it was nice just to go there after school and relax, you know, and just like they would say here, chill out.

PRESTON: [01:21:17] That was the place to do it?

SHAKER: [01:21:20] Yeah, that was the place to do it. And it was just a nice, a nice atmosphere and, uh, and I would go there a lot of times to have dinner too, later on with some friends, some teacher friends. We would go there and the food was really reasonable. There was one place I would go off and to get pad Thai. I don't know if you're familiar with pad Thai.

PRESTON: [01:21:43] No.

SHAKER: [01:21:43] It's a very, very common Thai, uh, Thai dinner. It's a noodle dish. So one, um, I don't know if I have a picture of her in here. I do. I might have a slide of her. But this one particular woman sold this, this pad Thai for about ten baht. Baht is the currency in Thailand, and that's less than a dollar. Less than, maybe 50 cents let's say. And it was good. It was good. It was really great. I loved it. And I used to go there often and eat it. And so that's a good postcard.

PRESTON: [01:22:20] Sure, yeah.

SHAKER: [01:22:21] I don't know what I wrote on here. Oh, it's one of the largest jedis in the world. It is the largest in Thailand, so I guess it is. That's what I wrote, so I assume it's true.

PRESTON: [01:22:34] So tell me something about the Peace Corps. Thailand is a very, uh, stable country, especially for Southeast Asia.

SHAKER: [01:22:43] Oh, yeah.

PRESTON: [01:22:45] But did you feel that, uh. We've spoken with Peace Corps volunteers in certain parts of Africa, parts of South America. And they say, especially the recruiter, Diane Gallagher, said that you have a sense that you learn to travel very light. You don't need very much in terms of material possessions because, you know, that there's a sense that if something happens, something goes wrong, the Peace Corps can get you out. And you, you know, you're not actually in any kind of danger.

SHAKER: [01:23:18] Generally speaking, yeah.

PRESTON: [01:23:20] Is that a sense you had? You didn't feel you were left alone?

SHAKER: [01:23:22] Oh, no. No, no. The only time, the only time I was a little bit concerned, um. I wasn't really in any danger, but there was a coup attempt when I was there.

PRESTON: [01:23:37] Oh.

SHAKER: [01:23:37] And that's, that's regular in Thailand. That's a common occurrence in Thailand. But I don't know if you recall, but an NBC reporter was shot at that time, was killed.

PRESTON: [01:23:47] Really?

SHAKER: [01:23:48] Yeah. Yeah. And so there was a coup attempt. Everybody at the school was listening to their radios to see what was going on. And I thought maybe, you know, if, if, that there might be, if there was a problem, I would have to get out. I was actually thinking about how I would, you know, get to Bangkok and get out of the country if there was a major problem, you know. But I guess the coup failed, if I'm not mistaken, and everything was fine. But that was, that was the only experience that I had where I thought I would need to get out. Excuse me.

PRESTON: [01:24:25] But you didn't have any sense that it was?

SHAKER: [01:24:29] Oh, no, no. No. Yeah. I had to be careful. I had to be careful when I was in the south, though, because we had some communists, communist, so-called communist people there. And I think at my school there might have been a teacher who was involved in, uh, in discussing communism. Promoting. That's the word I'm looking for, promoting communism and.

PRESTON: [01:25:01] This is the school in the south?

SHAKER: [01:25:01] At the school in the south. Yeah, I know there were some concerns. So I had to be careful not to hang around some people because there were sometimes raids done at people's homes.

PRESTON: [01:25:18] On the communists?

SHAKER: [01:25:19] Yeah, that were thought to be, you know, promoters of communism. So I think, I mean, I'm pretty sure that this person was and he was a nice person, but, you know, he would take me around sometimes, but I had to be careful.

PRESTON: [01:25:37] Right. Now, Peace Corps is not allowed to get politically?

SHAKER: [01:25:40] No, no, no. We're not allowed to get involved in politics at all. Right. Very apolitical. Yeah. Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:25:49] But did you have a sense of, uh, the effectiveness of some of the other Peace Corps volunteers? Did you feel, you know, that as a whole, people individually, the people you knew from your group, were doing a good job or, you know, a productive time spent?

SHAKER: [01:26:09] Well, it's hard to say because I didn't, um, I didn't spend a lot of time with, with the Peace Corps volunteers in my group. But I think for the most part, I think everybody tried their very best to do something, to accomplish something during the two years. There were, there were

some people who I would say, um, tried to take it, take life easy, and just kind of cruise through the two years without doing too much. Um. But I think most of the volunteers worked hard. Yeah. Yeah.

SHAKER: [01:26:49] As far as accomplishing something, I think what we accomplished most, and I guess I can speak for myself mainly, is creating friendship with the Thai people and teaching them that, you know, Americans are generally good people, you know. And that we are, Americans can be open minded and learn from other people. I think it was more of a cross, cross-cultural experiment than helping people better their lives, you know. I think, especially in Thailand. But Thailand is, is, I think, I think as far as. If Peace Corps left Thailand, nothing, there will be no disaster.

PRESTON: [01:27:45] Right.

SHAKER: [01:27:45] You know, Thailand can take care of itself. I mean, Peace Corps is not, is not needed in Thailand as far as, as far as development work.

PRESTON: [01:27:56] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:27:57] Thailand has great engineers. Thailand has great English teachers. Thailand has great farmers. And who are we to go there and teach these people how to farm?

PRESTON: [01:28:07] Right.

SHAKER: [01:28:07] You know, they can farm, you know, a lot better than we can. So. So, but I'm not saying that Peace Corps shouldn't be in Thailand. But I think what, what the benefit is of Peace Corps being in Thailand is that we can learn about each other's culture and create friendship between two countries, which I think is, in the long run, a lot more important. Although I guess in the beginning years, when Peace Corps first went to Thailand, there was more of a need.

PRESTON: [01:28:41] Right.

SHAKER: [01:28:41] Yeah, I guess there was more of a need at that time. And, you know, in a lot of small villages, you know, like I said, Peace Corps is a grassroots program. So, you know, when you go into a lot of small villages, they really don't have that much. So we're helping people. Um. And I guess that's what they try to do, is they try to send Peace Corps volunteers to villages and places that are poor. So, you know, so to speak.

PRESTON: [01:29:15] These pictures are so wonderful.

SHAKER: [01:29:18] They have a lot of great beaches in Thailand.

PRESTON: [01:29:20] Really?

SHAKER: [01:29:21] Yeah, yeah, that's what I enjoyed. There's some pictures here of sunrise at a beach.

PRESTON: [01:29:27] How's the water?

SHAKER: [01:29:29] Excuse me?

PRESTON: [01:29:29] How's the water?

SHAKER: [01:29:30] Oh, the water is, it's really nice. Nice and warm. Yeah, but during the daytime, it's not a good idea to go out into the, to the sun at the beach because you can burn very quickly. Yeah. Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:29:41] Now this is the Pacific?

SHAKER: [01:29:43] This is, um, kind of, this is the ocean. I'm trying to think what side. It's the, yeah, the Pacific side.

PRESTON: [01:29:51] Pacific side.

SHAKER: [01:29:51] Yeah. Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:29:53] So which part of the country did you like living in the best, or the better I should say, the north or the south? Which one did you feel you?

SHAKER: [01:30:00] Oh, between the central, the central area and the southern area? I think the southern area.

PRESTON: [01:30:07] That's really more.

SHAKER: [01:30:07] Yeah. I didn't think I would like it at first when I was told I was moving down there. I wasn't too happy about that. Because once you get used to living in a certain region, you feel comfortable. So it was difficult to, um, to make the change. But I much preferred living in the south because there's just a lot more as far as mountains and nature, you know, beaches, nice beaches. And great waterfalls, you know, really beautiful waterfalls. And a variety of foods.

SHAKER: [01:30:40] And you have, then you have different language even in the south. You have a southern dialect, you have several southern dialects. You have, each province I think has their own dialect. But I never was able to, uh, to learn it. I didn't really attempt to learn it because I felt comfortable with, with the mainstream Thai language that learning, learning the southern Thai was just a little bit too much for what I wanted.

PRESTON: [01:31:10] And the northern, the standard Thai got you through?

SHAKER: [01:31:13] Oh, yeah. They speak standard Thai all over Thailand. I mean, as far as the official language, the official language is, is the standard Thai. [tape break]

PRESTON: [01:31:28] This is tape number two of the interview with Peter Shaker on the Peace Corps, interviewed by Patrick Preston on May 13th, 1994. The brief interruption was changing the tape.

SHAKER: [01:31:44] Okay.

PRESTON: [01:31:44] For continuity's sake.

SHAKER: [01:31:45] Okay.

PRESTON: [01:31:46] This is the journal you're looking at now.

SHAKER: [01:31:47] Yeah, I'm looking at the journal. I have, um. I don't know if you want me to read something, uh, but I do have, like, the first day. I have an entry for the first day there.

PRESTON: [01:32:01] Read that. I bet that would be interesting.

SHAKER: [01:32:02] I don't know if it's interesting or not, but I'll read it and see how it goes. This is Thursday, March 1st, 1984. So this is, um, the first day of being in Southeast Asia and going into Thailand. The group stayed at the Hong Kong Hyatt Regency overnight. We walked in the vicinity of the hotel to absorb some of the Hong Kong life. We met an American businessman who gave hints about Hong Kong. He also took three of us to the top floor of the Sheraton Hotel to view the bay and Hong Kong Island. I guess this is our stopover on the way to Thailand.

PRESTON: [01:32:44] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:32:44] Then we walked to the waterfront for a closer view. The group departed for Bangkok on Cathay Pacific Airlines. We were greeted by the Peace Corps staff in the VIP room of Bangkok airport. They gave everyone a string of flowers. Everyone was surprised. Soon after, soon after the greetings, we were taken by bus to the Viengtai Hotel, where we are to stay until Saturday. So that was, I guess, the first day.

PRESTON: [01:33:17] How successful were you in keeping up with the journal? Was it something, did you write every day?

SHAKER: [01:33:20] Oh yeah, yeah. I think I wrote all the way to the end.

PRESTON: [01:33:24] Wow.

SHAKER: [01:33:24] Yeah. So as you can see, it's pretty, pretty. I got, let's see how many pages here have written stuff. Um. Until I got home, probably 80 pages. Back, you know, both sides. So we're talking double that. 160 pages of stuff.

PRESTON: [01:33:41] Was there any day you remember just really being down on the whole experience, really feeling homesick, really feeling like you weren't accomplishing anything, you know? Was any down time, I guess?

SHAKER: [01:33:59] Well, I guess, I guess at the beginning I probably had a feeling that I wasn't accomplishing too much because, again, I was dealing with some students who weren't too, too interested, too interested in learning English. And they, um. We were using a program, an English teaching program, that was new for the school. So I was experimenting with them. And I guess I didn't, I wasn't feeling that these kids were learning a lot, especially when I gave them tests and none of them could pass the tests. And I thought the tests were pretty simple. So I think there was a time during my first year that I felt that I wasn't really doing a lot as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was just basically being, I was just another teacher.

SHAKER: [01:35:03] But then I guess I analyzed it and eventually concluded that, uh, that just the fact that I'm there and working with teachers and, and, and teaching them some things maybe about America or about English, that I was doing something. But it took a while, I think, for me to, uh, come to terms with the fact that I'm not going to make a big impact on the English, on the teaching of English, you know, in my school or in Thailand. But I never felt really depressed or unhappy about the fact that I went into the Peace Corps. I never regretted, regretted being a Peace Corps volunteer.

PRESTON: [01:35:51] Would you go back? Would you join again if you had the opportunity?

SHAKER: [01:35:53] I wouldn't join now. I would maybe when I retire. And if the Peace Corps is still around in, uh, in 30, 35 years. I guess I have to put

in 35 years here before I can retire now. So I'll be, I guess, in my sixties. But I think, um. I do a lot of Peace Corps work, Peace Corps like work, in my job right now. So I don't, uh. I can, I can do a lot of Peace Corps like work here in the United States.

SHAKER: [01:36:27] And, you know, the third goal of, of being a Peace Corps volunteer is bringing the world back home, so to speak. So I do show my slides here at school, by the way, at Rogers Park School. A lot of the social studies teachers ask me to. I know I did last year. I presented my slides on Thailand. So I can reach a lot of people here and teach them what Thailand is like and what the experience was for me there.

PRESTON: [01:37:08] If there was, two last questions, if there was a piece of advice for someone who was considering joining the Peace Corps. Now, you said you had friends at your college, the dean who helped you to decide what you wanted to do. What would you say to someone who said I'm thinking about joining the Peace Corps?

SHAKER: [01:37:26] I would, I would say make sure that you have no commitments here. If you're going to join the Peace Corps, you can't take any baggage with you. You can't, you can't go into the Peace Corps and worry about, um, paying car loans or if you have a mount, a mountain of bills that are with you. You have to go with a free mind. You know, you have to be free of any commitments, free of any loans perhaps. Or you can, if you have a college loan, of course you can put that aside and the government will let you, will give you a, um.

PRESTON: [01:38:07] A deferment?

SHAKER: [01:38:07] Yeah. Deferment, right, that's the word I'm looking for. Will give you a deferment. Or if you have a relationship, if you're in a middle of a relationship, and if you're going to be splitting up with someone and you don't feel good about that, that can interfere with your Peace Corps experience. So you really have to be independent and just be ready to, to be on your own and not have any major concerns back home because you won't be effective. Research the Peace Corps. Make sure it's the right job, the right program for you. Talk to a lot of people who have been

in the Peace Corps, especially in the country that you're thinking about going into, because every country is different.

SHAKER: [01:38:50] I mean, I may not have been so successful, so successful if I went to Western Africa or if I went to, um, to an Arabic speaking country or to Nepal, you know. So you have to know the country you're going to. Research the country, know the people of the country, know kind of food they eat, know what the weather is going to be like, know what the transportation system is going to be like. You really learn as much as possible about the country. Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:39:20] That's my second question. What would you tell someone going to Thailand? What would you tell them to, uh, if you could share your experiences with them what would you say?

SHAKER: [01:39:29] As far as if they wanted to go to Thailand and whether they should go or not, is that?

PRESTON: [01:39:33] No, just, you know, to say, okay, when I was in Thailand, this is what I found. This is what I, you know, I had trouble with this. I didn't have trouble with this.

SHAKER: [01:39:38] Oh, I see. Well, Thailand is actually a pretty easy country to be a Peace Corps volunteer in. Because you have a lot of transportation, public transportation, so you can go anywhere in the country practically, whether it's by bus, by train, by airplane, by car. You know, you can travel almost anywhere in the country without actually owning a vehicle and you can get anywhere. Uh. You can. The food is plentiful, so you don't have to worry about starving if you're going to Thailand. A lot of fruit, like I said earlier. The money, it's very cheap to live in Thailand. So, you know, the money that you make will go far. Um.

SHAKER: [01:40:28] I guess as far as difficulties, if you can't take hot food, that might be a problem. If you can't take spicy food. If you can't, if you have an illness or if you just can't eat spicy food and you don't wish to get used to eating spicy food, then that could be a problem. I just had a story

that came to my mind about spicy food. It took me, it took me about six months maybe to get comfortable with eating hot food, the spicy food.

SHAKER: [01:41:02] But one, one time I recall having, having an after school snack or soup at this Nakhon Pathom jedi that we mentioned earlier. I didn't put any spices in my soup. I was having a Chinese type of soup, I think, and everybody was putting all this red sauce in it and all this spice. And I was, uh, I put a little bit and I was eating it rather bland for them. The people I was sitting with could not bear watching me eating the food without spices. So they just grabbed the bottle of red sauce and put it into my soup.

PRESTON: [01:41:49] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:41:49] And they said, now it's better, now it's okay to eat. And that's how I got used to eating spicy food, because people forced me to eat it. Otherwise I probably wouldn't, wouldn't have gotten used to it, you know? So you have to be willing to, to experiment, to experiment with new kinds of food. Um. If you're a female, you might have problems with some of the Thai men as far as being flirty and trying to get your attention. And I know, you know, women that were traveling alone would sometimes be harassed by Thai men on trains and busses. And so that could be a problem.

SHAKER: [01:42:40] You have to be able to adjust socially. You know, you can't, um. I guess, I mean, it may be difficult for, more difficult for women, but it's frowned upon when women hang out with men that they're not going to be, I mean, privately. I mean, for example, if I were to just take a walk with a female teacher after school alone, everybody would think, you know, there's something going on.

PRESTON: [01:43:06] You've ruined her reputation.

SHAKER: [01:43:07] Yeah. Yeah, I've ruined the girl's reputation, you know. And so it's tough, you know. I had to learn a lot about, um, I guess I made many mistakes in the beginning about how to deal with the female teachers, because most of the teachers that I worked with were females. And I

know a lot of female teachers went out of their way to do things for me that was socially unacceptable.

PRESTON: [01:43:31] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:43:32] You know, like the first few weeks at my school, I had to get a photograph taken because they have a big display case of all the teachers, pictures of teachers. So I had to put my picture up in the display case. So a female teacher had to take me after school to a photographer to get my picture taken. And she was really, you know, an attractive teacher and, uh, well, she was just helping me out and she felt really uncomfortable doing it. And then she was mentioning to me, you know, that, you know, people are going to, like to talk and so on. So I know she wasn't happy about the fact that she had to take me there but. So her reputation might have been tarnished a little bit because people saw her with me and they were talking about her for a while.

PRESTON: [01:44:23] Uh huh.

SHAKER: [01:44:23] So that can be tough, you know, learning the social rules between males and females.

PRESTON: [01:44:31] Right.

SHAKER: [01:44:31] But as far as, um, it's a great country, though, it's a really a super country to be a Peace Corps volunteer in. And there are a lot of good people there. And I would recommend it to anyone without any hesitation. Yeah. And learning the language a little bit ahead of time may not hurt if you can do that. Yeah.

PRESTON: [01:44:51] I think, uh, that's good. I think, you know, can give it a wrap then.

SHAKER: [01:44:56] Okay.

PRESTON: [01:44:56] Well, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]