

**Steve M. Shepard Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
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**Creator:** Steve M. Shepard  
**Interviewer:** Jack Franklin Davies  
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**Biographical Note**

Steve M. Shepard served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from 1986 to 1989 as a medical laboratory technician.

**Access**

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Steve M. Shepard

August 26, 2019  
Seattle, Washington

By Jack Franklin Davies

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

DAVIES: [00:00:01] All right. Are we recording? Yes, now it's recording. All right. So to the Kennedy Center, we're going to run this a little bit. We're sitting outside here. I've got the windsock on the microphone, so it shouldn't be a problem. But you can edit out this part of the tape. And we did a little Fiji kava ceremony earlier, but I won't include that since this is Steve's story. OK, so we're ready to go. OK. Hi, my name is Jack Davies. I'm a returned Peace Corps volunteer from the Fiji Islands from 1978 through '80. Today I'm interviewing Steve Shepard, who was also a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji at Sigatoka, and he was a health volunteer at the hospital from 1986 to 1989. How are you doing, Steve?

SHEPARD: [00:00:42] I'm doing good.

DAVIES: [00:00:43] I should say *ni sa bula vinaka*. I got to get a little bit of Fijian in here. So we're in Seattle today, a beautiful day, and recording outside,

so hopefully there won't be any distracting sounds. But if there were, it would be just another day in Fiji, wouldn't it?

SHEPARD: [00:01:00] Yes, it would.

DAVIES: [00:01:02] Yeah. So tell me about yourself, Steve. Where did you grow up?

SHEPARD: [00:01:06] I grew up in Seattle, in west Seattle.

DAVIES: [00:01:11] OK, around this area?

SHEPARD: [00:01:13] Actually very close to this area. It just happened when we were looking for a house many years later, when I was about 38 years old, my wife Leela, who I met and married in Fiji, liked this area. Right now where we're sitting, Jack, is about one mile from the Fauntleroy Ferry Dock where I grew up, three blocks from there.

DAVIES: [00:01:34] Oh, that's interesting. So I'll bet you've seen this area grow as well. And you were in Fiji at a time between, I'll say, the technological age when they started getting TV and so on. We'll get into that a little bit. But for the moment, let me stay focused on your training. Where did you learn your health sciences?

SHEPARD: [00:01:57] I learned my health sciences at basically Shoreline Community College and Seattle Community College. I took a course back in 1969, 1970, as a surgical technician, where I'd be passing instruments and sutures, either be sterile and work with the surgeons or be the circulate and essentially do what a circulating nurse does. And then a decade later, I was introduced to a program at Shoreline Community College for medical laboratory technicians, and I needed a year's college basic sciences to get in that program. That was very competitive. There were about 113 people looking at 13 openings, and so I managed to ace and get in the program.

DAVIES: [00:02:45] So you had some experience under your belt. How old were you when you joined?

SHEPARD: [00:02:49] Oh, when I joined Peace Corps, I was 35.

DAVIES: [00:02:51] Oh, goodness.

SHEPARD: [00:02:51] Just turned 35.

DAVIES: [00:02:52] Yeah, that's a little bit older than the average volunteer. So you trained in science, health sciences, and how did you actually find out about the Peace Corps?

SHEPARD: [00:03:03] Well, I had a friend that was a Dutch citizen that was living here in Seattle, and I was lamenting the fact that I just didn't know what was happening. After six years working as a medical technologist at Swedish Hospital here in Seattle, it didn't feel like that was what I wanted to do the rest of my life. I wanted to help people. I wanted to travel. I wanted to do something that would make a difference to somebody. And the Dutch friend said he knew somebody who'd been a Peace Corps volunteer, set me up with basically an interview with her, and went to a bar in North Seattle and talked to her. And she was very enthusiastic about her Peace Corps history.

DAVIES: [00:03:42] Was she in Fiji?

SHEPARD: [00:03:43] And no, she was not in Fiji. I believe she was in an African country, but it's been a long time.

DAVIES: [00:03:49] All right. So then you approached the Peace Corps and what kind of reaction did you get from them?

SHEPARD: [00:03:55] And it was positive reaction, at least comfortably positive, and it took me quite a while, although I understand it generally takes people a while. From the time I signed up for Peace Corps, it was just a little over a year before I was finally accepted.

DAVIES: [00:04:12] And was Fiji your first offer?

SHEPARD: [00:04:14] And at the time I asked about where I'd go and they said, well, we're not a travel agency and Pacific, Asia, we have a lot of different, you could go to Africa. So I said Pacific and Asia would be my preferences and they seemed to focus on that, which included the Caribbean. So when it came down to it, after about nine months, I'd gotten all this stuff out of the way. I was legal, didn't have a criminal record, and had a bona fide divorce. I wasn't running away from any women here. And so they told me that they had three finalist countries. One was Jamaica, one was Belize in Central America, and one was Fiji. And about two months later, I still had heard virtually nothing from Peace Corps. And one day the phone rang and they said, we'd like to invite you to a position in Fiji.

DAVIES: [00:05:06] Nice. And did you know anything about Fiji?

SHEPARD: [00:05:09] I really knew next to nothing about Fiji.

DAVIES: [00:05:12] You knew where it was?

SHEPARD: [00:05:13] I probably could not have found it very quickly on a map.

DAVIES: [00:05:17] That's funny. I think everybody knows Fiji from Fiji Water probably.

SHEPARD: [00:05:24] Nowadays, yes.

DAVIES: [00:05:25] Yeah. So where did you do your training or staging?

SHEPARD: [00:05:29] Staging was held in San Francisco in an older hotel in the Tenderloin district. And it was just a bit over a week in early July of 1986. And most of the other people there were volunteers going to Fiji, although they actually flew in two people from Fiji who were on Peace Corps staff there. So I met the Fiji nurse who was name was Wynu Thonganili Walala, and Wynu, who was a very popular lady, gave us our first gamma globulin shots.

DAVIES: [00:06:04] Oh, I remember that. Yeah.

SHEPARD: [00:06:04] And a couple of other people who had worked. Lau Penarth, an Indian Fijian woman who was married to an Indian man who was in the process of leaving Fiji and going to New York. But she also flew out to San Francisco and talked to us about what to expect. And we even did a few demos of how you would approach somebody if you're in a restaurant where there's very few tables. It's normal in Fiji just to share a table with other people. You just say, may I sit here? And they say, sure, come on. And so we did that kind of thing just to sort of break the ice with some Americans that weren't really used to people being that flexible.

DAVIES: [00:06:47] Yeah. So you had some Fiji food in San Francisco or where?

SHEPARD: [00:06:51] No, not in San Francisco. It wasn't until the training continued once we got in country.

DAVIES: [00:06:58] Ah.

SHEPARD: [00:06:58] And while we had a base in Nadi at the Nadi Hotel, after a week or ten days, we were sent in two different groups up to Ba, which is in northern Viti Levu, the main island, a very hot area. And I stayed with an Indian family, Sada and Savita and their two children, and they helped me learn a little bit of Fiji Hindi it's called. It's similar to Hindi, but it has a Fiji flavor to it. And they also taught me a little bit about how they cooked on their little kerosene stove on the floor, and made quite a few different Indian meals for me while I stayed with them, and went to a couple of Indian related events. And then finished up with Ba and went back to Nadi to the Nadi Hotel for another week or so, where we jumped out to southern part, the southeastern part of Viti Levu in Serua province.

SHEPARD: [00:08:00] I was sent to a small village called, a Fijian village named Vunibau. And Vunibau was right on the South Pacific Ocean. You could walk out on a beach every morning. We had Peace Corps trainers that had come from Fiji and they helped us learn the language. Fijian guys would talk Fijian, the Indian guys would, and women, would talk Hindi, Fiji Hindi to us. And we just had a good time and learned a lot and sort of

crammed both languages, which turned out we didn't need that much later. But I think that having a handle on both languages really helped with the experience, knowing what you're getting into, what people are experiencing, just sort of breaking the ice and feeling a little more like a local, even though you're definitely not.

DAVIES: [00:08:54] Yeah. So how long did your training actually last all together?

SHEPARD: [00:08:57] So I believe the training was set to be three months.

DAVIES: [00:09:01] Three months, OK. And what were your first impressions then after the training?

SHEPARD: [00:09:06] After the training, I was really enthusiastic. We had been pretty much kept on the western side of the island, except for Vunibau was a little over the border into the eastern side. But I think a lot of people were really interested to see Suva. Suva is the capital of Fiji. And Suva, to the best of my knowledge, is the largest city in the South Pacific, aside from Australia and New Zealand cities. So largest South Pacific city, had a lot of history, and when we finally got there we were able to spend almost five or six weeks. Once we were all given our assignments where we needed to go, I was told that I'd be going to Kadavu Island, which is Fiji's fourth largest island, to the south of Suva, about 90 kilometers way out there in the South Pacific.

SHEPARD: [00:10:01] So I got ready by buying a mattress, a full mattress, buying all the things, kitchen utensils, pots and pans, clothing, things that I thought I'd need, including clothespins, for doing my own wash, and was ready to go. And I found out that Peace Corps basically expected us to learn the way things are done locally. And that meant looking in the shipping section of the Fiji Times newspaper, finding when the next boat is going to Kadavu, and going down to the wharf and talking to the people and arranging your own transit on that boat.

DAVIES: [00:10:38] So other than the initial training, how much support did you get from the Peace Corps office?

SHEPARD: [00:10:43] We were basically given gamma globulin shots I believe every three months, and for that we would need to go to Suva. So I'd say a lot of support. Certainly they had a number we could call at any time if we had a telephone. In Kadavu, that was mostly radio telephone, so a little more difficult. But Peace Corps was really supportive in my opinion.

DAVIES: [00:11:07] What about monetary support?

SHEPARD: [00:11:09] It was good in that we got a stipend every month and if we found housing that would cost us money, we were given a reasonable stipend for reasonable housing.

DAVIES: [00:11:21] Yeah. Do you happen to recall how much that was?

SHEPARD: [00:11:24] For me in Kadavu, I was living in government housing, but I was only in Kadavu from September until December of 1986. So eventually when I ended up going to the Sigatoka Hospital in early '87, I was getting \$100 a month for housing.

DAVIES: [00:11:42] OK, so that was the local per diem rate, because I recall they put some money aside for us after the service. And I'll ask you what you did with that money later. So at what point did you start your job?

SHEPARD: [00:11:54] So I started the job pretty much the same week that I arrived in Kadavu, which probably would have been the last week in September 1986. I remember I booked my passage on a boat called the Land Dolly. Its crew had three Fijian men and three Indian men. It was a small inter-island freighter. And I was told that, hey, there are some people from South Africa going with you. And I thought, this is great. I've never met anybody from South Africa. It was actually a white couple who vowed that they were not going back home to South Africa until apartheid was finished.

DAVIES: [00:12:35] Oh, boy.

SHEPARD: [00:12:35] So when we got to Kadavu, they really wanted me to come exploring with them. And I was sort of the nerd that wanted to just, hey, I needed to get started with my project for Peace Corps.

DAVIES: [00:12:48] Yeah.

SHEPARD: [00:12:48] So I said goodbye to them and they headed out over the northeast part of the island of Kadavu.

DAVIES: [00:12:52] Hold that thought for just a moment, because you were there during a couple of coups. What was behind the coup?

SHEPARD: [00:12:58] Well, the coups were later. But what was behind the coup was multifaceted. But I believe that now most people believe what I did at the time, and that's simply that it was an apartheid against the Indians. The Indians were at the time almost 45% of Fiji's population. These people had been in Fiji since the late 1800s. They had helped Fiji grow. They were the majority of the entrepreneurs in Fiji, the majority of the teachers in the tertiary and colleges.

DAVIES: [00:13:35] They were the merchants and businessmen.

SHEPARD: [00:13:37] Exactly.

DAVIES: [00:13:39] Yeah. So how were you affected by the coup?

SHEPARD: [00:13:41] So I was affected in many ways. Several rather unsavory things happened to me. We can discuss that later. But I at the time was very interested in a woman that was a nurse at Sigatoka Hospital.

DAVIES: [00:13:59] Where you were working, right?

SHEPARD: [00:13:59] Where I was every day, yes. And so I immediately was in Suva at the time, actually, I should point out, because Peace Corps had brought me in for a gamma globulin shot and my physical exam. And so it was actually that morning I went to see the contracted Fiji doctor, who was an Australian or New Zealand expatriate. I'm not sure. And she

said, oh, are you going to go back? And I said, what? And she said, there was a bloody coup down there, right in Parliament, about a half a mile from where her office was located. And as soon as I got out of her thing, I went directly to the Peace Corps office and they, oh, everybody had sad faces. And this is shocking because the country has been taken over by a military government, and the newly elected prime minister, who was a Fijian man, also a doctor, a physician, had been deposed, arrested, and taken from power. And it was, it was really a shock. I really thought Fiji was going in a better, more improved direction, although we were also encouraged by Peace Corps that we should stay out of politics.

DAVIES: [00:15:16] Well, that's for sure. But you mentioned this other gentleman was arrested. What about yourself?

SHEPARD: [00:15:24] I was arrested by the Fiji military about a month and a half after the first coup. I had returned from Suva, where Peace Corps had kept all the volunteers that they could save, because they really didn't know what was going to happen. There were armed soldiers on the streets. People were going through checkpoints with armed soldiers, having your bag searched. Most of the tourist industry collapsed. All the Australian and New Zealand people that were visiting were gone. So it was just a few people. A lot of my Peace Corps friends left. They truly believed that because of the coup that they could not continue on with the job that they were doing.

DAVIES: [00:16:08] Why did you stay?

SHEPARD: [00:16:09] I stayed because what I was doing, I felt, still helped the people of Fiji in a tiny way and really was pretty much unaffected by that. Second reason is, frankly, I was just curious. It was exciting, although it was scary as heck.

DAVIES: [00:16:27] Yeah, we kind of glossed over what you were actually doing on the job. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

SHEPARD: [00:16:33] Yeah. What I was supposed to be doing was as a medical technologist, medical lab technician. Fiji School of Medicine graduated classes I believe every year. And I was supposed to have a counterpart at Sigatoka Hospital. Instead, there was a nurse who knew some basic laboratory testing, but in fact, it turned out that she really was very poorly trained and was doing things that would actually compromise some of the testing that she was doing. I remember she asked me one time, she was a native Fijian woman, and asked me one time what she thought, what I thought after, before the coup, but after the election of this guy, Timoci Bavadra, who is a Fijian man and had basically taken over after the guy who had been the Prime Minister of Fiji for about 17 years. So I told her, hey, you know, I think that it might be a good thing for Fiji. And she made a face that told me no.

DAVIES: [00:17:37] Oh.

SHEPARD: [00:17:37] She as a Fijian did not believe that Dr. Bavadra was a good choice for Fiji. So very soon after she left and I was the only person in the lab and I learned that nobody was going to replace me. So I went on trying to look at what I could buy for the laboratory if I could get some grants. And it became immediately obvious that any grant proposals that I could write to Australia and New Zealand weren't going to fly because this country was under martial law. It had had a military coup. Australia and New Zealand were very violently staying away from Fiji politics. They didn't believe what was going on was good.

DAVIES: [00:18:21] Wow, I'm getting shivers just hearing this. So you stayed in country. You were threatened by the authorities. They released you without charges, I understand.

SHEPARD: [00:18:34] Yeah, we didn't get to that. Actually, Jack, I had come back from an incident with the family that I was staying with. The husband was basically a wife abuser, and I told him that I could not stay. So I packed up my things, called Peace Corps, took a taxi to Suva, which was the most efficient transport for the suitcases I had. And Peace Corps then gave me a choice of either teaching at the Fiji School of Medicine, which I wasn't too interested in, or working at Sigatoka Hospital in the

laboratory. And I'd seen Sigatoka city when we first got to Fiji with the Peace Corps, and it was a wonderful, pretty much Indian town. Indian women in saris and salwar kameez, Fijian people intermingling happy with each other. It was paradise. It looked like paradise.

DAVIES: [00:19:29] Yeah. That's where the international airport is.

SHEPARD: [00:19:31] In Nadi. It's a ways from Sigatoka.

DAVIES: [00:19:34] Oh, how far?

SHEPARD: [00:19:35] But it's just down on what's called the Coral Coast, and I chose to go ahead to Sigatoka Hospital. And I think it was, looking back, a really good decision. But you mentioned, Jack, that I had had some problems and, yes, I had. After I went back to Suva from the Indian family that I was living with because of their domestic violence, I had to find a new place to live in Sigatoka, and Peace Corps put me up at a place called the Crow's Nest Resort. I had a room like a tourist until I found a new place to live, which I eventually did. But while I was still living at the Crow's Nest Resort, someone saw my shortwave radio. Someone called the Fiji military and reported that I was somehow listening to news from Australia. After the coup, I should point out that both newspapers and radio stations in Fiji shut down.

DAVIES: [00:20:34] Oh, they did?

SHEPARD: [00:20:35] There was nothing for several days. All you would hear if you tuned into the radio station was, we are the world, we are the people, over and over. So it was very spooky. And I think that gave me. So I really felt alone at that time. This was a time when Fiji was under martial law. A little bit later there was a curfew. You were not allowed, no one was allowed on the streets if you weren't an armed soldier after 8:00 at night. And I started realizing, my God, no newspapers, no radio. They don't want me to listen to Radio Australia on my shortwave radio, which the soldiers came to my room one day and confiscated and questioned me and actually took me to a checkpoint where they, a temporary headquarters in Sigatoka, and questioned me.

SHEPARD: [00:21:35] And then just as like the Fijian culture goes, after everything is OK, they made yagona, also known as grog, and we sat down with the lieutenant, Sacusa Lalinbalavu was his name. And we drank grog, four or five of us Fijians on the temporary military corps headquarters in Sigatoka. And then they offered to drive me back to my temporary room at the Crow's Nest. Peace Corps was kind of cool when Monday morning the people at the Crow's Nest Resort pointed out that there was an article on the front page of the Fiji Times about a Peace Corps volunteer arrested.

DAVIES: [00:22:17] Wow.

SHEPARD: [00:22:17] And that was not cool.

DAVIES: [00:22:19] Were you the only one?

SHEPARD: [00:22:20] I was the only one until I went to Suva for a couple of days. And then we realized that other Peace Corps volunteers were calling in and saying, gosh, you know, we were detained by the military, and showing up in the paper as well. So where I was initially the bad guy for a couple of days, everything changed.

DAVIES: [00:22:41] Probably just as well they didn't have TV then.

SHEPARD: [00:22:43] Yeah.

DAVIES: [00:22:46] Wow. So how long did this coup go on?

SHEPARD: [00:22:51] Well, there really wasn't an end to the coup. But certainly the gravity of the coup and how it sank in with individual people was a long time, Jack. What I saw immediately was where on the western side of Viti Levu, the main island, the Indians and the Fijians were really good friends. They had gone to school together. They had done a lot of things together as families. And the coup eventually polarized these people. It basically, I saw a lot of racism happening. And I remember one time I went to Suva for my gamma globulin shot right after those incidents. Had

a friend come running up to my door in the hotel I was staying overnight in saying, Steve, you've got to come to my father's house because they're downtown. They're beating Indians and breaking into the Indian shops.

DAVIES: [00:23:53] Oh no.

SHEPARD: [00:23:53] And she was terrified.

DAVIES: [00:23:54] Yeah.

SHEPARD: [00:23:54] And so I went to their house and stayed for a while and then made my way back to the Peace Corps office via one street where.

DAVIES: [00:24:03] Excuse me, but what did she expect you to do?

SHEPARD: [00:24:06] I think that. She was a younger woman that was the daughter of a New Zealand expatriate that I also knew. I had met him in Kadavu, met her in Kadavu, and they seemed to be pretty much in the same places from then on that I was in Fiji, just coincidentally. And so basically I think Melody just wanted some reassurance and was terrified, and it was indeed terrifying to see what I saw.

DAVIES: [00:24:34] Some moral support then. So there wasn't anything that you actually did to intervene?

SHEPARD: [00:24:39] No, just be some shoulder to cry on, a friend to talk to while all the violence was happening.

DAVIES: [00:24:46] What were your own feelings? Were you scared?

SHEPARD: [00:24:50] I tend to build a shell around myself, protective layer. And so, yes, I was terrified inside, but I was still functioning okay. Even though almost back to the Peace Corps office, I heard yelling and there were people grabbing big stones and throwing them through the glass fronts of Indian shops. It was hatred. And they were breaking, grabbing stuff, running off with it, all the windows, knocking down doors. And I

remember there was a sandwich shop run by some New Zealand expatriates. They were so terrified they said, gosh, you know, we came and we don't want to stay and see this.

DAVIES: [00:25:29] And were you concerned about your own safety then?

SHEPARD: [00:25:32] Yes and no, because I felt at that time I had been in country for a little over a year. I had learned the languages and customs enough to feel pretty darn comfortable. This is only my own perception and my own personality how I had blended in. But yes, I was scared. But yes, I kind of felt like nothing really bad was going to happen to me. The real scare was over with.

DAVIES: [00:26:00] Wow. So you stuck it out. And then what happened? Did you stay with the same job or same location?

SHEPARD: [00:26:06] So I did stay with the same job. I eventually found a small place right on about 50 yards from the South Pacific Ocean, a little tin shack kind of fashioned after a Fijian bure. And I was living in that shack only for about a month and a half. At that time, a Fijian woman was really helpful to me and we started dating. And after that I had gone up to the road to hitchhike one day into town to the hospital. Usually the bus wasn't all that reliable after the coups, and people would often stop if you're just standing on the road. Hey, where are you going? And you want a ride? Sure. But this time there was an Indian man standing on the road and he saw me and he said, where are you from? And I said, oh, from America. He said, where in America? And I said, Seattle. He said, I'm from Seattle. And I thought, oh come on, don't give me that. And he grabbed at his wallet and pulled it out and showed me a Washington State driver's license.

DAVIES: [00:27:05] No kidding.

SHEPARD: [00:27:06] Introduced himself as George Mansingh and he said, my gosh, you've got to come and visit my family, my son and his wife and their daughter are here.

DAVIES: [00:27:16] And here in Fiji?

SHEPARD: [00:27:17] Right here in Korotogo, walking distance from where I was living by the ocean there. So I arranged that weekend to go over and visit. I met Francis Singh, who was half Indian from his father and half Fijian, from the Fijian village on the east side of Viti Levu. And his wife, who was named Terry, and had a daughter named Megan. Terry was an IT professional in Silicon Valley and had met Francis, I think, in Hawaii. And a nice family.

DAVIES: [00:27:51] Uh huh. Excuse me for interrupting. You said you were dating a Fijian girl?

SHEPARD: [00:27:57] Yes. Emma and I went to movies and went out to eat and have lunch and stuff and had a pretty good relationship. Didn't move in together or anything like that.

DAVIES: [00:28:08] Now, excuse me again. Was this your wife or your future wife?

SHEPARD: [00:28:14] No, this was not my future wife.

DAVIES: [00:28:16] OK. I just wanted to clarify that.

SHEPARD: [00:28:19] So right now in time, we're basically looking at late July, August of 1987. I'd been in country for a year and a quarter and was doing okay, except that I kept having these pesky problems with my bowel. Ouch. Stomach was gurgling. My appetite wasn't really great. I'd go into Suva, talk to Wynu, the Peace Corps nurse, and they did some testing and said, well, you don't have anything. And then the second time they said, well, you have giardia, which is a little parasite that gets in you, gives you a lot of gas and easy to get rid of with a drug called Fasigyn that they gave me. And it didn't get rid of it, at least in my opinion, because I kept having the same symptoms. And eventually they felt, after several trips to Suva and several rounds of testing that were all negative, that it must be all in my head.

DAVIES: [00:29:18] Oh.

SHEPARD: [00:29:18] And unfortunately, the psychiatrist who they wanted me to see, who was a contracted Kiwi New Zealander from Peace Corps, had left right after the coup saying, my god, Fiji is a powder keg, I'm out of here. So the only other psychiatrist available would be Washington, D.C. So I was packed on a plane with two other volunteers, one who had unfortunately been sexually assaulted in Fiji and one who was actually an Indian woman, but she was raised and living in America. And we all went back on the same flight to Washington, D.C. I was tested again in Washington, D.C., and my gosh, I had all kinds of parasites. I had worms, I had giardia. And so, no, it wasn't all in my head. I definitely needed several courses over about a 15 day period to get rid of that.

SHEPARD: [00:30:16] And meanwhile, I was sort of stuck in Washington, D.C. And I was given a daily stipend, walk around money, and I enjoyed going to the Smithsonian, doing different things. But one morning I remember very fondly that I was thinking about one of the nurses that had actually seen me off at the Sigatoka Hospital. Her name was Leela. And I was also thinking about the book that I had been reading when I arrived in Washington, D.C., at National Airport. It was in Fiji, you learn to read whatever you can get because there aren't a lot of books. But this was.

DAVIES: [00:31:02] In Fijian language or in English?

SHEPARD: [00:31:03] In English.

DAVIES: [00:31:05] Oh, OK.

SHEPARD: [00:31:05] Probably less in Fijian language though. People are not really book people in Fiji. So I had been reading this book about some Nazi thing at the end of World War II, and when I got to my hotel that Peace Corps had arranged for me to go to, I think they rented out a whole floor of an inn in northwestern Washington, D.C. I just crashed out on, I was exhausted. I crashed out with jetlag on the bed and thinking about the book I had just read and asleep. I woke up hearing a very distinct German voice saying, what is this here we have? And it was a German

man, an elderly man, probably in his late sixties. He was also a Peace Corps volunteer. His name was Fred Gunsberger. And Fred and I got to know each other. Got to know, in fact, that Fred had been a German soldier during World War II, and my father had been an American soldier during World War II.

DAVIES: [00:32:09] Oh, boy.

SHEPARD: [00:32:10] It was interesting. But the relationship between Fred Gunsberger and I also included the fact that the new Peace Corps, the Peace Corps director in Fiji, was the same woman he had been under when he was a volunteer in Botswana. Fred was leaving, he was closing his service because he had hypertension. But we went around Washington, D.C., in those few weeks that we had, just like father and son. Fred and I got to be really good friends and it wasn't until Fred was finally had decided to go back as a private individual to Botswana and live out the rest of his life.

DAVIES: [00:32:53] To Botswana, OK. But you kind of danced around this girl back in Sigatoka.

SHEPARD: [00:33:00] Yeah, I think that was because I had originally come for, quote unquote, psychiatric reasons to Washington, D.C., until they immediately found out I was full of worms. I did have to leave Washington by having a second visit to a psychiatrist. And that psychiatrist thought it was really interesting when I mentioned that one of the reasons I wanted to go back was not only to finish my Peace Corps service, but also because I was really interested in one of the nurses at Sigatoka Hospital.

DAVIES: [00:33:31] Tell me more. What's her name?

SHEPARD: [00:33:34] So Leela. It was Leela Wati Krishna. A lot of women in Fiji, I even noticed at the hospital, don't use a surname. They just use Leela Wati or some other name that doesn't include the father's name. So at the hospital we'd actually have to put F stroke N as in father's name and then put that as a separate name so we wouldn't call her Leela Krishna.

She'd be Leela Wati father's name Krishna. But I was sent back to Fiji. Psychiatrist was really good about that. Told Peace Corps there's nothing wrong with this guy. He just had worms. And on the way back, I had a layover in San Francisco. So I got in touch with Francis Singh, who I had met his father and visited his family in Korotogo. He was now living in Silicon Valley. And so we he took me by Apple Computer and then back to the airport to catch my flight back to Fiji.

SHEPARD: [00:34:39] And back in Fiji, I found out that the home that I had left to another friend named Satish, a local Indian guy, had kind of used it for partying and there had been dogs in there that had defecated and the place was a mess. So I was pretty miffed at Satish and cleaned up the place really well. Got it back to the standards and basically had Francis coming and going, when eventually he announced that he was leaving Fiji. He was going back and I could have the house and all of the things that were in the house. He had planned, when he brought his wife and his stepdaughter, to live there for multiple years. So they had brought a video cassette recorder. They had bought all kinds of American appliances. I had a full size refrigerator. I had a three bedroom house.

DAVIES: [00:35:36] Wow. So this is modern living compared to the little bure on the beach.

SHEPARD: [00:35:40] Everything. Yeah. I could still visit that beach because it was only two blocks away, just down the way. But I had a much larger. [tape break]

DAVIES: [00:35:45] So you were living in a nice house, and things were kind of exciting after the coup. Let's go back to your job then. How did things go?

SHEPARD: [00:35:58] Well, every day I was going to Sigatoka Hospital. Every work day I was expected to show up. And I felt even though it wasn't exactly what Peace Corps thought I would be doing, I was doing something that was helpful and useful and it was allowing me to stay in Fiji and do the other things that I was doing. And of course I did have a warming relationship with this nurse named Leela, and Leela and I started dating.

I thought it was interesting because right after Fiji had a second coup. The original one was in May '87. This one was in September of '87.

DAVIES: [00:36:38] Oh, same here.

SHEPARD: [00:36:38] Another coup. And we got a different head nurse at Sigatoka Hospital at that time, and this nurse was helping the military a lot. She even gave a lot of the old hospital beds to the military for the guys to stay in. And she, Sister Varra was her name, and she really took a dim view of my dating Leela. We didn't do anything as far as displays of affection on the job. We were both very professional. Although Leela would occasionally, I'd find Leela in the lab waiting for me to tell me something that was going on and just hospital scuttlebutt or whatever. But Sister Varra, the new head nurse at the hospital, sent Leela away from the hospital and assigned her to public health project up the Sigatoka River.

DAVIES: [00:37:32] Because of you?

SHEPARD: [00:37:33] It was apparent to both of us that she didn't want us to be together, or any idea that we were together was not happy for her. So Leela and I, we continued dating on the weekends when she was back down in the valley, Sigatoka Valley, but it was very interesting.

DAVIES: [00:37:51] What kind of things did you do? What did you do for fun, hobbies and entertainment and all that?

SHEPARD: [00:37:55] Well, we took a trip to Ovalau, a couple of trips to Nadi prior to that.

DAVIES: [00:38:01] Ovalau was an offshore island?

SHEPARD: [00:38:02] And Ovalau was a small offshore island. It was where the original government of Fiji was located before it moved to Suva.

DAVIES: [00:38:10] Oh, OK.

SHEPARD: [00:38:10] But Ovalau had a lot of touristy kind of stuff to do and a lot of Victorian age stuff to see and do. And people that are a little more isolated from the main populace and in the main island. So it was really charming

DAVIES: [00:38:25] Well, you couldn't have been normal tourists since you spoke the language, understood the culture, and your now fiancée, or was she fiancée at that time?

SHEPARD: [00:38:33] No, she wasn't yet my fiancée. That didn't happen for a few more months, but it was coming up to second year and I was going to have, my service would have been over. I was going to have to leave Fiji. And I at that point felt that there was enough of a strength in our relationship, my relationship with Leela that I really couldn't leave her alone. And at the time when I did some research, the Fiji government had what I considered kind of a sexist law in that if you're a foreign man and you come and marry somebody in Fiji, you've got to take her away from Fiji. But if you're a foreign woman and you come and marry someone in Fiji, then you can stay with that person in Fiji.

DAVIES: [00:39:23] Oh.

SHEPARD: [00:39:24] So it became apparent that I was going to have to do a lot of quick thinking. And over a couple of months I made the decision to propose to Leela. And at that point she brought me home, not until that point, but at that point brought me home to a little shack that she lived in with her family. And her family consisted just of a 19 year old brother and her mother, who was widowed from a road accident her father had.

DAVIES: [00:39:57] And were they accepting of you?

SHEPARD: [00:39:59] And they were very accepting of me. It was, they were proud to have me in their home, offering me all kinds of things. I think their mom actually gave me the gold necklace that I'm wearing now.

DAVIES: [00:40:12] Oh, nice. Well, how did your proposal go? Was it done Fiji style, whatever that is?

SHEPARD: [00:40:17] Actually, I'm not sure what that would have been, so no.

DAVIES: [00:40:22] Kava, kava.

SHEPARD: [00:40:22] What I did was just the typical. I found a very nice ring. The duty-free stores had a wonderful selection of jewelry, and I got her an emerald and ruby and diamond engagement ring, and did the traditional down on one knee. And would you marry me?

DAVIES: [00:40:39] Wow. So what did the wedding look like? Where was it?

SHEPARD: [00:40:42] So we decided that we'd like to have a traditional Indian wedding. Although traditional Indian weddings tend to be very long, both in Fiji and in India. And so we had the abbreviated version. It probably took about 3 hours or so. A pundit came to marry us, although in Fiji that doesn't legally make you married. So in fact, in July, a month before our marriage, we did have to, Leela and I went to Suva together, and at that point we were sharing a bed together, so that was OK. And we went to a justice of the peace and got married and came back. But in everyone else's eyes we were still not married. It was the Hindu ceremony that was going to mean everything.

DAVIES: [00:41:31] May I ask how your family in this country felt?

SHEPARD: [00:41:35] Really just supportive. My mom couldn't afford to go to Fiji and I couldn't import her there. So my father was having some health problems so he couldn't come.

DAVIES: [00:41:49] Were they accepting of your wife?

SHEPARD: [00:41:52] As near as I can tell, yes.

DAVIES: [00:41:54] From a distance.

SHEPARD: [00:41:55] From a distance, right.

DAVIES: [00:41:56] At what point did they meet her?

SHEPARD: [00:41:57] And my father passed away before Leela and I came back to Seattle, where he was. But my mother met Leila in Maui, where I got my first job after we left Fiji.

DAVIES: [00:42:11] Oh, OK.

SHEPARD: [00:42:12] So that was the initial, the initial shock. And then my mom came another time when we had moved from Maui to the big island in Hawaii, in Hilo.

DAVIES: [00:42:23] So how much longer were you in Fiji after you were married?

SHEPARD: [00:42:26] So almost exactly a year.

DAVIES: [00:42:28] A year, OK.

SHEPARD: [00:42:28] So when I got married, it was pretty close to time to close service.

DAVIES: [00:42:33] The second year.

SHEPARD: [00:42:33] Most other two-year Peace Corps volunteers that I'd gone with were closing their service, and I went to a lot of the workshops. They had some really helpful ones for writing resumes and sending cover letters that ended up in the third year for being very helpful for me. As I mentioned, I had already gotten a job in Maui at Maui Memorial Hospital in the laboratory.

DAVIES: [00:42:57] OK. So you finished out your two years and then got a one year extension and then moved to Maui. Wow, what a story. Well, what did you do there? So, yeah, what were you doing in Maui and what are you doing now as a consequence of the Peace Corps?

SHEPARD: [00:43:20] Well, at the time, I was living in Maui with Leela, and as I said, I already had a job. So when we arrived, it was basically one of the

people with the company, Clinical Labs of Hawaii, met us, bought us lunch, got us accommodations, and helped us find a place to live eventually, which was a little shack out behind a Japanese family.

DAVIES: [00:43:46] Do you think the Peace Corps was helpful in getting you that next job?

SHEPARD: [00:43:50] I think that the end of service program that I had attended after two years gave me a lot of information about sending cover letters and writing a good resume and getting that going. So in that respect, yes. I thought it was interesting. A lot of the cover letters that I sent to other hospitals in Hawaii turned out all to go to Clinical Labs of Hawaii because they had the laboratories and all of the other places.

DAVIES: [00:44:18] They're trying to pigeonhole you. And Leela, did she get a job?

SHEPARD: [00:44:22] And Leela was a real stubborn person. So about working, she basically, from the time she graduated nursing school, she had been in Kadavu about a year before I was sent to Kadavu. She was in Sigatoka. She was all over Fiji as a nurse. And so after I started working at Maui Memorial Hospital, I went to the personnel office or the human resources department and said, gosh, you know, I have this person that's a nurse in Fiji and do you have anything that? They gave me a thing to fill out for her and said, sure, they were really excited about it. And Leela got hired as a, not sure exactly what the title was.

DAVIES: [00:45:07] OK, so you were husband and wife at that time?

SHEPARD: [00:45:08] We were husband and wife at that. We were married in Fiji.

DAVIES: [00:45:12] OK. Well, inclined to shift from Fiji to American culture. Did that cause any problems in the workplace working together?

SHEPARD: [00:45:20] No, we pretty much had our own hours. Leela ended up having to work some night shift and like that. So it was a bit challenging

in the beginning, but she was very proud to be working for an American wage.

DAVIES: [00:45:33] Well, Hawaii is a very mixed culture. How were you received there as an interracial culture?

SHEPARD: [00:45:40] I'm not sure about that, Jack. I sometimes felt everything was good, but I do think there was some friction too. I think I've mentioned that Leela is an Indian that's fairly dark skinned Indian, and I think that people saw that as sometimes not a favorable thing, some of the locals. And especially when we moved to the Big Island of Hawaii, I really felt that Leela was being pigeonholed and I don't think everybody was all that accepting. And so she was really strong and making her way. She immediately was transferred to Hilo Hospital, where I was working in the laboratory.

DAVIES: [00:46:24] Because of you, do you think?

SHEPARD: [00:46:26] I don't think so, no.

DAVIES: [00:46:28] OK. So it wasn't trying to split you up like the first situation back in Sigatoka?

SHEPARD: [00:46:32] No, that was just bizarre.

DAVIES: [00:46:33] Yeah. Well, let's fast forward. Here you are in Seattle and she's working and you have, you live in a nice neighborhood. How have you been received as a mixed couple, if that's even an issue?

SHEPARD: [00:46:47] I think pretty much it's pretty multicultural in Seattle. Seattle is always, in my opinion, been fairly, fairly multicultural.

DAVIES: [00:46:57] So do you imagine living here for time to come?

SHEPARD: [00:47:01] I think so. Leela's family is here now, her mom and her brother. Her mom did pass away a couple of years ago. Her brother married in a Hindu ceremony up in North Seattle, married an Indian

woman who had come from Fiji. And they're doing really well now. They have two children. They have a house bigger than ours out in Renton, which is a bit south of Seattle.

DAVIES: [00:47:27] Uh huh. And so you don't see yourself leaving this area because she has family now.

SHEPARD: [00:47:32] I think that's the main reason, you picked that up right away.

DAVIES: [00:47:35] Yeah, Fijians are very family oriented.

SHEPARD: [00:47:35] It's sort of an anchor, her brother and her are very close.

DAVIES: [00:47:38] Have you been back to Fiji to visit?

SHEPARD: [00:47:41] Last time we went back to Fiji together was 2005.

DAVIES: [00:47:46] OK.

SHEPARD: [00:47:46] And that was a lot of fun. I met a couple of people, one an old friend that I had lived with, and another an old friend that was from the Peace Corps office, right on the street in Suva. Fiji is just a small place where you can be in a country of 750,000 people, but here on the main island, my gosh, how can it be? You just go to Suva, the capital, and you're walking around the street and one day there's two people that, hi, how are you doing?

DAVIES: [00:48:15] Wow. So that was 15 years later, after they had TV. Had the country changed?

SHEPARD: [00:48:20] Yes.

DAVIES: [00:48:22] Or had you changed?

SHEPARD: [00:48:25] Both are very definitely true. Fiji, I think, did not positively change because of television. I mean, that Fiji did not change in a positive way. I don't want to get into all the pros and cons. And I haven't

lived as a resident since my Peace Corps service ended in 1989. So I'm always sort of a visitor, and I'm a little bit reluctant to start making judgment calls just from a two week visit.

DAVIES: [00:48:57] Sure. Yeah.

SHEPARD: [00:48:58] And what Leela's relatives, she has a lot of aunts and uncles in Fiji that she stays in contact with, but and her brother Shadawan also has a lot of old friends. So I get reports all the time. But firsthand, I don't know.

DAVIES: [00:49:12] Yeah. How about culture shock? Did you go through any culture shock either in Hawaii or coming back here?

SHEPARD: [00:49:17] I don't believe that I did. And I think Leela also is in a lot of ways like me, that she's a strong person and knows what she wants to do. And I think she was a real trooper about going through stuff pretty well. There were some weird, possibly racist issues in Hawaii and in America, but I think we overcame them fairly fast.

DAVIES: [00:49:39] Yeah, well, just a difference in material issues, everything from cars to supermarkets. Did that have any effect on you?

SHEPARD: [00:49:47] Yeah, it really did make a difference, although I think I'm pretty like a chameleon. I fit in pretty well to a different culture. I found out thanks to Peace Corps and thanks to the people of Fiji for the positive feedback that I got fairly quickly. So once we came back to America, we were in Maui. We saw cars and we saw movies and we saw television and all of the American things. I think that we were kind of expecting it and kind of used to it. I should make a point that Leela did part of her midwife training in New Zealand, and so she'd been out of Fiji, and we had gone for a three week vacation prior to leaving Fiji to Hawaii. That's when I interviewed for the job that I eventually got. So Leela had seen Pearl City and the mall there and Honolulu and Hilo, and so it was pretty, it wasn't all new for her and she was prepared for it.

SHEPARD: [00:50:48] And I think, like a lot of volunteers do, talk about culture shock. But I think the worst shock that I had was realizing that for three years I had been in a cocoon woven by Peace Corps to take care of my every needs, whether it's my every three month gamma globulin shots, my periodic health checks, my medications sent to me on time all the time, my stipend, my money for housing. All taken care of. I had never been in the military before, and I have not since. I've heard from soldiers that's how they live. But for me it was getting away from that sort of cocoon influence and the safety that I had felt from that. That was probably the most painful, and it wasn't all that painful, once we started both getting American wages and we both were gainfully employed.

DAVIES: [00:51:43] And plus you were older at the time. So you were 35 when you went into the Peace Corps. You would be now 38.

SHEPARD: [00:51:50] 38 or 39.

DAVIES: [00:51:50] OK. Yeah. So a little bit more mature. And what are you doing these days?

SHEPARD: [00:51:55] So these days, I had been working as medical technologist with a company that basically ate up the old job that I had at Swedish Hospital. They came in when I was gone in Fiji and Hawaii and, and there were a lot of mergers in laboratories all over. It was interesting to me that when I went back to the very same person that I had worked with at Swedish Hospital in the laboratory, that person interviewed me for a new job when Leela and I had just gotten from Hawaii to Seattle. And he said, well, what's to, how do we know that you're not going to just go off and join Peace Corps again? He just was really oblivious to the fact that, you know, I'd done my service. I was back as a regular person. I had given four weeks' notice, but he thought that he didn't want me back. He didn't want me to work with their team of people anymore.

DAVIES: [00:53:02] Oh.

SHEPARD: [00:53:02] So I found alternate situation at Pacific Medical Center here.

DAVIES: [00:53:05] And afraid of losing you. OK. Well, I want to ask you. So to try and summarize, um, we've talked about what you did before Peace Corps, what you did during the Peace Corps, what you're doing now and subsequent to Peace Corps. What do you consider to be your biggest accomplishments or successes?

SHEPARD: [00:53:27] Really, I think that it was a lot easier to have huge accomplishments when I was in Fiji. So maybe turning the slate a little bit. Having just had our 31st wedding anniversary, August 20th.

DAVIES: [00:53:47] Congratulations.

SHEPARD: [00:53:49] A few weeks ago. That's certainly accomplishment.

DAVIES: [00:53:51] Yeah, I'd say so.

SHEPARD: [00:53:52] We've definitely going through a lot of ups and downs. But we have stayed together and her brother has stayed geographically close to where we are.

DAVIES: [00:54:00] Yeah, well, it sounds like you had a lot of relationships in Fiji, I mean, friends and associates and so on. You mixed with a lot of people, Fijians and Indians. What more can you say about that?

SHEPARD: [00:54:12] Well, I think that all in all, learning to live in a different culture. Actually Fiji has two very distinctly different cultures, the Fijian culture, not to be confused with the Fiji Indians, the people whose ancestors had been brought to Fiji to work the cane fields and offered if they worked for ten years they could stay and become citizens and become Fiji citizens. So they. So I think it was really valuable not only to live in the Indian community and have Indian friends, but to live in the Fijian community and have Fijian friends and see the differences and the similarities in both cultures. And to have lived in both of those cultures was just a very, it's a precious memory and it's something that sometimes I can revive a bit if I go back and I have friends still there.

SHEPARD: [00:55:13] But it's really helped in a multicultural situation and a multicultural workplace to be able to relate to other people from other parts of the world. I think that it takes the sharp edge off my being an American, quote unquote. I think it's a lot easier to mix with the woman that I worked with as a med tech from Hong Kong and the folks that I knew from Nigeria that were med techs.

DAVIES: [00:55:40] Oh yeah.

SHEPARD: [00:55:40] And it just made everything easier. I wasn't acting like an American that knew all about their country, that I was pushy and I was instead culturally aware that, hey, these people live differently than you do, Steve. And you need to find out a little more about their culture, because even though they're trying to act as American as they can to fit in, they still have something that's very fundamental and very precious to them, and that's their own culture.

DAVIES: [00:56:11] Well, that's right.

SHEPARD: [00:56:12] So respect it.

DAVIES: [00:56:13] Yeah. And Fiji is communal as well. So very sharing and caring people. Well, we've touched on the three goals of the Peace Corps, which is a technology transfer, and it sounds like you were successful in that department. You went over knowing very little about Fiji and you came back with a great understanding and a wife. That's wonderful. So how do you share all that experience with your neighbors or your colleagues or whomever you might interact on a daily basis?

SHEPARD: [00:56:44] Well, on a daily basis, it's not really an issue. And I think I've found that when you start talking about your Peace Corps experience, it's often a sort of a foreign concept to a lot of people. They, most people are not really aware that Peace Corps exists or if they are, they've maybe heard some good or bad stories. I remember even in Fiji, I was asked, did your government make you come here? They didn't know that, no, I had given up a good job to go and help people in Fiji in any way that I could. And here in America, again, it's just a foreign concept

and people get bored really fast hearing about, yeah, you were in Fiji. So what? It's interesting, in the last few years I've noticed that the awareness of Fiji as a resort location or tourist location has really gone up, and certainly Fiji Water as well.

DAVIES: [00:57:39] I was going to say thanks to Fiji Water, huh?

SHEPARD: [00:57:42] Very possibly. I'm not sure where the source is that they talk about on the bottle, but.

DAVIES: [00:57:48] It's a nice picture of a waterfall.

SHEPARD: [00:57:51] Mm hmm.

DAVIES: [00:57:51] Well, let me ask you one more question that I've been pondering. I posed this last night to give you time to think about it. What good did we do?

SHEPARD: [00:57:59] What good did we do as Peace Corps Fiji?

DAVIES: [00:58:01] Yeah.

SHEPARD: [00:58:02] I think a lot, a lot of people in Fiji would tell me, you know, I used to have three different Peace Corps teachers, they'd call them Peace Corpses.

DAVIES: [00:58:13] Yeah.

SHEPARD: [00:58:15] And a lot of people had Peace Corps influence in their elementary school and their high school. Even Leela, my wife, the other day I was talking about this interview upcoming and she said, yeah, I had two. My chemistry teacher was a Peace Corps volunteer, and I think it was my language, English teacher.

DAVIES: [00:58:37] Wow, that's significant. I'm sorry that she's not here. I would have loved to have met her. And I will come back one day and see her

or come to the next reunion. Steve, is there anything else you'd like to add? This has been marvelous talking to you.

SHEPARD: [00:58:50] No, Jack, thanks a lot. I think the main thing is that marking time. It's been a while and Fiji has changed a lot. And when I was in Fiji we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Peace Corps and I just noticed online that Fiji celebrated its 50th anniversary.

DAVIES: [00:59:09] Fifty now, wow, that's great.

SHEPARD: [00:59:09] So.

DAVIES: [00:59:10] All right. Well, Steve, thank you very much for your time and all the information and for your service, of course. And please give my regards to your wife.

SHEPARD: [00:59:17] It's been my pleasure, Jack. Thank you.

DAVIES: [00:59:19] Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]