

Amy Amessoudji Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Amy Amessoudji
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Biographical Note

Amy Amessoudji (nee Waldren) served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guinea from 1995 to 1997 in a public health and community development program. She also served in the Crisis Corps in Togo from 2001 to 2002 as an HIV-AIDS technical advisor.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Amy Amessoudji

April 10, 2018
Madison, Wisconsin

By Harry E. Bennett

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

AMESSOUDJI: [00:00:00] Used to be Waldren. I always had to spell that, too.

BENNETT: [00:00:08] I'll keep this on for a little while. Today is April 10th, 2018. My name is Harry E. Bennett and I am interviewing Amy Amessoudji, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in, well, she was a Peace Corps volunteer in Guinea 1995 to 1997. And then she served in Togo in the Peace Corps Crisis Corps in 2001 to 2002. So we'll get the. She was in a health and community development program and then in her Crisis Corps, she was a technical adviser in HIV AIDS capacity. So we'll start the interview today by Amy, introduce yourself and maybe tell us a little bit about where you come from and just your family life, early family life.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:01:30] Okay. Hello, I'm Amy Amessoudji. I, uh. So starting at the beginning, I grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, and I have circled around. That's where we are now today. I went to school at the

University of Wisconsin here in Madison and studied the easiest thing I could think of, French and Spanish, for me that was my go-to subject, and got some great jobs in offices answering phone calls and taking minutes and was very quickly frustrated with my major. Not wanting to teach, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my languages so.

BENNETT: [00:02:30] Could you tell us a little bit about your family? Did you come from a large family?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:02:36] There were two of us. My sister and I, and my parents who divorced when I was in high school.

BENNETT: [00:02:55] So I guess we come to the most common question in these interviews is why did you join the Peace Corps?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:03:04] So I wanted to join the Peace Corps. I had been an exchange student in high school to Mexico, to a small village, and loved that. And as part of my French major in college, I did the junior year abroad and loved that. I lived in Aix-en-Provence in France. And as I mentioned, I was totally frustrated with my options of being a French and Spanish major just working in offices, and I found myself volunteering for hospice programs and translating for Spanish speaking patients and loved that. And I decided that I should probably join the Peace Corps in the Caribbean. So I applied and chose the Caribbean for my zone and was offered West Africa instead.

BENNETT: [00:04:09] Okay. Well, how did you hear about the Peace Corps?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:04:17] Well, I grew up in Madison. I've always known about it. We didn't have close friends who had been Peace Corps volunteers. But it was something that I always. I don't know. I would just always highly regarded Peace Corps volunteers.

BENNETT: [00:04:35] Did your parents, either of your parents, ever talk about it or?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:04:39] Uh, no. They, when I joined, um, my father was enthusiastic, and my mother forbid me to do it.

BENNETT: [00:04:51] Well, that was. I was going to ask that, how that, how that went over on the, with the family.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:04:57] It was over her dead body. I was sorry about that, but I went and she survived just fine.

BENNETT: [00:05:06] Did you, um, like was it a, was it a a process of quite a time that you were thinking about it, or did it happen fairly quickly?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:05:19] It happened fairly quickly. I had been out of college and working for a few years and once I decided that that would be something I was interested in, I applied and I interviewed pretty quickly and was offered a post also within. I would say it took about six months before I put everything in storage and sold my car and took off. Bought a nice big backpack slash duffel bag, that ended up not being as useful as I thought it would be.

BENNETT: [00:06:06] Mm hmm. Did you, what kind of, what was the time period in from like, you know, the initial application to the time that you went?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:06:22] I think it was about six months. Uh, might have been a couple of months longer. I mean, the application process took me, you know, maybe a couple of days to fill out the paper forms way back when. I didn't have an email address, you know, nobody used emails before I left. When I came back, they did. I needed a tutorial for what I missed. And faxed it into Peace Corps and they called me on a landline telephone pretty quickly, maybe within a couple of days, and I had a couple of phone interviews and then I was sent my paperwork and said yes to the very first offer. I was ready.

BENNETT: [00:07:11] Yeah. So Caribbean was your request, but you were. You weren't particular when it came down time to go.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:07:20] Yeah. I love the beach. I thought, oh yeah, I'll be perfect in the Caribbean. They needed me somewhere else. And I was quick to say, great. Good.

BENNETT: [00:07:29] What, how did your, outside of your family, your friends and oh, you know, associates that you had, how did they react to that news you were going to the Peace Corps?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:07:42] My friends were pretty excited about it. Yeah, it was. I had a. I had to break up with my boyfriend to go. He was not happy about it. Yeah. That was too much to ask, to come and visit or be a long-distance relationship. And yeah, so that's not really where I wanted to go. Is there any editing allowed in these interviews?

BENNETT: [00:08:16] Yeah, well, I mean that's.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:08:19] It was tough. I mean.

BENNETT: [00:08:20] Yeah.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:08:21] It was. I knew that I needed to make that change and it was kind of a harsh way to do it but.

BENNETT: [00:08:31] Would you, would you almost describe it at a certain point it almost became a calling?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:08:35] Oh, definitely.

BENNETT: [00:08:36] Yeah.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:08:38] Definitely.

BENNETT: [00:08:38] Well, sometimes you have to delay a side.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:08:42] Yeah. I mean, it was a very strong feeling that that was where I should go and where I needed to be. And two years is not a very long time, and it's how I was looking at it. And so I thought that a

relationship could start again, stop again, you know, if it was the right thing. Two years is not too much.

BENNETT: [00:09:07] So you've, you've been accepted to the Peace Corps and you've got your site, I mean your country, that you're going to. Did you? You knew the program you were recruited into, that what you were going to do?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:09:24] Right. I knew the name of it. I didn't know a lot about public health or about community development before I had my trainings. I knew that I loved working with the patients that I had in the nursing homes, and health care was also kind of a new area for me and, uh, and as you said, like a calling. So it felt right. It sounded right, what I knew about it.

BENNETT: [00:09:59] Can you describe the, you know, because there was. The different eras of Peace Corps had different training and, you know, where you embarked from. You live in Madison. So where did you go initially and then what was the, what? What went on between Madison and getting finally to Africa or to Guinea?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:10:27] We went to Philadelphia and met from all of our cities in the U.S. We all met and came together and did some icebreaking, I think, activities. Tried to learn each other's names and got a lot of shots and did a lot of paperwork and got our tickets to fly from. I mean, I guess it was Philly to New York and then to Dakar in Senegal. We did our training in Senegal in a former military camp called Chess [Thiès] because it was close enough to Guinea, easier to, logistically I guess, I'm not sure why they did that, but that was standard for Guinea volunteers at that time. We learned local language and our, um.

BENNETT: [00:11:33] Well, speaking of language. Now Guinea, its national language?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:11:38] Is French.

BENNETT: [00:11:39] French.

BENNETT: [00:11:41] Then what was your, what was your native language or?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:11:47] So the local language that I learned was Maninka. Um. And in my village that was one of three main languages that were spoken, but I was only able to learn one very well. You know, how is your family? How's your home? How's your health? We made homemade dictionaries and notebooks. You know, clinic equals.

BENNETT: [00:12:18] Were the, were the instructors native speakers from Guinea?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:12:23] Yes. Yeah. They had great instructors. Some of the volunteers were learning French and so they had less time that they were able to spend learning their, the local language. So my French major helped me for the first time in my life.

BENNETT: [00:12:46] So you're in Senegal. Are you, are you in host family stays or are you in a dormitory or?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:12:55] Yeah, we were in army barracks in a camp with a cafeteria and a, uh, yeah, separate buildings and a big compound with a concrete wall around it. And yeah, we, um, we didn't really, we didn't have a host family. We didn't have a homestay during that training. I know that some volunteers do. After we finished in Senegal, we went to another training center in Guinea. Uh, we flew from Dakar to Conakry, and then we drove up into the mountains to Mamou. It was called Mamou in Guinea.

BENNETT: [00:13:45] And so that's how you transitioned from Senegal to Guinea was you flew there. And then had you been assigned your sites while you were still in Senegal, or did they, did they wait till they got you in country?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:14:02] Uh, we had been assigned our region when we were in Senegal. We may have been assigned our sites. I'm not, I'm not sure if it happened there or if it happened in Mamou, but I knew that I was

assigned to the forest region, which was a rainforest in the south of Guinea, kind of bordering with Liberia and Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast.

BENNETT: [00:14:35] So overall, I mean, did you feel that your, the training that you got in the language, the local language? Did it, did you feel prepared or at least ready to go?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:14:52] Well, if we stuck to the script, I had a few really good greetings. I felt like I was ready to learn more of it. Like I had kind of figured out some of the key words and cultural elements, of course. Long greetings, long handshakes. And repetitive greetings, like that was all new. And so I felt like we had a good starting point.

BENNETT: [00:15:27] Okay. Um, I guess. So you're, you go into Guinea. What were your, what were your first impressions when you, when you got into the country that you were going to serve in? Because you've been in Africa for, and we didn't really know the time period. How long were you in Senegal in the training mode before that you were shifted to, you know, into Guinea?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:16:01] I don't know, it was a couple of months. Uh, we were there. We were very acclimated by the time we left. We had some. Our stomachs had adjusted. We finished getting our shots or we had some good clothes made. We had our training and our specialties completed. So it was a couple of months. I didn't, uh. It's been a little while but.

BENNETT: [00:16:35] So when that training ended.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:16:38] Yeah.

BENNETT: [00:16:38] Was there, was there any more training once you got into Guinea or?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:16:44] There was.

BENNETT: [00:16:44] So you went, you went to another training in country then?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:16:49] We did. And when we flew in it was. By the time we started driving to the second, to the training center in Guinea, it was nighttime. And I remember kind of being packed into the back of Land Cruisers. And the second year volunteers had packed lunches, sandwiches for us, in little brown paper bags. It was really sweet. And driving in the pitch black on really, really bumpy roads with. When we would come through a town, there was no electricity. We would just see little glowing dots on the side of the road, which were little kerosene, tiny open cans lit on tables with people selling stuff like bags of peanuts or bouillon cubes. And so that was pretty remarkable, that night drive. Senegal had a lot of electricity and it was pretty well developed. So that was a big difference.

BENNETT: [00:17:55] So you're, you're in the country. And were you in, like the capital of the country, the capital of Guinea or?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:18:06] Uh, we flew in through the capital of Guinea, Conakry, but we quickly drove out of it.

BENNETT: [00:18:13] Okay.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:18:13] Into a mountain training. It was like a hotel. It was really nice and it was cool compared to the desert of Senegal. That was pretty nice relief. And we finished our training there and then we're sent off in taxis to our regions.

BENNETT: [00:18:39] Okay. And how long was that? The training at the hotel facility?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:18:44] That was a shorter time. That was maybe a couple of weeks. We had our swearing in ceremony there.

BENNETT: [00:18:58] Mm hmm.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:18:59] And it was. Yeah.

BENNETT: [00:19:02] Did Guinea at that time, did they have a large contingent of Peace Corps volunteers in country?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:19:11] They did. They had, um, I don't know how many they had. They had a group that were selected to represent their generation at each of our training places. So we got to know volunteers from our assigned region before we went. And, uh. So I haven't done my homework. I don't know. I don't know how many there were.

BENNETT: [00:19:42] Yeah.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:19:44] I don't remember how many we were.

BENNETT: [00:19:46] Just an interesting, I mean, something that I'm always interested in was what was the age distribution in your group that you went?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:19:55] Oh, I was one of the older volunteers.

BENNETT: [00:19:57] Oh okay. And you were?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:19:58] I was 25.

BENNETT: [00:19:59] 25, so it was a young.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:20:02] It was a very young group. Yes. Fresh out of college, very healthy. Like we were screened for, I think it was if you can tolerate sulfur drugs, then you got sent to Guinea.

BENNETT: [00:20:15] Did you have any older, older volunteers in the, older than 26 or?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:20:21] Um, not in my training group.

BENNETT: [00:20:24] But in the?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:20:26] In country?

BENNETT: [00:20:27] In country in the service.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:20:28] Uh, I, there may have been a few years older, but by and large we were a very young group.

BENNETT: [00:20:44] So in that, in the hotel situation. Did you get your the, like for the public health, were you trained in what you were, what you were going to be doing or?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:21:01] Mm hmm.

BENNETT: [00:21:01] So that was, that was when you got down into that?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:21:05] Well, we also had a lot of training in Senegal. How to do health education sessions, what it's like working in the clinics in Guinea, overviews of the health system. Um, a lot of. And we did have some practice sessions with people in the neighborhood without having home stays. We did have interaction with community members and learning how to be, how to do our work in the village. And so we had, in Mamou, we had a chance to interface with Guinea agencies, so they sent representatives to train us in programs that they had going on in the clinics where we would be assigned to. And we learned how to write grants and project management. We learned about community development in both places but.

BENNETT: [00:22:24] Uh, okay. You know, prior to going to your site, were you ever, did you ever meet like your counterpart or the person that you would be directly working under? Or was there, was there even a person like that?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:22:41] Uh. Nah, eventually there was, there were people that I worked with, but I really kind of found them once I was living there.

BENNETT: [00:22:53] Okay, I think we've got you to the point where you've been trained and you know where you're going. So you go. How did Peace

Corps prepare you? I mean, did they have housing arranged for you or did you have to go find your own housing?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:23:10] Some of the volunteers had housing. Their villages had provided housing for them. When we got to my village, we. Like I said, we took taxis to get down to the forest region. It was a little bit of a drive. And so we were installed by other volunteers. And by the time we got to our regional capital and then up, we dropped everybody off on the way. And then I was the last one. And the, first the road was just blown out in so many places. So it was really hard traveling to get there. And so it took about a week of driving, spending the night in a regional house, driving, spending the night in a regional house, and then getting past the blown out roads to get to my site. And they said, no, there's no house free. We don't need a volunteer. That was the first interaction I had with the.

BENNETT: [00:24:29] So it was a week, a week of travel?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:24:32] It was about a week before I had that meeting. Yes.

BENNETT: [00:24:36] Was it just the slowness of the transport? I mean, it just took.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:24:41] Yeah, we weren't moving the whole time. But there were places where, for example, there was a bak ferry that was, you know, people would wait in line for hours and then you would get to it and, you know, someone would hand pull the ferry across the water. And, you know, it was like crossings like that or, you know, the taxi, because we were in taxis. We were just a bunch of volunteers piled into these dumpy little cars with their baggage strapped on the roof and, um. But I remember there was a cassette player in the taxi and the driver was interested in hearing American music. And so we played, everyone had mix tapes back then, and we played each of the volunteers' mix tape in its entirety, like we had. It was a, it was the longest road trip of, you know, up to that point, I guess, maybe in my life. And it was just so funny to get to know each other through our music.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:25:50] But yeah, it was a long trip and we dropped people off on the way and spent the night in my village because taxis weren't going out of there very often. So maybe once, once a day we could get a car to go to the neighboring village where there was another volunteer. Well, a town. He was a teacher, so he was in kind of a bigger center in the prefecture. I was in N'Zoo prefecture. And so another week or so of that, crisscrossing through my village, showing that I was really interested in living there. Then some wonderful administrator said, why don't you just live in my office? I'll work from my home. And he gave up his concrete house with a metal roof and a, it even had a drop ceiling in it, which was really fancy. Everyone else in the village was in mud huts just about. There were some concrete houses. But so he gave me his office, which was essentially the old, uh, clinic, and the walls are pretty streaked up so.

BENNETT: [00:27:14] Did you, did you have things to establish your household? Did you bring those with you, or did you have to get those locally?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:27:25] I had to get those locally.

BENNETT: [00:27:27] Like a stove. Did you have a cooking facility?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:27:29] I had, yeah. In the regional capital, I bought a lot of things like sheets and a water filter and some buckets and kind of figured out after I was installed how to make that work. You pour the water in the top one and you cut a hole in the bottom of the bucket and stick your filter in there. And anyway, so, uh, and the stove.

BENNETT: [00:27:58] Speaking of water, where was your water source in the village?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:28:02] There was a pump located very close to, uh, I guess in city blocks here, it was about two blocks away, through my neighbor's courtyard and down a path behind another, uh, cluster of houses compound. And it was a really beautiful pump. The water in Guinea was fantastic. I never got sick from that water.

BENNETT: [00:28:30] Yeah. And so you, but you would filter your water?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:28:33] I would filter it anyway for drinking. Yeah.

BENNETT: [00:28:38] Okay. So you're in, you're in your village, you're in your house and you go to work. What was that like?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:28:45] Uh, it was funny because I had been already a professional for so many years, so my concept of going to work was pretty established. You show up at certain times and there's certain etiquette and you have assignments and you need to be efficient and accomplish a lot. And my work in the beginning entailed of going to the clinic and hanging out, learning everyone's names, or trying to figuring out what people were interested in. Practicing hello, how are you, over and over and over in the different languages. Until I found the health center director at that time was, um, interested in doing some educational seminars. And so then that was, I guess that was my first project that we embarked on.

BENNETT: [00:29:49] Can you describe a little bit of what's the, was it a clinic? And so it was, it had medical personnel doing services or medical work. And then you were the public or the public health or education person?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:30:07] Yes. And that took some time.

BENNETT: [00:30:10] Had anyone done that before?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:30:12] No, no. I was the first Peace Corps volunteer in their village that they didn't think they needed. Oh no, it's not true. There was a girl who had gone and left quickly. I don't know if she spent a night or a week. So they were a little bit, I think that they were a little bit traumatized from that, but it had been a few years. And so I was there and they didn't know how to work with me. I didn't know how to represent myself right away. Through kind of establishing relationships then we kind of figured out how we how we can work

together. And it was a, one, two, three, four room clinic with, uh, what are those called? Bricks with holes in them for the windows, the, uh, for the air to circulate and shutters on them. And it had a metal tin roof that was very loud when the rainy season.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:31:26] There was a nice big courtyard and the director of the clinic lived right next to the clinic. It was really hard for him to take a nap. People would come with their emergencies, you know, air quotes, emergencies. So the one of the rooms was a birthing and delivery room. The other was the prenatal exam room. There was a tiny laboratory that was, um, hardly ever used. There was a microscope with a, with a mirror on it. You could tilt toward the window and reflect light onto the slides for stool samples. And we had a chart with pictures of parasites for diagnosing. And there was the doctor's consulting office and the pharmacy.

BENNETT: [00:32:33] Now, when you say, doctor, was he an itinerant or was he in this in the clinic every day?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:32:39] He was the clinic director.

BENNETT: [00:32:42] Oh, okay. So you had a doctor on site.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:32:44] We had, uh, they called them a doctor. And I don't think they were an MD. I think they were trained in health care and could diagnose a lot of illnesses. And they followed an organigram diagram. If this is the symptom, then kind of like in the Where There Is No Doctor book. I followed those diagrams a lot and so, yeah. So it was highly functional when that director was there. It was. Well, like I described, it was a pretty remote location. And so government officials tended to be located there as a punishment. So we had a lot of turnovers. And as people could get out, they would. So he left.

BENNETT: [00:33:46] What was your impression of like the, just the general health of the people, of the village? Were they, did they have a lot of problems or were they fairly healthy, a fairly healthy population?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:34:01] Yeah, they had a lot of, a lot of diseases that should have been managed, but it was a very poor area and so there was a lot that was related to malnutrition. There's a lot of diseases like, I mean, so much malaria, so many, um, diarrheal diseases. So many, you know, bloated malnourished children with scabies and, you know, a lot of rashes, a lot of snake bites. And in harvest, a lot of machete cuts. And, um, what was another? But also just so many pregnant women.

BENNETT: [00:35:02] Well, you say harvest. So it was a, it was an agricultural area of? What kind of crops were they growing?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:35:09] Rice.

BENNETT: [00:35:11] Rice.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:35:12] Cassava, oranges. A lot of peanuts.

BENNETT: [00:35:19] Is it, was it primarily for the local, the local consumption? I mean, was that, they farmed for their own food source and not, they didn't? Did they have an agriculture of commodities that they sold or they sent out of the village?

BENNETT: [00:35:35] The roads were just so terrible, uh. Since that wasn't my area. I know, I know it's your area. And you probably would have been into it more, and maybe now going back I would be. But from what I understood about it, we had a big market day in our village and people would come from the smaller districts, uh, and the roads were just so terrible. I remember riding, we were assigned mountain bikes. So when I would ride my mountain bike out to the districts to do rounds, I would see rotten bananas and plantains piled up in cars that were in washed out roads. And so it was really hard for people to get their crops in time. But there was corn. So I'm sure that the crops that they could dry and milk got.

BENNETT: [00:36:41] So they, well, what was the population of the village? Was it a large, fairly? You say you had district towns or smaller.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:36:51] Mm hmm.

BENNETT: [00:36:51] So you were in. But then you were saying there was a teacher, another Peace Corps volunteer, and he was in a larger. So what do you? Was it thousands of people or?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:37:07] Yeah, I think it was about ten. Maybe it was 10,000 people in my village.

BENNETT: [00:37:13] All right. So pretty good sized.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:37:14] Pretty good size. It was a kind of a bridge town. So there were, there was a good population of Liberian refugees. There were Fula families. There were Forest. They called, we call them Forests so who spoke Guerze and Kpelle, kind of more like native from the region. And there were a lot of Maninka speakers. And so with the Liberians there was some English, a little bit of English.

BENNETT: [00:38:06] Mm hmm.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:38:06] And some French. A lot of people who had gone to school learned French, but I would say it was primarily Maninka.

BENNETT: [00:38:19] Could you describe like an average day, you know, just a day of work and kind of what you'd. What time did you start?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:38:30] Okay. So. Um. Let's see. So I would wake up pretty early, the sun would start to get hot, and my, I had a foam mattress that got really, really uncomfortable, so I didn't really sleep in. The morning was good. Maybe five-ish I would start hearing. My house was an office. So it was in a kind of a larger building that had a wall that divided my section from a family in the front section, and they had three, or three wives and nine children. And so I would hear the kids wake up and I could smell the smoke from the fire and we would start shuffling around and go to get our water. Uh, yeah.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:39:32] I had a jerry can. I would go and I would fill maybe one a day and, um, get my coffee boiling. And so, I mean, it was, uh, I don't know, I guess maybe an hour and a half morning preparation time. Uh, I had the luxury of having an indoor shower section, which was a slanted floor that went out a hole that snakes kept coming into. So I put screen over it. So it was a mixed blessing that I had that room.

BENNETT: [00:40:17] Was it water piped in to the shower or did you have to bring water?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:40:22] Oh, it was bucket baths.

BENNETT: [00:40:23] Bucket baths. But you did have a floor that you could drain water out of?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:40:27] I had a floor that the water would roll, roll down because it was slanted. So that was a luxury. And then I would walk. Typically, I walked down the, we laughed and called it the international highway. We were right on the road. It was not paved and it was full of a lot of pits and ditches and with water streaming over it. So I kind of went back and forth between taking my shoes off to wade through. Sometimes there would be logs crisscrossing that we could tiptoe over. Eventually, I just wore flip flops for everything and to the clinic. If there was something going on, usually I was on call for labor and delivery when they were shorthanded, which was always. They always needed someone on hand, especially around the full moon, and especially if it was at night.

BENNETT: [00:41:42] So you were, so you were actually kind of assisting in labor?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:41:49] The midwives, yeah.

BENNETT: [00:41:49] Okay. And had you ever had any experience in that, part of the Peace Corps?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:41:56] No, I did not. We did some training on things in general that you will probably be asked to do and common practices. And so we had a little bit of training for that. And then the, there was a school down the road. A primary and secondary school. The highest grade was eighth grade. And they were interested in learning English. And so I taught greetings and Bob Marley lyrics, fun stuff over at the school, at the different, different grade levels. And I started rotating a health topic in and I would do the circuit of oral rehydration fluids at different learning levels in all the classrooms.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:43:02] Each quarter I ended up doing lesson plans for the refugee school, which was younger kids, and so it was mostly songs in English or skits. And for adult education, we would have people come to the clinic for vaccine days. Or whenever I had a captive audience, I would pull out my curriculum, do a felt storyboard or something. And I would take my take my topic on the road. But so English classes really helped me kind of get started doing the teaching.

BENNETT: [00:43:50] So you got, I mean, we've covered your work day kind of. So how about leisure time? I mean, your time off, what did you, how did you fill that?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:44:00] Um.

BENNETT: [00:44:01] And like after work and weekends or days off.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:44:07] Um. So the workday was divided up. We had long siesta time when the sun was unbearable and you probably wouldn't get much done anyway if you kept at it. But so, and I did a lot of running, uh, trail running. People just got used to me, like at first it was a little bit surprising and I would get all of the "where's the fire" jokes? And eventually it was just pretty normal. There goes the white lady jogging. So I would do evening trails, and in the dry season, I had to cover my face with a bandanna for the dust. And when I rode along, the, when I ran along the highway, trucks would come by and just cover me like it was. It would be an easy animation to do, you know, before and after the truck, just like head to toe the same color as the earth.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:45:28] And I did a lot of traveling on time off. I would catch rides with rice distribution trucks that were empty, UNHCR or, uh. Or if I could get a taxi, I would take a taxi. But by the time I would arrive to the regional capital, I guess it was about 90 kilometers away. But it would take most of the day stopping and pushing out of the mud and picking up other passengers. I would just be all the color of dirt from head to toe. There was a little shower in the Peace Corps house in the regional capital that had a trickle of water that would come out of it. And I would just walk straight in with my shoes, with my clothes, and just like let it run over me.

BENNETT: [00:46:24] You say regional. That was, it was where volunteers from that region, they would. Was that like for weekend or when you had time off you could go in and?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:46:38] Yes. When we needed to go for projects, for telephone, for trainings.

BENNETT: [00:46:48] You have no phone in your village?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:46:50] No phone, no radio. There was a Doctors Without Borders house in the city nearest me, I guess I would say, where the other volunteer was located, in the prefecture in Beyla. And so we did our community map in the beginning, and that was like, where's the nearest radio? And that was about all the exposure I had to it. I knew that it was there. I had some kind of communication that if I ever needed to use it, I could. But we never, I never did. I drew a map of the.

BENNETT: [00:47:32] You're talking radio, a two way that could transmit out?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:47:37] Yes.

BENNETT: [00:47:38] So that was your like your emergency.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:47:40] That was my emergency connection.

BENNETT: [00:47:43] Never needed it. That was good.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:47:45] Thank God.

BENNETT: [00:47:49] Well, and I guess that was covered. The interaction that you would have with other volunteers occurred in the. Were you, okay, were you ever, the whole, all of the Peace Corps volunteers serving in Guinea, where they ever called in for like in-services or anything like that? And now that was, that was in the city that you were in, that took forever to get to your village. So how would you do that or how frequently would that be?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:48:23] That happened a couple of times. We had in-service in the capital and we would fly. There was an old Russian, old fleet of Russian airplanes where everything was written in Russian, all the exit instructions and everything, and you'd take off and the compartments would flap. You know, they were, they were a retired fleet, maybe resurrected for the forest. So it was a muddy runway that we had. So we would fly in and out of the regional capital, Nzérékoré, to Conakry. And, um, we were. We had a training. We were evacuated for, there was a coup d'état when we were there and um.

BENNETT: [00:49:17] How long after you initially arrived in the village did that happen?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:49:21] It was, I think it was after a year. We were very well established. And it was fortunately occurred around the time of a scheduled in-service. So volunteers were making their way to the capital already. And so we just went on lockdown at the Peace Corps house in the capital. And some of the volunteers were sent out to like the ambassador's house or other houses where they had room because we were pretty packed in there.

BENNETT: [00:49:56] So they got everyone, everyone into the capital and then they just waited it out?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:50:03] Yeah.

BENNETT: [00:50:03] How long did that occurrence?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:50:06] I think that took about a week. We, um. The military hadn't been paid. Uh. We. I know one day that I did hear gunshots near the house, but we were protected. There were, uh, we weren't a target by any means. We were provided, uh, MR, what are they called, MREs? The military salty meals, the dehydrated awful things. We were throwing brownies over the wall and trading them for mangoes from our neighbor's trees. They liked some of our stuff, and we all in the neighborhood, we'd go up to the roof sometimes to peek around. And everyone around us was pretty much holed up for that time. And then it was over and we went back to our sites.

BENNETT: [00:51:15] Did you, did you communicate with back home? Well, and on that same topic, how did you communicate, just through the letters written?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:51:29] Written letters, and we would do phone calls sometimes. It was kind of a process. We would just dedicate the day to trying to have a phone call. And the lines were not reliable. So I would go to phone center and get in line, give them the number that I would like to call.

BENNETT: [00:51:57] Now was this in the prefecture?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:51:58] In.

BENNETT: [00:51:59] The city or the?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:52:00] That's how I did it in the capital.

BENNETT: [00:52:02] The capital.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:52:04] Uh.

BENNETT: [00:52:04] Oh, that's right. You just had a radio in the.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:52:07] In the, in my village there was a, there was a radio in the prefecture. There was. We would write letters and hand them to taxis in my village, and then they would hand them to someone in the village where you were mailing it to. And then, so that was fun. You'd be walking along and someone would say, oh, here's a letter. Like someone handed it to me to hand to you.

BENNETT: [00:52:30] So how, and then coming back, I mean, mail from the States. Did you, how did that come to you? Did the taxi drivers deliver the mail?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:52:40] That, Peace Corps managed that. So it would come to the capital house. They would send it out in their vehicles when they would go visit areas or if someone was traveling back to their regional capital. But that's where we get it, at the regional capital or in Conakry.

BENNETT: [00:53:02] So for your family back here in Madison, what how much time would pass between them writing to you and then you being able to respond, I mean?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:53:16] Yeah.

BENNETT: [00:53:16] I'm just curious. Was it weeks or a matter of days or?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:53:21] Well, and over time, it just gets so frustrating. We weren't trying to answer each other's questions really. It was just reflections and news updates is what it turned out to be. And, uh, maybe once a month or longer I mean.

BENNETT: [00:53:45] Well. And then on the same vein, did any family members come to visit you? Did you have anyone or friends or?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:53:57] No, I didn't have visitors. There was my father and his father did meet me on vacation in The Gambia.

BENNETT: [00:54:10] Oh, okay.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:54:11] So that was, that was fun.

BENNETT: [00:54:12] Was that in your first year or second year?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:54:14] That was in my second year.

BENNETT: [00:54:16] Second year.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:54:17] And, um, that was, that was fun. But no one came to my village. It was, um, it was too, I think, far from medical care for them to feel comfortable to visit.

BENNETT: [00:54:38] Okay. Well, um, and I guess. Normally, you know, your year, your first year is adjustment. Your second year is a rush to do those things that you wanted. How was your second year of service, did it?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:55:01] Well. My second year of service, I had a different health care director and I, who was very, very difficult to work with and kind of scary. And so he was a violent person. And I just stopped hanging out in the clinic. I still worked with the midwives sometimes, but I focused primarily on community development and public health education. So I was in the schools and we did community events, but my construction projects were not done when I was free to go. So and I had this feeling that maybe they would never finish if I did leave. And so I stuck around for a few more months until the fall and we had buildings inaugurated and people were trained.

BENNETT: [00:56:14] And this was a, was it a Peace Corps extension? I mean, an official extension of service? I mean, you were able to extend?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:56:22] It was unofficial.

BENNETT: [00:56:23] It was an unofficial extension, because I know there was, there were designations that some did that and then others were able to get an extra year or.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:56:33] Right. There were some people who did extend for a year, but I just hung around for an extra period of time.

BENNETT: [00:56:43] Did that, you know, you have the formal COS [close of service]. Did that just, you just waited your COS for a period of time or were you already officially parted?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:57:01] I must have just waited. I don't remember how that, how I worked that out, but I mean we did have, all together we had a COS conference out on an island off of the capital. And then after that, I went back to my site and finished up. And then I went back up to the capital. Uh. Yeah. And it was rainy season by then.

BENNETT: [00:57:36] So did you. You didn't, uh, you know, there's the option. Did you take the immediate flight home from the country or did you travel?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:57:47] I, I traveled. My, uh, so my father had visited in The Gambia and my mother retired when I COSed. So I traded my ticket home to a flight to Kenya. And we met in Kenya and went on a safari. And then we came home. This is kind of the slow way through Europe and then.

BENNETT: [00:58:16] With your mother?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:58:17] With my mother and with her husband. And that was, they're adjusting to being retired and my adjusting to being retired, I guess, COS.

BENNETT: [00:58:26] So apparently your mother had come to accept and?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:58:34] She did.

BENNETT: [00:58:35] And did she come to value the experience, your experience I mean?

AMESSOUDJI: [00:58:41] She, and she has. I think mostly she was relieved that I had survived.

BENNETT: [00:58:47] Yeah. Of course.

AMESSOUDJI: [00:58:47] And but she had focused on Africa since I was there. We lived in New Orleans before I left and she was in New Orleans there. And so the Audubon Zoo has had travel packages. And when she saw something in Africa, you know, she started to focus on that for her retirement exit strategy. So that was, that was really nice to be able to spend some time with her. It's very different in East Africa, but it's still sunny and beautiful so.

BENNETT: [00:59:38] In the, you know, the end of service, of course, as that comes. Did you have, were you putting together, you know, what's next while you were still serving in the Peace Corps? But did you have ideas of what you were going to do?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:00:00] I did. I wanted to go to medical school. I figured if I could do some of the things that I did for two full years, then I could definitely do medical school. That was, that had seemed so hard to me before, but, um, yeah. So I started going to school to do my, because I had only studied French and Spanish. I didn't have any science prerequisites or anything. It was kind of a crazy idea.

BENNETT: [01:00:32] This is when you come back?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:00:33] When I came back.

BENNETT: [01:00:34] And you did come back to Madison?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:00:36] To New Orleans.

BENNETT: [01:00:37] To New Orleans. Okay. That's where your mother lived.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:00:42] Mm hmm. And that's where I had been living before I before I went to serve. And so I did my prerequisites and I had appendicitis pretty quickly after I came home. When I finally was able to communicate with someone from my village, they weren't surprised at all. They said, oh, it was all the rocks in the rice.

BENNETT: [01:01:12] Oh.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:01:15] So I had a long recovery time and started working in the Charity Hospital emergency room in New Orleans there when I was taking my prerequisites for medical school and started to learn about research and I, uh, by the time I was accepted to medical school, I didn't want to go anymore. I had seen a lot of that culture close up and had different ideas by then.

BENNETT: [01:01:54] So did you have, uh, I know you went, you recently went back to Africa to Rwanda.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:02:07] That's true.

BENNETT: [01:02:07] Do you have relationships or contacts with people still from your village that are ongoing or?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:02:18] Well, we didn't have email. There was Internet was not available for public access really until partway through my service. And so I couldn't exchange email accounts with my villagers. And however, when Facebook started and I started making connections with people, one of my students, one of my former students who had grown up and was working for the US, on a USDA project, was really connected on social media and we found each other. And so through him, I've been able to kind of send messages to people, but I really don't, don't have good relationships with anyone.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:03:14] I was able to work with him. One of the happiest experiences I think of my life, one of the most satisfying outcomes of Peace Corps, is when Ebola hit our area. He was able to write some

grants that I was able to help translate and get funded to do some outreach events in my village and in Guinea. That was really fantastic.

BENNETT: [01:03:50] And that would have been in like just the last three or four years?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:03:55] Yes. And he had been on one of my projects and he learned how to write grants in my little living room in a group of his peers. And they wrote a beautiful project and came up with their 25 percent contribution pretty handily. And, uh, and then he ended up using that for his career. It's something that makes me so happy to know, that he's been able to do so many great projects in his life.

BENNETT: [01:04:37] So, okay, we. You left the, left Africa in '97. And then you were in New Orleans. And then you see that you went to Togo.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:04:53] Yes.

BENNETT: [01:04:53] In 2001. Um. Was that. So you're not going to medical school.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:05:02] Right.

BENNETT: [01:05:03] So you decided to go back?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:05:04] Yes.

BENNETT: [01:05:06] To Africa?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:05:07] Yeah. I was really missing it. And, uh, and that was just a six month commitment that was. But that was really fun. That was working on a really technical level with counterparts who were on similar career paths that I was on. That was really a great experience and, uh, I was able to work on UN Development Program grant doing community assessments with the Red Cross volunteers in a few regions in Togo to prepare trainings for peer volunteers to go out in the villages and help neighbors better support families who had

children who were dying of AIDS living with them. And I wish that it had been a project where we were providing medical care and medications and nutrition.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:06:29] But this was Red Cross. What we had were volunteers. And so we could help people to be less fearful and to kind of understand that the parents aren't able to work as much and they need firewood and we can help by doing a lot of things. And so that was, uh, we had a lot of focus groups done with faith communities were reaching out. They had members who were struggling and I started referring. There was an organization that was funded by the World Bank in kind of the neighborhood that my, uh, Red Cross office was in the capital, where they supported patients and with medical care and with all of the services that they needed that we couldn't. So I started referring patients to this organization called Vie Sans SIDA, Life Without AIDS, that my future husband was the executive director of. And that's how we met.

BENNETT: [01:07:49] Oh.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:07:49] And so I started.

BENNETT: [01:07:51] So he was involved in the organization that you kind of?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:07:57] Started referring, yes. He was doing better work, I mean, more immediate care. So they were doing excellent work. So I kept referring people to his organization. And that's how we got to know each other. And after my service was complete, a few months later, he came and joined me in New Orleans, and we were married there. And moved here after Katrina.

BENNETT: [01:08:32] After Katrina. Oh, so you were, you were in New Orleans during Katrina?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:08:36] Yeah.

BENNETT: [01:08:38] Oh. And were you in an area that you couldn't move back to or?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:08:45] Well.

BENNETT: [01:08:46] Or did circumstances just come together?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:08:48] It was closed. They closed our neighborhood. It didn't flood on our street. This, a couple of the cross streets flooded. We had a lot of wind damage and trees were down and roads were blocked. Electricity was out for several months. So we couldn't go back. Garbage collection didn't happen. The people who did go and clear out their refrigerators and such, they had garbage piled up over our heads for about a year. Let's see, it was a. And then I got pregnant, so we never moved back.

BENNETT: [01:09:30] Okay. You came up to Madison and.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:09:33] And we stayed.

BENNETT: [01:09:33] And you've essentially been here since?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:09:35] And my husband loves it here, so go figure.

BENNETT: [01:09:40] Well, you're back to your, you're back to your source.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:09:46] Yeah.

BENNETT: [01:09:49] Kind of end this up with, they always. One of the questions, and it's just these are like the three general goals of the Peace Corps. And if you could just provide like experiences in your service that met the goals. I'll give you the first one, to provide technical assistance where requested. Well, I mean, I think it's been obvious.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:10:22] Yeah, we had midwife trainings, we had peer support of peer volunteers, peer educators trained for HIV prevention. We had children. I had one mother come and tell me the recipe for making

rehydration solution that her preschooler had taught her. So, at different levels.

BENNETT: [01:10:50] How about the second goal of to promote a better understanding of the United States? Well, your husband, I mean, he's.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:11:00] Sure.

BENNETT: [01:11:01] He now has an understanding.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:11:04] He does. And, uh. And I just, I think that. There was a volunteer who followed me and we met. She came to visit me in New Orleans and was able to tell me about my, the children who used to spend their free time on my porch or in my living room hanging out, listening to music and such. And they were, um, I don't know, not as surprised by her ways that they had been by mine. So in one very small way. But there were other very good exchanges that we had, especially with my students who were really open to learning about the world. And we had opportunities with my colleagues to really discuss our world views and understand our similar personalities and dissimilar personalities despite the cultural differences. So I feel like I was able to have a lot of authentic relationships with people and in that way they were able to learn about Americans being people.

BENNETT: [01:12:29] Mm hmm. And then I guess on the other hand, since you've been back, do you feel like you've been able to tell Americans more about the people in Africa or relate more? And then along with that, what kind of activities have you done in the promotion of that or that you think have been, you know, things that you would have maybe not done if you had never been in the Peace Corps, since you've been back?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:13:06] So how did I bring it home? I, well, I guess I've done a lot of classroom presentations, uh, from, I guess, very young kindergarten, first grade level up through college classrooms. I have presented different aspects of life in Africa. When I did my master's degree in public health, I did a lot of projects where I would focus on issues that

I could share with my colleagues, my classmates. And raising my children. They have needed to understand a lot about their dad's culture and understand a lot about the differences between Guinea and Togo and rural and urban.

BENNETT: [01:14:13] Have they visited?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:14:14] They have been to Togo and visited with their family, their cousins and grandparents and everyone. And, um. And we do, uh, they then present on international days or whenever they can have a chance. And we do, our favorite pictures to start with are the high-rise buildings in the capital, because everyone's like, oh, Africa, it's all huts, you know? My pictures from Guinea might confirm that. So we lead with the. My husband grew up in Lomé, which is a larger city than Madison, so he didn't spend any time living in a village. So I'm kind of the hick between us, so.

BENNETT: [01:15:14] Yeah, I think that's something that people don't realize is that there's such a kind of a dichotomy within those countries. I mean, there's a very urban, sophisticated. They have every service. And then there's a rural component that is sometimes, you know, ages behind.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:15:34] That's so true.

BENNETT: [01:15:34] And it just depends on where you land. So I guess you have two children?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:15:44] Yes.

BENNETT: [01:15:46] Maybe we could just end up on. They're, I think I've met them. Teenagers?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:15:53] They're, yes, they're adolescents. 14 and 12.

BENNETT: [01:15:57] Okay. Have they, they have a concept of Peace Corps. Do you do you think that they are thinking of maybe that is a possibility, that they would someday serve in the Peace Corps?

AMESSOUDJI: [01:16:12] Yes, they, I mean, I bring them to Peace Corps events. They are always receptive to coming along with me, for volunteering for fundraisers and Peace Corps parties and such. After our experience in Togo, my son is less eager, and my daughter speaks in terms of when I do Peace Corps. So I was promising them that when they do their service, I'll come with them. It'll be joyful for me. Although now, as they get older, I think they would probably not like that. They're not as comforted by that concept. They may want their space from mom, but, uh, I certainly encourage it. There are so many other ways that they can do international service now. So we'll see what the best option is for them when they're ready.

BENNETT: [01:17:25] Any other, any other parting comments or it's, I think it's, we've covered a pretty good service in Africa.

AMESSOUDJI: [01:17:34] Yeah, I think we've covered a lot more than I thought we were going to cover. So thank you so much for taking the time to interview me and it's been a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]