

**Daniel Ach Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
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**Biographical Note**

Daniel Ach served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kazakhstan from 2004 to 2006 as an English teacher.

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Oral History Interview

with

Daniel Ach

June 20, 2019

Austin, Texas

By Margaret Nott

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

NOTT: [00:00:02] It is June 20th, 2019. This is Mardi Nott, also known as Margaret Nott, RPCV Benin 1991 to 1994. I'm interviewing Daniel Ach, who served in Kazakhstan from 2004 to 2006. So why did you join the Peace Corps?

ACH: [00:00:33] Um, I, I joined the Peace Corps, a lot of it has to do with, I think, this sense that I needed to escape, I guess growing up in central Texas, I grew up in a kind of out in the country, kind of isolated, um, somewhat lonely. Um, and I just remember laying I have this, you know, distinct memory. One day I was just sort of laying, uh, under the grass in my front yard and looking up at the stars and just kind of like, um, wanting to, uh, having this feeling like I just need to get out and see more of the world. And I think a lot of young people have that that sense. But as I went to college then and which wasn't too far away, and I've been at Baylor University in Waco.

NOTT: [00:01:28] Okay.

ACH: [00:01:29] Um, I became more involved in residence life. I was a RA started interacting with a lot of um, a lot of other students that were, I guess, you know, kind of outside my bubble, my worldview, my the perspectives that I've kind of grown up with, um, and felt like, really this first sense of awareness that there was something really outside of what I know and what I'm comfortable with, and that I needed to find out more about it. Hmm. Um, so a lot of a big piece of my story is kind of growing up in in the church, having friends in the church, um, not, you know, not being confronted with a lot of like, you know, dangers of youth like um, the stereotypical like, you know, drugs, sex, rock and roll. Right. Yeah, those things. Um. To put it in a phrase, yeah, but um, so some of the like it was me was like my own identity and my faith and um and especially at Baylor, which has its roots in sort of like the Baptist tradition, Protestant, Protestant, Christian tradition. A lot of questions I got from people are like, oh, what would you do? Missions or something like that. And to me, the sense was like, I, I you know, my faith was important to me, but I also wanted to see, um, like I had the sense that like it's more about it's more about relationships. Like I didn't want it to be this sort of like transactional feeling. I wanted to really get to know people. And, you know, if that came out through a normal relationship, and that's great.

ACH: [00:03:39] So it was in some sense that also sort of reinforces this sense that like, OK, this is one clear perspective of looking at, um, looking at how we're interacting with quote unquote the outside world. And just reinforced this sense of like, I'm living in a in a bubble and I want to sort of see what's outside that. Um, so it felt almost like a whim, although um, for signing up, but it was sort of like, yeah, I guess several years in the making. Like I'd heard about it in first session at um at Baylor, and I thought about it and I actually didn't submit my application until the summer after I graduated. So there was a little bit of time before after I graduated and when I actually went to.

NOTT: [00:04:33] Ok, so you heard about an info session at Baylor and you applied after you graduated. Can you tell me what your background was until that point and how you filled the time until you were invited to serve?

ACH: [00:04:58] To my background before that, I started at Baylor on a music scholarship. So I did music. I mean, I got involved in this show choir. I played bass for a show choir called The Time. So lots of like musical numbers and show tunes and things like that. And we as part of that group, after my freshman year, we went to an international music festival in Graz, Austria, the birthplace of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Yeah. Maria Shriver.

ACH: [00:05:29] Yeah, I just made that connection. But yeah, that's sort of like kind of where I got bit, I guess, by my sense my sense in Austria, like kind of being abroad for the first time was this sense of like. I'm curious, just overall sense of curiosity, like I just wanted to walk around and explore and I still have that, you know.

ACH: [00:06:03] Anyway, so I did music switched to English lit. OK, which folds into my tendencies of escapism. But in a different way, within the words of the page, and just, you know, gaining more exposure that way to kind of other worlds. And I want to put it that way. But after I graduated, I joined. I just found a job because I knew that I would probably be doing this. But I also needed a little bit of money. So I just went back home in temple and worked at the central Texas Workforce Center, helped people develop resumes and stuff like that with them and connecting them to local jobs. So it wasn't very.

ACH: [00:06:52] You know, I think it was nine months after I graduated that I got and got the invitations preparing to go. So the following spring, I remember my uh, whenever I told my coworkers and man that nine months felt like so long. It was it was not a very interesting jump. But I remember telling my coworkers and, you know, I remember one, this older gentleman, he came up to me and knew I was going to Kazakhstan. And kind of in central Texas, like at that time, there was I'd never heard of Kazakhstan. So many others had just this this concept of Kazakhstan.

NOTT: [00:07:33] Right. Right.

ACH: [00:07:34] Yeah, I remember him coming up to me. And, you know, he like put his hand on my shoulder and tears in his eyes. It's like, Be careful over there. And I said it's so, you know, Kazakhstan, it's okay. It's fine. Um, it's not it's not Afghanistan. And like this is in a war zone.

NOTT: [00:07:57] Right. Right.

ACH: [00:08:01] So there's, you know, lots of those sort of like preconceived notions. And I think to some degree, maybe I had some of that. Like, I mean, I had this sense like, OK, it's not it's not as like. I can't make that broad of a generalization about Kazakhstan, and that means something specific. But my sense is just like I don't really know anything about it, you know, so Peace Corps send some materials and it was kind of reading through that. And so that was kind of my first exposure to a lot of the culture and history of Central Asia at the time. Yeah. Before up until then, other than like a random geography quiz, I suppose, in high school.

NOTT: [00:08:49] Right.

ACH: [00:08:50] So again, that's sort of just feeling of of curiosity and exploration. And just that was piqued.

NOTT: [00:08:58] Right. So what was your reaction once you were invited or accepted?

ACH: [00:09:07] I do remember kind of like weighing this, like there was this tension, like, do I know I know nothing about this. I have no idea what it's going to be like. I sort of I think over the coming months and even into my Peace Corps service, I developed this mantra of like, don't have expectations and you won't be disappointed. Right. And so I remember struggling with that. But also at this at the same time, think with this this sense of like, what am I going to be leaving behind? What am I going to be losing by going? And I you know, I agonized over a couple of journal entries. Yeah. Through that. And it ultimately came to this this realization like that. It is a matter of perspective, like, yeah, I could be leaving something behind, but what am I losing out on by not going?

NOTT: [00:10:15] Right.

ACH: [00:10:18] And I mean, just looking back, I think at the time I was reading, this is probably big at the time. Like there's Rainer Maria Rilke. He wrote letters to a young poet. Which was which was sort of popularized at the time because it was huge in Sister Act. Whoopi Goldberg. Remember that? But yeah, he there's this great quote in there. He says, let life happen to you. Life is in the right, always in just a sense like that. I had, you know, faith knowing that wherever I was would end up going whatever ended up happening to me, whatever sort of the borders of my world ended up being, that, all of that would culminate in something that would be integrated into my life, integrated into my experience, relationships that I would build that ultimately would have meaning. And so, you know, looking back, I think by having I'm so glad that I, you know, worked through that and process through that, because, you know, that the vestiges of my college experience that I was clinging to. Um, you know, friendships and you know, connections to or even imagined connections, of possibilities going out of college. Um, those everyone else moved on.

NOTT: [00:11:52] Right. Right.

ACH: [00:11:55] You know, even coming back to visit for I think I came back for a week or two. Um, the summer after my first year of service. And really all of my friends, except for maybe like one or two, they moved on. They're doing their own things and.

NOTT: [00:12:09] Yeah.

ACH: [00:12:10] Um, and that's kind of how life goes, you know, it's just it's always moving and changing.

NOTT: [00:12:15] Yeah.

ACH: [00:12:16] And so I think that was a big realization to me to like really, experience each day for what it is.

NOTT: [00:12:26] Right. What were the reactions of your friends and family when you made your decision?

ACH: [00:12:34] Um, similar to my coworker. Maybe my parents, I think, have always been supportive, but didn't know what quite what to make of my decision. But, you know, they wanted to they encouraged that. Um, so I'm very thankful they've been a blessing in my life. Um, I remember having some conversations with my grandma who also had some sort of stereotypes, but also like I mean, she came from a different generation. Um, she has some biases, but still, like I felt from her the same sort of like on curiosity, you know. Like so that came out like one day, you know, a question like, so are you going to have to grow your beard out like those people over there? And I'm like I'm like, oh, I know. What does that mean?

ACH: [00:13:30] And so it was just it was kind of fun having those conversations and helping them also increase their awareness that like, you know, I have no idea what it's going to be like. They don't either. And this is like this is a great opportunity to really have a window into some other experience and world and not just not just be like and not just be a, I don't know. I had these images of like it's like it's like a window or a door. But also, um, I think so much of what we see and what we experience from other from people of different culture, different cultures, different cultural identities. Is this idea maybe like a TV, right? A screen. We're just seeing a one way image. And it's limited by the box that is around it.

NOTT: [00:14:32] Right.

ACH: [00:14:33] Um, and so really stepping into that. And just I don't know, kind of like, you know, the Wizard of Oz effect, right? It's all black and white. And then you step into color. But even then, it's by degrees.

NOTT: [00:14:52] Right. Right.

ACH: [00:14:54] And I was still I mean, throughout my whole experience and even afterwards, as I'm processing through it, thinking like, you know, how was I how was I working through getting rid of the frames of the TV?

NOTT: [00:15:11] Right. Right. Yeah. Did you date any preference for where you wanted to be assigned and what projects were you invited to join?

ACH: [00:15:22] Yeah, so I, I had I had preference at the time. I think that application is different now. But at the time, you could preference a region. So I did preference East Europe, and that's largely because of my heritage, my family, you know, maybe can tell from the name, OK, but they immigrated from what was Austria at the time, Austinite, the Austrian empire at the late 19th century. So they were actually were Texas Czechs. So there's a big Czech community in central Texas, among others, you know, German community and stuff like that. So I really wanted to explore more Slavic cultures, and that's my preference to East Europe. And so getting the invitation to go to Kazakhstan, that was something that I was like kind of agonizing over a little bit like, if I turned it down, what would the next invitation be? Would it be what I preference? What if it's not? What if it's something that's even further removed from what I had imagined? And so I ended up accepting, um, Kazakhstan again, really not knowing anything about it. But the it ended up working out because I ended up being in a Russian village in the northern part of Kazakhstan with the host family for two years. So I still got to I got what I, you know, kind of wanted to get out of it and getting a better sense of Slavic and maybe post-Soviet culture or Soviet culture, even though it's very it's very different, I think, than the Czech experience.

NOTT: [00:17:08] Right, yeah.

ACH: [00:17:16] So then I was invited to being an English lit major, doomed to a future of graduate work. Oh yeah. I did a I did an English education position. So I was in a little village of twenty five hundred people.

NOTT: [00:17:36] And you taught English?

ACH: [00:17:37] And taught English to all grades from fifth through eleventh. And I also started some um, some sort of optional elective English courses as well.

NOTT: [00:17:51] Okay. Where and how were you trained to prepare for your assignment?

ACH: [00:17:58] My training in the sort of nuts and bolts of teaching was during Peace Corps.

NOTT: [00:18:09] Right. Yeah. Pre-service training.

ACH: [00:18:15] So other than that, my love for English and for literature and I think just my own tendencies to like the technical nature of grammar and poetry of the of the language like was more preparation for me. So I think it was more individual and personal. But the actual training was. Yeah. During our 11 week pre service training before we actually got to the site. And so that was in country. Yeah. So I've never really had any formal teacher training.

NOTT: [00:18:57] Right. Right.

ACH: [00:18:59] And so really what I think I was meant to be was a, um, a native speaking connection. Um, a resource for the local English teacher. Um, bringing some bringing some different perspectives and techniques to teaching, because the system itself, like I think. I think what it felt like is that I was more a catalyst, not necessarily

NOTT: [00:19:39] An expert. Right.

ACH: [00:19:43] I was I was a catalyst to create some sort of change within the education system, which had largely been defined by the Soviet system, centralized top down rote and learning education model, as opposed to maybe more of the like constructivist scaffolding approaches to education.

NOTT: [00:20:11] Did you learn a language during your training?

ACH: [00:20:17] Yeah. It's my first exposure. I didn't know any Russian before I went and found out that that was like the language that most people spoke. Other than Kazakh, which was what ethnic Kazaks spoke. But I learned that as well during pre-service training. But because of my I think

my background in languages and music, I did pretty well with the language. And it kind of took to it pretty quickly. But I didn't know anything. Like I got to learn the alphabet and a few like words before I left. Yeah, it was it was fun. I still I have lots of fond memories from training just because it was just so many like so many like new and exciting experiences.

NOTT: [00:21:11] Right. And where was the actual training site?

ACH: [00:21:14] The training was just outside of Almaty, which is one of the larger cities of Kazakhstan in the south. And we were outside. And some neighboring districts in this town called Esik. E-S-I-K. Well, it's different in Russia. And so what was what was interesting about it is that we were in a village. It was it was a Uighur village.

NOTT: A what village?

ACH: Uighur. It's an ethnic group.

NOTT: [00:21:52] Okay.

ACH: [00:21:54] You know, historically nomadic population kind of coming from the, you know, the ancient Mongols. But they're kind of like it's kind of like a it's kind of like the Kurds. It's a nation without a state, without a state. So a lot of the Uighurs live in western China. And they've been in the news a lot because of the reeducation programs and some of the oppression that's been perpetrated on them by the Chinese government. But there's a huge population of them in Kazakhstan as well.

NOTT: [00:22:26] Okay.

ACH: [00:22:29] So they have their own kind of language, their own culture and history.

NOTT: [00:22:33] Do you know any of their language?

ACH: [00:22:35] No, I didn't. I didn't get to learn any. I did get to learn one of their traditional instruments, though. So there was a there was a girl in the village that that played and performed. And I thought it would be fun just to kind of pick it up. So I learned I learned a song and I ended up playing it in our sort of like training. Graduation.

NOTT: [00:22:59] Right.

ACH: [00:23:00] And it was so fun because most of the volunteers actually lived with Uighur families, especially in our town. And so they all got in and we're dancing and singing along with it. It was, I was really nervous, but yeah.

NOTT: [00:23:18] Did you live with a Uighur family? Did anybody not at all?

ACH: [00:23:22] Mm hmm. Oh yeah.

NOTT: [00:23:25] Were they at a central site or so?

ACH: [00:23:29] Well, we were in because of our cohort was kind of large. I think it was close to 40. No, I mean, maybe 30.

NOTT: [00:23:37] Okay.

ACH: [00:23:40] We were in multiple villages around the training site.

NOTT: [00:23:45] Oh, that's nice. How did you get from there if you needed to go in to class, or to?

ACH: I took busses.

NOTT: [00:23:52] You took busses. Okay. And what was the traditional instrument that you played? Oh, you don't remember?

ACH: [00:24:04] I can't remember. Okay.

NOTT: [00:24:08] Okay, is it stringed or is it?

ACH: [00:24:09] It is stringed. Yeah. There are two strings. I can't remember the name. I'll have to look it up.

NOTT: [00:24:21] So you had busses in your country. That's posh.

ACH: [00:24:28] Oh, yeah. The public transportation is great.

NOTT: [00:24:32] That's wonderful. So did you have to have any kind of transportation? Were you were you were you pre cell phone?

ACH: [00:24:43] We were on the cusp. Yeah. Yeah, 2004 to 2006. So cell phones were becoming more mainstream. And later, when I did get to site, I think probably after six months or so, I did get my own cell phone that I would use whenever I went to went to the town. So in the village, there was no cell phone reception. But it was easy to. It was easy to have just a little a cell phone to coordinate with the other Peace Corps volunteers that were in the city. Yeah, because we had secondary projects going on together, music clubs and language speaking clubs and stuff like that.

ACH: [00:25:23] So, yeah, that was that was. It's funny. We joke like, you know, some of the connecting with some of the other RPCVs. So talking about like if you have a cell phone, it's not Peace Corps, it's Posh Corps.

NOTT: [00:25:38] Oh, my gosh. Yeah. So did you. So back to one of my questions. Did you have a bike or were you entirely reliant on public transport?

ACH: [00:25:52] Yeah, I'm walking and public transportation. Okay.

NOTT: [00:25:55] And your village? Your village was where was it in the country or what was the name of it?

ACH: [00:26:04] So once I got to the site, I was in a village called Tarhanka.

NOTT: [00:26:09] Okay.

ACH: [00:26:12] It was in this little river valley. It was kind of an agriculture community during the Soviet Union. It was a large it was they had a horse. I am a collective farm, and they raised a lot of pigs and um. And they farmed sunflowers. Oh, wow. So and during the during the summer months, there would just be miles and miles of yellow fields in the distance and uh, just a really beautiful, beautiful village. One main road, now on this little river. So yeah, it was really, I mean, it didn't it didn't feel like a village in some ways because they had such a great infrastructure that even remained. I'm not great, but I mean, like they had infrastructure that remained from the Soviet Union that that that still was functional and houses had like heated, heated radiator systems, coal stoves and stuff like that. So the houses were really well kept. But a lot of the centralized buildings and services that were run by the Soviet Union had collapsed a lot and deteriorated. There was a dome cultura, a House of Culture, that this little village, 2,500 people, you know, they had this huge Soviet house of culture where they would do performances and they had they would have musical instruments and sporting equipment for all the village people. But without the without the central funding, you know, that just there were still some people that kind of kept it up. Um, the school is a lot like that, too. You know, they would kind of have to patch a patch a lot and put some band aids on it. But the houses were really kind of like independent and well-kept.

NOTT: [00:28:22] So what was your initial entry into the country like? What were your initial reactions?

ACH: [00:28:30] Uh, I talked a little bit about that earlier, but yeah, really just like I didn't really know anything about it. And so I my first introduction was sort of like a the booklet that Peace Corps sent. Yeah. About the history and some of the history and some of the culture. And um, but even that, I mean, it's that's hard to put into words. And practically when you're on the ground and kind of seeing how people who have such a lot of their history and culture has been, interwoven and subverted and co-opted by. Soviet culture in many ways. It was really interesting, seeing as how the nation was actually working through developing a collective identity after as they're as they're developing their nation after the fall of the Soviet Union. I was coming in. This was I mean, a little over a decade after the Soviet

Union fell. And so they were they were doing a lot of like developing a real sense of nationalism around in many ways, a sort of like imagined and idealized vision of what their culture used to be.

NOTT: [00:30:05] Mm hmm.

ACH: [00:30:07] So, I mean, in some ways, it may have been made up.

NOTT: [00:30:11] Maybe not. Right.

ACH: [00:30:13] But it was it was hard to tell because it had been part of the Soviet Union and then part of the Russian empire even before that. Right. And so a lot of that was lost. So they were really kind of recreating it.

NOTT: [00:30:29] Do you remember your emotional reactions? Do you remember periods where you were really lonely and or wanted to go home?

ACH: [00:30:38] Oh, yeah. The first the first season when I got to the site. So it was full. And getting into winter, the winter months were. So it got dark really early.

NOTT: [00:30:50] Oh, yeah.

ACH: [00:30:51] I would wake up. It would be dark. I'd go to class and it would be cold. And the school would put plastic film over the windows to keep the cold out. So there would be this sort of hazy sunlight coming through the windows. And then when classes ended, I'd leave and it'd be dark again. So that first winter, we got down to like negative. Forty five degrees. I was indoors a lot of the time. Right. And I didn't really have anyone my age or still was learning the lines while I was. So I was really lonely, isolated, and I was probably depressed. So, yeah, working through that. And at the same time, like I would also I was also kind of like trying to figure out, like, how do I how do I work through some of the, navigate some of these like ethical dilemmas that I had sort of imagined, like, OK, no one here's my age. Like as soon as they graduate kids graduating high school, they're they like they typically would leave.

NOTT: [00:31:52] Right.

ACH: [00:31:53] So really, the only people that were there were the old people that that just end up staying there, stuck, they had the property there. Right. Or my students. Right.

NOTT: [00:32:02] Right.

ACH: [00:32:03] And so it was really difficult to kind of make relationships, let alone like navigating like the cultural norms about how you how you build relationships and how men interact. Yeah. So I had to, that was that was that was challenging.

NOTT: [00:32:27] You just mentioned how men interact. What was so different about that?

ACH: [00:32:36] So a lot of a lot of the culture of, I mean, I don't want to put it in this sort of like stereotypical way, but like some there was this sort of like there was this sort of like joking narrative of how men would become friends. You know, they'd get drunk, they'd fight, and then they'd become best friends. And so a lot of the a lot of the social structure was built around the table.

NOTT: [00:33:15] Mm hmm.

ACH: [00:33:18] There is a drinking culture there. Men are sort of, I mean, I'm not saying that women didn't have some problems with alcoholism, too, but it's almost more of a norm for men to have some sort of like that's how they interact or it's over it's over a shared bottle of something. And it's almost like the exceptions were more felt more the like, you're kind of expected to drink unless you're like a sportsman. You do sports or, you know, there's some sort of like prescriptive health reason for not doing it.

NOTT: [00:34:02] Right. Right.

ACH: [00:34:04] And so I struggled a lot with that. Like, I mean, I didn't want all of my relationships to be about like, okay, I have I have to drink, you know,

to have some sort of relationship. But that's where I felt like a lot of men would approach me. They're like, hey, let's go get something to drink, you know? And especially with the young people, too. And so how do I have relationships with my students, especially with my own kind of my Western perceptions of, you know, authority, the dynamics of authority and power, power as a teacher over them? Um, you know, I I'm not going to drink with my students right now. Like I can't do that. So there was always this. And eventually it just kind of it became so it became so tiring to feel like constantly having to navigate that. That that added, I think, a lot to my feeling of isolation. It was easier to back or back away and isolate myself to some degree than it was to try and interact.

NOTT: [00:35:14] Right.

ACH: [00:35:14] And that's really one of my biggest regrets, I think, is giving in to that temptation to just isolate myself. Um, I mean, it wasn't always like that.

NOTT: [00:35:28] Right.

ACH: [00:35:29] It was, but in the village, there was that sort of like that sense of oppression. That's a strong word, but.

NOTT: [00:35:41] So if you were to advise an incoming or new volunteer on how to work through that, what we through the feelings of isolation, how would you how would you advise them? Looking back now that you're wiser.

ACH: [00:36:05] I mean, it's really hard, but like I don't think I've truly valued. Not truly valued. I didn't really come to appreciate my dependence on community till even just a few years ago. And how much you really need each other at the time, you know, I was still working through a lot of like, you know, what do I value and why? And so I think that was part of my my journey of doing that and even getting to where I am now. But I would just say that, I think being reflective and having putting some words to um, what you feel and when, and being OK with that, like I felt like I had to constantly I was constantly giving in to some version of myself that I didn't recognize or didn't want to become. And so that was that was part of my

own personal journey, but I think just being able to articulate, you know, where you're at, because that's part of it. Like it's not about like it's not about like, OK, I have to I have to give in to something because I feel like that's how I'm going to fit in or to navigate these. But it really it's more about the conversation, right, where we're there to share culture, where they are to share ourselves.

NOTT: [00:38:00] Right.

ACH: [00:38:01] And that's part of the conversation, like, OK, you're uncomfortable with how this is going. Talk about it. Say this is this is this is you know, I don't want to. I want to talk to you. I don't wanna have a drink. And let's talk about what that means, you know?

NOTT: [00:38:22] Right.

ACH: [00:38:24] So a lot of it was I mean, that that kind of goes hand in hand with the language and sort of having to stumble through that. It just takes it does take a lot of work. And so being OK with that. And so that's the that's the one piece like it takes, I think, having a good support around you to be able to have to always put that energy in.

NOTT: [00:38:50] Right.

ACH: [00:38:53] Really thinking through some good strategies for mindfulness. If that's prayer. If that's some journaling. And putting in the work really to know yourself better and be more aware of yourself, which is something that I think that was one of the pieces of my story growing up in central Texas, being educated in central Texas, having this sense that I do need to be more aware, but not really having the tools to increase my own awareness and going into Peace Corps. So I had to like all of that was done on the fly.

NOTT: [00:39:38] Right. Right.

ACH: [00:39:39] Um, so I think it really benefits someone who's stepping into different, who's stepping into cultural difference and navigating that. To do

to do more on the front end. And developing their intercultural competency, um, finding a mentor or finding a coach. And then it's easier now, I imagine, with social media and more connected connectivity to have some familiar support structures, whether it's family or friends, to be able to work through and work through that.

NOTT: [00:40:18] So what were the specifics of the job to which you were assigned? And what were your living arrangements?

ACH: [00:40:26] Oh, okay. So um, yeah, I was living with the host family. Um, they were they had a son, but he was kind of in college, so they were sort of empty nesters. Well, they had two sons. One was in college and in Russia in another country. The other was in a college in the town. Um, so he was actually typically renting in the city during the week and the come home on the weekends to visit. So yeah, they were sort of empty nesters. Um, they both kind of worked for the local government. Yes, so they were Nina and Colea. And then my role was as an English teacher was actually a co-teacher, so I taught with another English teacher. There were actually two. One of them was the principal and the other was just the English teacher. And they both had very different styles, personality and teaching styles. So, yes, Svetlana Grasnova, she was the main teacher that I that I taught with. And she was really open and curious and personal, personable. And she lived next door to where my host family was. So I would visit her a lot. She had her daughter was in my in my classes whenever I was teaching and was one of the best students. And so that was really the arrangement like I would be I would teach a lot of the sort of some of the lessons in class, in native language. Right. But she would do a lot of the more functional stuff of grading and things like that.

NOTT: [00:42:32] Ok. Hmm. And what hours did you work?

ACH: [00:42:39] Oh, well, so I was teaching, like I mentioned, all classes. So they would typically have two lessons a week, except for some grades that would have three lessons a week. So I felt like I was constantly like lesson planning, doing teaching lessons. So it was all throughout the week. So pretty much it felt like 9:00 to 5:00. Yeah, there's a full there's a full day.

NOTT: [00:43:05] Yeah. So you would get there at nine. And how long? I don't know. Probably I don't understand the structure.

ACH: [00:43:17] Probably more like 8:00 to 4:00 I guess.

NOTT: [00:43:17] And were they were the classes two hours long? One hour long?

ACH: [00:43:22] They were usually, I think, 50 minutes. Ok, 45 or 50 minutes. So, yeah, it would be sort of like rotating through, you know, I'd teach like fifth grade on Tuesday, Thursday, OK, I teach 11th grade on Monday, Wednesday, Friday. And so it was always like I'd get there early. I do lesson planning, prepare for the day, prepare the materials, teach one lesson, maybe have a break, teach another lesson. The next day would be very similar.

NOTT: [00:43:58] Ok, so did you do most of your lesson planning at school then? Oh, that's nice. Yeah. Was the school open air or?

ACH: [00:44:10] No, it was. It was a building. Old, old Soviet Brutalist square building.

NOTT: [00:44:17] Mm hmm. Were the windows glass or?

ACH: [00:44:21] Windows were glass? Yeah.

NOTT: [00:44:23] And where are you in your living arrangements? Did you have a room or a separate room?

ACH: [00:44:32] Yeah, separate room. That was part of the agreement, right? So, yeah, it was a separate room with a lock. Um, shared a shared a bathroom upstairs with the other guest room. So when the when their son was home, like we would share their bathroom. But otherwise I had it to myself. And yeah, it was actually more of like a futon like daybed and did have a balcony, but it was effectively closed for half the year because of the cold. We put plastic over the over the door. But it was super warm because of the attablini, the radiation system when it would be like it. It's a

coal stove, but then the heat would run through the pipes of the whole house. And so like I mean, middle of the winter, 45 degrees outside, and there would be like a hundred degrees in my room.

NOTT: [00:45:33] So, um, what were your relationships with other people? Did you make friends in the town or?

ACH: [00:45:46] Mostly with mostly with the other teachers and mostly with my English teacher? Yeah. I mentioned the difficulties with building relationships, especially with men. And there was one time where I was on the bus coming back from the town, um, from doing one of my secondary projects. And I did it like music club and film club and stuff. And um, so I was just sending like a last text to another volunteer and put it away in my bag. And then this guy kind of stumbled up out of his chair and grabbed me by the neck, and he was starting to like kind of yell at me. And the other the other women in the village on the bus, they were like, hey, what are you doing? You know, he's our teacher. He teaches our little kids. He's the American. And he's kind of like confused. And he was a little drunk as well. But, um, so he thought that I was some sort of like terrorist taking the bus or maybe a spy or something like that. But he ended up at the end of that inviting me over to his house to meet his daughter. I didn't go, but I mean, that was sort of the it was sort of like it was very much a fishbowl effect, like everybody knew who I was, but they kind of gave me space. They gave me. Um, not many people would try to initiate a relationship with me.

NOTT: [00:47:14] Yeah.

ACH: [00:47:14] Um, I think to some degree there was this fear that I was that was sort of like that was a big narrative as well, that if you're a foreigner, you're somewhere you don't really belong, especially American. You're probably a spy.

NOTT: [00:47:28] Yeah.

ACH: [00:47:28] And I even had the one of the local um, the minister of education of our region, which is kind of like a county, I guess, or state.

Yeah. State came and wanted to interview me, just to, you know, make sure that I was a good kid and not spying. I mean, there was nothing there to spy on. It was a village of 2,500 people.

NOTT: [00:47:54] Right.

ACH: [00:47:55] But yeah, there was always that sort of like a little undercurrent of that fear.

NOTT: [00:48:03] Right.

ACH: [00:48:04] Which I mean, in rural and rural America, you see the same thing, right. The reds, the commies, the right like there was huge in the eighties and nineties have growing up.

NOTT: [00:48:13] Right. Right. Yeah.

ACH: [00:48:16] And still you I mean, you still see some of that today. You know, the relationship politically between us and Russia.

NOTT: [00:48:29] So did you take any vacations or travel while you were there?

ACH: [00:48:34] So I did come home once in the summer right before the pre-service training for the new group, because I assisted with the training for the second group coming in a year after I did. And that was a think for about a week and a half. I also went to southern Kazakhstan to this town called Shymkent for the Persian New Year, Nowruz.

NOTT: [00:49:04] What was that fun?

ACH: [00:49:05] Yeah, it was amazing.

NOTT: [00:49:07] What did call the Persian New Year? Never mind. OK, keep going.

ACH: [00:49:12] And also to just some of the surrounding countryside in the state where I was. But I really I spent the majority of my time on site. OK.

NOTT: [00:49:30] What do you think were your main accomplishments, your regrets?

ACH: [00:49:42] It's hard because I mean, I know, I'm sure that there was some impact. I just don't really see. There wasn't anything like clearly measurable. The so there were lots of relationships I had with students. Some of those kind of continued. But it's hard to keep in touch.

NOTT: [00:50:03] Have you kept in touch with anybody?

ACH: [00:50:06] Some I'd write I've written letters to my host family and some emails and stuff like that. They're not too tech savvy. So I you know, I do handwritten letters every once in a while. And I've connected with some of my former students and they're kind of all over the place. So a lot of the a lot of the women, this was just sort of like some of the norms, I guess, in terms of profession. More women would be involved in language learning. That was sort of the big field and like interpretation and translation. Some businesses, you know, they would do like economics and language. Those were the sort of big fields for women. A lot of the men were more pushed to do like more either agriculture, if they're staying in the village or go on to, you know, more technical, technical fields. So there weren't a ton of there weren't a ton of men in my class, mostly women. As far as your students went.

NOTT: [00:51:25] Yeah. So how do you feel about or how was your reentry into the United States? Can you talk a little bit about that?

ACH: [00:51:38] Yeah, there was there was some adjustment. Like, really, I there was one sort of primary sense of unease about kind of entering back into the rat race.

NOTT: [00:51:53] Right.

ACH: [00:51:54] I guess to put it bluntly, but this sense that like I had grown accustomed to having that sense of like small accomplishments of us, of a slow, slowness of life, of enjoying the small things of life, that I was really

uneasy about getting back into life that is defined by how you are, what you your accomplishments are.

NOTT: [00:52:22] Right.

ACH: [00:52:25] You are what's on your resume. You are like, did you did you achieve that percentage increase or whatever, you know, like doing more things. And so I think I think that was a big appreciation of mine coming back. There was also this this sense of being overwhelmed by my choices.

NOTT: [00:52:51] Yeah.

ACH: [00:52:53] This was around. And when I came back, this was around the same time that like Naked juice, all that had come out. And I remember just going to the store. Huge supermarkets, right? Wal-Mart Supercenter HEB Superstore. Target Superstore. And there'd be like this huge, huge refrigerated case full of, you know, green, different shades of green and orange and red and pink and purple juices like so many and just like bombarding me. So that was like that was just, I think, one sense of overwhelming. And I experienced, again, through it through the eyes of my wife when she came, she was from Kazakhstan. We met there and, you know, kind of her coming here and just like menus in restaurants, like all of the choices. And we're in our culture, we're so accustomed to having things in individualized. It's exactly the way we want.

NOTT: [00:53:57] Right.

ACH: [00:54:01] That we don't have a sense of really like what it means to, I think, give something up or compromise. It's easy. It's easier for us to think of to be self-absorbed.

NOTT: [00:54:14] Right.

ACH: [00:54:15] And so that was something that I was trying to be mindful of, too. And I just.

NOTT: [00:54:19] So when I asked you about your relationships, you didn't mention your wife? So how did you meet her?

ACH: [00:54:27] Oh, you're talking about my village. I met her at the.

NOTT: [00:54:30] Oh, she wasn't in your village?

ACH: [00:54:32] No, I met her at one of the conversation clubs that we hosted in the town. So she just came, she was a college student. And yeah, I saw her looking at me, although she says I was looking at her. But yeah, we just kind of got to know each other through the clubs. And I'd invite her out. And we had just lots of conversations. And we were kind of we were dating for about nine months before I COS'ed.

NOTT: [00:55:05] Okay.

ACH: [00:55:06] And we kind of like decided to be friends. But pretty quickly after that, we kept chatting and talking and. Yeah. And ultimately decided. So we did long distance for about a year before she you know, she came to the U.S. on a fiancée visa.

NOTT: [00:55:23] Oh, nice. Oh, that's so romantic.

ACH: [00:55:26] Yeah. We're going to be married now 12 years in July. 7-7-7.

NOTT: [00:55:34] That's beautiful. Were you tempted to stay on longer?

ACH: [00:55:43] Yeah. Tempted. I felt like there was just the sort of push to like, you know, you kind of go two years and you can extend, but it's sort of like an exception. And so I felt like it wasn't really an option. At the same time, I was looking into graduate school. So, yeah, I ended up just going to graduate school.

NOTT: [00:56:13] Let's see. Have you gone back to visit?

ACH: [00:56:17] Well, I went once the year later when I went to go meet my fiancée. And I visited the town, but I haven't been back since. It's just so

expensive to fly there. And now we have kids, too. That's more. But I think we'll go back. We'll go back eventually. Yeah, I think. My well, my wife has also visited, I think maybe once since then. But even when she went to visit, she said, like so much has changed since then, doesn't really feel the same. And her family's kind of spread out. So there's really no huge reason to take us back there.

NOTT: [00:56:57] Right.

ACH: Yeah. For better or for worse.

NOTT: [00:57:06] So you are in Heart of Texas Peace Corps Association. Are you in Friends of Kazakhstan or any other organizations?

ACH: No.

NOTT: Associated with Peace Corps, obviously. What have you done to fulfill what is the. I read something that the third the three goals have changed. I thought one of the three goals were to bring the world back home. What have you done in that way?

ACH: [00:57:42] So part of my work now is in an international field. So I'm a study abroad advisor. So I try to like what I've really discovered is that I not just that sense of curiosity and exploration that I've loved, but I love sharing that. And I and I want to try and I try to in in culture that that that same sense and students. To want to want to sort of be lifelong learners, kind of this this perpetual kid in a sandbox.

NOTT: [00:58:18] Yeah.

ACH: [00:58:20] Because there's just so many beautiful and interesting things about the diversity of our world. Yeah. And so that's in my work now, like helping students go abroad and working with helping them. And not just have that experience, but to make it impactful and meaningful to them. Like I mentioned before, like, you know, the things that I struggle through with, like even working through a greater sense of my awareness while I was there, like how could I help students be better prepared for that so

that they it's not so challenging right now to navigate that. The awareness of themselves. Awareness. Awareness of others. And how do they bridge that difference? Right. So I try to do workshops. I do cultural workshops, have developed a lot of professional development towards that. And so I work with students and other campus partners and international partners to try and develop programing and advising for students who are going to experience that. So, I mean, I think a lot of my work is very more relational and coaching with the students that I send abroad and that I interact with daily basis through my work, plus my role as a family, as a husband and father and of a intercultural family.

NOTT: [00:59:59] Mm hmm.

ACH: [01:00:02] I'm bringing that to, uh, bringing that to central Texas, increasing the awareness that. And I did that within. I'm trying to do that more within local church, so I'm a leader in my local church and I'm developing a workshop for talking about, you know, into intercultural, intercultural awareness within the body of Christ. Has a church that is supposed to be united in diversity. Something that, you know, Paul talked a lot about as he was going around in the early church and meeting with people who are Greeks and Romans and Jews from various backgrounds, Hellenistic Jews or Greek speaking Jews or whatever. And so that was a huge topic in the early church. And I don't think that's changed much right. In the history of the church. And so that needs a lot of work with just people recognizing that there is a culture and that that doesn't that like Western Protestant culture as it's as it's as it exists in the U.S. isn't per se like biblical culture. And there's lots of room for how do we how do we navigate that and discuss that openly? Create a sense of vulnerability and, you know, putting ourselves in in these learning situations to say like, hey, your experience has been different than mine. But we're still part of the same church. So what does that mean? It's not just minimizing difference. It's, you know, how do we celebrate our unity but recognize that there are there are and we all have our different stories and how that plays into who we are as a church.

NOTT: [01:02:15] Right.

ACH: [01:02:16] So that's something I'm working on right now, which I think is important work, too, as we experience more polarization. Yes. And within US culture and where the church has played a role in that historically.

NOTT: [01:02:35] Yeah.

ACH: [01:02:38] And even now, in sort of like, you know, evangelical politics, which yeah, it's a it's a hard topic.

NOTT: [01:02:49] Yeah. Is there something you would like to talk about that I haven't touched on in this interview?

ACH: [01:03:03] Well, I've got two wonderful kids, Victoria and Edward, and I'm looking for a friend to someone who has the Peace Corps kids and start with the Peace Corps kids network things. So it'll be fun to kind of maybe as they get a little older, get them involved in.

NOTT: [01:03:23] Yeah.

ACH: [01:03:29] Because we do try to celebrate both of our both of our cultures within our family. And in recognition of that. And as a parent, that's difficult.

NOTT: [01:03:40] Yes.

ACH: [01:03:42] Let alone as parent. It's difficult being a parent, but navigating that with them is has been has been fun, challenging.

NOTT: Yeah.

ACH: And we want to within our education system, like, you know, how do we do that? How do we how do we encourage them to speak multiple languages and have an awareness of different cultural elements and. Not just sort of like this is the way we do things in our house, but.

NOTT: [01:04:10] Right, right.

ACH: [01:04:12] Yeah. So something that we value and I try and work through that. Anything else that you thought would be?

NOTT: I can't think of anything else. OK.

[END OF INTERVIEW]