

Sara Thompson Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Sara Thompson served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Burkina Faso from 2010 to 2012 in a program to educate and empower girls.

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Oral History Interview

with

Sara Thompson

July 12, 2018
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:02] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. And today, July 12, I am interviewing Sara Thompson, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Burkina Faso from 2010 to 2012, and she was in a girls education and empowerment program. Let me ask you, why did you join the Peace Corps?

THOMPSON: [00:00:36] It's the million-dollar question.

GANZGLASS: [00:00:38] The million-dollar question.

THOMPSON: [00:00:41] Ever since I was little, I'd always wanted to join Peace Corps. I always had some affection for Africa as well, just based on stories my mom would read to me when I was little. And a literature, you know, Joseph Campbell's stories. And it just was always a very intriguing place for me. And then I was actually not kind of the quote unquote traditional volunteer. Actually, after undergrad, it took a year

off, traveled around the States for a bit and then then did my master's. And after getting my master's was when I decided I really thought it was the best time for me to join Peace Corps. So I had actually got my master's and it took about a year and a half for the application process. And I was offered the girls education and empowerment position and Burkina Faso, West Africa, and I gleefully accepted.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:45] Great. So where did you grow up?

THOMPSON: [00:01:49] I have sort of two, two regions that I grew up in, Nebraska being one of them and then Tennessee being the other. So I went, I sort of grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, but I went to middle school and high school in Memphis, Tennessee or around Memphis. I never really felt as though like I fit in in Memphis. I really kind of missed the north. Memphis was very much the Bible Belt. I was raised Catholic and I largely felt out of sorts around all these Baptist kids who, you know, were very active in church. And Catholic, traditionally, it's very much show up to mass, be quiet for an hour. Church shouldn't really be fun, just listen to the priest. And so, yeah. And I even I studied abroad when I was getting my undergrad and that really kind of bit the travel, the travel bug really bit me.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:47] But what were your undergrad and grad degrees in?

THOMPSON: [00:02:52] Criminal justice, criminology and then French. I really knew that I wanted to actually work in French speaking West Africa for some reason. So yeah, so I did that. And then when I studied abroad, I realized I didn't know enough about the States. Because when you're abroad, everybody asks all these questions about the States. I was like, I don't know. I don't know. I mean, I'm not BFFs with Britney Spears, you know. So I kayaked in the Everglades for a bit, went to Chicago for a weekend, lived in Alaska for the summer. And that was when I felt that I could get my master's and I'd had a little bit of fun. And so I got my master's at Rutgers in Jersey.

GANZGLASS: In French?

THOMPSON: In Newark, New Jersey, actually.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:40] Yeah, but in French. Your master's is in French?

THOMPSON: [00:03:44] It's actually criminal justice, criminology.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:46] So it was French was the first degree?

THOMPSON: [00:03:49] Right. Well, I had I had double degree in French and criminal justice, criminality, for all those French speaking criminals.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:55] So what did your family think about all of this?

THOMPSON: [00:03:58] Oh, they were they thought I was crazy. They thought I was off the rails. But when I was getting my master's, I studied wildlife crime. And so things like illegal logging in Indonesia. And based on the research that I conducted, when you are, you know, addressing criminal activity, you need community involvement, you need community buy-in. And I think that that's really what catalyzed the whole Peace Corps process into reality, rather than just the dream, because it's all about working with the community. So I really wanted that field experience. So yes, to prep for it, I actually moved to Alaska during the application process.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:45] To prep for what?

THOMPSON: [00:04:46] For living in Africa, in a harsh environment with very little resources, I guess. Beyond that there aren't very many similarities. But it's interesting. I mean there are quite a few people, especially in rural Alaska, that live off the grid, don't really have running water. So it's not too dissimilar.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:07] So did you live off the grid in Alaska?

THOMPSON: [00:05:11] Parts of it, sort of. One house, it was a water catchment system where you can only use whatever water you had in that basin. And you so you relied on snowmelt or if you ran out of water you could

order some. But so I was housesitting for somebody. And then I rented a cabin that was similar water structure, that had a composting toilet, so that was interesting.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:43] So you were roughing it to a certain extent.

THOMPSON: [00:05:45] Sort of. My African self would disagree, but.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:52] For the time it seemed roughing it. So it took a year and a half to even be selected. Was that the standard time?

THOMPSON: I think so.

GANZGLASS: So it takes that long now.

THOMPSON: [00:06:07] I think. Well they, so two or three years ago, don't quote me. It was a few years ago Peace Corps really revamped the application process. So now it just takes a few months. So I don't know the new application process, but it's very different than just what I went through less than a decade ago.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:26] So it took that long. OK, so you got the letter and I should ask you, what did your friends say? Did they also think you were crazy? Or supportive?

THOMPSON: [00:06:37] Yeah. My friends in Alaska, quite a few. I kind of lived in a hippie town in Alaska and quite a few of my friends actually served. So they were a little bit more understanding. Yeah, it was a mixed bag I think. So yeah. But I think a lot of Peace Corps volunteers actually go back to Alaska sometimes because it's not as, you know, the onslaught of American culture isn't as great, I don't think, in parts of Alaska.

GANZGLASS: Interesting.

THOMPSON: So yeah, quite a bit of the town.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:20] Were former volunteers. That's really interesting. It would be interesting to do a study. Would be really interesting. So where did you meet up with the other volunteers? I assume you all traveled together. I should ask, did you all travel together to go overseas?

THOMPSON: [00:07:39] Yeah, this this is a good question. So there were four sectors. There was the girls education and empowerment. And then there was the primary education and basic education, which were the two education sectors. Primary education was your traditional teachers. And then the two other sectors were the small business and health. And so the primary education folks, they arrived in country a month, I think, before everybody else. And our group was a strange group in the sense that there were over 80 of us at the same time.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:21] 80 in girls education.

THOMPSON: [00:08:23] 80 in the group.

GANZGLASS: The whole thing?

THOMPSON: [00:08:25] Yeah. For girls education, I'm not sure. There was probably a little over a dozen of us. Or maybe 20 per sector, we could say, just for the ease of math. And so, and it's interesting because when I was in Burkina, the programs changed dramatically. They added an agriculture sector. They changed the education sector I think once or twice. And so there were about 60 of us that showed up to staging in Philadelphia. And so we were in Philadelphia for two days before we were sent to Burkina.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:04] Then what happened in Philadelphia?

THOMPSON: [00:09:07] We did staging, quote unquote, where they did all last minute vaccinations. They did a few kind of, this is what you prep for. This is maybe a very, very brief introduction of this is going to be a very different culture. Be prepared. And then it was kind of your last meal in the States, you know. It wasn't too noteworthy to me, I don't think. Yeah. I mean, even the people that you hang out with is very different

than what happened when you were in country. And there were so many of us. I mean, there were about 60 of us before we met up with the teachers that were already there.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:55] So you showed up, I should know. But what is the capital of Burkina Faso?

THOMPSON: [00:10:01] So it's Ouagadougou. It's such a fun, fun word. Oh, all of us in Burkina would call it Ouaga. I guess the nickname or the easy reference.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:18] So you've showed up in Ouaga. And what happened then?

THOMPSON: [00:10:25] It was a whirlwind of a training. So the training was a typical three months or so in the country. It's funny because on the plane over, I had read my Economist magazine and there were some articles about how Al-Qaeda kidnappings were on the rise in West Africa. And so upon arrival, kind of, you know, the country director welcomes everybody. You know, they get us all in the same gymnasium or same auditorium room. The country director welcomes everybody, you know, and we do kind of brief introductions and she asks if I, you know, if anybody had any questions. So I'd been the troublemaker and I asked point blank, well, are you worried about the Al-Qaeda kidnappings. And she really very much glossed over it like, no, it's fine, you know, it's very vague and dismissive. And so after a few days in the capital, if not a week, they took us up to Ouahigouya, which is a smaller town closer to the Mali border. And it was kind of in a risk area. They didn't have too many volunteers in the north because of security concerns.

THOMPSON: [00:11:46] And sure enough, three days after we get into Ouahigouya, get settled in with our host families, and try to get used to the heat of the Sahara Desert, we were evacuated due to Al-Qaeda kidnapping threats. And so, yeah, it's funny. One volunteer, every time I see him, he always talks about that story, about how I asked that question. And then, sure enough, they evacuated us, which was very difficult because, I mean, they had done a lot of preparation, obviously, you know, to find the host families and to get everything prepared because

again, there were 80 of us. And this was the most that Peace Corps had really hosted at one time. So it's a quite a logistical hurdle to really get us around. Yeah, yeah. Because, I mean, Burkina itself is pretty small, I think the size of Colorado or New Jersey, and then you have an onslaught of 80, you know, Americans.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:54] So you had moved in with your host families?

THOMPSON: [00:12:57] Yeah. Yeah. And so and you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:01] So within a week you were out of those places?

THOMPSON: [00:13:04] Yeah, they took us out. And I'm not, I can't remember, I don't think that we packed our stuff. I think Peace Corps staff were sent in to even pack up everything. And yeah, we didn't get to say goodbye or anything like that. And again, I mean, you know, it's really difficult because it's not like they were promised all this money or whatever. But, you know, they had to do preparations. They had to prepare this mosquito net for all of us. And they were given some money to feed us, etcetera. And so it was just, it was very much like but, you know, and they just pulled us out and drove us back to Ouaga. I think within the day they consolidated, yeah, there was.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:48] How far away was this?

THOMPSON: [00:13:50] I think it was two to three hours on a paved road. So it wasn't too bad. Maybe longer, maybe four. But I could be wrong. So at least it was a paved road.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:01] Did you get a chance to really interact with the family that you were going to stay with?

THOMPSON: [00:14:06] Not really. And to be honest, I mean, especially the first few days, you're just so, there's such an onslaught of so many new things coming at you. And it's really hard to absorb everything. And then even at night, you would sleep in this hut that, you know, there was no window that I can remember. And it's under a mosquito net in over 100

degree heat. And I don't think I slept for the first few days just with the heat alone. So yeah, it was very hard.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:38] So you mentioned the heat twice. Was that the main impression you had when you got there?

THOMPSON: It was very hot.

GANZGLASS: Any other immediate impressions that you can remember?

THOMPSON: [00:14:48] It smelled like burning trash when we first arrived because they burned the trash. And I remember that it was very dusty. And when we first got into the airport, actually, the power ran out. The power was out. So there was a whole luggage, you know, confusion as to, and yeah, it was hot. I can't, I don't really remember too much about the food just yet. I think it was still pretty good mix of, you know, American food thrown in. But definitely by the time we got to Ouahigouya, I don't know if I even ate.

GANZGLASS: It wasn't memorable in any case.

THOMPSON: [00:15:37] Right, right, well, and because and again, they just kind of yanked you out and it was hard to really make any memories. I remember the teachers being concerned about how they would run out of beer and why once all of us showed up, because that was the point that we met up with the teachers that were already there. So they were in, I think, a more unfortunate position because I think they'd already form bonds with their host families.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:03] And they were evacuated? You all were, the whole group?

THOMPSON: [00:16:06] Yeah. So all 80 of us now, rather than just like the 60 or so, there were 80. A little over 80. I think we started with 87. And after training it was 79 or something like that. But so, yes, we were in the capital, back in the capital.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:23] Where did they put you?

THOMPSON: [00:16:25] The Dragon Hotel I think was what it was called then. And I think we went to this rec center for training. I mean, we still did the trainings as though nothing happened.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:37] But you didn't have a home stay then?

THOMPSON: [00:16:40] No, we stayed in a hotel. Yeah. But after two weeks, I think it was either two or three weeks, they relocated us to Koudougou, which is on the western side of the country, just in between another major city, Bobo, and Ouaga. And so Peace Corps, I think, really scrambled to find host families. And then they actually just doubled us up into the host families. And, yeah, we completed our training in Koudougou then. So we didn't finish and we didn't complete the training in Ouaga. So, yeah. So that was a bit difficult because the host families I think were chosen, I mean, it was very last minute and so there really wasn't too much of a vetting process. And even the host family that I and another volunteer training at the time had stayed in, I think one day they went through our stuff and like, stole a granola bar or something like that. And I think others had a few issues with host families. I mean, who knows if it was because, you know, it's kind of thrown together at the last minute, or you know, for whatever reason. I think it was hard for us having been like yanked from Ouahigouya and then to Koudougou.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:05] What was your host family, what did they do? Were they professionals or what?

THOMPSON: [00:18:10] Yeah, I think. So the host family dad's name was Madi, and I think he was a government *fonctionnaire* of some sort. He was pretty well off just based on his house and the decoration. There was tiling in his house. So it wasn't just kind of a mud hut. And Christine and I, the trainee that I was with, she and I slept in a room. We both had our own bed with mosquito nets. And I think we actually had a fan as well. So, yeah, it was a bit more posh than what would have been in Ouahigouya.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:45] And how big was this town that you were in?

THOMPSON: [00:18:50] Koudougou would be considered not as developed as a regional capital, or maybe around a regional capital status. So there was power. I think Ouahigouya had some power, but not the houses I don't think had power. But in Koudougou, there was power, there was electricity. There was an Internet cafe, I think, or two. So slightly more developed, I think, than what Ouahigouya had been.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:24] And just talk a little bit about the training, the confusion. What was the language training?

THOMPSON: [00:19:32] This is a good question. The language training was with mostly French because Burkina Faso is a former French colony. But beyond the French, there were several dozen languages. It was, um, and I think at that time they had to have known where we were going, because at one point when they put us into our local language groups, the language would depend on the region.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:02] So you learned both French, I mean, you already knew French.

THOMPSON: [00:20:06] Yeah. So I was really lucky already having known French. So thankfully I wasn't as exhausted at the end of the day. That being said, speaking French is pretty. Speaking another language can be exhausting if you're not used to it.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:22] But then you all learned the local language?

THOMPSON: [00:20:25] Yeah. So I learned Gourmantche and then Mooré was I think the more widely spoken language. It was the language where I think you could pretty much use it anywhere in Burkina. And Gourmantche was the language specifically to the region where I was placed, which was the east. And so I was out in Matiakoali, was the village name.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:53] I'll ask you how to spell all of this later on.

THOMPSON: [00:20:55] Yeah, no, absolutely.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:58] So just a little bit more on training. What was your cultural training? What was your preparation on the education side? Because you clearly didn't have an education background. What was that training like? Did it adequately prepare you for your job?

THOMPSON: [00:21:20] Well, that's complicated because. So girls education and empowerment, it was more of secondary education, which could be translated as increasing the number of girls who are enrolled in school or just kind of working with students, you know, doing mentor programs or extracurricular activities to support student life.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:48] So you were actually a teacher?

THOMPSON: [00:21:50] No, no. So that's important only because then the village where I was was really confused. So you're not a teacher, so what are you doing? And really, you know, extracurricular activities, they exist, but it's not. But why would I? It was just very confusing for the local population to understand what I was doing.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:17] Was it confusing for you as well?

THOMPSON: [00:22:21] It did get to be confusing for reasons I can get into once we get into when I'm dropped off at site.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:30] OK, well, I mean, is there anything else you want to say about training? We don't have to stay in training.

THOMPSON: [00:22:35] No. I mean, yeah, I think the training was really good actually. The staff were amazing. Our security officer Congo, I'll never forget him. Haruna Congo. And he was amazing. He was very, he was always on top of it. He was very frank with people. And if he didn't know something, he would definitely look into it. He provided us with some really good information, you know, about the country. That was really useful. And I'm blanking on the name of the individual who led

cultural training because he was amazing as well. I mean, we could ask him any sort of random, you know, Western question, and he really would take it in stride. I mean, I give this guy amazing points for, really, frankly, answering a lot of our questions, especially with the Burkinabe or Burkinabe culture, however you want to pronounce that that word. People pronounce it both ways. Burkinabe, Burkinabe. But, yeah, we had so many questions and the Burkinabe culture is, it's more on the soft spoken side. The nonconfrontational side and being vague, it's not very frank. And so whenever.

GANZGLASS: Not like Americans?

THOMPSON: [00:24:09] No, definitely not like Americans. I mean, if you ask a question, you're not really sure if you would be given the right answer for whatever reason, right? I mean, there could be many reasons why you're given the answer you're given. But I want to say his name was. I'm blanking on the name.

GANZGLASS: Doesn't matter.

THOMPSON: [00:24:29] OK. And then my language trainer, Barema, he was great as well. He was really a lot of fun to work with. He taught me the Gourmantche and again, he would answer very many, so many questions I had about not only the language, but the culture in the east. And yeah. And he was a lot of fun. So that was. So training, it's exhausting. I was probably sick for most of it. But it went really well. Jean-Luc and Sylvie were Peace Corps medical officers or PCMOs. And they were great. They were very knowledgeable, and they were very patient.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:16] These are all people from Burkina Faso. The whole staff was local?

THOMPSON: [00:25:21] The PCMOs were not. Sylvie was Canadian and Jean-Luc was actually Cameroonian. So, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:31] Ok, so you finished training.

THOMPSON: Yeah.

GANZGLASS: And then somebody drove you out or you went by yourself or how did you get to the town you were going to be in?

THOMPSON: [00:25:44] So we swore in, in Ouaga I think, or maybe Koudougou. We uh, and then somebody from Peace Corps drove a batch of us to Fada, which would be the regional capital in the east, and dropped off one or two of the volunteers in around that area the first day. And then I remember I was the second day and, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:17] Were you the only one going to this town? Or were there others too?

THOMPSON: [00:26:20] I was the only one. And I think I was the last one that was dropped off. So yeah, I was dropped off. Matiakoali was about 100 kilometers from Fada to the east and about 65 kilometers from the border of Niger. So, and that's not too terribly important. But it is interesting to note that Niger actually shut down while I was there because of the. There were two French individuals who were either, there were an attempted kidnapping and a shoot-out. It might have ended in a fatality, but I'm not sure. But for those reasons of safety and security, Niger was shut down. And then actually Mali was shut down in 2012 because of the coup. And we could not go to Cote d'Ivoire and the northern region was shut off. So we were pretty isolated, increasingly so as service went on. And actually as service went on, there were at least two civil unrest incidences which caused consolidation for us. And there was fear that.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:39] So it was the anti-Americanism or it was just violence? I shouldn't say just, but.

THOMPSON: [00:27:45] Yeah, it was the military wasn't getting paid. I mean, it's a pretty typical story. And so they started shooting up the capital and then some of the regional capitals as well were being, there were some unrest. And so we were consolidated twice.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:06] And this is, I don't know the history. Why was this going on? Why weren't they paid? Was it corruption or?

THOMPSON: [00:28:14] Yeah, I think it was something along those lines.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:18] It wasn't tribalism or anything like that?

THOMPSON: [00:28:20] No, no, it was, I think it was just as obvious as they weren't getting paid and due to reasons that, you know, the government really didn't pay anybody much of anything. I mean, even the teachers, they wouldn't get paid, I think, regularly. So, yeah. So safety and security was always an issue. And actually in Matiakoali out in the east, because of bandits and others, I would call Congo on a weekly basis. I was required to report to Peace Corps on a weekly basis just to say, hey, Congo, I'm still out here and still alive I guess. So yeah. So the only countries outside of Burkina that we could really even access were Ghana, Togo and Benin really. And I was in Mali when the coup happened, actually. But yeah, that was later.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:18] So let's go back to this. You show up in this town. And who was your local contact? What was your living quarters like? How did you find all of this?

THOMPSON: [00:29:34] Right. So I lived in the traditional mud hut with a tin roof held down by big rocks. And I shared a courtyard with four other buildings. Each building took a corner of the courtyard. But the only building that was really occupied on a full-time basis was the courtyard that was catty corner from mine and there was a family there. There was a wife and a husband and three kids at the time. And then one, I called her the slave child, but I don't know. She was from a nearby town and she did pretty much all the chores. So they were a pretty well off family for where I lived. They had a light, they had a solar panel. The husband was a *fonctionnaire*. He was a government official sort of. And the wife was a teacher. So they made pretty decent money for the town that I lived in.

THOMPSON: [00:30:35] And so my house was like two major rooms and then like a little place with the drain for a shower, then kind of a back room. But it was still fairly small and I had my own latrine. The door to the latrine fell off, I think within the first few months and stayed broken for about six months. But in the latrine, I just had the hole and there really wasn't much drainage for a shower. So I actually I asked the neighbors that they wouldn't mind if I just took a shower where they showered because where they had the shower and the latrine, it was two different areas. So, yeah, I didn't really want a shower where I was going to the bathroom.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:25] And this was the family that lived in the same courtyard with you.

THOMPSON: Yeah.

GANZGLASS: So did you become friends with them?

THOMPSON: [00:31:32] I did. Their names were Ali. Ali and I can't remember his wife's name, but they were really nice. They were very welcoming. But I also tried not to rely on them too much. I really kind of wanted to just go off on my own. I'm really wanted to be kind of a very pretty independent entity there. I had found out that there had been quite a few other Peace Corps volunteers before me and I really didn't want to get into the habit of what they did. And a lot of times what they would do is just kind of choose a family and hang out with the family. I mean, this is obviously hearsay. I mean, this isn't, be critical of or pass judgment on previous volunteers. But I just, yeah, I had a certain way of how I wanted to delineate who I was.

THOMPSON: [00:32:29] And I was also strange in the sense that after it got dark, I really wouldn't go out. I really didn't like to socialize with people. And part of that was because I actually I wear hearing aids, I'm hearing impaired. And so at night, especially when there's no light, it's very difficult to read lips or to hear because the Burkinabe speak very, very softly as well, which was very difficult for me. And so. But I mean, so that was hard and really you're exhausted anyway. And I didn't.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:03] Did you cook your own meals or did somebody cook for you?

THOMPSON: [00:33:07] I would cook my own meals.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:09] And you did all the shopping by yourself?

THOMPSON: [00:33:12] Yeah, I loved the market. It was strange because in Matiakoali, as opposed to the rest of the country, the market was only every Friday and the rest of the country, the market was every three days. So yeah, it was interesting that it was only every five days. But I, especially by the second year, I got to know a lot of the women really well. So I would always seek them out and get whatever they were selling and trying to support them economically that way. So yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:45] Just before you get to your job, was it lonely staying in at night and not socializing with people?

THOMPSON: [00:33:54] Yeah, I mean it was. Some nights I would sit around and chat with the family. I wouldn't really, they would invite me to dinner but, I don't know, I just felt bad about taking other families' dinners, and I don't know. But I would talk to Ali and every now and again, my counterpart would invite me over. So, I mean, there were some nights when I would get out. But no, I mean, you just read, I mean. And some nights, you are just so exhausted by the time the sun goes down, you're like, all right, it's bedtime, guys.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:34] So what was your job? So what did you do?

THOMPSON: [00:34:37] Right. So my counterparts were Dumi, who was the principal or the head honcho of the school, like the primary school in Matiakoali. And then my mayor adjunct, which is Kondi. Kondi, I think it's Kondia.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:56] Kondia was what?

THOMPSON: [00:34:57] Kondia was a mayor adjunct.

GANZGLASS: Mayor adjunct.

THOMPSON: And they were very typical guys in the sense that they had dreamt up what I would be doing but didn't really talk to anybody in the community about it. So one of the reasons why I was living in the courtyard with that family was because. I can't remember the wife's name. But she, they wanted me to work with her to increase enrollment in girls, you know, and for girls to attend school in the nearby villages because a lot of times. So school costs money in Burkina and a lot of times the family can't really afford school. So they would just choose the male child to attend. And so often times.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:47] So it costs money for primary as well as secondary?

THOMPSON: Yeah.

GANZGLASS: Oh, so not just secondary.

THOMPSON: [00:35:53] Right. And then you also have to have uniforms, which was also an added expense. And so, so yeah, they wanted me to work with her. And so you know, like, all right, this sounds great. And so I had a conversation with her and she goes, I'm pregnant. I don't really want to work with you because I'm pregnant. And, you know, I really want to focus on my family. And I got that. I mean, that made sense. I mean, and obviously, I mean, the mayor adjunct and the principal or the superintendent did not talk to her about these preconceived plans that they had had. And then it was a little bit more sensitive because she really didn't want me to tell her boss that she didn't want to work with me because she was pregnant. And so there was like that added layer of complex, complexity.

THOMPSON: [00:36:55] So I tried to avoid those two as much as I could. And Kondia himself. I mean, he was very traditional Burkinabe in the sense that he had two wives and he himself favored his male child. And so that bothered me. And even one time, I run, and I was running in the bush one day and I had seen him and this other lady in the bush. And I think

there was an exchange of money. And so, I mean, and corruption was pretty rampant. And, uh, and I think even when attending school, I don't think a lot of families really end up paying. But there are so many kids in the classroom, the teachers don't really call roll every day and say, oh no, you haven't paid, you need to leave. So it was very, you know, loose-goosey type of set up.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:53] How many kids are in a class?

THOMPSON: [00:37:58] Fifty?

GANZGLASS: Fifty or so.

THOMPSON: Yeah, it's a sizable classroom and so yes, so I just kind of.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:07] So what did you do to get kids to come to school? I mean, with whom did you end up working?

THOMPSON: [00:38:12] Well, I actually didn't. I worked a little bit with the school, but not related to girls' education and empowerment. I worked with the high school a little bit to do some extracurricular activities. We did a day where we celebrated high grades. We had a traditional dress day. I painted, you know, the HIV AIDS mural. Played some sports. So I would hang out with the students a bit. And in the primary school, I actually did like a picture pen pal correspondence because they're so young and between English and French, that really wouldn't have worked. But I had my niece's class would draw pictures and send them over, and then one of the primary school classes would draw pictures and send them over. So that was interesting. But for the most part, I actually worked with the women's community garden. Yeah. And planted, I worked with them a bit just to have a routine and habit.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:26] Did you start that or did it exist?

THOMPSON: [00:39:29] It existed already. There was a local German nonprofit where Ali worked and they did a lot of adult literacy classes in the local language and they sponsored this community garden. And it was a

very progressive sort of endeavor. So really through the community garden. I mean, it was full of women. And I thought, well, I mean, you're impacting some, I'm sure, female child by working with the women. And malnutrition was a huge issue. Malnutrition and malaria are really the major causes of death. It really wasn't HIV AIDS. And so there's a tree called moringa. Not sure if you've heard of it. It's a tree that's native to India. And the leaves are incredibly nutritious.

GANZGLASS: Oh, yes.

THOMPSON: [00:40:27] Yeah. I think you actually can buy it at Whole Foods now. It's really ridiculous how available it is. But so, for the first year I kind of just helped them water their plants. They grew vegetables and I think it was in the dry season. Yeah, they would get the water from the wells and so I would just show up and help. And my local name was Mondy, Mondy Tiampbieno. I could never pronounce my last name, but I think it actually means white *commercant*. And so I would help the women's community garden and then Kondia would invite me over to dinner, and he would say, Mondy, you can't help the women. They're worried that you're going to fall in the well. I'm like, I'm not going to fall in the well. So I worked with them really for the first year.

THOMPSON: [00:41:25] I mean, I really wanted to get a sense of what's going on in this community. And I mean, who better to show that to you than the women? I found there was one lady, her name was Diapwa, and she. I just kind of followed her home from work and, uh, from working in the community garden. And she would put me to work, you know, she'd have me shucking corn or, you know, doing some other chore or whatever, which was so much fun. Because a lot of times, if you show up in a courtyard, you're like this token white untouchable person that needs to be handled very, very carefully. So sit over here on this amazing chair that you're taking away from everybody else and just sit there. But Diapwa, she would actually put me to work. So I loved that about her. So I was always hanging out.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:15] And you spoke French with all these women or did you speak the native language?

THOMPSON: [00:42:18] I stumbled around with my Gourmantche. Yeah. It's hard because I don't really learn languages very well orally. And so it was really hard for me to just repeat something that they would say. I mean, especially because some of the sounds, I mean obviously I didn't grow up making them. And so I would try to, I would try to prompt them to teach me by saying, you know, I would say like "eggplant" in French and, you know, indicate, well, tell me what it is. And they would be like, yeah, no, that is an eggplant, you're right. No, but in Gourmantche. And they finally got it. But then when I would try to repeat it, you know, they would laugh at me and, you know, I would.

GANZGLASS: So French is better. And they spoke French?

THOMPSON: [00:43:03] Some. I mean, not really, but you stumble your way through it. And especially the older generation, they probably didn't go to school. So they, you really only learn French at school. So French is kind of the rich people language and so. But I would know my plants or, you know, at least. And I did, I found an agriculturalist who lived in the area who helped me kind of start the seedlings for the moringa trees. And so he helped me start the seedlings. And then we had a gathering where he would translate for me and we would talk about the benefits of the tree and everything like that.

THOMPSON: [00:43:54] So by the second year, I actually planted 75 trees in the garden, which I thought would be great because the garden was already a protected area. You know, they already prevented goats or cows or whatever from grazing there. But unfortunately, right before garden season, the women sent in just some kids to just clear everything out, you know, because during the rainy season, everything just starts growing. And they did not tell the kids about the moringa trees.

GANZGLASS: So they pulled them?

THOMPSON: Pulled out all 75 moringa trees. So, I mean, you think, OK, I'm not going to be the stupid white person coming in and telling them what to

do. So, you know, I used local knowledge. I was with them for about two years, you know, watering their plants, seeing what the pattern was, and, you know, found a local agriculturalist who helped me with the seedlings. And yeah, it still failed. So what can you do?

GANZGLASS: [00:45:00] But that's not a cultural issue. No, that's just bad luck that kids weren't told.

THOMPSON: [00:45:07] Well, and I gave the agriculturalist. His name was Barema as well. I gave him more seeds and I even had given him some papaya seeds. I mean, he would grow anything. So I would oftentimes just feed him some seeds. But I tried not. But then I did find out the agriculturalist, he. I wondered why the community. I mean, he was sort of with the community, but not really. But then I found out that he had divorced his wife. So I think there was a bit of a stigma tied to that. And he remarried or something like that. I mean, he was an interesting character. I think he understood how. I think he understood kind of my perspective and what I wanted to do and was there to help. And so if we would show up at courtyards and a woman was trying to give me water, he would say, oh, no, no, no. Like, he would try to be my protector. And he actually built in the courtyard in front of my hut, I didn't have any shade. And so he had built kind of like a straw roof. The name of that's escaping me. But like a straw shaded area that kind of gave me some privacy. Because for the most part, I just woke up to the children of the village because I, the courtyard was right next to the water pump.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:31] So everybody was right there.

THOMPSON: [00:46:34] Yeah, watching me sleep. And so, yeah, I would put up my bug hut and sleep in the bug hut at night outside in the courtyard. And yeah, just wake up to all these little kids peering over the courtyard wall. So, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:51] That's good. So you did that for two years?

THOMPSON: [00:46:56] Yeah, I did a few other things. I did like an English camp for a few, for a month or something in the capital at one point I think the first year. And then in Burkina Faso, the volunteers organized the Bike of Burkina. So the volunteers would get together and bike all around Burkina to different Peace Corps volunteer sites. And then at each site we would do like an activity, an antimalarial activity or soap making activity. And so that was about a month or so, which was a lot of fun. I was really excited about that.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:31] So you got to see the whole country that way?

THOMPSON: [00:47:33] Yeah, absolutely. And I helped with some reading camps. There was Friends of African Villages. Friends of African Village Libraries, FAVL. And they were mostly out in the West and they would have reading camps. And I was hoping that some of these activities would kind of give me some ideas or help me do something. And in the village where I lived, I was really actually hoping to get a FAVL branch out in Matiakoali. But there was something about the east and the west where in the west there seemed to be quite a few more resources. In the east, there was very much a dearth of resources.

THOMPSON: [00:48:14] And it's interesting because on the bike tour, you know, the volunteers would go around introducing themselves, especially if there were VIP individuals attending. And whenever I would mention that I lived in Matiakoali, everybody was like, Matiakoali, you know, wow, that's out there! And so even among the fonctionnaires, which are the government officials that they get stationed around the country, I think it was a pretty hard post for whatever. I don't know if it was the bandits or the security situation or the language. I never could quite discern what was so different about the east versus the west.

THOMPSON: [00:49:01] So I raised five thousand dollars to support kind of a local library. The Tentwa is the nonprofit that Ali had worked for.

GANZGLASS: Tentwa?

THOMPSON: Yeah, Tentwa. It's Gourmantche. I don't know what it means but. So I had conversations with the teachers and government officials and children, tried to understand kind of which books would be the best. And I even bought, Tentwa made some books in Gourmantche, so I bought some Gourmantche books.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:40] So you raised five thousand dollars for a library.

THOMPSON: Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: And was there a library to start out with or were you creating a library?

THOMPSON: [00:49:49] I think I was reinvigorating the library. I think there had been a library that kind of fell into disrepair for lack of a better word. There was just a lot of dust in this room and there were some books. But, yeah, I don't know, I just. There was some sort of infrastructure already there. So I thought, well, maybe if I got relevant books. Because the books in the library were very much standard French books. It really wasn't locally appropriate. And so, you know, I talked to the teachers to understand what the curriculum was, what the required reading was. And even for primary school, there are books, you know, that help you, like the workbooks that the kids need. And so I tried to get something that was more locally relevant.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:38] You raised the money in the States among friends?

THOMPSON: Yeah.

GANZGLASS: And then you bought the books in Ouagadougou or?

THOMPSON: [00:50:46] Yeah, I was. I was negotiating so hard. So, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:54] So what do you think your, I don't want to say best, your biggest accomplishment was in this town? Was it the library? Was it something else?

THOMPSON: [00:51:05] Yeah. I would have to say really the relationships I formed with the women at the community garden. I have so much respect for them and what they do on a daily basis. I mean, you know, I'd run marathons before. I was very athletic growing up. And so I thought, oh, you know, getting water out of a well is a piece of cake. But I mean.

GANZGLASS: It's hard work.

THOMPSON: Yeah, after two hours of that, I was ready to go take my morning nap. And oftentimes you see the women, you know, they're very much just taking their time chatting. And it's because the work is never done. I mean, you can't rush through something because you have ten other activities to do, whether that be getting the water, cooking the meal, doing the laundry, doing the dishes, cooking the meal. I mean, most of the meals were cooked over like a controlled open fire, you know, in this big cauldron. And the local staple was mostly corn, sorghum. And they would form that into like a mashed potato-like food that you would eat with your fingers. And there would be some sauces, like a peanut sauce or an okra sauce or a leek sauce. So the everything was so labor intensive. And so that was a very humbling experience.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:37] And the men take care of the animals, is that it?

THOMPSON: [00:52:40] Yeah. Or they sit under the tree. Yeah. It's interesting. I mean, I did drink the local. I wasn't one of the volunteers who didn't indulge in alcohol at site. I did drink the local alcohol, which was interesting, because it was cooked for three days and then it was still kind of fermenting. And so then when you drank it, it would get stronger as it's still fermenting in your stomach. And so it was interesting. But so I would go to. It was called dolo, so I would go to a local dolo bar. I mean, the women kind of make you drink at 7:00 in the morning after working at the. They would be like, here Mondy, drink this. I'm like, alright. I mean, some days, I mean.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:30] So women drank as well as men.

THOMPSON: [00:53:32] Mm hmm. Yeah, it was Christian and Muslim. So yeah, it was a mixture of religions. But everybody wins because then when everybody has a party, everybody's part of it. It was very much like, it's Christmas. Yay, everybody gets to eat everything.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:51] So there were no tensions between the Muslims and the Christians?

THOMPSON: [00:53:54] None. Yeah, yeah. If anything, everybody just loved it if there was another excuse to party and I don't blame them. I mean, the holidays are a lot of fun. Yeah. So yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:05] So the relationship, you know, any changes that the women made because of things you talked to them about?

THOMPSON: [00:54:13] I don't think so.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:16] You learned, did you learn more from them than they learned from you?

THOMPSON: [00:54:19] Yeah, pretty much. Exactly. And yeah. And you really, you just kind of learn patience. I wish I had learned a little bit more Gourmantche, then I think I would have had better conversations. Because most of the women, it was very difficult to communicate with them. And it was interesting because one time one of the women, Nahini, she had taken me to a friend's place and we were just kind of sitting there and this guy's like chatting. And then this female is chatting and, you know, half an hour later, I'm like, what is going on? I mean, do I really need to be here? And Nahini's like, yeah, yeah. No, he beats his wife. So we're trying to use you as like a reason to convince him not to beat his wife or something, you know.

GANZGLASS: Interesting.

THOMPSON: Yeah, things like that. Yeah, it was always a learning experience. I mean, even in the rare instance that I would go to the dolo bar. Especially with my women friends. One of the guys asked me, he

goes, now tell me. I was like, oh gosh, what are we getting ourselves into? And he said, now, do they really have divorce in the States? And so we had a long conversation about love and stuff like that. And again, one of the reasons why I really stuck to hanging out with women I couldn't really communicate with was, I mean, the men, you know, they want to marry you and that was always annoying. And so I would always make up the excuse that I had five husbands and didn't really need another one unless he wanted to be my sixth. But by the weekend I'm exhausted, you know. And so they thought that was funny.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:11] They understood you were kidding?

THOMPSON: [00:56:13] Yeah. Yeah. I think. I mean, everybody kind of laughed so. I don't think that they really thought that I had that many husbands. It's interesting because one of my friends and myself went to Togo for a week for vacation because Togo had a beach, you know. And I think they had pineapple year-round. Because at site I didn't really have access to fresh fruit and vegetables unless it was rainy season and unless it was papaya or mangoes or watermelon. So I would have access to some fruit.

GANZGLASS: Well, those are good.

THOMPSON: Yeah, no, absolutely. But it was very specific months of the year. So on the way down to Togo, we were on this huge bus and it broke down in the middle of the night. And so earlier, everybody was really mad at us because we had missed the bus and the bus left without us at this one stop. And so there's this whole debacle. And so after that, then the bus breaks down. And so we're all hanging out by the side of the bus. And, you know, I'm chatting it up with the women and telling them the story about the husband and making jokes. And at the end of that, all the women loved us and they're like, oh, you really well hung out with us. Like *bien coze* is French. So I thought that that was a good sign. I mean, I thought if anything, I learned how to be social.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:51] That's great. So you finished your Peace Corps service.

THOMPSON: Yes.

GANZGLASS: And what happened afterwards, did you travel on the way back?

THOMPSON: [00:58:00] I did travel. I spent some time in Morocco and I spent some time in France and then tried to do the Camino de Santiago, got bitten by bedbugs. And so we took a slight detour and did the Portuguese Camino de Santiago.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:21] As opposed to the Spanish one?

THOMPSON: [00:58:23] Yeah. Because the bedbugs just ate me alive. I was pretty miserable. So, you know, I'd be remiss not to mention that, I mean, when I was in Peace Corps, I did get sick pretty often. I had diarrhea often. At least once a month, I would have a temperature of 103 for whatever reason. And I had boils, I broke out in boils. So right during one of the reading camps, I had this mosquito bite. And I think I was telling the story to Sam. I was like stabbing it with my leather because I was having issues and it grew to the size of a quarter, got black, and then by the time I got to Ouaga, Sylvie, the PCMO, she helped to kind of drain it and stuff like that. And so I kind of had the hole, a hole the size of a bullet, in my leg for a while. And then since then I had broken out in colonies of boils. So boils would just grow everywhere. And a lot of it was because of the heat. And so I was pretty miserable. And the second year my family really wanted me to come home for Christmas. And so they paid for a ticket and.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:38] And that was allowed? Was it allowed to go home?

THOMPSON: [00:59:42] Yeah. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: In our days.

THOMPSON: It wasn't allowed?

GANZGLASS: No, no.

THOMPSON: [00:59:48] You could go home. I didn't really want to, I mean, to be quite frank. I had a lot of health problems, but part of it too is after talking to Jean-Luc, it was well we can see if this is environmental then. Maybe it'll clear up when you go home. And so I spent Christmas in Virginia with my sister and my mom but sure enough, when I came back, I broke out again in boils and really, by that time now it's going to be chronic. I mean, it's not like, you know, I think leaving five months earlier wouldn't have made that much of a difference. So I do still break out in boils.

THOMPSON: [01:00:39] And I also I was on mefloquine, which is the antimalarial medication, because the Peace Corps mandates that you take antimalarial medication if you're in a malarial prevalent area. And so my last week or so at site, I got incredibly dizzy. It was almost as though just the room was spinning and would not stop for at least a half an hour. Or so much so that I was, you know, vomiting everywhere. And this was one of the last days. So everybody had been feeding me and it was just awful. And it was so bad, I was so worried that I called the PCMO.

THOMPSON: [01:01:28] And he deemed, it wasn't Jean-Luc. Jean-Luc was on vacation. And at that time they had actually fired Sylvie. They had accused her of pilfering meds. But a lot of it was mismanagement of the meds by Peace Corps, especially when Niger shut down. They shipped everything that was left over from the med unit to Peace Corps, to the Peace Corps in Burkina. And there was some issue with how it was signed over and they got rid of Sylvie, which was really unfortunate because she was an amazing PCMO.

THOMPSON: [01:02:07] And so I was super dizzy, it wasn't going away. And even by, so I had two days left at site. So the doctor's like, well, you're coming in for your close of service. And so I went in for my close of service and the dizziness was still there. So I at least have it documented that it did stem from Peace Corps. And so, yeah, after talking to quite a few medical personnel in the States and doing a lot of research, it turned out I had mefloquine toxicity.

GANZGLASS: Which is from the, um?

THOMPSON: From the mefloquine, yeah. So that's been really difficult because I have some claims with Department of Labor, FECA, Federal Employees' Compensation Act, and it's really, really, really, really, really hard to get access.

GANZGLASS: [01:03:04] And it doesn't go away after you take, after you finish taking the antimalarial?

THOMPSON: No.

GANZGLASS: Does it stay in your body forever?

THOMPSON: [01:03:15] The lifecycle of mefloquine I think is four months. But maybe I'm wrong. But the side effects are permanent, so now I suffer from vestibular issues. So dizziness and vertigo. Yeah, there can be days when you feel so sick you don't even want to get out of bed. And I mean, I still break out in boils, especially every summer in D.C.

GANZGLASS: [01:03:46] Are those related, are the boils related to the dizziness?

THOMPSON: [01:03:49] The dizziness? No.

GANZGLASS: [01:03:52] You just have two things going on?

THOMPSON: [01:03:54] Yeah. Yeah, exactly. And it's just been, it's a nightmare getting access to Department of Labor. I've had to get my Congressional representatives involved. I mean, I've been living in D.C. for five years, but I'm still registered in Alaska because the Alaskan senators are more, they're more responsive. And I was always worried that Eleanor Norton Holmes, who's, you know, our District representative in Congress, I was worried that she wouldn't have the standing to tell the Department of Labor, look, you need to be responsive. So it's pretty, it's been really, really challenging actually.

THOMPSON: [01:04:33] I think really most of the impact of my Peace Corps service has really been post-service, because that's when. It's just been even more challenging because I'm in the States and I should have access to these resources. And you're just, you're largely not able to access them. So I've been working with Nancy Tongue with Health Justice for Peace Corps Volunteers. And we've been really trying to be heard. Because even within the Peace Corps community, it's been really difficult to create a safe space where you can be slightly critical of Peace Corps. Because Peace Corps needs to do better by their volunteers when we come back sick and injured.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:23] What would the solution be? I mean, not going to the Department of Labor? Should Peace Corps be handling this all on their own? Because they don't really have a disability program, right?

THOMPSON: [01:05:36] Right. And I think. So the current legislation that just passed the House, actually, and it passed the Senate a few months ago, it lengthens the amount of time that Peace Corps can take care of you. So Peace Corps can now take care of you up to four months after you come back from service. And that's key because originally, especially when I came back. So what happened was I broke out in boils January, but I had like a coupon from Peace Corps so I could go to the doctor, show them this coupon 127C form, and say, hey, I'm breaking out in boils. And so a doctor can treat me. But to get treatment, I had to file a Department of Labor claim, which is fine because my issue's chronic anyway. But it was just a lot of paperwork to go through like \$100 worth of medication. And I mean, thankfully, I was in a position where, you know, I could pay whatever amount and be fine. So the thinking is with the bill. Yeah sorry, are we?

GANZGLASS: No, no, it's fine.

THOMPSON: So the thinking is with the bill by lengthening the amount of time, then Peace Corps can take care of the volunteer, but um.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:04] But do you fault Peace Corps for treatment in-country, or is it all post-service that the problems developed?

THOMPSON: [01:07:14] Yeah, this is a difficult question because, I mean, as full disclosure, I actually sued Peace Corps because of their use of mefloquine. Because if you look deeper into the federal government's use of mefloquine, Department of Defense actually moved away from it in 2009. They sent out an official memo. And they recognize like this is a very, this is a neurotoxic drug. We're not going to give it to our SEALs. We're not going to give it to our Rangers. We are not using this drug. And so in 2010, you know, Peace Corps just kind of handed me the medication, no questions asked. And, you know, circle that you're taking mefloquine. And it doesn't really say on any of the documentation that, look, this is a serious neurotoxic drug, like these side effects could become permanent. I mean, everybody jokes about your nightmares, etcetera, and I did have those. But nobody really looked at kind of the other symptoms.

THOMPSON: [01:08:17] I mean, and even at one point, Jean-Luc had done a site visit. No, I had gotten sick and I was asking Jean-Luc for some medication. I don't know if I was breaking out in boils or had diarrhea or what, but so he was trying to send me medication and for whatever reason, nobody was going to go to Matiakoali that day. And at some point in my file, he had written that I was not adjusting well. And to a certain extent that could have been true. But I had a mefloquine specialist review my medical records and he said, no, this is classic case of mefloquine toxicity. You know, you're having anxiety issues and mental health issues and these are serious side effects.

THOMPSON: [01:09:08] And Peace Corps waits until you're overseas to give it to you. And the CDC actually says that you should start it in the States at least two weeks in advance to monitor for side effects. Because how do you know you're not crazy? I mean, how do you know? You're in the middle of nowhere Africa, with no running water or electricity. So how do you know you're crazy because you're just in the middle of nowhere?

GANZGLASS: [01:09:32] So this might have been going on for two years undiagnosed?

THOMPSON: [01:09:34] Right. Right. And I think the dizziness, that the vestibular issues were a very clear indicator. And so, like I said, it's just if you look into it a little bit more, it gets more and more suspicious. And I'd even tried to file a whistleblower claim to really understand, you know, why was Peace Corps still using this drug, this drug of first choice, when it's the least effective and most toxic? If you look at the scientific literature, because there are safer, more effective options, but one of them that's the safest is expensive. And so I think Peace Corps was really using mefloquine as the cheapest option.

THOMPSON: [01:10:15] And then if you really look into it, like the CDC conducted a study on Peace Corps volunteers without their knowledge in the early '90s in Benin or Togo. So it's interesting how there's this documented sort of paper trail everywhere where it's kind of a red flag. I mean, why would Peace Corps agree to have their volunteers tested on without the volunteers' knowledge? You know, centered around the side effects or the adverse effects of mefloquine. And the CDC conducted all these studies and the Peace Corps volunteers had no idea that they were test subjects taking mefloquine for the CDC to do research on.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:00] And you would think the Peace Corps doctors would be trained in this.

THOMPSON: [01:11:04] Right. Exactly.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:06] I mean, somebody from the United States would know about it, but it's something that they should be made aware of.

THOMPSON: [01:11:11] Exactly. And that was, and so with the legislation, with what I had, that's what I requested from Representative Poe's office, who is leading the drafting of the legislation on the House side. And, yeah, adequate training for your PCMOs and to start mefloquine in the States. That's fine. I mean, I don't want to sue Peace Corps just to sue. I mean I was really trying to make a point and so yeah, start mefloquine in the States and use it safely. But there was pushback from Peace Corps and then some Representative's office, Chairman

Royce's office, of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, they said, well, Peace Corps should be compliant with the CDC with all medication. But unfortunately, word had gotten around that Peace Corps had already said that they were compliant with the CDC. So when dealing with Congress it's just, it's a nightmare.

GANZGLASS: [01:12:11] So it's still a pending issue. Did your lawsuit go anywhere?

THOMPSON: [01:12:16] No. The judge ruled that I, that the U.S. courts lacked jurisdiction because it originated overseas. And I said, well, that proves my point. I mean, Peace Corps specifically waited to give it to me overseas.

GANZGLASS: [01:12:32] But you were an American working for an American agency?

THOMPSON: [01:12:37] No, unfortunately. I mean, so if you're a federal employee, you cannot. So I sued through the Federal Tort Claims Act, so you have to be kind of a civilian overseas, injured by the. Well, sorry. For the Federal Tort Claims Act, you have to be a civilian that's been injured by the federal government for whatever reason. So, for instance, like you trip and fall on a post office sidewalk and are injured because of that.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:07] But that's different. I mean, you were a government employee.

THOMPSON: [01:13:12] Well, and so that was the court's reasoning as well, that I had access to Department of Labor FECA. But I tried to show, I mean, I had call logs where I called my claims examiner several times, never got back to me. I mean, I had documentation to show that Department of Labor wasn't even compliant with their own rules and regulations. So I do not, in fact, have access to FECA as a former Peace Corps volunteer. And so, um, yeah, so there is that and then it originated overseas. And there was like a third reason why the courts rejected it. But I mean, regardless, it was more out of principle than anything else.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:55] So it's been an ongoing saga. But are you being treated for it? Is there treatment?

THOMPSON: [01:14:01] There is no treatment. And unfortunately, even in the States it's been really difficult to find a doctor. Mefloquine toxicity doesn't exist in the medical literature yet. If you talk to the VA, if you talk to former military doctors, I'm in touch with a former military physician and a former Army psychiatrist. And they're, you know, they're very well read on mefloquine toxicity. And they've done quite a few studies about it and have published literature on it. So they've been incredibly supportive. It's interesting, the military community is incredibly supportive of sick and injured volunteers because they really get it, you know, and it's just a little unfortunate that, you know, the Peace Corps, broader Peace Corps community should be a little bit more receptive to people who have been sick and injured and, you know, just want a safe space to talk about it.

GANZGLASS: [01:14:59] I think it's just people are not aware of it.

THOMPSON: [01:15:02] True. There is some of that. Absolutely. So, yeah. But yeah, we've been working with the National Peace Corps Association. I've had several meetings on the Hill. So we'll see slowly, slowly. Little by little was what they would say in Burkina.

GANZGLASS: [01:15:20] But other than that, it was a good experience, it sounds like.

THOMPSON: [01:15:25] Yeah. I mean it's interesting because especially with me being on the Hill, all of my talking points surround my health issues. So I feel like my memory of kind of the better parts of my service have really just been colored in a different light or have diminished somewhat. And yeah, it's interesting. I was looking at pictures the other day and it was good to see me happy in Burkina. And like I said, I do think that my Peace Corps medical officers did take care of me. I have heard from other volunteers where they haven't been as fortunate. So I do feel very lucky. But yeah, my service, it's very complicated.

GANZGLASS: [01:16:21] So it's changed your life, but not for the better because now you have a chronic illness.

THOMPSON: [01:16:29] Yeah. I mean without the illnesses, you know, sure. Would I be living and working the life in D.C.? Sure. But to a certain extent, you know, there's such a community of those of us who have been sick and injured and we haven't really had a platform and we really haven't had advocacy. And so it's actually been, yeah, it's actually been pretty rewarding trying to affect that change that I think is needed. I mean, you know, there are so many discussions anymore about what's the direction of Peace Corps with technology and what about phones? And I think that we're in such a prime environment where we can really look at Peace Corps critically. I mean, and not to be critical in the sense of, oh, this is part of this, but critical in ways that matter, you know, and to make it run more efficient or have a greater impact.

GANZGLASS: [01:17:27] Well, there are lessons that are learned in each period, right?

THOMPSON: [01:17:31] Exactly. So, I mean, hopefully, you know, well, I do think the environment is ripe for that. Now, whether or not anybody really grabs that torch and, you know, charges full steam ahead into that argument, I don't know. But I do think it's warranted. And I do hope that, you know, those of us who have been sick and injured are part of that conversation.

GANZGLASS: [01:17:58] Good, so thank you for the interview.

THOMPSON: [01:18:01] Yeah, thank you for having me.

GANZGLASS: [01:18:02] Is there anything else you want to say?

THOMPSON: [01:18:04] Um, yeah, I think there are so many, but it's all right, I think, uh, I think.

GANZGLASS: [01:18:11] You made the point?

THOMPSON: [01:18:12] I think I've said what I wanted to say. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I really appreciate it.

GANZGLASS: [01:18:19] Great. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]