

Jeff Liu Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Jeff Liu served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Moldova from 2014 to 2016 on a small enterprise development project.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Jeff Liu

May 17, 2019

Austin, Texas

By Kelli Haynes

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

HAYNES: [00:00:01] This is Kelli Haynes and it is May 17th, 2019, and I am interviewing Jeff Liu. Jeff, can you tell us when and where you served in the Peace Corps?

LIU: [00:00:17] I served in the Republic of Moldova in a city named Balti. I started my service in June 2014 and ended my service July 2016.

HAYNES: [00:00:29] Ok, so I just wanted to ask you sort of in a chronological order about your service and we'll just start way before you started serving. Was there anything growing up that made you want to join the Peace Corps?

LIU: [00:00:46] I didn't know about the organization until 2010, 2011, right before I graduated, thinking about what to do with as a career and as like things to branch off of before I started my career and I majored in economics and minored in international relations. So Peace Corps, the

Foreign Service, government work or something I was really interested in at the time. And it all made sense to look into these like international organizations.

HAYNES: [00:01:17] Yeah. How did you find out about it?

LIU: [00:01:20] Found out about it through, I think someone in the university or just Googling for like international volunteer service, Peace Corps, the British Volunteering Service, the European Volunteer Service, all came up and I obviously qualified for the Peace Corps after I gained my citizenship. So I wanted to call.

HAYNES: [00:01:43] So what was the application process like when you applied?

LIU: [00:01:49] It was pretty long. Lots of, I guess, waiting, applying and waiting, it took me probably three days to apply and then a couple of days to wait. Got the interview fairly quick and then nominated the next day, but then another year and a half to two years of waiting.

HAYNES: [00:02:11] Two years of waiting. Was that when you had to mail in and everything and wait for them to mail back?

LIU: [00:02:18] It was at the time, it was electronic. I mailed in only like certain health records.

HAYNES: [00:02:25] Ok, great. So did you get to choose what part of the world you wanted to go to?

LIU: [00:02:32] I had the ability to choose regions and I specified Africa or Eastern Europe, because I didn't, I knew I didn't qualify for South America and I didn't feel like going into Asia.

HAYNES: [00:02:44] OK, and what sector did you serve in?

LIU: [00:02:50] And I did small enterprise development.

HAYNES: Great, tell me about your assignment.

LIU: [00:02:57] It was with at first with the regional development of the Northern Regional Development Agency of Moldova, and they were a quasi-government agency that did developmental work in terms of waste management, aqueducts, water purification, building roads, mainly with US aid and European agencies. They were the one who were distributing the funds and then deciding on what type of criteria it meets their standards.

HAYNES: [00:03:34] Ok, and what was your specific position like that?

LIU: [00:03:38] Um, I sort of started out just helping them think about the projects, planning things out and working with them in terms of more planning and organizational efficiency in the office. But it didn't work out and unfortunately, there were really busy and really stressed. The organizational structure is more of a top down where the head director had to say in most things. And when he's not there, usually people didn't do much or seriously trying to finish the things he told them to do.

HAYNES: [00:04:17] So it didn't work out?

LIU: [00:04:18] No, it didn't work out. I stayed there for until February of, no February, April of 2015. And then when I got moved to another agency that dealt with women business development and also just small business development. They had grants that came in from U.S. aid and then they interviewed and researched the applicants that had business ideas, were already developed businesses to contribute more money to or help them better organize and develop their business. They range from like, hair salons to farms to beekeepers to designers, architects. Any regional northern region small time businesses qualified, and they mainly focused on women who started a business or had partners.

HAYNES: [00:05:21] And what did you do specifically with that organization?

LIU: [00:05:25] Very similar to the first organization where I helped them with organizational stuff, technology issues, and just really helped them develop and critique businesses on the businesses ability to perform. And the budget and funding was right for this specific business, or is it too much of a risk? Things like that.

HAYNES: [00:05:48] Ok, I want to go back in time a little back to your pre service training. Can you tell me about that? Was it in a different part of the country than you ended up?

LIU: [00:06:00] Yeah, pre service. We stayed in a little village called Truescu. It was about 20, 30 minutes from the capital. And we did our language training, their cultural training there, and did a small project there in terms of. Seeing what the organization are, seeing, what the community needed, like research permit and our admin training and medical training was in the capital.

HAYNES: [00:06:34] Ok, what? How long was that, too?

LIU: [00:06:38] So from June, June 5th, June six to August, early August.

HAYNES: [00:06:46] Ok, and the training in the capital, was that just a couple of days or did you commute meet back and forth.

LIU: [00:06:51] We commuted back and forth.

HAYNES: [00:06:53] Ok, what did you what did your days look like in pre-service training?

LIU: [00:06:57] About four hours of language in the morning and then another three to four in the afternoon. And then every few days we got afternoon off a little bit early because we did cultural training and what the culture was about, things to do, things not to do. And it was Monday through Saturday and Saturday. We have the afternoon off.

HAYNES: [00:07:26] Ok, so in the morning, you did language, in the afternoon you did job training?

LIU: [00:07:30] Um, job training was once a week. And it was only in the afternoon. It was predominantly language training.

HAYNES: [00:07:38] What language did you learn?

LIU: [00:07:40] I learned Romanian.

HAYNES: [00:07:41] Ok, was that easy to learn?

LIU: [00:07:45] First maybe month, month and a half. It was a lot of language wasn't super difficult. It was romance based, kind of like Spanish. The I still don't know, date is very well, but I the I guess word conjugations wasn't too bad. And future tense, past tense was easier as long as you got your basic word verb conjugations correct.

HAYNES: [00:08:14] Did you have any expert had you ever heard Romanian before you started learning it?

LIU: [00:08:20] No. And then I had some conversations with Peace Corps volunteers are currently out in Moldova, and they told me not to study the language. I'll just get it, you know, get on arrival. I'm like, all right, good. And yeah, that was what I did.

HAYNES: [00:08:38] Did you speak Romanian all the time?

LIU: [00:08:41] At site?

HAYNES: Yeah.

LIU: During pre-service, not so much. We tried. I had a friend, Andrew, he's a PCV, he changed his name to Andre when he was there full time. We had

conversations in Romania maybe an hour, a day outside of class, just trying to understand each other. We sounded so dumb, but we understood each other and that was OK.

HAYNES: That's something.

LIU: Yeah.

HAYNES: [00:09:10] And then once you got to say you speaking Romanian, what time?

LIU: [00:09:14] I got to say I was speaking Romanian. Sometimes the host family wanted me to teach their kids English. So I spoke English more with them, the kids and then Romanian with their parents. With foreign languages, I don't, I'm fairly reserved and I don't talk much somewhat introverted and need my time to recharge. But overall, the office I spoke a lot of English too. The only time I spoke Romanian was on my secondary projects with students and youths.

HAYNES: [00:09:55] OK. So when you got to site your first couple of months there, what was that like?

LIU: [00:10:04] Um, it was OK. I had site mates. Four site mates, actually five, before September and then four site mates throughout until the first group left, but we interacted with each other fairly regularly, had projects working with each other. First couple of months with the host family was OK. My language eventually developed where I had no problems understanding them, although my host dad translated my Romanian to other people. It's like I said the same thing. He just said it another way.

HAYNES: [00:10:43] From Romanian to Romanian.

LIU: [00:10:45] Yeah, it was fairly good. Summer was ending, winter was coming. And I just got to know people and explore different projects and ideas in the area.

HAYNES: [00:11:05] Did you, was it a hard adjustment?

LIU: [00:11:08] It wasn't a hard adjustment, culturally. I felt like Moldova post Soviet bloc was very similar to China during the 1990s. And I grew up in China. I was born there. And the buildings all look very similar to people culturally or different. But like workwise, I like the mentality of communism was fairly similar. So it wasn't too bad.

HAYNES: [00:11:37] Um, you mentioned living with the host family, did you live with the host family the full two years?

LIU: [00:11:43] I did not. So I stayed with them from August, the second host family at the actual site from August to January. At about October or November, they started hinting that I should move out because they had another baby coming and that was the fourth kid. So there were like, you should just move to our apartment. I didn't want to do that because I didn't know what winter was like buying food. And all that was just strange to me at the time. So I eventually moved out in January to the new to the apartment, because the room that I was staying in, the gas wasn't very strong and it wasn't very warm. So they were like, the apartment's really warm. And I'm like, alright I'll just move there.

HAYNES: [00:12:32] Was it your family's apartment?

LIU: [00:12:33] Yes, my host family's apartment. Not connected, a whole different block on the other side of town.

HAYNES: [00:12:40] They were just like, get out?

LIU: [00:12:40] Yeah. They, like, just live there. Well, it's the same rent. I get this place by yourself and I'm like, sounds great.

HAYNES: [00:12:48] Cool. And then did you live with a different host family during your pre-service training?

LIU: [00:12:53] Yes, it was a different host family during pre-service. They were in the village and fairly well-off host family just like the one in Balti, you know, very family of lawyers in Balti and, in training site Truescu, and then in Balti it was a family of furniture merchants.

HAYNES: [00:13:19] I want to hear about your secondary projects now.

LIU: [00:13:25] I had a lot of secondary projects that I mainly worked with another volunteer for recycling during near the end of my service. We did a recycling program coming out of the schools, had a recycling center off of far side of town that got sold recyclables to Romania. He was able to pick up each local school. We had about eight school sites that did plastics and paper recycling knows one of my bigger projects. Also some of the other ones, I did a volunteering training program with another volunteer out of the the city hall. And it was fairly big, already developed by previous volunteer, had about 40 or 50 students trained every semester. And we trained as students on how to why it's important to volunteer, what is volunteering, how to develop their projects, and then giving them a small amount of money or teaching them how to raise the money to complete a project. Some of them were volunteering at the orphanage, painting, repainting for playgrounds. Some other ones were like sustainability, how to how to keep building sustainable and things like that. I also taught English once a week at the school at a local high school with 12 and 11 former high school students and taught Chinese once a week out of local Chinese school that I randomly found to high school middle school students, mainly conversational, some reading and writing. And I think those were all those secondary problems.

HAYNES: [00:15:20] Well, it sounds like you kept really busy.

LIU: [00:15:23] Yeah, it was. It was ups and downs sometimes during for like six weeks at a time, Sunday to Sunday, like literally eight to 12 hour days doing the volunteering project and sometimes two to three weeks without much because it was summer and no one was there.

HAYNES: [00:15:44] Yeah, that sounds right. What did a regular week look like?

LIU: [00:15:50] Regular week when I had primary projects was four hours dedicated to the primary partner. I usually went in in the mornings when they had stuff for me to do. I did them when they didn't have stuff for me to do. I helped other volunteers or did side projects, secondary projects. Some of the help for other volunteers could be from different cities. They needed something typed up or they need a website to be designed internally. We helped along with that. And in the afternoon I went to teach English or teach Chinese or go to the secondary projects that I've worked on. And then lunchtime usually either go home for lunch or go to a local, I guess, cantina for lunch, usually the university ones really fairly good and cheap, and then at night I usually eat with my host family when I stay with them. And when I didn't, I usually went home to cook and once or twice a week go out with another volunteer or some local friends to a pizzeria or a bar.

HAYNES: [00:17:01] Yeah. Tell me about the food in Moldova.

LIU: [00:17:04] We had very Eastern European Soviet type food. There is *mamaliga*, which is like a corn mill, but kind of like corn bread, but softer and more not gelatinous. But you can poke at it and I'll move that with fish or with beet soup was pretty good. There is *sarmale*, which is like a leaf, like a dumpling, but leaf instead of the dough, it's a leaf wrapped and that is rice, pork or various vegetables. That's fairly good. Uh, they put *smântână* on everything. I forgot about sour cream or mayonnaise. Either one is fairly good on *mamaliga*. And my favorite would have to be, it was wasn't local local, because pizzerias popped up everywhere, Italian style thin sliced pizzas. Those are pretty good. And my go-to would probably be the *pelmeni*, which is like a Russian dumpling, smaller, different fillings on the inside, usually pork.

HAYNES: [00:18:37] How big was the city that you lived in?

LIU: [00:18:40] It had a reported population of one hundred and twenty thousand, but realistically probably seventy thousand. Okay. From center of town you can walk to the village, the farmlands within fifteen minutes and if you walked north, maybe it'll take you 30, 40 minutes to get to a village or like just the farm outside of the city and not very big. No. You sort of either knew everybody or like second or third degree knew other people.

HAYNES: [00:19:19] Tell me about tell me about your host family's house and then tell me about the apartment that you moved into.

LIU: [00:19:24] So my host family's house is very central, literally downtown. It was an office style house where it was two stories. First story had some storage stuff. Second story was their house, house, apartment. Inside the first door was their their house. It was very well furnished, one to two bedrooms with a big kitchen and living room together and a loft in one of the other bedrooms. OK, fairly big. And my room was the third door, which is just an office that they repurposed to, um, to a living quarters. Everyone except mom and dad slept on couch beds, which is like Soviet style couch was more comfortable than your American futons and stuff like that. I'm fairly, fairly firm, very durable. And it was very comfortable, had a bookshelf, a desk, a chair and the futon with like a closet in my area. The bathroom was right next to outside, but right next to my room.

HAYNES: [00:20:47] Nice, and you said something about the gas and the heating.

LIU: [00:20:54] Yeah, so the gas was turned on whenever the temperature reaches a certain threshold and the government's like, we need to turn on gas hostname. I found out this later. The host family had the on switch and then my room had an on off switch, but my own switch was in turn on and when it was turned on, the host family got the first round of gas and then whatever filtered down to me I had wasn't too bad. Very variable. But you have to wear like multiple layers during winter if you want to stay in that room.

HAYNES: [00:21:30] What was the winter like?

LIU: [00:21:32] Winter, winter would probably be like New York or Maryland. OK, it was sort of, I guess inside your bones kind of chill as long as you root, you know, you layered up, it's totally fine. What worried me about winter was the ice. The roads weren't very clear. Like luckily the roads, there are a lot of potholes. So you step into them, there's some sort of traction for the ice, but you really can't see some of the black ice and they don't really clear the ice during winter. And me being really tall, I fell all the time. Oh, even with the trucks on which I like the way springs. So yak tracks, you put them over your shoes and have like spring coils along the bottom, that helps traction a little bit. But I stopped wearing them because mine was like bright orange and only the foreigners wore them. So it's like I'll just be very careful. My friend told me to just waddle like a penguin and it did work.

HAYNES: [00:22:41] That made you stand out less.

LIU: [00:22:44] Yeah, a lot less than the orange yak tracks.

HAYNES: [00:22:46] Um, hey so I wonder what was packing like if you had to pack all those winter clothes.

LIU: [00:22:55] Um, winter clothes. I brought one coats, one coat. I found another coat at Peace Corps, when people leave, they just leave a bunch of stuff, so another coat there. I had thermals prepacked during summer and it wasn't, it wasn't too bad as long as you knew how to layer it was totally fine.

HAYNES: [00:23:26] Did you get, I just know that there's like a weight limit for your bags when you travel. And I feel like having to pack a bunch of coats would make it trickier.

LIU: [00:23:35] My weight limit was right on seventy five.

HAYNES: [00:23:39] Wow.

LIU: [00:23:40] Yeah. So it wasn't too bad. I had one big luggage actually one big one big luggage, a big backpack and a smaller luggage that I packed. I crammed the small luggage so much ended up weighing like thirty five pounds for like a carry-on luggage. Yeah it's quite a lot.

HAYNES: [00:24:00] Yeah. But they don't weigh your carry-ons.

LIU: [00:24:04] Yeah. They don't weigh carry-ons. So if that was good I think my backpack was about twenty five pounds so I'm all over one hundred pounds of materials.

HAYNES: [00:24:16] Wow. Ok, so what were your, what was your favorite project that you did? You told us about them, but you didn't tell us that.

LIU: [00:24:21] My favorite project would have to be overall teaching students, working with students either in English, Chinese or volunteering. That was fairly hands on. You get to see how the students develop and grow, really understand different topics and their strange and foreign to them, something that their schools or parents wouldn't be able to explain for volunteering. So the Soviet type volunteering before sort of mandatory and they had volunteering days where you go plant trees or clean your community or, you know, help beautify the surrounding environment. I was once, once a year, maybe twice a year, and the school's other students were kind of forced to clean their classroom and all that stuff. So building the mentality of volunteering is good for your community was difficult at first. But when you see them understand and get the topics, it's really, I guess, rewarding and nice to see.

HAYNES: [00:25:28] Yeah. Did you have anybody you were close with in your community?

LIU: [00:25:34] Um, mainly the high school students in terms of local local people, high school students, hang out with them once in a while, either

go running or, you know, walk around the neighborhood. And then I was fairly close to Peace Corps volunteers because we did all of the projects together. And I think without the Peace Corps volunteers, I would have been more sheltered and need more time to recharge. But having them as an outlet because they know they understand how I feel, they're more familiar with things, was something very important to have. Um, it was a good balance between local and Peace Corps volunteers.

HAYNES: [00:26:17] Did you ever get to see the Peace Corps volunteers who worked at your site?

LIU: [00:26:22] Yes. The country that I stayed I volunteered in didn't have a rule on internal travel. With some countries you have to take vacation or PTO to internally travel. Ours did not, until I think possibly the end of my service, but that's another story. So I always found other volunteers that needed help with projects or just wanted to. I guess I just wanted to see a different part of the country. I know I pretty much travel throughout the country except the very far north. I don't think I made it all the way to Edinet, but overall I did a lot of traveling throughout the country and because I was the capital, a lot of volunteers came into my site because they needed to get away from the host family or just needed like a place to take a break and cool down. My apartment was fairly big enough to host a lot of people.

HAYNES: [00:27:24] Great. You mentioned traveling, did you go on any vacations nearby countries while you're there?

LIU: [00:27:32] I went on quite a bit of vacations, but I don't think I've finished all of my vacation days. My furthest vacation would have to be China. I went for Chinese New Year's for seven or nine days. And that was fairly good. But surrounding region in Europe, I did Germany, Hungary, Romania, Austria and Slovenia or Slovakia, which ever, one of the two countries that inland next to Austria. Went to Israel, that was very fun. And I think that's it. Never got to go to Ukraine because the site kind of closed

and we weren't allowed to go until the end of service. And by that time, I didn't want to travel.

HAYNES: [00:28:27] Yeah, yeah. That sounds like a lot of places to go without finishing vacation days.

LIU: [00:28:34] Oh, also Czech Republic. Czech Republic is really fun. Oh, and Italy. Italy was good.

HAYNES: [00:28:42] Wow! You did a good job seeing the continent.

LIU: [00:28:46] Went out maybe a week at a time.

HAYNES: [00:28:54] Awesome. Alright, so we talked about how it was coming in, like in your first year, at least, it is a pretty easy transition. What was your last year like, the end of your service like?

LIU: [00:29:07] Like the last year was busier than the first year because new volunteers came in to work with them and get them to understand the community after their transition for maybe a month or two. And one of my friends, his name is Bartosz. He's a Polish-American volunteer that had stronger language abilities than me. He knew Polish and Russian and studied Romanian. So he was a great use to go to the Russian speaking part of the city, which is pretty much everywhere, and get connections and work with people to develop projects. I used to either speak Romanian or get a student to translate, but having him around was very helpful and I don't think the recycling project would have started without having his help.

HAYNES: [00:30:00] Oh, so what about the last, like three months of your service when you're closing down on your projects?

LIU: [00:30:09] I didn't actually close down the last three months because our recycling project was, I guess, midway and ended in April. And then we had to do, I guess, summaries and reviews and see how we can sustain

the project further into the future. And I still taught English, taught Chinese, and the volunteering project was also wrapping up, but not finalized. And then the main goal towards the last three months was to make sure that the volunteers who were staying there had the ability and the connections and the people and the know how to get what they needed. I'm just documenting these things, reminding them, you know, things to do and things not to do was, I guess, the main task.

HAYNES: [00:30:57] Yeah. And then what was your transition back home like?

LIU: [00:31:04] Transition back was pretty rough. I'm assuming it's fairly similar for all volunteers. Getting back, applying for jobs was fairly hard. First week or two, I kind of just stayed and didn't really want to go anywhere or talk to any, you know, distant or further relatives of my parents. Maybe my grandma. Took about a month to visit the local Peace Corps volunteer chapter to, you know, socialize with them. Found a part time job within I guess two months with a family friend working at a clinic doing billing and insurance work and really fully transitioned after I decided to move out of the house to another city and found a job there and, you know, started developing and living life like a kind of similar to what I did in the Peace Corps. Really reaching out to other people, growing my network, feeling that this is a career that I want to stand.

HAYNES: [00:32:07] Yeah, great. How did the Peace Corps help you in your career after Peace Corps or did it?

LIU: [00:32:16] I don't think I did, because I majored in economics. I had odd jobs here and there and before the Peace Corps, I was a data analyst at Shell for seven months. And then after I got back, I went to a whole different field because one of my family friends knew to help. So I did claims and billing and insurance with two providers that helped me. But Peace Corps didn't qualify me for that job. But it did build the experience of working with different people, different cultures, understanding organizations and quickly understanding situations within a community or

within an organization. And I think that part was very, very valuable in terms of just growing as a person and working with different situations.

HAYNES: [00:33:08] Yeah. And then last question. I just want to know if you have the opportunity to talk to someone who is thinking about joining the Peace Corps, what advice would you give them?

LIU: [00:33:21] So during my first three months of actual site we're building, this has to do with the question. Yeah, we were building a website for Peace Corps volunteers to be able to utilize fully the resources that we have and networks that we have, to develop future projects to prove current projects or just get project ideas. And I was sort of self-appointed to where I look through all the documents, understood what things we have. And with sort of the point person to questions for like a librarian pretty much. And I went through all of the Balti previous volunteers before the end of service, what was that called? The thing that we wrote up, not DLS, but like a site where you pretty much?

HAYNES: [00:34:17] Description of service.

LIU: [00:34:18] Yeah, the description of service. And then along with that, it came with like a psych report concluded and so forth. And at the end of the site report, people wrote the answer to this question. Some of them said, you know, don't listen to anyone's advice, try to try things out, do your own thing. You know, if you fail, it's part of the service. No matter how difficult or how stupid it is. Um, but I would after reading all those things, I would say to future volunteers, Peace Corps isn't for everybody. For Republic of Moldova, our ET, early termination or medical leave rates were pretty high. We started with about 70 people. We ended up with about 38 at the end of service. Again, it's not for everybody, but I would say it's one of those things that you'll never be able to experience because it's very unique. Your experience at site could be different from your site mate who has another different experience, even though you guys were a mile away. Because the connections, the friendship and the situations you're dealing with will be totally different. Your story would be fairly

unique. Even if you replace a volunteer and local people, still are friends of that volunteer, they'll remember you for the reasons that you were there, not for a previous volunteer's purpose. I would say it's never too late to do it. And it's sometimes, you know, you go too early. We had people go at various stages when I thought, you know, at twenty four it was always too late. If I don't do this now, it's too late. But once I got to the country, people in their 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s were saying the same thing. So it's never too late. It's good to give it a try, but it's, you know, not for everybody.

HAYNES: [00:36:19] Yeah. All right. Thank you.

LIU: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]