

Jason Scott Pielemeier Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Jason Scott Pielemeier
Interviewer: John Pielemeier
Date of Interview: August 7, 2019
Location of Interview: Washington, D.C.
Length: 70 pages

Biographical Note

Jason Scott Pielemeier served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala from 2001 to 2004 on an environmental management project.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed November 6, 2019, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. This interview is in the public domain.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Technical Note

This transcript was created by Sonix software from the MP3 audio recording of the interview. The resulting text file was lightly edited and reformatted according to a standard template.

Suggested Citation

Jason Scott Pielemeier, recorded interview by John Pielemeier, August 7, 2019, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

DISCLAIMER

This transcript was generated automatically by Sonix software from the audio recording. The accuracy of the transcript cannot be guaranteed. Only the original audio recording constitutes the official record of this interview and should be used along with the transcript. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy or would like to recommend corrections, they are encouraged to contact the library reference staff.

Oral History Interview

with

Jason Scott Pielemeier

August 7, 2019
Washington, D.C.

By John Pielemeier

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

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:00:01] This is John Pielemeier on August 7th, 2019, and interviewing Jason Pielemeier, my son, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala from 2001 to 2004. And I will let him, I will interview him and he'll talk about his service. We're going to start with basically asking Jason why he joined the Peace Corps.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:00:44] That's a good question. I had a different childhood than probably many Peace Corps volunteers because I spent about half of it overseas since you had your career with USAID. So I was exposed to international living and different cultures from an early age. When I went to college, I studied international studies as well as political science. I studied abroad for a semester of my junior year, and all of those experiences left me with a feeling of continued curiosity and interest in international living and travel. So as I was nearing

graduation and trying to decide what to do next, I explored a number of options.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:01:52] Where did you graduate from?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:01:53] I graduated from Northwestern University in the year 2000. And I, many of the options that I was looking at were ones that would involve living overseas. So in addition to applying to the Peace Corps, I applied for a Fulbright grant and I was looking into other potential fellowships and stipends for international travel and living. And Peace Corps was the first to give me an offer.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:02:28] All right. At that point, did you speak any languages? Did you have any language skills?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:02:33] I spoke Portuguese from having lived in Brazil in high school and had taken Spanish at the college level, at the high school and college level, but had sort of deviated from that quickly my sophomore year when I decided to study abroad in Russia. So I had jumped from Spanish to Russian. And then spent my first semester of my junior year abroad in Moscow, continuing to learn Russian. So I think it's fair to say that by the time I graduated, I had a sort of confused mix of Portuguese, Spanish, and Russian, none of which I would have called necessarily fluent or close to fluent at that time.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:03:23] So Russian was not a place for a Peace Corps in those days?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:03:29] Russia was not. But there were a number of former Soviet republics that I think did have Peace Corps programs. I remember preferencing Latin America in my application. My time in Moscow was fascinating but was a bit of a lark and had more to do with the political events that were transpiring at that time and my interest in sort of living and experiencing that in real time. And I kind of came back pretty convinced that, um,

that that was not the region that I wanted to necessarily specialize in or return to anytime soon. So, yeah, I requested Latin America and I think I had probably at that point still more Spanish or better base of Spanish than Russian, even though I had been living there more recently.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:04:29] And what was the process for your application and what you heard from Peace Corps?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:04:34] Yeah, so it was a little bit strange. I applied and was accepted, as I recall it, before I graduated. But my initial assignment was to be a business development volunteer in Honduras. And I was, on the one hand, excited about that. I wanted to be in Latin America. I had just done my thesis, my political science honors thesis at Northwestern, on the relationship between indigenous rights and environmental activism in Latin America and some of the tensions between those different movements. And one of the case studies that I had used was around the Mosquito Coast of Honduras and Nicaragua. And so I, I was aware of that region and had read quite a bit about it.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:05:35] On the other hand, business development didn't sound like something that I was particularly cut out for or interested in. I think I knew enough from speaking to you and Mom about your Peace Corps experiences and other more recent RPCVs to know that the initial assignment isn't necessarily a fait accompli in terms of what volunteers ultimately do when they get in country.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:06:01] And just to, your mom was who?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:06:04] Sorry, my mom, Nancy Pielemeier, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia, and my father, John Pielemeier, who is interviewing me, was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Ivory Coast. So then I accepted the position. The departure date was, I believe, September of 2000, so

several months after my graduation. At some point after that, the Peace Corps followed up with me to say that they had not received the necessary medical documents, which I had had my doctors submit. So for whatever reason, they got sort of lost in transmission. And the Peace Corps indicated that I would need to provide them again, and that because of the mix up, I wouldn't be able to deploy on the original September deployment to Honduras as a business development volunteer.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:07:05] On the one hand, I was disappointed because I was eager to go, and the other hand I thought maybe I could use this as an opportunity to kind of throw the dice again and see if I might get a different assignment, which I did. I was, I can't remember if somebody advised me to do this or if I just sort of instinctively knew. But I reached out to the Peace Corps in the course of all of this and spoke to someone at headquarters who was herself a returned Peace Corps volunteer and sort of indicated that I was more interested in some of the other programs, including environmental programs, and would there potentially be deployments to Latin America in, for environmental programs, in the next deployment cycle, which was January of 2001. And she said, yes, there was, in fact, a group of environmental management volunteers that was being placed in Guatemala.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:08:02] But I didn't have the requisite Spanish to meet the conditions for that group. And so I kind of scratch my head. And I asked her, well, how much Spanish do you need? And she told me whatever it was. And I felt like I pretty clearly did meet that sort of intermediate level. And she said, well, you'll need to demonstrate it. So I think I ended up going to the Department of Agriculture here in Washington and taking a test in order to demonstrate that my Spanish was sufficient. And so with that, I did then get placed into that environmental management cohort deploying to Guatemala in January of 2001.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:08:43] All right. Were there any preparations that you did before you went or you just?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:08:52] So I had some time to kill because I had, I had not made plans. I had thought I would be leaving in September. So a friend of mine from Northwestern, Wyle Manasara, had taken a job in Boulder, Colorado, at a telecommunications firm and I'd been in touch with him and he had been crowing about how great his condo was and how beautiful the mountain front was out there. And so I eventually convinced him to let me sort of share his apartment and sleep in the loft of his apartment for a few months as I was waiting to deploy. And I took advantage of that time as well to study for and take the LSAT as well as the GRE, on the theory that I would probably want to apply to grad school when I returned from Peace Corps, but would likely do better on those standardized tests exams before going to another country and learning another language.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:09:58] And so I basically spent three months out in Boulder, preparing for those exams and also doing a lot of reading. I remember reading the Catholic Church report around the assassination of Bishop Gerardi and others and Rigoberta Menchú and other sort of accounts of the civil conflict in Guatemala. Some other historical sources that went even further back into the, you know, pre-colonization Mayan archeology and history of Mesoamerica. So it was, I think, in a way nice to have a little bit of time to prepare. And the more I read and learned about the country and the culture, the more excited I got about my deployment.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:10:48] Great. And when you were called to the training, where did you go?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:10:57] So the Peace Corps at that time was training through a third-party contractor, The School for International

Training, which had a training site in Milpas Altas, which was about halfway between Guatemala City and the old colonial capital of Antigua, Guatemala. It was a lovely campus. And so there were about 50 of us who arrived and, um, deployed across four different programs. All of us were staying with families in the nearby communities, and I think that had been a practice for some time. At the time, I think there were 50 volunteers arriving basically every quarter into Guatemala. It was one of, if not the largest Peace Corps countries in the world.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:11:53] And so the families we stayed with had hosted various volunteers before and quite accustomed to, you know, that experience. I remember staying with a lovely family with quite a few small children, which was useful because I was able to communicate better with them than with their parents. And, you know, spending the days at the Peace Corps training center, taking language classes, cultural adjustment classes, all kinds of different things, and also just getting to know the rest of my cohort, most of whom were like me, recent college graduates from all over the U.S.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:12:33] Were they all environmental management volunteers?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:12:35] No. About a quarter of us were environmental management. There was a healthy schools program. There was a municipal development program working with the municipalities. There was a small business program. Actually, I think the municipal development program was not our cycle. The other one that was in our cycle was appropriate technology. So those were the four programs that were being trained at the same time.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:13:05] And did you receive any training related to environmental management?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:13:10] Yes. So part of it was, um, kind of an introduction to what that was meant to be. There were, as I recall, sort of three components to the environmental management program. And obviously each volunteer would do more or less of each of them, depending on kind of where they were placed and what their host partner organization needed. One aspect that I was really excited about was the idea of eco-tourism or community-based tourism. Another was environmental education. So we did a lot of familiarization with curriculums for different levels of students and different concepts around environmental education. And the third was kind of waste management. So trying to work on waste management solutions at the very local level. So I think we got training across all three of those.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:14:09] We did a number of site visits. I remember going to a trash processing facility outside of Guatemala City. Particularly memorable from the olfactory perspective. We spent a week of our training in the site of our trainer. So the person who is the environmental management volunteer who was training us, who had completed his two year cycle, um, was, had been in a site in southern Guatemala called Volcan de Ipala, which was a volcano with a lake in the crater and a bit of forest around the edge of the volcano. The municipality and a local association were trying to develop into a tourist attraction and to conserve. It was an area that was otherwise quite barren and mostly cattle pastures. So it was a pretty isolated piece of forest.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:15:17] And that also happened to be the region, Ipala, that our Peace Corps director for the Environmental Management Program, a guy named Flavio Linares, was from. So he was closely connected to that, to that site and that project. I remember that at one point, Flavio let me know that he wanted me to replace Michael, our trainer, in that site. And I remember, on the one hand, of course, being honored that he wanted me to be there and knowing that that was an

acknowledgment that he thought I would do a good job. On the other hand, it was in a completely Latino, meaning non indigenous area. It was a pretty small piece of forest and a lot of work had already been done there. And so I wasn't terribly excited about that project. And I think I found a somewhat hopefully diplomatic way of letting him know that. Because ultimately I was able to kind of negotiate with him and with Michael in order to end up in a different site.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:16:28] How long was the training?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:16:30] Three months total.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:16:31] Was anyone deselected from your group?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:16:34] That's a good question. I don't think anybody was. I don't remember anybody being removed for behavioral issues, although there were behavioral issues, I'm sure. I think there were some people who may have been sort of held back due to language, not having demonstrated sufficient proficiency in Spanish. But I think those people were either given the option to go back or to sort of stick around for another training. Um, yeah, I think most people, I think, you know, were graduated out of training and sent to sites all across the country.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:17:12] Was there, were there physical requirements in your training and going to be selected?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:17:19] I don't recall that being something that was.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:17:23] Psychological tests?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:17:25] I think they were evaluating us for sure. I don't remember taking any kind of formal tests in that regard, but I think they were certainly trying to make sure that we were emotionally stable. And that as much as the process of moving to a new country and, you know, learning a new language and

immersing in a new culture was definitely going to be a challenge for all of us, that we had the tools we needed to be able to cope with that.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:17:56] And language, what were you learning? Was it just Spanish or was it also the local language?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:18:01] No, it was only Spanish. And I don't, I think this is different from country to country. But, you know, for us, we weren't informed of our ultimate sites where we would be deployed until really the end, I think the last couple of weeks of training. And therefore, those of us, myself included, who ended up being sent to sites where indigenous languages were prevalent really had no opportunity to begin studying those languages before we were deployed. Peace Corps did provide, I think, some resources for us to be able to pay for local language training, but it was really on us to find a suitable teacher and make those arrangements. And that was an easy thing to do.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:18:56] I do remember that I did take some Q'eqchi', Maya Q'eqchi' classes, from a professor in the nearby city of Coban. He was a teacher who had taught a number of other volunteers in the region. And it was mildly helpful. I think he was a kind of member of the academy, the Mayan academy, and, you know, had a strong kind of rooting in the language, the formal language. But there were very few pedagogical materials and books and other things available. You know, very little written material at all in Maya Q'eqchi'. So I ended up, after taking classes for maybe a couple of months there, which was a bit of a logistical challenge because it was several hours away by bus and really required a full day commitment to go in and get to class and come back. Ended up just paying a friend of mine, who ended up becoming a close collaborator, to give me a classes in Chisec, in my site, even though he wasn't trained as a teacher.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:20:07] So none of that really. In your training site originally, when were you informed about your assignment finally?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:20:19] Yeah, I think it was just a couple of weeks before we were done with the training.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:20:23] And how were you, how did you like what you were told?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:20:27] I was very excited. I, um, we had sort of, I think, ferreted out a good deal of information about the universe of sites that were available to us.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:20:36] How many environmental volunteers were there among them?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:20:39] I think there were probably a dozen of us. Yeah. And we, you know, I think all had sort of different preferences in terms of where we wanted to be. I don't remember anybody else being terribly excited about the site that I was most interested in, which was Chisec. It was, I think, one of the most, if not the most removed site in the sense that it was pretty isolated from where other volunteers would be. It was in one of the least developed areas of the country in terms of infrastructure and poverty levels and things like that.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:21:15] Mm hmm. So how were you told?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:21:20] I can't recall. I think we were just, you know, maybe called in one by one to have a conversation with Flavio and Michael, our trainer.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:21:31] Right. And you said, thank you very much. And when do I go?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:21:35] Yeah, I was excited.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:21:38] Did you guys have a party before you left or?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:21:40] I'm sure we had multiple parties. Yeah. I mean, I remember the day, um, different. The day we sort of ended, um, some. I think the idea was most people, the counterparts, the local counterparts for whom, you know, volunteers would be working, were meant to come and pick them up. So my counterparts from the municipality, the municipal government of Chisec, dutifully arrived, I think a bit late. A guy named Marcellino Cucu, I think was his last name, who was one of the sort of deputy mayors, who was very short Q'eqchi' indigenous guy with about three teeth and a sort of wizened smile, arrived together with a driver, one of the chauffeurs from the municipality, which is a I later learned kind of a prestigious kind of political kickback position.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:22:48] And, um, yeah. And so I hopped in the pickup truck and made small talk. They went back to Guatemala City to run a bunch of errands and pick up a bunch of supplies and things. And it was about an eight hour drive from there. So we didn't end up arriving into Chisec until quite late.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:23:09] Well, before we go on, had you met any other previous volunteers from Chisec?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:23:15] So I was the third volunteer placed in Chisec. As far as I understand, there had never been volunteers previously in Chisec because initially of its remoteness and accessibility and then later because it was one of the more violent areas during the civil conflict. It was one of the dozen municipalities that were identified as *zona paz*, peace zones, in the peace accords because of the level of violence that had occurred there, and therefore it was a target for certain development assistance, including the construction of a highway from the nearby city of Coban, that would go north through Chisec and some other northern distant municipalities up into the Petén, which was the department where Tikal and many of the

archeological and big Mayan Biosphere Reserve parks were located.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:24:20] And so the theory of putting an environmental management volunteer there was to help some of the local communities that were along that road and had natural resources or archeological sites that could be developed as tourist destinations, because this highway would potentially become a natural sort of tourist's transit route from Coban in Alta Verapaz to Tikal and surrounding attractions in the Petén.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:24:51] Had there been volunteers from other programs in Chisec?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:24:53] So the first volunteer to go, um, I think about a year before me, was a guy by the name of Kelly Kirschner who was in the municipal development program. And I later found out that basically the idea for an environmental management volunteer in working with the municipality was Kelly's idea.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:25:14] Oh.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:25:15] I mean, or something he suggested, and that the municipality ultimately agreed with him on. So Kelly had been there about a year. And then only I think maybe three months before I had gotten there, a woman named Shonda Ferguson had been placed as a agricultural, I can't remember exactly what the program was called, but she was vaccinating a lot of animals. That was essentially her job.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:25:41] Veterinary work.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:25:42] Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:25:44] Yeah. Interesting. So they were both at post at that point?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:25:49] Yeah. Kelly had been there some time and Shonda was relatively recently arrived.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:25:55] So as your municipal hosts drove you to Chisec, was there a place for you to stay?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:26:07] Yeah. So there, they were in the midst of building this highway, it was an Inter-American Development Bank financed highway. It was being constructed by an Israeli firm called Solel Boneh.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:26:19] Say it a little louder.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:26:21] Solel Boneh was the name of the Israeli construction firm. It was a very tricky highway, or at least there were a couple of parts that were quite steep. Coban, the municipal capital of the Department of Alta Verapaz, sits in the highlands in the cloud forests. And Chisec, although maybe only 100, 100 and some kilometers away, is probably 3,000 feet lower in altitude. Maybe that's, maybe that's more, uh, maybe that's exaggerated. But it's significant, significantly lower. It's basically in the rainforests. And there were some very sort of tricky curvy parts of the highway that remained quite dangerous even after, in fact, maybe even more dangerous after the highway was paved. So anyway, all of this work was being done and the construction phase had advanced such that many of the construction workers were in Chisec and had taken up essentially any and all of the available housing.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:27:27] Yeah.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:27:27] Chisec was a town of about 10,000 people. I would say probably 8,000 of them living in houses that did not have concrete floors. So dirt floors, thatch roof huts on top of that. And so there were very few kind of apartments available. So I, so Marcellino and the municipality had arranged a room for me

in the Catholic Church, which had a series of small little apartments with rooms with bathrooms, essentially. So that's where I stayed initially. The plan was for that to be temporary, but I ended up staying there for most of my tenure as a volunteer.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:28:11] So to help people understand where Chisec is, from Guatemala City how would you describe it?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:28:18] From Guatemala City? So Guatemala City sits roughly at the center of the country. And there's sort of, you have to take the highway going east towards the Atlantic Ocean for about three or four, three or four hours. And then turn off on a highway that goes north up to Coban, which is another three or 4 hours. So it's about, you know, I'd say, was then probably seven or eight hours from Guatemala City to Coban. Sometimes you could do that direct. Sometimes you had to transfer.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:28:55] By bus you mean?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:28:55] By bus, and then once you're in Coban you would take either a bus or a little minivan to Chisec. And that was

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:29:07] Further north?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:29:08] Further north. And that was probably two to three hours. Again, I mean, and in fact, when I first got there, because the construction was ongoing and the road hadn't been completed, it was, could be up to four hours.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:29:22] Wow.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:29:22] Well, so, yeah, quite, quite, quite challenging and especially hard to do if you didn't have a four wheel drive.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:29:29] Mm hmm. And if you kept going north from there, how long would it take you to get to some other place that people might know about?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:29:39] Yeah. I mean, there's not much north of Chisec. You would go kind of wind around north on the road that eventually was paved all the way to Flores, Petén, which is the kind of tourist, is the capital of the Department of Petén and kind of the tourist hub. That from Chisec now with the paved road is maybe four hours, three or four hours. But back then before the paved road would have been 5 to 8 hours. There's one sort of town about the size of Chisec in between, the town of Sayaxché, which was another kind of sort of sleepy municipal town center. And a lot of small what they call aldeas or villages along the way.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:30:35] So you're, you were greeted by the two volunteers who were already there or?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:30:40] I think eventually. I think we got in pretty late that first night. I think I remember meeting Kelly pretty soon after. Shonda was originally, I think, placed in a cooperative kind of agro-aquarian cooperative outside of the capital, so she, outside of Chisec, the municipal seat. So she wasn't living there full time initially. She later then did move into Chisec.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:31:10] And how did settling in go in terms of your living situation and your job?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:31:15] Yeah, so the living situation was, um, it was fine. There was water, I think 2 to 3 times a week. And so had to pretty quickly get used to, you know, not flushing the toilet very often and keeping buckets of water nearby.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:31:34] You had your own toilet?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:31:36] I did have my own toilet and shower. And those worked when there was water. Otherwise, you had sort of buckets of water that you could use. But you had to make sure you kept them full. You know, it's interesting, Chisec is a rain forest, so there's quite a bit of precipitation. But during the three month kind of dry season, water becomes quite precious because the topography, and this ended up becoming really fundamental, literally and figuratively to the work I did, the topography of Chisec is somewhat unique. It's this karst limestone topography where the ground is incredibly porous. And so water seeps down from the, from the ground level into aquifers that are quite deep and often inaccessible. So people needed to rely on rain catchment and other sort of ways to get access to water during the dry season in particular.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:32:40] Mm hmm. And how did the municipality greet you? Did they have a clear idea of what you were supposed to be doing?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:32:48] So they had identified a number of communities, well, a number of tourist attractions or sites that they thought could be developed into tourist attractions. There were essentially two initially, both relatively close to Chisec. One was the Lagunas de Sepalau. These were essentially cenotes, so natural kind of lakes that formed in the sort of basins between the karst tower formations, and other than in the dry season were sort of beautiful, placid, a series. There were three of them, lakes that you could swim in and sort of stare up at the, you know, beautiful white cliffs of these karst towers crowned with, you know, verdant tropical foliage. Very, just very beautiful, very peaceful.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:33:54] So those were located in a community called Sepalau, which was about maybe ten or 15 miles, or maybe 15, 20 kilometers from Chisec. There was a road, a non-paved road there. And then there was a series of caves that were

even closer, maybe a couple of miles north of Chisec called Jul Ik' which.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:34:27] Would you spell Jul Ik'?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:34:28] Jul Ik'. Jul, J-U-L, and then Ik', I-K, glottal I-K [also spelled Jul Iq'], which I think means wind hole. I can't remember exactly. And they were, um, caves that had been explored by a French spelunker who became very relevant to the story of my Peace Corps tenure, but had never really been developed. I mean, the local communities obviously knew about them and I think occasionally went into them to perform rituals. But, um, but they were, there were. There was one sort of very large cave entrance, sort of a sinkhole, and then a cave. And then there was a smaller cave that was a little bit harder to get into, but had a sort of carbon painting of a couple of monkeys that was prehistoric. And so those were kind of, that was another set of attractions.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:35:38] That was in an area that had been *parcelado*, which means it had been divided up into private parcels. There was a community there called B'omb'il Pek. B'omb'il Pek means Painted Rock. And that was the name because of the cave. But there were also private landowners who had put cattle pasture along the road. So it later, one of the challenges of developing that site became having to negotiate between the community, on the one hand, most of whom lived in Chisec, because it was so close, and the private landowners who controlled the access from the road. So those were the initial sites that had been kind of identified for me to work in.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:36:26] There was a third site that I had heard about and that was sort of potentially one that I could include in my portfolio, which was a bit further away, probably a 30 minute drive along what would eventually be the paved highway, which was the archeological site of Cancuén. Cancuén was the city at the sort of beginning of the navigable waters at the

base of the Mayan highlands. So from Cancuén, Cancuén was located on a bend in the Pasión River, the Río de la Pasión, which was navigable from there sort of north and west to the Usumacinta River, which is the river that forms the boundary between the Petén and Chiapas, Mexico. And on which there are a number of very large and famous Mayan archeological cities and sites. And eventually you can sort of navigate your way all the way to the Gulf of Mexico from there.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:37:37] So Cancuén was an important sort of trading center because a lot of the goods that came from the highlands, including obsidian and jade and quetzal feathers would come down and essentially get shipped out from Cancuén up to the Northern Kingdoms of the Mayan empire. That was a site that was being developed, had begun to be developed, I think, a couple of years before I arrived, by a team out of Vanderbilt University, by a famous and also infamous Mayan archeologist by the name of Arthur Demarest.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:38:14] How do you spell Demarest?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:38:16] Demarest, D-E-M-A-R-E-S-T.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:38:21] Did the municipality help introduce you to these communities? How did that start? How did you get started with them?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:38:27] Yeah. So, yes, I remember going out to Sepalau for the first time with Marcellino and him sort of describing who I was and what I was there to do and getting kind of a pretty stone faced reception from the community. So yeah, it wasn't clear that a lot of work had been done to kind of explain things until I arrived. You know, I didn't know a lot about the local political dynamics. But it was pretty clear that, you know, the mayor didn't necessarily hold a lot of sway outside of the capital, the town seat. You know, there were certainly, the municipality had the funds to build roads and schools and

things like that. And so people would come constantly into the municipal building where I worked out of, with their solicitudes, their handwritten, you know, requests for a school or highway or water tanks or whatever they needed.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:39:33] And then there was a complex process of political analysis that went into deciding which of those solicitations would get prioritized and funded and who would do the work and how much kickback the mayor and his council would get for that. So that was all, um, sort of stuff that I learned later. Um. So I met through Kelly, a guy named Ernesto See, who was a young man a couple of years younger than Kelly and I, who had grown up in Chisec. His father had been kind of a town drunk. But Ernesto and his siblings and his mother had sort of weathered that. And his father, I think, had eventually straightened himself out. And they, like many in Chisec, were evangelical Christians.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:40:34] Ernesto was one of the few in the town who had gone to at least a couple of years of university level schooling, you know, very much by his own bootstraps, paying his own way. You know, there was, you know, most kids in that area, I think, of his age, you know, didn't graduate high school. And even those who did never really thought about post-secondary education. But Ernesto was always just a very different kid and very smart. And he and Kelly had become fast friends. And Kelly sort of recommended me him to me as someone who could sort of help me engage with the communities. You know, on the one level, I necessarily needed someone to translate for me, because in each of these communities there were very few people who spoke Spanish. But also I needed a kind of cultural translator to sort of help me understand the reality of kind of the communities and what was realistic in terms of the kinds of projects I was proposing.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:41:40] I remember going back to Sepalau with Ernesto some number of months into my tenure and having the whole

community basically come eventually after we first arrived. And it was supposed to be a scheduled meeting and of course no one was there. I made the classic mistake of, as the first few people were arriving, offering to buy sodas for them. And then later having to buy sodas for essentially the entire village because it would be discriminatory of me not to. And having a long conversation translated by Ernesto well into the night which made for a harrowing motorcycle ride back, on the back of Ernesto's motorcycle on a very bumpy road. And, you know, basically talking through my spiel about, you know, the fact this highway is coming in and people like me would be coming from outside and would be really interested in seeing these beautiful lakes and, you know, would, the community could potentially benefit from that.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:42:48] And getting a lot of very difficult questions about why I was so interested in their lakes and the water and who exactly I was working for. And later on that harrowing bike ride home, I remember Ernesto telling me that, you know, we didn't necessarily narrowly escape, but were kind of in that sort of marginal space between being accepted by the community and potentially being lynched by them.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:43:24] Oh, really? That particular day?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:43:25] Yeah, um.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:43:26] Really.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:43:27] So that was, you know, that was a kind of a splash of.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:43:32] Lynched because you were seen as?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:43:34] These communities, as I later came to learn and appreciate, had been through an incredible amount of violence in the not so distant past. This was, you know, I was there in

2001 and the peace accords had been signed in 2004 [1994]. The last massacre of the civil war occurred in a community in Chisec in, uh, in 1993. So sorry, the peace accords were signed in 1994, yeah, and the last massacre in 1993. So, you know, these communities, these, the individuals in these communities, had themselves been uprooted. Many of them had family members who had died. I later found out that there were family members who had killed other people's family members within those communities or had ratted them out, you know, as guerilla sympathizers to the military or vice versa. So there were really, really complex, you know, social dynamics that I really just didn't fully understand, probably still don't fully understand.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:44:40] And the other thing I learned quickly and again became another one of the kind of foundational pieces of my experience in Guatemala was in Chisec, was that they didn't, despite having been on the land for some time, a number of generations, didn't have legal title to the land. That was something that all of the communities in the region were very sensitive to and were, you know, the first priority that they had was to get legal title to their land in order to ensure that they would not be displaced again, that their children could inherit the land from them. And so for someone from the outside to come in and all of a sudden start talking about all these resources that they had and how valuable they were and, you know, I think was, um, raised a lot of concerns.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:45:31] So you visited these three sites, one after another to start off or?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:45:41] I think I focused primarily on Sepalau and B'omb'il Pek Jul Ik', the caves. I did eventually get up to Cancuén when a gentleman by the name of Brian Ruder, who was the natural resource specialist at the USAID mission in Guatemala City, came up to pay a visit. He had gone up with Kelly before I had arrived, so Kelly had been up there once before. The

archeologists would only come for the three months of the dry season because it was very hard to work otherwise during the rainy season. So it must have been kind of in later in the summer of my first year that I first went up there and met Arthur Demarest and his team. And started to talk with them and some of the local communities about potentially doing some work on eco tourism around that site.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:46:41] And that that jibed very well with Arturo, Arthur Demarest, because he had developed a site further north near Sayaxché several years prior and had come back later after finishing that work to see it completely ransacked. And realized that the sort of cycle of archeological site development that was then, and still now, kind of typical, which involved training local community members to work in excavation and paying them good wages, relative to what was available locally for a number of years, created a level of dependency and expectation on revenue beyond what the communities could generate through their essentially subsistence agriculture. That once the archeological projects wound down and finished created incentives for those same community members to loot the sites.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:47:56] Oh my.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:47:56] Which they had conveniently been taught how to do. And so he didn't want to see that happen again in Cancuén. He saw sort of community led tourism as a potential way to provide for ongoing sustainable economic opportunity for those communities, and also to kind of help them generally value and protect the site. Recognizing that the state of Guatemala was not in a position to be able to protect the vast majority of the sites that were not major international tourist destinations. So that sort of came together well and we did, I did end up working in Cancuén. But before that and really as I was just beginning to get settled in Chisec and begin to reach

out to some of these nearby communities, I had another somewhat kind of startling experience.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:48:53] I was staying in this Catholic Church compound, and there were a number of workers for a NGO run out of the Salesian mission of the Catholic Church called Talitha Kumi that had a contract from USAID to do land tenure work with communities in Chisec. So to basically help the communities put together the paperwork they needed to apply for ownership of the land that they inhabited. And one night, some of these workers who would spend the night occasionally in the Catholic Church when they would be done too late to be able to go back to Carcha and Coban, the nearby cities where they lived, were having some beers and being quite loud in the hallway. And so I decided I'd go out and join them because I couldn't sleep.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:49:52] And so we were chatting and they asked me kind of what I was there to do, and I explained this whole concept of eco-tourism, and they started laughing and I sort of said, you know, why are you laughing? What? Why does that sound funny to you? And they said, well, you know, we just came back from these communities which are around these caves called the Cuevas de Candelaria, the Candelaria Caves, which happens to be the one existing tourist destination in this whole region. And there's a hotel there run by this French spelunker, a cave explorer, and they're going to lynch him. And I said, what do you mean they're going to lynch him? And they said, well, the communities want to get their land title. But we went to the capital and did the research and realized that there's a protected area that's been declared on top of them, and they didn't know that.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:50:55] And it turns out it was the French guy who had this, who lobbied for this protected area to be established. And we just informed them that basically they can't have their legal title because of this protected area, because of what this

Frenchman did. And so they're going to lynch him. And lynching is, you know, this is the second time I've mentioned it. I eventually later witnessed, unfortunately, a lynching in Guatemala.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:51:22] Really?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:51:22] In Chisec. I mean, it is unfortunately not an exaggerated concept. It's something that happens. You know, it has roots in kind of vigilante justice and the violence around the civil war and the conflict there. And then also sort of exacerbated by frustrations with the lack of any real criminal justice system operating at the state level. So I remember the next day going in and talking to Kelly and saying, you know, I think we've got a problem here because if these guys lynch the one hotel operator in our entire municipality, I'm going to have a devil of a time trying to get tourists to come to Chisec over the next couple of years. So we went in and I talked, I got an appointment with the mayor and Don Marcellino, the guy who had, deputy mayor, who was kind of my counterpart, told them what I had heard.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:52:20] And I think they were sort of generally aware of this French guy and some of the tension between him and the local communities. But they sort of were bemused but agreed to kind of convene a meeting. And so I managed to get the French guy and some representatives from these communities and the mayor. And eventually we got the Guatemalan Land Fund, which was in charge of land titling, Talita Kumi, this NGO that was working on land titling. There was a, CONTIERRA was an organization set up to deal with land conflicts in Guatemala because there were many of them. So we eventually set up a process of basically trying to mediate this dispute. And that led to a lot of work which ultimately resulted in the communities getting, for the first time ever in the history of Guatemala, exclusive rights to manage this, um,

patrimonial cultural, this cultural patrimony site that had been declared unbeknownst to them over their communities.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:53:24] And also we were able to, with the help of USAID, which was funding much of this land titling work, convince the Land Fund to give the communities legal title as long as they committed to creating conservation easements in the areas where the patrimonial, the cultural patrimony overlapped with their community polygons, *poligonos*. So that was a pretty complicated negotiation between the Guatemalan Land Fund, the Ministry of Culture, which was in charge of the site, the communities. The French guy ended up on the losing end of all of that and having been, he was kicked out of the community. He eventually bought a private piece of land further down. This was a 12 mile stretch of caves where the river ran in and out seven times. So he was still there and is still there to this day. And there's still a lot of tension between him and those communities. But I would say that being able to get that situation ironed out was one of my proudest accomplishments as a Peace Corps volunteer.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:54:28] Hmm.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:54:30] And that ended up adding a fourth sort of tourist destination to what I eventually ended up calling the *ruta de turismo comunitaria de Chisec*. So the community tourism route of Chisec, which included Sepalau, the caves of B'omb'il Pek Jul Ik' and the Candelaria caves. And then the archeological site of Cancuén.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [00:54:56] Jumping ahead a little bit, I had understood there was another issue related to the Frenchmen that affected or related to your relationship to him.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:55:08] Well, yeah. So he wasn't very happy with me. I mean, I think initially he saw me as sort of a useful idiot, you know, kind of this naive American Peace Corps volunteer who

came in and, you know, helped him basically get out of a jam by bringing attention to the fact that, you know, that he might get lynched. And because my job was to promote tourism, I think he initially saw me as being kind of on his side. So he worked hand in glove with a local man by the name of Sergio Serha. So Daniel Dreux was the name of the Frenchman and his partner, Sergio, who had been a boy when Daniel first came and was exploring the caves and had been kind of his guide and potentially his lover. I mean eventually, it's not clear. There were several credible accusations that I heard from the communities that Daniel molested young men, young boys in the community. So it would be somewhat surprising if Sergio, having worked with him for so many years, didn't have some sort of physical relationship with him.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:56:17] But putting all that aside, Daniel's business was basically to spend half the year in France drumming up support and kind of building clientele to come take these sort of all expenses paid trips to his caves where he would, you know, you would go through him essentially as a travel agent. He would fly you to Guatemala City, provide the transport to Candelaria. And then you would sleep in his very, very pretty rustic kind of mahogany eco lodge. And then he would have all kinds of activities, including going into the caves, and he would pay community members to wear these fake white Mayan smocks and put on fake Mayan rituals and kind of do all this song and dance for the tourists. So that was his business.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:57:13] And so eventually when he realized I was taking the side of the community and working against his interests, he started trying to get me kicked out of Guatemala, and he did that in two ways. First, there were a number of adjacent properties. So the caves were kind of along this river, which was literally going in and out of these karst hills on the. And then just north of the river was an oil pipeline and a highway, the major highway that was being paved. And then just north of that was a flat area that was, uh, had a number of large

fincas, large farms, cattle farms, that were owned, almost all of them, by former army generals and colonels who had helped clear that area of the guerrilla in the eighties and nineties, early nineties, and had essentially taken the best land for themselves after having done that and who were subsequently involved in narco trafficking.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:58:24] And that was kind of known generally, including to me. And so I knew some of these guys, including one who owned some of the land adjacent to Cancuén, which was closer to these caves around Candelaria. And so I eventually ended up hearing from this guy who I knew, who had become kind of a friend of Arthur Demarest's and a friend of this project, and was building a hotel in anticipation of this tourist gold rush and also, I think, as a useful money laundering vehicle. He kind of whispered in my ear one night, you know, hey, you know, you should know that this French guy is basically telling all the *fincaeros*, the big landowners, that you're organizing the *indígenas* to take all their land. And so I said, you know, that's funny. You know, that's not what I'm doing. I'm very specifically focused on this particular conflict around these particular caves.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [00:59:28] And he said, I know, I know, I know. But, you know, some of these other guys, they don't know you. They don't know what's going on. They're pretty conservative. And I said, well, I'd appreciate it if you could tell them that I don't have any beef with them. I'm not interested in sparking a revolution or a second, you know, internal conflict here in Guatemala. And he basically told me that he had my back and he would let it be known that I was not going to mess with their land and that they should not mess with me. So I thought I was in the clear. And then I subsequently got called down to the capital by Charlie Reilly, who was then the Peace Corps director and had been the Peace Corps director since I had been there. And thought it was kind of odd, had maybe a lingering suspicion that it was about this kind of stuff. And Charlie, sure

enough, wanted to know what was going on with these caves and these communities and I told him the story.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:00:31] And Charlie had been involved with the Maryknoll Catholic mission in Ixcán in the seventies during the heart of the civil war in Guatemala. And he was tough cookie. Lovely guy, had been a professor at Georgetown before becoming the Peace Corps director. And so he heard me out and he said, well, listen, here's what I'm hearing. We've got a lawyer that we've contracted to take some pretty high-profile cases forward to conviction around Peace Corps volunteers who have been raped. We really want to send a signal that, you know, if you mess with a Peace Corps volunteer, you will, you will be convicted. And we hired this kind of high profile but slimy lawyer, and it turns out he's also friends with Daniel and some of these Cámara de Turismo, you know, Chamber of Tourism kind of elites in Guatemala. And basically, they've started a whisper campaign that your life is in danger.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:01:41] And so the lawyer told me that and made sure he kind of did it in writing and put it on record. So I'm in a kind of a tough spot because if something were to happen to you after I was advised that you were being threatened, that would be on me. And I said, Charlie, I totally understand. You know, I get it. That's not necessarily surprising. But I can tell you, I feel very safe. I know the communities are looking out for me. You know, I've got some relationships with some of these powerful actors up there. And, you know, they've told me that, you know, that they're aware of this whisper campaign too. So, Charlie, much to my surprise, basically said, you know, there's an expression in Spanish, *el perro que ladra no muerde*, which means the dog that barks doesn't bite. And he said, look, I've been living and dealing with this kind of thing in Guatemala for long enough to know that if they wanted you killed, they would have killed you already.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:02:41] The fact that they're doing this whisper campaign is because they want to basically get rid of you without having to go that far. And I don't want to play their game. So as long as you promise me that you will be very careful and you check in with MINUGUA, which was the UN mission in Guatemala, the peace verification mission, which had an office in Coban. And have them do regular visits very visibly once every couple of weeks to come check in on you, to kind of send a signal that you're on the list of people who are being watched, then I'm comfortable sending you back to your site if you're comfortable going back there. So I did. I went back. You know, I don't know if I would have made that same decision if I was in Charlie's shoes. But I'm very grateful to him that he felt compelled to stick up for me and went back to work. And we ended up getting that situation resolved with the communities. Well, not fully resolved, but certainly advanced.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:03:50] Wow. Uh, anything further about that situation? You want to tie off that loose end?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:03:56] Well, just to say that, you know, now it's 2019. So 15 years later. And unfortunately, there continue to be issues between the Frenchman and his colleague Sergio in those communities. And we've recently had a member of that community who came up to the U.S. He and basically all of the male landowners from that community have been charged with an assault on Sergio Serha's wife, which is a fiction according to the community, but is an attempt essentially to get back at them for all of this messiness. And there have now been ten members of the community who have been arrested on these fabricated charges and held, some of them in detention for months because they're unable to pay bond and they don't have legal representation and they're extremely poor.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:05:01] And so the community members are quite frustrated. They don't have many economic opportunities. And

if they do go out of the communities searching for economic opportunities, Sergio has been very adept at hearing about that and then siccing the police on them. So this gentleman, Arturo, fled the community with his ten year old son. And was, turned himself in on the border. And because of the arrest warrant that was in the databases of the immigration authorities here in the U.S., he was separated from his son. And we've been working through our church here in Washington and through my former law firm in New York to have them now reunited and to process an asylum claim, based in part on this ongoing land dispute. So that's why I say the situation is not completely resolved, unfortunately, it continues to this day.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:05:58] Do you know whether the communities benefit at all from tourists going to the caves?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:06:03] So, yes, I mean. I don't know. I haven't sort of followed up and done any kind of analysis. But certainly they, they had the exclusive rights to manage tourism, continue to, under decree from the Guatemalan government, have that right. I don't know how many people will go and sort of how much income the community is able to generate through that. While I was still there, after the decree was issued, USAID provided a little bit of funding through Counterpart International to build some basic trails and like lodging for tourists who wanted to come in and stay with the community. They also basically USAID, Brian Ruder, the gentleman who I mentioned, bought into my *ruta de turismo comunitario* idea and initially had given me some seed money to do some small projects. Build trails, put some signs up, and then eventually wrapped that into a project with Counterpart where Counterpart came in and kind of more systematically worked on developing kind of this ecotourism in those four communities that I mentioned.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:07:17] Hmm. Fascinating. Do you want to talk about the other sites?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:07:27] Um, no. I mean, I think, uh. You know, one thing that's probably worth talking about that kind of became a side project that spun out of this Candelaria work that ended up becoming a whole other area of work, not really related to tourism, but more specifically to conservation and land management. When we faced this challenge with the communities having sort of their land title overlapping with this cultural patrimony, we had to figure out a way to reconcile that so the communities could have the legal tenure but without, while still protecting the caves. And so I think it was Brian Ruder who recommended that we reach out to a guy named Anthony Stocks, who was a professor of anthropology, who had worked in a protected area in Nicaragua with the indigenous Awas Tingni community there.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:08:33] To essentially have trained the community in GPS mapping so that they could map out their existing land use within this protected area which had similarly been declared on top of them without their prior informed consult or consideration. And they ended up developing this methodology that was part of this Inter-American Court sort of mandated settlement that the Nicaraguan government eventually acceded to, whereby the protected area remained, but the communities were allowed to remain within it as long as they continue to protect the area and kind of manage the land as they had been doing, as was represented in these maps that Anthony and his team had helped work with the communities to develop.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:09:25] And so he basically came in and used that same methodology with these communities to help them plot out how they were currently using land and develop kind of a land use plan that they could show to the government, which would demonstrate that they would continue to conserve the areas

that were above the caves and only use areas sort of adjacent and removed from that, uh, the river and the caves.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:09:54] So he physically came in with a team and?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:09:56] He physically came in. He brought this tall, lanky Afro-Caribbean guy from Nicaragua who had been one of his kind of partners there. And yeah, we basically taught the community members how to do this. And we bought, we had some money from USAID, and we bought an ArcGIS software and a plotter to be able to print these big land use maps. And we had meanwhile developed an NGO, Ernesto and some others in the community with advice and support from Kelly and I. And so that local NGO, APROBA-SANK, ended up becoming kind of the local implementing partner with Tony and ISU, Idaho State University. So once we piloted that in the Candelaria caves, at the same time as we were doing that, we started hearing from some communities in a different part of Chisec about these jaguars that kept killing their cattle.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:11:04] When you say communities, Chisec as the region or Chisec was just the town?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:11:08] Chisec is both the county seat and the municipality, a very large municipality. It has since been divided in two. So that kind of got us interested and curious. So we started looking, going to visit some of these communities and finding these jaguar tracks and realizing that if there were jaguars, that must mean that there was quite a bit more forest preserved than maybe anybody had really appreciated. Because jaguars require, you know, fairly large areas of continuous forest in order to be able to survive and breed. But the fact that they were killing cattle indicated that there was pressure on their, uh, on their, you know, their forest habitat. So we basically started a project, pitched a project and got USAID to fund a project to basically take that land use planning methodology and move it into this other region of

Chisec, a group of about 20 contiguous communities who were around a basically a small mountain range.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:12:19] And the kind of the way we structured it was to, if the communities were to do this land mapping and land use planning and create easements, then they would not have to pay. So the way the World Bank had come in and structured the Guatemalan land tenure system after the civil war was to essentially say, you need to generate revenue from the land. So you need to charge people for the land that they may already be on and using. And they recognized that there were different qualities in the land in Guatemala and perhaps different locations as a result. But only I think there was like four or five different basically levels at which the land was assessed, the values the land was assessed. And so in these areas, these kind of karst sort of rainforest areas where Chisec was, you know, it was one of the lower cost levels that the land was assessed at, but it was still astronomically unaffordable for the local communities who were essentially subsistence farmers.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:13:22] And so but the communities were nevertheless so committed to getting the land, to buying the land and owning the land and having that security of tenure, that they would pursue highly unsustainable vocations for the land in order to generate the little bit of revenue that they needed to be able to get the land, to buy it, to put the 10% deposit down and get that kind of ownership from the state. So we saw this kind of negative feedback loop that existed because of the law. And we spoke to USAID and we spoke to the Land Fund, and we said, look, basically you need to disrupt this. And the way you could do that is if you agree to give these communities a discount in exchange for the community easements. Then they won't have as much financial pressure once they've received the land to have to keep cutting down the forest and pushing agriculture into these very unsustainable sort of hillsides.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:14:23] And so, yeah, so we were able to convince them of that. And we got this project together. And we did this land mapping with 20 plus communities and created a conservation easement zone contiguous among these communities. In exchange, the communities were prioritized in terms of their land titling. They went to the top of the front of the line, so to speak, and they only had to pay a fraction of the price that they otherwise would have. So that was a win until we realized that once they had their title, they all of a sudden became very vulnerable to outside land speculators who wanted to buy the land from them.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:15:01] Just for a moment, we as Peace Corps volunteers, Counterpart was involved still and Idaho State was still involved?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:15:10] So Counterpart was only involved in the tourism stuff. So this was Idaho State as the USAID recipient working with APROBA-SANK, our local NGO, as the local employer.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:15:25] OK, yeah.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:15:26] So that. So, Anthony, Tony Stock, kind of helped us develop the proposal for that and get it approved. And he ended up coming and living in Chisec for about six months and then he left and then Kelly, who had finished his Peace Corps tenure by that point and had actually gone back to Sarasota, Florida, where he was from, agreed to come back and work for about six months as the country director because Anthony's sabbatical had finished and he had to go back to teaching in Pocatello. And then after Kelly's tenure ended, I ended up taking that project on for about six months after my Peace Corps tenure had finished. And so I ended up spending about three years in Guatemala, two and one half of which were Peace Corps between the three month training, the two

year deployment, and then three months of training the next batch of environmental management volunteers.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:16:23] I then spent six months still in Chisec but with my own pickup truck and liberation to be able to drive it, which was always something that was verboten as a Peace Corps volunteer. And upgraded from the Catholic Church for the last six months to a separate house. So that was kind of the capstone to my three years was doing that project.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:16:50] When you left, somebody else came on?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:16:55] Yeah. As a Peace Corps volunteer?

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:16:58] Yeah. Or whatever, what happened with the?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:17:00] Oh, with the land titling project?

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:17:01] With the jaguar protected area.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:17:04] Yeah, so when I left basically Ernesto, who was the president of APROBA-SANK, we had sort of trained him and a cohort of people, including in how to run the software, the mapping software and the printer and all that. They ended up continuing that project, uh, I think with some funding from the European Union. So USAID's funding at that point had run out. And they were more at that point we had gotten the titles essentially to the communities. And as I was beginning to allude to earlier, realized that in solving one problem, we had created another because the communities all of a sudden had the title and could therefore, um, *desmembrar* is the word in Spanish, and basically dismember the community. So the initial title is issued as a community title to all of the men in the community. And we began insisting that the women also had to be named on the community title.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:18:05] But but once they had that, it were essentially was essentially private property, communally owned. And so if they wanted to, they could pay for a land surveyor and a notary to come in and basically survey out individual parcels to and then basically break that out as a piece of private property and give a title to the individual family within that community. So if that happened and when that happened, then that individual could choose to sell without consulting with the rest of the community. And there were a lot of economic pressures to do so. So if your wife was sick and you needed medicine or you wanted to send your kids to school somewhere, you know, really the only way to get cash was to sell your land. And there were people who are willing to, at least for some of these communities that were more accessible closer to the highway, who were eager to pounce.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:19:06] And basically, we'll pay for your, you know, the land assessor and the notary to come do all this work and then we'll buy the land from you. But they bought it without necessarily being bought into this broader conservation project. So the second phase of work that SANK ended up continuing, and I ended up doing some consulting for them because I was still kind of doing some work with them after leaving Guatemala but before starting law school, was about how do we keep these communities together as a communal title and yet still be able to access credit markets, for example, on behalf of individuals, which was not an easy problem to solve because they needed to be able to put something up as collateral in order to be able to get credit from a bank. But they all they had was a communal title. And so we were looking into some of the legal mechanisms coming out of the peace accords which establish the concept of an indigenous community governance model essentially. And I don't think we ever fully cracked that nut, legally speaking, although I think SANK continues to work along those lines to this day.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:20:21] Didn't, um, didn't I hear at one point that a new president came in and gave title to the communities?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:20:30] The communities got title through the project. Yeah. It was under the same president, Alfonso Portillo, who was subsequently arrested and convicted of narco trafficking and murder, I think. Or at least murder, anyway.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:20:47] One of the several former presidents of Guatemala who are in jail.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:20:50] Yeah, exactly. It's a long tradition.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:20:55] Well, these are really intriguing and really valuable activities. Um, tell us a little bit more about SANK and how you got that going.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:21:08] So we started with a youth group called the Movimiento Juvenil de Chisec, or MOJUCHI, that sort of Ernesto and Kelly and I kind of set up to be a place to try and kind of build leadership among some of the sort of junior high, high school age students in Chisec. Many of whom I had gotten to know because I was doing some education in the schools as part of my environmental management project. Many of whom, of course, Ernesto knew just through the local connections. And so we had projects that we did with MOJUCHI. We got a Peace Corps grant to build a playground, for example, and for three months we would wake up super early every morning with these kids and go, you know, mix our own cement and create playground equipment.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:22:07] And yeah, and so basically that kind of together with the need for a local implementer for some of these projects that I was starting up around ecotourism, um, led to the development of this NGO. And so we, you know, went through all the legal process of associating under Guatemalan

law and creating bylaws and mission and all of that kind of stuff.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:22:34] Was there a board?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:22:35] Yeah, there was a board. None of us foreigners were on the board. We were kind of external advisors. There was another guy who kind of came into Chisec about halfway through my tenure there, a Frenchman by the name of Benoit Benito who had a lot of experience working in community development in Chisec, and he was with Veterinarians Without Borders, a French European NGO, and he was just a great guy who, um, I remember him kind of coming and nobody could figure out what he was doing. And he basically would come back and he'd come and stay for weeks at a time and kept coming back. And we were like, what is he doing? Is he ever going to do a project here? And he was basically just learning. And basically his model and maybe Veterinarians' model was not, we've got a project idea and we're going to come implement it in your community. It was we need to learn about this community and do a needs assessment and figure out what they want, what they need, what makes sense. And then we'll pitch that back and create a project around it.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:23:45] Hmm.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:23:46] And it just struck me as very thoughtful and a very sweet guy. And so he ended up becoming a partner for SANK. And as I said, I did some consulting with them after I left. And I think to this day, SANK may still be doing some work with Veterinarians Without Borders.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:24:05] Hmm. Interesting. Um. I do recall hearing something about unionizing the shoeshine boys.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:24:13] Yeah, so that was another little project. So that was really Kelley's initiative primarily. But we worked in this

municipal center that had been rebuilt, kind of white elephant project at some point, and stood kind of on a hill in the middle of the town in front of the park. And, you know, one of the few kind of big buildings in town separate from the church and the hospital. And so it was sort of a gathering, central gathering place. Um, these, I mentioned communities would come, you know, travel hours and hours with their smudged up handwritten solicitude asking for a road or a water well or whatever. And they would want to come in and see the mayor. But, you know, they'd come with their dusty boots and want to make sure they were looking their best before meeting with the *concejales* and the mayor.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:25:13] And so they would, there were these shoe shiners that were all little kids who would hang out and shine shoes and, you know, so they were often kind of bored and just hanging out. And so we would chat with them. And, you know, it was very notable that in a culture and community that was extremely conservative, these kids from a very young age had to learn to be very social, you know, kind of aggressive, to be able to convince people to procure their services and be sort of quick on their feet.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:25:47] Uh huh.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:25:49] And so they were quite bright, but they were also obviously not in school because they were there shining shoes. And so they were kind of the poorest of the poor from some of the poorest of the poor families.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:25:58] How old would they be, do you think?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:25:59] They were, you know, 5 to 12. Yeah, 6 to 12 maybe.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:26:06] Mm hmm.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:26:07] And yeah. So we. And they would often fight with each other and undercut each other. And basically Kelly came up with the idea of, look, why don't we unionize them and set a standard price higher than the price that they're currently charging. But in exchange from that, get a commitment from them to behave according to a certain code of conduct. So they're not fighting in front of a municipality and undercutting each other. And get a commitment from their parents to send them to school. And if they need help, then we'll raise some money. And so we did that. So they basically, the school, there was a morning school and an afternoon school, and they agreed basically half of them would work in the morning and go to school in the afternoon and the other half vice versa. And, you know, Kelly was able to convince the parents and get the mayor to sign on to these little badges that they were certified, you know, shoeshine union kids.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:27:00] And we ended up, again, this was another reason for forming SANK. Um, both through MOJUCHI at the high school level and then with the kids at the elementary school level, we wanted to help support kids can stay in school and support their costs. And so we started raising money from friends and family abroad and we kind of needed a vehicle through which to legally kind of, you know, have that money in a bank account and spend it. So yeah, so we did that. And it was really cool. We had, and we had a soccer team associated with the shoeshine kids, so they would play against another sort of group of local kids. And it was great. It was really. I mean, I give Kelly a ton of credit for that, it really was a great project. And hopefully those kids, I don't think that the, you know, shoeshine union still exists, but hopefully that group of kids that we worked with learned a bit about kind of teamwork and self esteem and importance of education through that project.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:28:07] And as I remember, some of this fundraising came our way and went for girls' scholarships mostly?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:28:13] Right. So at the high school level, we were particularly dismayed with how few girls were going to that sort of secondary education. So we kind of realized that it was primarily, um, it was partly cultural, but also an issue of means. A lot of the families didn't have the means to support even sending their kids to free school, which was free public school. But there was like fees associated with it and you had to buy a uniform and you needed supplies and it ended up adding up. So yeah, we created this scholarship program. We, on the Guatemalan side had set up SANK. On the U.S. side, wanted to be able to have a 501(c)3 vehicle through which to solicit tax deductible donations. So we ended up being connected, I'm not sure exactly how in retrospect, with an organization called Deep Roots, which was set up by some returned Peace Corps volunteers from Namibia and at the time was being run by a guy named Michael Graglia.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:29:19] And they had since created, they were originally set up to get donations for girls to go to school in Namibia and then a separate group in, um, in Zim-, and Zambia had kind of come to them and said, we've got a similar thing going. Could we kind of come under the umbrella? And they said yes. So at that point they had already kind of expanded to two countries, but both in Africa. And we said, hey, well, what about Guatemala? And we convinced them. And eventually Nepal also came under kind of Deep Roots. And I ended up after coming back, being the head of the board of Deep Roots and ultimately for several years and then ultimately dissolving it as it kind of lost our volunteer kind of momentum. But yeah, so we, we sponsored a whole cohort of girls to go through a high school sort of in conjunction with the elementary school shoeshine kids.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:30:17] Hmm. Amazing. You mentioned environmental education. Most of this was in the schools that you were doing that?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:30:26] Yeah. The local elementary schools in the town center.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:30:31] What would you do in terms of, just give an example perhaps?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:30:35] Yeah. So I would come in and it was probably like fourth, fifth grade that I would teach to that. So I sort of worked it out with the guy who was in charge of the local schools and I would get like one hour a week in each of the schools and come in. And I had a bunch of like interactive games and things that were part of these curriculum that the Peace Corps had shared with us. And it was very basic stuff about kind of taking care of water and, you know, trash, you know, how to deal with trash and the importance of protecting trees and animals. I think what was most impactful, both for me and for the students, was less what I was teaching, but how I was teaching.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:31:32] Because, you know, these kids were basically being taught in a very kind of traditional rote style where the teacher would say something, they would repeat it. They were never being asked to open ended questions. They were never being asked to think for themselves. And that's essentially what I did. So I would typically kind of I developed this technique where I would start my classes. The very first class, I would come in, I would introduce myself and say, you know, I'm Jason, I'm a Peace Corps volunteer. I'm from the United States. I'm here, I'm going to be teaching every Tuesday at this time for whatever, for the semester. Do you have any questions? And then this painful period of silence and giggles would drag on. And I kept saying, you know, you must have questions. I am this very strange person who just walked into your classroom, like, I'm sure you have a million questions. I need you to ask a question. And then eventually somebody would raise their

hand and ask a question, and then they would all get interested and ask questions.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:32:32] And you know, that was kind of me signaling to them that this was going to be a different kind of class and that really I wanted them to be participating. I wanted them to be inquisitive. And so, yeah, and that was. It was always, it was always a chore because I had a lot going on with these other projects and I felt like this wasn't my main priority and I'd have to sort of put the lesson plans together the night before. And, you know, develop, prepare my materials or whatever. But I always came out of it rewarded and, you know, feeling like it was a really meaningful thing to do.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:33:11] Yeah. Interesting. Um, Kelly. Did you do anything with Shonda while she was there?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:33:21] So Shonda definitely was involved. She was very involved with MOJUCHI. So as I said, she eventually moved in. She was kind of initially living out at this kind of cooperative, which was a little bit outside of Chisec, and eventually because that was pretty remote, eventually moved into Chisec. And as the road got better, it got easier for her to kind of commute. So she was very involved with MOJUCHI, with the youth club. She was involved with SANK as well, but she wasn't working in the municipality like Kelly and I were. So we weren't working with her on this sort of day to day basis. And then eventually when Kelly left, he was replaced by another municipal development volunteer, a woman named Amy Olson. And Amy.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:34:08] What was the first name?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:34:09] Amy.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:34:11] A-N-D-I-E?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:34:11] Amy. A-M-Y.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:34:11] Amy Olson.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:34:14] Yep, who also kind of became involved in a number of these projects. And then of course, Kelly came back to run the Idaho State Project. So we had kind of a big group after a while. And then when I left, I trained the group of incoming PCVs, environmental management PCVs, as I departed. And then one of them became my replacement in Chisec, which was great. And then we actually had a second environmental management volunteer who we put in a nearby community to work with some of these communities that were getting land title. So there ended up being quite a few Peace Corps volunteers in the region.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:35:06] And one of the volunteers who later came in, uh, was a woman by the name of Megan Ybarra, who ended up coming back to the region to do her PhD fieldwork in anthropology around land conflicts, including studying the Candelaria conflict. And she's the one who sort of looped me back into the situation with Arturo and the ongoing conflict there. And she's now a professor of sociology at University of Washington in Seattle.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:35:42] Oh my. Have you read her dissertation?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:35:43] I did read a version of it, I believe, back in the day because, yeah, she had, she had interviewed me for it and had said it's a. It became part of a broader book that she has since published.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:35:58] Ah. Uh huh.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:36:00] Yeah. There's a number of folks who I met through that period of time who are still involved in the region. Another guy, Brent Woodfield [Woodfill], was one of the archeologists

working with Vanderbilt around Cancuén, specializing in cave archeology, who's now a professor at Woodford [Winthrop] University in North [South] Carolina. So yeah, there continue to be a number of folks from that period who are still engaged in such.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:36:26] Uh huh. Interesting. Very interesting. Anything further about any of the other volunteers in the area? Did you have much contact with any other volunteers or were you pretty much in your own little world there?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:36:41] No, there weren't a lot of volunteers, yeah, other than the ones I mentioned. But Coban, which was the nearest city, which was initially three or 4 hours, but eventually as close as an hour and a half once the road was paved away, had a number of volunteers in it. And then Coban had a number of other small cities that were kind of satellited around it, San Juan Chamelco, Carchá. And then a number of other sites like Chisec that were within a couple of hours. And so it became kind of the hub. It was sort of the hub for Peace Corps volunteers coming in to do language classes or various other shopping and other things that you couldn't do in your sites. So there were a group of volunteers who lived in Coban who were kind of the go-to people you would go stay with when you were in Coban and hang out with. So I did get to know quite a number of the volunteers in Alta Verapaz, in that department over the time.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:37:43] But but not, you know, it was pretty episodic and kind of coincidental when we would necessarily be there at the same time. And I would go into Antigua, you know, once every few months, maybe once a quarter. Guatemala City itself didn't have much to offer, but we'd have to go into Guatemala City because that's where the Peace Corps office was. It's since been moved out of but.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:38:09] Moved to where?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:38:11] It moved to Antigua, I think, or maybe Milpas Altas, I'm not sure. But in any event, it's, you wouldn't want to spend much time in Guatemala City if you didn't have to. So we would all go to Antigua and hang out there and go out to the bars and stuff. So, you know, I, I wasn't totally disconnected from my cohort and from other volunteers, but I was probably more removed than most.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:38:37] Uh huh. Yeah. When you were about to leave you, they asked you to work on the training program for the next group.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:38:51] Mm hmm.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:38:51] Did you, did you leave and go back to the States and then come back to Guatemala? Did you just stay around? How did that work?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:38:57] Yeah, I think I stayed. I did go back to the States at one point because I had to. I remember I had to go to Pocatello, Idaho, to kind of get all my HR paperwork done. I remember also that that visit also served for Tony to try and convince me to become a, you know, to apply to become a PhD student in cultural anthropology there which I, you know, was, there were some things that were attractive about that. But ultimately, I didn't think I had the attention span for doctoral work. So I ended up applying to law school from Chisec. And you know, and then ended up going after I, after I got back but.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:39:44] Did you do the LSAT again?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:39:48] So no. Well, I had studied for the LSAT in while I was living in Boulder before deploying. I had then had kind of a mishap of an LSAT exam that I took in Colorado, which I, at the time you could either, you had three days and you could

cancel it and it would never get scored. Or you would get the score and you would have to then average it with whatever subsequent score if you took the test again. And I basically forgot to fill out an entire section of the bubble sheet, so I canceled that score. But I was fortunate because the School for International Training, which did the Peace Corps training in Guatemala, was certified as a proctor for the LSAT as an organization. So I was able to then do the LSAT from Milpas Altas at the end of my training period.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:40:39] But it was funny because I, I totally forgot about it. You know, I had the focus of my life for three months studying for this test, and then I screwed it up. And then I went to Guatemala and I totally forgot about it. And then one day, like a Friday, one of the trainers was like, hey, I think we're supposed to do this exam tomorrow. And I said, Oh my gosh. I totally forgot about it. So I went home that night and I had brought an LSAT book with me.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:41:04] Oh my god.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:41:05] And, you know.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:41:06] Now you're three years later.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:41:08] I mean, no, this was still at the beginning. So this was only several months later, but, you know, flipped through it and took some quizzes or whatever and then went in the next day. And I took the exam in this very beautiful, you know, by myself in this room and this beautiful campus. I remember feeling kind of serene and kind of feeling a little bit like, you know what? It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter how I do on this test. This is so irrelevant to my life right now. And of course, I scored better on that exam than I did on any practice exam. And I give a lot of credit to the sort of state of mind that I was in as a result. And so, yeah.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:41:43] Wow. Anything, what'd you do on vacations? Did you take vacations?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:41:49] Yeah. So I remember coming back stateside a few times. I remember you guys coming down a few times.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:42:00] Once.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:42:01] Was it just once?

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:42:02] Mm hmm.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:42:02] Kit came down. I had a number of visitors. So you guys came down. It was Christmas, I think.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:42:09] Christmas, yep.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:42:09] One year. And then we went up to.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:42:12] Killed the turkeys.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:42:12] Tikal. We killed some chickens, I think, and then went up to Tikal and then went over to Belize. That was a nice trip. And then Kate had come down separately.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:42:22] Sister Kate.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:42:23] My sister, who had just graduated from college herself and came down to take some language classes and we traveled a bit. My cousin Rick came down at one point. A number of friends, my friend Byron Carr came down and happened to be there during 9/11, so was stuck there for a little bit. Um. Yeah. So we had a number of visitors, a group from Northwestern actually. Byron, who had been two years younger than me at Northwestern, had such a kind of impactful experience that he went back and helped recruit a

group from Northwestern that came down and worked with me and with SANK as kind of a mission trip, so that was great.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:43:07] We had another person who was from Northwestern who ended up coming down to work with us for a little while, a guy named Jeff Seelbach, who was a radio television film student, and he came to help us because we were trying to create a local community television station. This was another sort of side project of ours and we had gotten a grant from Apple and gotten some equipment. And he helped us kind of get it set up and train kids in how to video and edit and stuff like that.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:43:44] And that really worked for a while.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:43:45] It worked for a little while. So yeah, there were a number of outside visitors who came in and I would, you know, if I needed a break, I could always go to Coban or go into Antigua. So I don't, I don't remember feeling too isolated, even though I was physically somewhat isolated.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:44:03] How was your health during all this period?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:44:06] I was probably at my most physically fit in terms of, you know, I was living in a rainforest. It was hotter. It was very hot. I didn't do a ton of physical manual labor because I was working in the municipality. But between playing soccer in the evenings, the little pickup games and projects like this playground project or the trail building projects that we would have that I always wanted to not just supervise but be there and actually help work on. I got a lot of exercise. The only hiccups were dengue fever, which I got twice, I believe, although in neither case were they able to confirm it through blood tests. But that's fairly typical with dengue. The second time was the most serious. And I was fortunate because I had actually traveled into Guatemala City before the fever manifested.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:45:04] I was actually there to pick up Jeff Seelbach, who I just mentioned. And I was staying with Brian Ruder, my USAID friend. And I woke up that morning just feeling terrible and I had a really high fever and I was vomiting and diarrhea. So Brian helped me get to the local private hospital, which is where the Peace Corps volunteers would go. And fortunately, I think, picked up Jeff and kind of gave him a place to sleep for a couple of nights while I was in the hospital. But I was there with a 104 degree fever for, I think I was in the hospital for three days, maybe four.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:45:40] In Guatemala City?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:45:41] In Guatemala City.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:45:42] Was it a private hospital, government hospital?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:45:44] Private hospital. It was a fairly nice hospital. I remember being pretty well taken care of, but the doctors were convinced that because I was a Peace Corps volunteer who had come in with essentially runny stools and vomit, that I had some kind of bacterial infection, stomach bug. And I kept telling them, look, I've been here for whatever, a year and a half, I've never gotten a stomach bug. I grew up in Africa. I have a stomach of steel. And I'm coming from the highlands and everybody in my community has been getting sick with this mysterious fever. So I'm coming from the rainforest. So Guatemala City is in the highlands. And the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which is the vector for dengue, doesn't survive in Guatemala City and in the highlands. So they weren't thinking dengue. That wasn't something that really crossed their mind.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:46:43] I wasn't thinking dengue either, because I didn't really know what that was. But I knew there was some sort of mosquito borne virus that was kind of going around the community. So they tested me for everything. They put me on

Cipro, very strong antibiotics, which I insisted on having them take me off of, even in my feverish semi hallucinogenic state. And eventually the fever broke and got this really awesome rash all over my body as the fever kind of came out through my pores. And I remember getting released from the hospital and actually feeling more sort of confused and dizzy upon release because my body had essentially gotten used to this very high fever state. So my temperature was back to normal, but I felt anything but normal. And I got back. I got in a taxi. I got to the Peace Corps office.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:47:39] And I had several months prior brought in my bicycle for some repairs. So my bicycle was there and I thought, oh, you know what? I'll just hop on my bicycle. And I was going to try and get a taxi, but there were no taxis, had room for the bicycle in their trunk. And so I said, you know what, I'm just going to bike to Brian's house, which is something I never would have done in a sober state of mind, try and bike through Guatemala City. And I must have been so erratic because I got pulled over by the police in Brian's neighborhood for apparently, you know, biking while intoxicated. And they eventually delivered me to Brian's door. And within a few hours, I think my body readjusted to being at a normal temperature. But it was a pretty kind of hallucinogenic experience. Yeah. So that was it really. The, you know, I really, I did pretty well in terms of stomach bugs and other kinds of bacteria, but the dengue virus got me a couple of times.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:48:43] What was the other kind of serious? It was the first.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:48:45] The other time, I was also in Guatemala City. Fortunately, I didn't have to be hospitalized but had sort of similar symptoms. It wasn't quite as bad. But it was very familiar when it happened the second time.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:49:03] Hmm. Well, no other major health problems?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:49:09] No, no other major health problems. I mean, somewhat miraculous for the kind of amount of caves that I was stuffing myself into and kind of cliffs that we were scrambling down. I never had any kind of major physical, you know, I didn't break any bones or twisted ankles or anything like that.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:49:30] And nothing has popped up since you left Guatemala and resulting from Guatemala?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:49:34] No, I don't think so. You know, and I know Kelly actually has since had malaria, which he never knew he had in Guatemala. He got it and probably just dismissed it as a fever of some sort and, you know, kind of sweated it out. And then, you know, eventually after coming back to Sarasota, got very, very sick and fortunately thought to tell the doctors that he had lived for a while in a malarial area. And they diagnosed it as malaria.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:50:05] Mm hmm. You mentioned 9/11. It would just be interesting. How did you learn about 9/11?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:50:14] Yeah, so I was mentioning my friend Byron Carr was visiting at that time and September 11th happens to be my birthday. So that morning at about 5:00 in the morning, he, Byron, was staying with me in my little Catholic Church room. He and I were both literally kind of jumped out of bed at the sound of fireworks, sort of cascading in the narrow hallway outside of my door. Because the youth group, the MOJUCHI youth group kids had come to serenade me, which is a kind of customary thing to do on your birthday. So we awoke to a start. And then went out and, you know, had a little had some cake with the kids and then kind of went back to sleep or at least to bed for a little bit. And then I remember, you know, it was probably 8:00 in the morning or so, we were kind of making our way up from my, from the church to the municipal

building. And somebody sort of came up and said, did you hear all the buildings are falling?

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:51:27] Some Guatemalan friends?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:51:29] Guatemalan, yeah, friend or somebody said, you know, in America, all the buildings are falling. And I said, I wonder if there was an earthquake or something. So we made our way up and Kelly was already there, I think, in the municipality and kind of filled us in with whatever he knew. And we had satellite TV at that point in Chisec. And so I remember pretty soon going to one of the little *cómodos*, little eatery places, and just watching this coverage in Spanish on the news. But Kelly's brother at the time was working at the Pentagon, so Kelly was pretty, pretty concerned and was trying to call out to the Peace Corps headquarters to figure out if they had heard anything from his family. But the mayor, this happened quite frequently, had failed to pay the bills for the satellite phone in the municipal building.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:52:30] And so, and that was the only, there were no fixed lines at that point at that time at least, no cell phone service. That did come in later. And so he was having a hard time. He wasn't able to call out. There was a private satellite phone thing that you could pay for and dial out. But, you know, it's a rainforest. If there's a lot of cloud cover, the satellite doesn't necessarily go through. So anyway, he did eventually, he was eventually able to, I think, connect with the Peace Corps and find out that fortunately his brother was okay. But I remember that being a big cause of concern. I knew that a friend of mine from high school, Tommy Rollins, was working at the World Trade Center at the time.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:53:11] Oh my goodness.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:53:12] So I was very concerned to hear about him. And, you know, just in general, just all totally in shock. And yeah, it

took a few days. Byron and I ended up going to Antigua. His flight back was canceled because I think all international travel was canceled for a number of days. So I sort of stayed with him and we just sort of sat in front of the TVs in the bars and hostels in Antigua and tried to try to understand that just like everyone else, you know, what had happened and what was going to happen. But I do remember pretty soon thereafter, after Byron left, having to go back to my site and kind of just go back to work. And, you know, people were very sympathetic and everybody wanted to know if my family was okay. But, you know, once they figured out that I was okay and my loved ones were okay, you know, we went back to the normal causes of concern and projects that we had going. And it just didn't have that same lasting impact for me or for the people around me that I think people were living here in the U.S. went through.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:54:20] Most of your contacts. You had a phone that you could use every once in a while, the city, in the town, as I recall. But most of your communication back with the States was letters or what? How were you communicating?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:54:34] Yeah. So there was. So I think initially it was I would go into Coban once a week for my language classes or whatever and I would just do my email at an internet cafe while I was there.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:54:49] They had an internet cafe there?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:54:51] Yeah, there there was. And there were these one or two private satellite phones, basically entrepreneurs in Chisec who you could pay however many *quetzales* per minute and make calls. I don't know that we made international calls. I remember using that to talk to some other Peace Corps volunteers within the country. But eventually sort of towards the middle of my time there, USAID actually funded the installation of a satellite internet cafe that became kind of a.

You could go there and pay per hour to log on. And the connection was pretty spotty because if it was cloudy, you didn't get signal. And even if it was clear, it was still satellite upload speeds, which were pretty slow. And I remember being very frustrated, completing my law school application from there because it would constantly fail to upload and then delete.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:55:54] Oh my gosh.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:55:54] And I'd have to rewrite it all and just spend hours and hours at one point doing that. And then towards the end of my time, cell phone towers came in. And so you could do these prepaid cell phone plans. And so I had a cheap, so I think I had a cell phone pretty much from when I got there because I, you know, in the training center, we had cell signal there. And even when I would go to Coban, I would have a cell signal and I could get calls for free, including international calls. Making calls, of course, you had to pay for the minutes and then if it was international, you'd have to pay above and beyond that.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:56:35] And who knew you were going to get a call?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:56:38] So I think we'd have to coordinate it, you know, like at a certain time or I would call and say, call me back kind of thing. I don't remember spending a lot of time on the phone with folks back here, including you guys. And, you know, eventually once I, once there was cell signal in Chisec and I basically had a phone on me at all times, I think it was easier. People could just call. And I would generally, if I was in that area where there was reception, I could answer. But yeah, a lot of it was email communication I think. I probably did do a few handwritten letters, but not, not too many. I had a computer. I remember bringing my own computer with me and bringing some, uh, CDs and stuff. So I had music and books. I

read a lot, you know, in the evenings and had a lot of spare time.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:57:36] But but less and less, I mean, by the, you know, as things moved on, I became really busy with a lot of these projects. And so I think I sort of did less reading and less kind of journaling and kind of twiddling my thumbs towards the latter half of my time there.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:57:56] You still have journals?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:57:58] Unfortunately, um, I think I may have one, but I know one of the journals that I had was damaged, some sort of water damage. Yeah, I have to check. I think I may still have some journals, but I wasn't very ritualistic about keeping journals, I have to say.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [01:58:21] Well, I think we've covered a great deal of territory. Is there anything else that you think we've missed?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:58:30] Um, you know, there were some pretty funny stories. Maybe I'll just tell one, because I think it illustrates a little bit of the kind of Gods Must Be Crazy nature of kind of where I was. And, you know, it was sort of amazing because, as I said, by the end, you know, we had cell phones, we had internet, the highway had been completed. Everything seemed very connected. But at the beginning it really was quite remote. And even with those connections later on, it still in many ways was quite remote. So the one story I'll tell that kind of illustrates that and also maybe foreshadows some of the challenges that I think Chisec has had to go through since I left. So I was there in the early 2000s, and that was around the time that the, um, PAN, P-A-N, political party in Mexico had finally displaced the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, the PRI, which had been there forever.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [01:59:32] And when they did that, they sort of severed the existing kind of, look, you know, kind of the existing relationship between the narcos in Mexico and the government, whereby the narcos kind of would be able to do their thing and the government would look the other way. And so the Mexican Air Force started patrolling Mexican airspace for the first time. And as a result, the drug shipments were starting to come into northern Guatemala instead. And in particular, there were areas of northern Guatemala where the military had built landing strips during the civil conflict. And a number of those landing strips were on these fincas, these cattle farms, that had been subsequently taken over by these former military guys. And so we would see these prop planes come in and then a few hours later, you would see big plumes of smoke coming up.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:00:41] And what I eventually realized, because I eventually went and saw one of these things, was that the planes would come in, land, unload the cocaine into these SUVs that would then drive it up across the border. And they would just torch the plane.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:00:58] Really?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:00:58] Because it was essentially easier than having to fly it back and take the risk of flying it back to Colombia or Bolivia or wherever they were coming from. And because there was just that much money involved that they could basically one time use.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:01:12] How would they get out?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:01:13] They would, I don't know. I mean, they would, they would drive the drugs across the border into Mexico. So one day, um, we were. This was sort of towards the second half of my tenure, and Anthony Stocks, Tony, was there and had been there for a few months and was there with his girlfriend,

Penny, who was a number of years younger than him. And they had decided they wanted to get married in the local municipality. So they had sort of signed the civil registry and we planned a big party for them. And Tony had done some shopping in Guatemala City on his way up, and including among his shopping was a bunch of fireworks that he had bought. So we all sort of stayed up that night having a nice dinner and party and drinking. And at some point decided we should set off these fireworks.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:02:12] So despite the fact that it was late in the middle of the night, we went outside and set off these fireworks and made a lot of noise and commotion and eventually kind of stumbled home to bed. And then the next morning, um. So unbeknownst to us, that same day, a prop plane had been flying over Chisec with barrels full of cocaine. And I don't know if the Guatemalan military pursued it or what happened, but instead of landing, they dumped the cocaine off the plane. And in these big sacks, 100 pound sacks. And there were some farmers in this rural village who were planting their corn and saw these sacks fall from the plane and didn't, were curious, and didn't know what it was and went over. And they found these sacks.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:03:08] And they figured, we don't know what this is, but we've got to do something about it. It fell off these airplanes. So they hired a truck and they loaded the sacks on and they brought the sacks into Chisec to the police station, and they essentially turned over several dozen tons of cocaine. And so, again, this was all unbeknownst to us, but apparently rumors had started to immediately flitter around town that all of this, all of these drugs were in the possession of our tiny little local police station, which sometimes didn't even have any policemen in it. And so when I woke up the next morning, the local gossip, who was the guy who ran the erstwhile cable network, was riding around on his bicycle. And he saw me and

he said, Don Jason, Don Jason! Did you hear what happened last night?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:04:06] And I was kind of, you know, still a little hung over and foggy. And I was like, what happened last night? I was, I was like up all night. What are you talking about? He's like, the narcos came! The narcos came for their drugs. And I was like, what do you mean the narcos came for drugs? He's like, there were some drugs that fell off an airplane and the community brought them and these guys brought them in. And last night the narcos came in and didn't you hear all the shooting, the machine guns? And I started to kind of piece things together, and I realized that we had been the narcos. And that everybody had gotten their old rusty rifles out to, you know, protect against the narcos who they thought had come for their drugs, which was not an unreasonable thing to expect to happen necessarily. Apparently, the drugs had been, you know, they had ended up calling somebody to come and take them away, you know, earlier that evening.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:04:59] Somebody appropriate?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:05:01] Hopefully. Yeah, the police from Coban, who probably then gave it back to the narcos so they didn't have to come looking for it. But, but that was kind of funny. But, but also serious sort of story, just about how, you know, distantly removed from the drug trade these local communities were, but yet it was flying right over them and sometimes falling on top of them. And was influencing these, for example, these military finca owners where they were getting, according to one of my sources, \$25,000 a pop for each plan that they would land on their, on their runways. So it was big money.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:05:45] Right. I have a question here. It says, overall, how do you assess your service in light of the three goals, three goals of the Peace Corps. To provide technical assistance where requested, to promote better understanding of

Americans, to promote better understanding of other people by Americans.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:06:04] Yeah. I mean, I think it was very successful according to those goals. And others that I would add to it. But certainly on the technical assistance front. I didn't have a lot of technical knowledge to share, but I think just kind of bringing a sense of, um, you know, community. The sort of bringing in as an outsider and demonstrating to these communities a sense that they, as a community, should be empowered, should feel empowered, should be organized. I think was really helpful. I think they. That was something that sort of was also being reinforced under Guatemalan law. They were supposed to be sort of community councils and, you know, and everything was supposed to be organized like that.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:07:03] But because of the generations of discrimination and the factionalism and the impact of the conflict, that wasn't easy. And I think in a way, having an outsider who was eventually deemed sort of benevolent enough and not, you know, kind of not self-interested, to kind of give them a push towards organizing. We organized these community associations. And I think, you know, regardless of sort of where the, how much the ecotourism concept has ultimately benefited the communities, I think, I hope that that sort of encouragement to sort of organize themselves, to think of themselves as self-sufficient, to think of themselves as the owners of these natural and historical places, hopefully was empowering.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:08:04] On the promoting better understanding of Americans. I think, yeah, between myself and bringing a lot of visitors, including you guys and colleagues from Northwestern and others, I think we had, you know, a number of kind of funny cultural exchanges with the community. I mean, this is a community that when Kelly arrived a year before I came, literally as he would walk down the streets, parents would pull

their kids in from playing in front of their houses and hide them.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:08:39] Oh my.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:08:40] Because they were so afraid, you know, Kelly was there to steal their babies and there were all these rumors.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:08:45] Wow.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:08:45] And so I give Kelly a tremendous amount of credit for breaking down a lot of those barriers to the point that when I got there, that was not the primary reaction. There was still some of that. And especially as I worked in the smaller villages outside of the municipal area, there were definitely people who were very wary of me. But I think we were able to kind of demonstrate that, you know, foreigners were not always there to steal or to foment problems or create challenges, but which was very much, I think, the prevailing understanding to the extent that there was one before we got there.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:09:27] And then on the providing better understanding of other people by Americans, I think both between the scholarship fundraising that we did through SANK and Deep Roots. We would constantly send newsletters out and we had a website and then all of the people that I was able to get to come to Chisec and visit, you know, again, between the Northwestern group and the friends and family and various people that came. I think I was able to really open some people's eyes about, you know, just the challenges and the humility and also the incredible resilience and beauty of the people living in this region and with this deep cultural history. So, yeah, I mean, I think it was great along all of those lines.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:10:22] In terms of like my own personal development, it really, um. I went into my Peace Corps experience with more tools than I think most did because I had already lived

overseas. I had already lived in developing countries, but I had never done that by myself. And I had never been like on the ground, in the dirt, you know, we always lived in nice houses in, you know, the capital cities and things like that. So it really gave me a lot of confidence to be able to work in these very different places with people with very different backgrounds. And notwithstanding all of that, to be able to articulate sort of shared goals and to organize and work together around those and to achieve some of those goals was really, was really meaningful.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:11:14] And that gave me a lot of, I think, confidence in both myself and frankly, just in kind of humanity in general, that when people do work hard to see eye to eye and to understand each other and to collaborate, that you can achieve a lot.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:11:32] Was there any point you thought, you know, let's hang this up and it's just too difficult? There's something going on here. They're after my skin or something.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:11:44] You know, I don't remember. I mean, I'm sure that thought must have crossed my mind at some point. But I don't remember ever taking that very seriously, entertaining the idea of leaving. I mean, I just, I fell in love so quickly with the area and the people and the challenges and the opportunities and became so invested so quickly that even though the work became extremely difficult at times, um, I don't think I would have ever been able to let myself off the hook that easily. So no, I don't. I mean, I don't really remember. I mean, I think the question that I worried over more was, can I ever leave? When? When do I leave? At what point can I extract myself responsibly from all of this? I've sort of started all of this stuff.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:12:44] And, you know, it was fortunately I was able to extend for a reasonable period of time through the ISU project with some more resources. And I was fortunate to have

incredible local partners who were capable to take on and sustain a lot of the work. So it was, um, it worked out fairly well in that sense. And, you know, I didn't, I didn't, I don't think I regretted too much leaving. And I was ready for law school and, you know, working at that grassroots level. I remember learning a ton, but also feeling like I needed to understand better these kind of broader legal structures that were influencing so much of what was happening to these people on the ground and in their communities. And that's ultimately why I decided to go to law school.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:13:36] Mm hmm. I do remember at one point, I think after you left, I ran into a woman named Liza Grandia, who's an anthropologist.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:13:50] Yeah.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:13:50] Who was working, I think, in the Petén.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:13:51] Yes.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:13:52] Doing graduate work. And she was involved in some project activity with family planning and environment, sort of cross sexual pop environment stuff. And I don't know, I guess she contacted me at some point and said, do you know anybody named Pielemeier who's been in Guatemala as a Peace Corps volunteer? And I said, well, yes, I do. And she said, well, the reason I'm asking is I guess I got this request from this group that were working with some sort of a conservation area to help in figuring out how to have fewer children. Because they said, you know, we've been part of this conservation area and we only have limited land. And if we keep having more children we're going to divide it up and we won't be able to make a living out of it. And she said, it's the first time I have ever found in my years in Guatemala anybody requesting family planning. I think it's because of this Peace Corps guy.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:14:59] Yeah. You know, Liza was great and she was, um, had worked for many, many years with an organization called ProPetén, which was doing conservation management stuff in the Petén. And, um, I'm still in touch with her very sporadically. But she also, I think, cited to some of the stuff we were doing in Chisec in her dissertation, which became a book as well. So yeah, I mean, I don't remember family planning being a particularly strong part of the work we were doing, but I do think we talked about it with the communities, um, and I do think that, you know, when you start from the premise of looking physically at the map. And saying, here's, this is the boundaries of your communal land claim.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:15:58] This is where you have currently, you know, you have land use. Different things, planting and different vocations. This is the number of families. This is the number of children. You know, the math starts to sort of play itself out even if you don't have to be literate. You don't have to actually even understand math. But, you know, kind of that this is a finite piece of land. And it's not that you're going to be able to produce a lot more per square meter in the future. There were maybe marginal improvements that people could make in terms of the way they were planting and the things they were planting. But at the end of the day, I think people were already beginning to sort of see that kind of play out. And that was how you saw a lot of the migration into the Petén from the highlands and into Chisec originally, from the highlands was because of large population growth.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:17:00] Also the Germans who had come in in the late 1800s and privatized a lot of the land that had been taken from the Catholic Church and created these big coffee fincas, that pushed a lot of the Q'eqchi' out of the highlands into Chisec and the lowlands, including Petén. But then you were having sort of the secondary wave of migration and that's actually what people call it. Part of the reason why Chisec had so

much forest was because these Q'eqchi' had come out of the highlands into, first into Chisec, and they were like, this is a very broken. There's not a lot of flat, easily arable land. It's very broken, these karst towers, these mountain ranges. So they pushed past that into the Petén, which was much flatter and easier to basically raise and plant corn and beans and eventually cattle. And so it became a secondary frontier.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:17:52] And so you had people migrating back from Petén and then other people coming from the highlands and, and people in Chisec itself, you know, basically having more kids than they had land to give to and then trying to find new corners that they could occupy. And interestingly, while I was there, there was, it was almost unheard of that anybody would come to the States. There were a few kind of, you could count them on one hand, people who had come to the States because they had somehow gotten connected with the missionary family and been adopted or something and had spent some time in the States. But it just wasn't a thing. People didn't do that migration. Now, 15 years later, there are many people apparently. I mean, this is August 2019, and it was only I think about six months ago there were a couple of reports back to back of children dying in Customs and Border Patrol custody from Guatemala. Both of them were from Raxruhá, which is the area that used to be part of Chisec and has since been split out as its own municipality.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:18:56] Oh, really?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:18:59] And just anecdotally, including from Arturo, the guy from the community near Candelaria who's here now, it's just become much more common. And I think it's partly that continuous population pressure. It's partly the fact that, um, this is something new from when I was there. Apparently there's been a huge influx of African palm plantations. So basically large industrial.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:19:27] Oh, really?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:19:27] Palm, plantation palm oil companies have come in and bought up a lot of this land, again from communities, some of whom had title, some who didn't.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:19:40] Right.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:19:40] And then created these big palm plantations. And the people, you know, sell the land because they see this big windfall of cash, but they don't think about what they're going to do next. And they might be promised, you know, a seasonal labor job on the palm plantation, but you're making minimum wage and it's only certain number of hours a week for certain months of the year. And it's not enough to support a family. And so quickly, people realize that they can't sustain themselves and they need to figure out Plan B, so it's a real challenging situation.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:20:21] Are there Peace Corps volunteers still in Guatemala?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:20:23] Yeah, I believe so. I mean, I'm certain there are still in Guatemala. I don't know for sure about Chisec. But I guess I would be surprised if there weren't.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:20:35] And do you ever, in other RPCV gatherings of Guatemala volunteers, you ever participated?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:20:41] Yeah, there are occasionally. I mean, I think I'm in. I think if I was on Facebook more, I would probably be more aware of. There was for a while. I remember when I first came back, before I went to law school, there was a number of folks from my cohort who came back to D.C. looking for jobs and trying to figure out what was next. And then once I went to law school and kind of got disconnected from that community, there were a few people who I would occasionally still be in

touch with. Shonda, for example, lives in Hagerstown. So she's not immediately in the area, but not too far away. But I have not I don't regularly connect with RPCVs from Guatemala.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:21:30] All right. Well, this has been, I think, a fascinating interview. And do you have any things that we, that you'd like to add?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:21:39] Um, I guess the last thing I would add is just that I did try and do some work on this waste management piece of the environmental management work. You know, this was an area that because of the highway, increasingly was getting access to kind of junk food and kind of plastic enveloped, you know, whether it was plastic water bottles or plastic chip containers, there was a sort of visually growing notable waste management challenge, distinct from the kind of human waste kind of. There was no sewage in Chisec to speak of. I think maybe in the very sort of center of town, there was some basic sewage system, but otherwise people just had outhouses.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:22:39] And in a way, that was probably better because there was no other. There was no way. It was 10,000 people. So it was still probably disperse enough that you would rather not concentrate all of that human waste. But the trash was becoming a real issue. And so, you know, for example, we helped build with the youth group a bunch of trash receptacles to put around the park and sort of public spaces. But then we had to figure out what to do with the trash. And so the typical thing that people would do is just take the trash out to the landing strip in Chisec. There was a landing strip there too, and just dump it in a pile and burn it. And some people would also do that with their household trash. They'd just take it to the corner of their yard and basically set it on fire. And at the end of the day, that may have not been the worst solution, although burning plastic isn't great.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:23:31] So anyway, I, you know, we started thinking about like, well, if we wanted to create an actual dump, what would that look like? And realized really quickly that that's a very challenging thing to do in a karstic environment.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:23:44] Oh.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:23:44] Because you don't want the waste to be concentrated and then seeping into these underground aquifers which are all interconnected in different ways.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:23:53] Yeah.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:23:54] So, you know, realized this kind of back of the envelope feasibility study that that wasn't going to be something that the municipality is going to be affording anytime soon. Um. So but one thing we did do that kind of stemmed out of that was I got in touch with the University of San Carlos, which is a university system in Guatemala and some people there who were interested in studying karst from the geology department. And we ended up putting together a symposium in Coban on water and waste management in karst ecosystems. And we brought, there were people who came from Costa Rica and from Guatemala City. And yeah, it was just a really random thing that I ended up basically putting together.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:24:48] Uh huh.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:24:48] Together with this one professor. And it was like a really cool meeting. And, you know, I think it really, I hope that it sort of helped kind of highlight the need to really think this through from a geology perspective, kind of ecosystem perspective. So yeah, so that was kind of another little random thing.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:25:12] Do you know whether what exists now in terms of?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:25:17] In terms of waste management?

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:25:19] In karst areas?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:25:19] You know, I don't. You know, I mean, you know, Florida is very karstic. Cuba is karstic. There are a number of areas that kind of have karst topography. So there are solutions out there that have been developed. But whether they are appropriate for, you know, this kind of municipal budget is, I think, not clear, or certainly wasn't clear when I was there. So, yeah. I don't, you know, I don't, I don't know what, if anything, has come out of the University of San Carlos Geology Department in terms of whether they've continued doing any work on this.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:26:00] Well, it's amazing. It's amazing how things, sort of one thing leads to another. And if you're active and aggressive and find the right people. Um, no Mayan ruins in Chisec?

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:26:15] In the town center?

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:26:16] Yeah, or around it.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:26:18] Um, there were plenty of Mayan ruins. Yeah, but it says 22 minutes which I'm not, we've definitely been talking for longer than that. Yeah. I mean, there were plenty of ruins, I don't think a ton of in Chisec itself, but just outside, I mean, they were literally everywhere. I mean, you could basically just be driving and you would see mounds. I mean, by the time I was done, I'd spent enough time with archeologists that you could kind of you'd be like, oh, that's that. That is, that was a building that had now just looks like a little hill. But that hill doesn't make sense here topological, topographically. That's a settlement.

JOHN PIELEMEIER: [02:26:59] Well, thank you, Jason. It's been a great interview and I appreciate your taking the time to do it.

JASON PIELEMEIER: [02:27:05] Yeah. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]