

Ken Ng Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Ken Ng
Interviewer: Phyllis Noble
Date of Interview: February 22, 2017
Location of Interview: Long Beach, California
Length: 72 pages

Biographical Note

Ken Ng served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Micronesia from 1975 to 1978 as a teacher and a teacher trainer.

Access

Open.

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Suggested Citation

Ken Ng, recorded interview by Phyllis Noble, February 22, 2017, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

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Oral History Interview

with

Ken Ng

February 22, 2017
Long Beach, California

By Phyllis Noble

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

NOBLE: [00:00:02] This is Phyllis Noble. Today is February 22nd, 2017. I am interviewing Ken Ng, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Micronesia from 1975 to 1978, and then was a Peace Corps volunteer connected with United Nations Volunteers in China from 1984 to '90. 1986. And we are here in Long Beach, California. Ken has driven in from Riverside to do this interview.

NG: [00:00:37] Here we are.

NOBLE: [00:00:38] And I'm very glad that we're here. Um, Ken, let's start with who you were before you joined the Peace Corps. Let's go way back. Where were you born?

NG: [00:00:48] I was born in Oakland, California. My father was a radiologist, uh, trained by the U.S. Army, and my mother has a master's degree in public health nursing from Columbia. So I have an older brother and I

have a younger brother and a younger sister. So there was partly a family ethos of serving the public. And I think that, uh, was an influence of why I joined Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [00:01:18] Yeah.

NG: [00:01:19] Um, I attended UC Berkeley, which, as you know, has produced more Peace Corps volunteers than any other school in the U.S.

NOBLE: [00:01:24] Yes, although the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

NG: [00:01:28] You're catching up. You're second.

NOBLE: [00:01:29] Yes, we're proud of it.

NG: [00:01:33] Um.

NOBLE: [00:01:33] When you were growing up, so you had a brother and a sister. There was three of you in the family.

NG: [00:01:38] Two brothers.

NOBLE: [00:01:38] Oh, two brothers. Two brothers. All three of you were guys?

NG: [00:01:42] Yeah, two brothers and a sister.

NOBLE: [00:01:44] Okay, I see, I'm sorry. And, um, did your family travel a lot together? Did you have opportunities for travel?

NG: [00:01:52] Um, not so much. My father took a sabbatical to Sweden, actually, when I was ten, and he took the whole family. But we didn't travel that much. I think part of the growing up that had an influence later on is that my father would take my older brother and myself backpacking and camping a lot.

NOBLE: [00:02:13] Oh, yeah.

NG: [00:02:14] And so, you know, we were kind of tough guys, you know, not macho, but, you know, we could, you know, we were comfortable, you know, not having flush toilets and living outdoors.

NOBLE: [00:02:24] Okay. Yeah.

NG: [00:02:25] So I think that was a factor. And of course going to Berkeley, um, there was a lot of activism going on. I was there from '69 to '73.

NOBLE: [00:02:36] Oh yeah, very active time.

NG: [00:02:37] So there was lots of free speech movement, anti-Vietnam protests going on. Um, and I think that was a factor. So.

NOBLE: [00:02:48] Did you study languages either in high school or at Berkeley?

NG: [00:02:51] I had, in high school I had two years of Chinese, and then the district only promised two years, depending on the number of students who requested that class. So, um, even to take those two years of Chinese, I had to take a bus and go to another school in the district where they had a Chinese class. So if I wanted to continue Chinese, I would have to go even farther to another school in the district. So I said, okay, that's not going to happen.

NOBLE: [00:03:21] Eats up too much time in your high school day.

NG: [00:03:23] Well, I would have had to stay at that other school all day.

NOBLE: [00:03:26] Oh yeah. Okay.

NG: [00:03:27] So essentially, like you're transferring to a different high school.

NOBLE: [00:03:30] Yeah. You didn't want to do that.

NG: [00:03:31] So I had two years of Chinese and then I had two years of German.

NOBLE: [00:03:36] Mm hmm.

NG: [00:03:36] So when I went to Berkeley, I had another year of German to fulfill a language requirement there. So, um.

NOBLE: [00:03:45] And in your family, with your grandparents perhaps, did you, was there any Chinese spoken at home?

NG: [00:03:52] Um, my generation really was the first generation, or I should say my parents' generation, was really the first generation that could move out of Chinatown.

NOBLE: [00:04:03] Yeah.

NG: [00:04:04] So there was, Chinatown now we think is sort of quaint. And, uh, but in the early days, Chinatown was basically a ghetto.

NOBLE: [00:04:13] Yeah.

NG: [00:04:13] So the Chinese had to live here. They didn't have much choice. So I think with the growth of suburbs with, uh, civil rights movement and the civil service testing and so forth, that a lot more opportunities opened up for Asians as well as Blacks. And because of that, my family was able to move out into the suburbs.

NOBLE: [00:04:38] Yeah.

NG: [00:04:38] So it was my parents' generation who really were able to take advantage of higher education opportunities, employment opportunities, and places to live as well.

NOBLE: [00:04:48] Yeah.

NG: [00:04:49] So for me, growing up, we weren't growing up in Chinatown anymore, at least when I started going to public school, and the emphasis was more on be American.

NOBLE: [00:04:59] That's right. Yeah.

NG: [00:05:00] So although my, my parents spoke Cantonese and they would, you know, reprimand us in Cantonese perhaps. But, you know, at home we spoke English. We were completely fluent in English.

NOBLE: [00:05:12] Did they lapse into Chinese or Cantonese when they didn't want you to know what they were talking about?

NG: [00:05:16] I'm sure they did. You know, when they went to their bedroom and shut the door, then they. I'm not sure that that was necessarily their dominant language, but I'm sure they were bilingual at that point. Um.

NOBLE: [00:05:27] So your knowledge of Chinese was predominantly through your studies in school?

NG: [00:05:32] Right, because the study in school, we're studying Mandarin. So my parents were speaking Cantonese.

NOBLE: [00:05:37] That's right.

NG: [00:05:39] Uh, so after I graduated from Berklee, I studied social science there, which is almost like an independent major. It's, there's a department, you meet with your advisor, and basically you put together your own program. I think there was only three required classes that you had to take. And then you meet your requirements to get your diploma. So I graduated in social science and.

NOBLE: [00:06:06] In what year was that?

NG: [00:06:07] 1973.

NOBLE: [00:06:09] Oh, yeah.

NG: [00:06:10] And then so my older brother was a year ahead of me in school, and he, he was in the first group where they had the Vietnam lottery, the Selective Service lottery.

NOBLE: [00:06:23] Oh, the draft.

NG: [00:06:23] Right. So he knew his number was 22. So he knew once he got out, he also went to Berkeley, and he knew once he graduated he was headed for the military or Canada, you know.

NOBLE: [00:06:33] Yeah.

NG: [00:06:34] I mean, I don't think he meant to go to Canada at all, but he knew he was going to get drafted. Uh, so he chose to enlist instead. So because of that, it was a three year commitment. But he qualified to go to language school in Monterey.

NOBLE: [00:06:49] Ah.

NG: [00:06:49] So he, um, he studied Chinese and Japanese there. So he had studied some Japanese in Berkeley as well. So he did well enough in Chinese that he asked, can I take the Japanese class too?

NOBLE: [00:07:04] Yeah.

NG: [00:07:05] So, uh, he did that, and he ended up being stationed in Japan, uh.

NOBLE: [00:07:11] During the Vietnam War?

NG: [00:07:12] Right. So basically, they're monitoring Chinese military broadcasts that they pick up from Japan. So he had gone that route, and I was sort of leaning towards being a teacher while I was at Cal. So I was accepted at San Jose State into a elementary teacher program and graduated from there. And at that time there was a glut of teachers in California. So I said, well, I can just apply for Peace Corps as well. You never know what's going to happen.

NOBLE: [00:07:51] Yeah, yeah.

NG: [00:07:51] So that, uh, application went through. And they, on the application they say, where do you want to serve?

NOBLE: [00:07:58] Oh, they did?

NG: [00:07:59] Well, at that point, you just had what region.

NOBLE: [00:08:02] What part of the world.

NG: [00:08:03] Do you want to serve in. Like, Asia.

NOBLE: [00:08:04] Did they also ask you is there any part of the world where you would not want to be assigned?

NG: [00:08:07] I don't recall that.

NOBLE: [00:08:09] Okay.

NG: [00:08:09] So I just put Asia because I'm Asian and there's no program in China right at that time.

NOBLE: [00:08:14] Not at that time.

NG: [00:08:15] So they said Micronesia. And I said fine. And there were 31 trainees in my Micronesia group.

NOBLE: [00:08:23] Where did you go for training?

NG: [00:08:25] We had three days staging in San Francisco, which was, uh, summer like June of '75. And if you've been to San Francisco in the summer, it's very foggy and cold typically. And it was for our staging as well. And then we flew to Hawaii. We spent a night there.

NOBLE: [00:08:50] Can we back up a little bit?

NG: [00:08:51] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:08:52] How many people were in your group?

NG: [00:08:53] 31.

NOBLE: [00:08:54] 31 of you.

NG: [00:08:55] So we're all teachers. We're all headed for the Marshall Islands, District of Micronesia, which.

NOBLE: [00:09:00] Yeah.

NG: [00:09:02] Um, it's helpful if you have some understanding of Micronesia. So Micronesia is in the northern hemisphere. Most people think it's in the southern hemisphere, and they're wrong. And geographically, it's about as large as the continental United States.

NOBLE: [00:09:19] Oh, wow. It's huge.

NG: [00:09:22] So it's sort of in the middle between Hawaii and the Philippines.

NOBLE: [00:09:25] Okay.

NG: [00:09:27] Uh, but the deal with Micronesia, you have about 2,100 islands. But if you took the total landmass and put it together, it's half the size of Rhode Island.

NOBLE: [00:09:38] Mm hmm. It's just so spread out.

NG: [00:09:40] The islands are spread out all over the place. And at that time, um, it was being administered by the United States under a trust agreement with the United Nations. So back in the 1500s, I guess Magellan had stopped, um, in the Marianas Islands, which is in the far western part of Micronesia, and subsequently that became a Spanish colony which was administered from the Philippines. And then after the Spanish-American War, uh, Spain was losing territory because of that. So they lost the Philippines, they lost Guam, and they ended up selling the rest of Micronesia to the Germans.

NOBLE: [00:10:24] Oh.

NG: [00:10:26] So then World War I came along, and Japan was an ally of England in World War I.

NOBLE: [00:10:37] Ah.

NG: [00:10:37] So after World War I, Japan took over Micronesia as a League of Nations mandate.

NOBLE: [00:10:46] Ah.

NG: [00:10:48] Except for, you know, Guam, which was U.S. territory. Then there are a few islands which belong to other people. Um, and after.

NOBLE: [00:10:55] So this, this, these islands have gone from virtual independence to a Spanish speaking dominance to German and now Japanese?

NG: [00:11:07] Well, I don't know how predominant Spanish ever was there, but yeah. So then the Japanese took over. And then after World War II, of course, the United States defeated the Japanese and Micronesia became one of five trust territories set up by the UN. So within this big area, there's, uh, six districts. So Micronesia. So in the far west, you had the Marianas Island chain, which Guam was part of geographically, although politically it wasn't until more recent times. And in the Far East you had the Marshall Islands, where my group was headed.

NOBLE: [00:11:50] Mm hmm.

NG: [00:11:50] And in between you had it was called the Caroline Islands. So altogether there were six administrative districts. So once the U.S. took over Micronesia, um, pretty much the U.S. ignored the place. And, uh, there was a couple of exceptions. So there were rumors that, uh, I think the CIA had some sort of training base for jungle warfare or something back in the Marianas Islands. And where I was in the Marshalls, we have

a missile testing base on Kwajalein Atoll. So we shoot missiles here from California, and they're supposed to come down in Kwajalein Atoll lagoon.

NOBLE: [00:12:40] Ah. And there are people living there?

NG: [00:12:45] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:12:45] On the atoll?

NG: [00:12:46] Yes. So the other big deal that we did is we did nuclear testing. So you've heard of Bikini Atoll and Enewetak Atoll. So those are both part of the Marshall Islands.

NOBLE: [00:12:59] Okay.

NG: [00:13:00] So that's, but for the most part, the U.S. sort of ignored Micronesia. And there's a famous quote by Henry Kissinger when he was asked about Micronesians and he said something like, 100,000 people, who gives a damn?

NOBLE: [00:13:14] Oh, gee.

NG: [00:13:15] So, of course, as volunteers there, we sort of cared a bit more than he did perhaps, but I understand he has bigger fish to fry, so to speak. So the U.S. came under criticism for its neglect of Micronesia. So part of the response was to send Peace Corps volunteers.

NOBLE: [00:13:34] Okay.

NG: [00:13:35] And at the time I was there, Micronesia had the highest per capita number of Peace Corps volunteers of any country in the world.

NOBLE: [00:13:44] Oh my goodness.

NG: [00:13:44] So think of my group. We have 31 teachers and we're going just to the one district of Micronesia.

NOBLE: [00:13:50] Yeah.

NG: [00:13:51] So I don't know how many volunteers at work total, I suppose I could count. Um, so the 31 volunteers in my group were all teachers, and 29 of us are right out of college. There were only two older volunteers who had actual teaching, paid teaching experience.

NOBLE: [00:14:13] And this group of volunteers was mixed, men and women?

NG: [00:14:16] There were 20 women and 11 men. And almost 20 different states represented.

NOBLE: [00:14:24] Diverse. And any married couples?

NG: [00:14:27] Not at that time. So, um, we had training in the Marshall Islands. And at the end of training.

NOBLE: [00:14:37] Was there a particular island that you were?

NG: [00:14:39] Well, the main island is called Majuro. It's the district center. And there's only, that's the only place where there's really a town, as we would think of it.

NOBLE: [00:14:49] Mm hmm. And where did they put you for training? Were you in a school dormitory or what sort of facilities?

NG: [00:14:57] There was a private, um, of course there's lots of missionaries in Micronesia. At the time we were there, there were like seven different missionary groups. So we were, um, housed at one of the mission schools during the summer. Um, I think it was called Assumption. And part of our training was in Majuro. And part of our training is on what's called an outer island. So any island away from Majuro.

NOBLE: [00:15:31] Is an outer island.

NG: [00:15:32] An outer island because you're not in the district center.

NOBLE: [00:15:35] Did those outer islands have names?

NG: [00:15:37] Yes, they all have names. The island we were on was called Arno. Arno Atoll.

NOBLE: [00:15:43] Okay, so, um, when, in the part of training that happened in, um, I don't know if I'm pronouncing it right, Majuro?

NG: [00:15:50] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:15:51] What went on in training? What, what were you learning?

NG: [00:15:55] Well, training was broken into three parts. Language of course.

NOBLE: [00:15:58] And what was the language?

NG: [00:15:59] Marshallese.

NOBLE: [00:16:00] Marshallese.

NG: [00:16:01] So within Micronesia, there's ten different languages. So in the Marshall Islands, you speak Marshallese, and there's even a western dialect and an eastern dialect, but they're very similar. So language training was one. Cross-cultural training was another component and so-called technical training. Since we're all teachers, we're, we did practice teaching. And so that was the three training components.

NOBLE: [00:16:31] And your practice teaching was with what age group?

NG: [00:16:35] Elementary. We're all elementary teachers except we had one, um, Ralph Smith from Kentucky, who was a special ed. And, uh, you were asking about married couples. So at, near the end of training, Ralph and another volunteer, Barbara, decided they wanted to get married, which they did. Um, so because of that, they were. When we got our placements, um, assignments, they were both stationed in Majuro so they could be together.

NOBLE: [00:17:07] Okay.

NG: [00:17:08] Yeah, but most of us were sent to separate villages.

NOBLE: [00:17:14] But before we get into where you were assigned, how was the, when you went on out to Arno Atoll for another part of training, how did that differ from your experience in Majuro?

NG: [00:17:29] So when we were on Arno, we were living with Marshallese families.

NOBLE: [00:17:33] Ah.

NG: [00:17:33] So we weren't like in a dormitory situation anymore. We were two or three or one of us were living with different families.

NOBLE: [00:17:41] So describe that. What, did the family speak any English or were you immersed in?

NG: [00:17:46] For the most part, no.

NOBLE: [00:17:47] You were immersed in Marshallese during that part of training?

NG: [00:17:50] Right.

NOBLE: [00:17:50] Yeah.

NG: [00:17:51] Um, so yeah, I think in, in a way it was somewhat artificial in that the Peace Corps was providing Western style sort of food for the families to prepare to a certain extent. So we weren't entirely going native, so to speak. Um, so also we had practice teaching at that time, so they would just have the village kids come together. Okay, you're, you're teaching a lesson today. You're teaching a lesson tomorrow. So that gave us a chance to. Uh.

NOBLE: [00:18:25] And, um, so your experience there on Arno was living with a family, eating with the family.

NG: [00:18:31] Right.

NOBLE: [00:18:32] Did you have your own place to sleep? Did you have a room of your own?

NG: [00:18:36] No. So if you were, essentially you're in a thatch hut with the family and you're sleeping on the floor. Um, you may have brought a sleeping mat with you or a mattress, um, or a mosquito net, that kind of thing.

NOBLE: [00:18:53] Did most people in the family sleep on a mat with a sleeping, with a mosquito net?

NG: [00:18:59] I would say no.

NOBLE: [00:19:00] Uh huh.

NG: [00:19:03] So, uh, you did activities with the family when you weren't in class, so we had a chance to go fishing for flying fish one night. That was pretty exciting. They're a migratory fish. So you go out in the middle of the night on these, um, boats. They're called boom booms because they have this two stroke engine goes boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, and put out all this terrible smoke. But you have a lantern hung on there. They're open, there's no deck, but there is a little bit of a mast. So they hang a lantern there, which attracts the fish.

NOBLE: [00:19:35] Oh.

NG: [00:19:36] And then you actually have, it's like a net with a pole that's used for cleaning swimming pools. So you go and try and scoop the flying fish out of the water. Kind of crazy. But that was an interesting experience.

NOBLE: [00:19:50] And that's only done at night?

NG: [00:19:51] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:19:52] That kind of fishing?

NG: [00:19:53] As far as I know. That was the only time we went fishing for fish. But you can also see sharks out there. I go, okay.

NOBLE: [00:20:03] Had you done fishing here in California?

NG: [00:20:05] Um, I'd done mostly in streams and rivers, yes.

NOBLE: [00:20:09] But not out on the ocean.

NG: [00:20:10] Not out on the ocean.

NOBLE: [00:20:11] Yeah. And then did you take that flying fish, did you take your catch home and cook it up?

NG: [00:20:16] Yeah, so. Well, of course, by the time you get back, it's 3:00 in the morning or something. I'm going to bed. But the Marshallese stayed up and cooked it, and then they'd woke you up. Come on, come eat some fish.

NOBLE: [00:20:25] Oh, wow. Actually sounds quite wonderful. But your practice teaching was just not actually in a school with other teachers?

NG: [00:20:36] Well, most of the Peace Corps trainers were actually teachers themselves. Um, so within my group, uh, most of us were called replacement teachers. So the native teachers at most had a high school education. So our job, in theory, was to replace them in the classroom so they could come into Majuro and get more advanced training.

NOBLE: [00:21:07] Oh, okay. Yeah.

NG: [00:21:08] So, um, so the first year, that's what I did. I was sent out as a replacement teacher. I was also sent to Arno Atoll, but I was sent to a very remote island village in Arno. So even though you're within 20 miles of Majuro and even on my, on Arno, there were four other volunteers. I never saw them except at Christmas.

NOBLE: [00:21:35] Oh, really? Wow.

NG: [00:21:36] It was a, it's a two day walk to go from my village to the nearest Peace Corps, other Peace Corps village.

NOBLE: [00:21:41] So you are really isolated out there.

NG: [00:21:43] So yeah, what I had, I think was considered a pretty tough assignment. Um, so I was only the second volunteer to be assigned to that village.

NOBLE: [00:21:54] Okay. Somebody you were, so you're replacing another replacement teacher?

NG: [00:21:59] Well, the person who had been there before me had gotten sick, and had only been there a few months before he had to go home. And so they're very happy to have me there, and not just because I was, you know, a novelty, but the, the more remote, smaller villages, um. How should I put it? At that time, they only had universal education up to eighth grade. So to go to ninth grade, the people had to take a high school entrance test. And the village where I was at, nobody ever passed the high school entrance test.

NOBLE: [00:22:41] Oh.

NG: [00:22:42] Because, well, anyway, for whatever reason. So, uh, on the entrance test, there's math and there's English. That's it. So at the school I was at, it was me and one Marshallese teacher. So the head teacher, Heine, said, okay, you're teaching seventh and eighth grade. I was okay, fine.

NOBLE: [00:23:04] How many, how many kids altogether in the school?

NG: [00:23:06] Oh, maybe 20.

NOBLE: [00:23:09] Oh, very small.

NG: [00:23:10] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:23:11] And that ranged from first grade through eighth?

NG: [00:23:13] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:23:14] So you divided.

NG: [00:23:14] But the village had maybe 100 people.

NOBLE: [00:23:18] Yeah.

NG: [00:23:18] Right.

NOBLE: [00:23:18] Yeah.

NG: [00:23:20] Uh, so at the end of my first year, people, I had all the seventh and eighth graders take the test. I said, you know, if you're a seventh grade, you don't pass, nobody cares, right? It doesn't matter.

NOBLE: [00:23:31] But if you're in eighth grade, this is a crucial for the rest of your life.

NG: [00:23:36] I said, yeah, if you know seventh grade, you can take it again next year and you get two shots at it.

NOBLE: [00:23:40] Yeah.

NG: [00:23:41] So, uh.

NOBLE: [00:23:42] And you had been teaching seventh and eighth grade all as one group?

NG: [00:23:45] Yes. And essentially you had no materials.

NOBLE: [00:23:51] So you're teaching English and math with no textbooks.

NG: [00:23:54] No textbooks.

NOBLE: [00:23:55] Do you have a chalkboard? What was it, what, describe the classroom?

NG: [00:23:58] The school actually had been built by the Seabees. So there was a two room school. It had a concrete floor, plywood walls, sort of wired windows. Kind of leaked, the roof leaked, tar paper roof. Um, but in that respect, it was kind of a nice building, right? It was fairly stable. So all my students took the test.

NOBLE: [00:24:25] And you had a chalkboard and chalk?

NG: [00:24:27] Had a chalkboard, probably no chalk. Probably no paper. We had one of these hand-cranked ditto machines, but no ditto fluid. After a while, you know, so you're originally, you know, you and the students, and you're lucky if you have paper and pencil.

NOBLE: [00:24:42] So the students also had, did not have paper and pencil?

NG: [00:24:45] Well, the school is supposed to provide, provide but.

NOBLE: [00:24:48] Mm hmm. Oh how difficult, how difficult for them to, to learn and memorize things when there's nothing written.

NG: [00:24:55] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:24:56] Hmm.

NG: [00:24:58] So.

NOBLE: [00:24:59] And in your group of seventh and eighth graders, how many would you have had in your classroom?

NG: [00:25:04] About seven.

NOBLE: [00:25:05] Okay. All right.

NG: [00:25:08] So at the end of my first year they, well, actually the test comes out by ship, right? There's someone from the, from Majuro who comes out to give the test.

NOBLE: [00:25:16] Uh huh.

NG: [00:25:17] And it has to be before the end of the school year just because transportation is so, um, undependable and slow.

NOBLE: [00:25:25] Yeah. So the kids don't go elsewhere to take the test. The test comes to the kids.

NG: [00:25:31] Yes. So then, you know, finally everybody takes the test and then their tests are corrected back in Majuro. And then they say, okay, so and so is a passing score. And then you kind of, they announce the names and who got what on the test.

NOBLE: [00:25:46] Yeah.

NG: [00:25:47] So three of my eighth graders passed the test.

NOBLE: [00:25:51] Okay.

NG: [00:25:51] So the, the village was ecstatic.

NOBLE: [00:25:54] Because they'd never had anybody to pass the test before.

NG: [00:25:56] Right.

NOBLE: [00:25:56] Now you've got three. And what happens to those eighth graders who failed it? Could they repeat eighth grade?

NG: [00:26:03] Yeah. It was very flexible. I mean, I had eighth graders who were 17 years old.

NOBLE: [00:26:08] I was going to ask, yeah.

NG: [00:26:09] Uh, you know, when it rains, people don't come to school, right? Fishing is good, people don't come to school. So it's very flexible in that respect.

NOBLE: [00:26:18] And during that first year, where were you living on that, on Arno?

NG: [00:26:26] Okay. Well the village was called Langor, so.

NOBLE: [00:26:28] Oh, Langor. Okay.

NG: [00:26:32] So I was provided with a thatched hut for myself. I had two rooms, which was spacious by Marshallese standards, because usually you have the whole family living in a space that big.

NOBLE: [00:26:44] Yeah.

NG: [00:26:45] And then the head teacher was living in one of the classrooms, actually, with his wife, and they had a son.

NOBLE: [00:26:54] And in your thatch hut, was that hut connected to a family's compound, or were you totally on your own?

NG: [00:27:00] I was on my own.

NOBLE: [00:27:01] So did you cook? How did you eat? You cooked and shopped for yourself?

NG: [00:27:06] There's no place to shop.

NOBLE: [00:27:09] How do you get, how do you obtain what you need?

NG: [00:27:13] You bring everything with you.

NOBLE: [00:27:17] From Majuro?

NG: [00:27:17] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:27:19] Canned goods?

NG: [00:27:20] Yes. So some people, yeah, you usually have sort of a choice. Um, you can live by yourself, cook by yourself. Some people will go native. They'll live with their adopted family. Usually there'll be a family in the village who will sort of look after you, um, if you want to, you know, and so that relationship can become as close as you want it to. I mean, there was a family that sort of adopted me, and I'd go visit them and, you know, have an occasional meal with them. But I was, I preferred sort of to live by myself.

NOBLE: [00:27:52] Yeah. Yeah. So, um, some canned, I can imagine canned foods of various kinds. And then there'd be rice?

NG: [00:28:01] Yeah. We'd have rice.

NOBLE: [00:28:03] Fish?

NG: [00:28:03] Um, fish. Right. So I got really sick of eating fish because mostly it's just reef fish, very sort of bony to me.

NOBLE: [00:28:13] You're showing me with your fingers that they're pretty small.

NG: [00:28:16] Well, it can be, yeah, because they live in the reef, right, so they're not very big.

NOBLE: [00:28:20] Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

NG: [00:28:22] Um, so the first summer. Well, let's see. Well, if we go back to training. So.

NOBLE: [00:28:29] Yeah.

NG: [00:28:30] Um, at the end of training, two of the 31 in my group decided they did not want to commit to the two years.

NOBLE: [00:28:36] Okay. There wasn't a thing called deselection at that point?

NG: [00:28:39] You know, it is different from the early days of Peace Corps sort of. I guess when you were serving that, I'm sure they were kind of looking at us to see if there's someone who really didn't fit, but I think they weren't really there to weed us out so much.

NOBLE: [00:28:54] No psychologists coming.

NG: [00:28:54] As in the earlier days.

NOBLE: [00:28:56] No individual meetings with psychologists.

NG: [00:28:58] I've talked to earlier volunteers as well, and that seemed to be a big part of it. But I think by the time they got to my year, they had sort of figured out the selection process a bit more. So the emphasis on training wasn't really so, okay, you know, a third of you aren't going to be here or whatever, you know, at the end of training. So, um.

NOBLE: [00:29:19] And did training include, um, a lot of medical things, vaccinations?

NG: [00:29:24] Not so much. There was a Peace Corps doctor for all of Micronesia. So he came through and gave everybody a physical. I think at the end of the first year, he gave everybody a booster shot.

NOBLE: [00:29:34] Yeah.

NG: [00:29:34] We all had a medical kit. Um. So, so at the end of training, we're down to 29.

NOBLE: [00:29:44] Yeah.

NG: [00:29:44] And then Ralph and Barb, they got married, and they, they were having a tough time, you know, with the marriage, with the new jobs, with the new culture. So they decided to early terminate. And then there were two other volunteers, both of them, I said they were two sort of older volunteers. Neither one of them made it for the first two years either, so they both were early terminated. One girl became pregnant and a Peace Corps doctor said, you're going home.

NOBLE: [00:30:19] Home.

NG: [00:30:19] You're not having a baby here. Um, and then another volunteer had a medical problem and he was sent home. So of the 29 who committed to the two years, I think there were six who didn't finish the two years.

NOBLE: [00:30:35] So now you're down to about 23 at the very end.

NG: [00:30:38] At the very end. And of the 23, I think 11 stayed on either as extended with the Peace Corps. I think three of us extended with the Peace Corps, and there were other handful that got jobs with the Department of Education or something like that.

NOBLE: [00:30:55] And then opted to stay for more time.

NG: [00:30:57] So either you kind of love it or hate it.

NOBLE: [00:30:59] Yeah, yeah. Um, I actually would like to talk about training a little bit more. Did you feel that you got what you needed in training to, to be able to do your job? And to live successfully?

NG: [00:31:10] Yes and no. I think for me, in language class, they were using something called silent way.

NOBLE: [00:31:18] And what was that?

NG: [00:31:19] Silent way is when the teacher is silent most of the time, so that by, by doing motions or giving commands, they want you to learn the

language that way. And I found that really frustrating. I mean, okay, giving the word for this, how do you say that? I mean that.

NOBLE: [00:31:41] Right.

NG: [00:31:41] You know, write it down for me. But silent way it is, is not done that way. It's all, they give a command. And, you know, you're trying to figure out what the command is and you're, meanwhile you're trying to figure out, well, okay, this means that. But how does that grammatically fit with this? And why don't you just write it down for me?

NOBLE: [00:32:00] Right.

NG: [00:32:00] So I find that really frustrating.

NOBLE: [00:32:02] Yeah.

NG: [00:32:02] I mean, I'm a language teacher now and I understand the rationale behind it, but, um, I found that aspect of training was really frustrating. I think the rest of it, the cross culture, I think was fine. And the technical aspect I was, again, I think the schools differed a lot. If you were in a big village, they tended to have a, well, they first of all had more of a history of Peace Corps volunteers having served there.

NOBLE: [00:32:34] Mm hmm.

NG: [00:32:34] And, uh, once we get to my second year. So in my second year of Peace Corps, my job shifted. I was no longer a replacement teacher. The district was introducing science and math materials. So they said, okay, we want you to supervise the introduction of these materials. So I was assigned four elementary schools.

NOBLE: [00:33:03] Still in the same atoll?

NG: [00:33:05] All on Arno Atoll.

NOBLE: [00:33:06] On Arno, okay.

NG: [00:33:07] Right. So, um, and my job then was to rotate among the schools and answer questions, to give demonstration lessons, or things like that.

NOBLE: [00:33:18] So you're a little bit out of your field now in science.

NG: [00:33:21] Well, I mean it's still elementary schools, right?

NOBLE: [00:33:24] That's very basic stuff.

NG: [00:33:26] You know, I know the materials better than the native teachers do.

NOBLE: [00:33:29] Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

NG: [00:33:30] Um, so that per se wasn't a problem. But now I have to travel to four different villages and work at four different schools. I mean, again, the schools are all very small. The villages are all very small. But now I have to move.

NOBLE: [00:33:45] And were you still living and sleeping in your same hut?

NG: [00:33:50] No, because the villages are far apart.

NOBLE: [00:33:53] Oh, so you would have to find a different place to sleep in each of those villages?

NG: [00:33:57] Right. So usually the teacher at the school would say, okay, we've arranged this for you. So you're staying with this family or whatever.

NOBLE: [00:34:06] And you'd stay how long in one place?

NG: [00:34:08] Usually a week in each place.

NOBLE: [00:34:09] Okay.

NG: [00:34:10] Again, depending on transportation.

NOBLE: [00:34:12] So how would you get from village to village?

NG: [00:34:15] Sometimes I walk, sometimes you have to, well, one village, you have to wait for a boat. It's all the way across the atoll. And you have to wait for someone who's going there in the boat. So.

NOBLE: [00:34:24] Yeah. So you couldn't say, I'll be there on Wednesday at noon?

NG: [00:34:30] Not at all. I'll be there sometime next month. Okay.

NOBLE: [00:34:33] Okay. Yeah, yeah. And sometimes you'd walk from one village to another.

NG: [00:34:38] Right.

NOBLE: [00:34:39] And you'd have to carry all your stuff with you?

NG: [00:34:41] I had a backpack.

NOBLE: [00:34:41] Your teaching materials and your clothes.

NG: [00:34:44] Yeah. And food, right? Because you're a guest, right? So, okay, I'm going to be staying there for a week. I can't come empty handed, right? And I'm not going to go out fishing, right?

NOBLE: [00:34:54] Yeah.

NG: [00:34:54] So you, you have, you know, 5 pounds of sugar, you have 5 pounds of flour, you have, you know, a couple of cans of, you know, Crisco or something. And whatever family you're staying with, you say here. Thank you very much. You know, and.

NOBLE: [00:35:09] And so Peace Corps was paying you a living allowance?

NG: [00:35:14] Right.

NOBLE: [00:35:14] Which was modest.

NG: [00:35:17] I don't remember what it was.

NOBLE: [00:35:18] Yeah. But out of that, you had to buy all this food to present as contributions to each family that was putting you up.

NG: [00:35:25] Right.

NOBLE: [00:35:25] Yeah.

NG: [00:35:27] And actually, as you know, Peace Corps volunteers also earn vacation leave.

NOBLE: [00:35:32] Yeah.

NG: [00:35:32] Right. But because Micronesia was so far from anywhere else, I think we were given an additional bonus so that we could afford to travel somewhere else.

NOBLE: [00:35:42] Oh, how nice. So maybe before we plunge further into that second year, what did you do in between the first year and second year? You had some weeks off? Schools were closed for a little while?

NG: [00:35:52] Um, we were teaching for Community College of Micronesia. So again, most of the teachers, elementary teachers, would come into the district center and they said, okay, we have classes for you guys at CCM, Community College of Micronesia. So we taught at CCM for the elementary teachers during that summer.

NOBLE: [00:36:15] I see. So you didn't have vacation time?

NG: [00:36:18] We had a couple weeks.

NOBLE: [00:36:19] You were doing teacher training.

NG: [00:36:20] Right.

NOBLE: [00:36:20] Yeah.

NG: [00:36:21] Doing teacher training.

NOBLE: [00:36:22] Yeah. So when you did travel, where did you go?

NG: [00:36:27] Um, I decided to come home actually.

NOBLE: [00:36:31] You did?

NG: [00:36:31] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:36:32] And that was in between. When, at what point? Halfway through?

NG: [00:36:37] I think it was. Oh boy. I remember coming home at some point.

NOBLE: [00:36:44] I'm thinking, surely after your first two years before you extended, you would have come home?

NG: [00:36:48] Yeah, because I wasn't teaching that summer because there, most of the volunteers are gone.

NOBLE: [00:36:53] Yeah.

NG: [00:36:54] Um, in fact, my teacher group was the last teacher group that Peace Corps was sending.

NOBLE: [00:37:01] Ah.

NG: [00:37:02] So before us, there had been like a medical group many years before. And when we came, there was a group of volunteers who were setting up agricultural co-ops. So, uh, copra, dried coconut meat is one of their cash crops. So they were setting up co-ops in the villages to sell the copra. And actually that program was ending also. So after my group,

there were only a handful of volunteers being sent out. So because the U.S. was sort of transitioning Micronesia to become independent, uh, they had sent out two lawyers who were Peace Corps lawyers, and they were working with the court system in Majuro. And there were one or two other sort of technical volunteers who were sent out, and that was it.

NG: [00:38:00] Um, so I think most people really didn't appreciate the fact that there were no teachers, Peace Corps teachers, coming after my group to replace us. And there were some villages that had Peace Corps for many years. And as my third year in the Peace Corps, I was assigned to one of those villages and they didn't really understand that I was the last.

NOBLE: [00:38:22] Uh huh.

NG: [00:38:24] Um, so, uh. Although there still is Peace Corps in Micronesia, but no longer in the Marshall Islands. Marshall Islands is now an independent country, and they don't have a Peace Corps program in the Marshall Islands.

NOBLE: [00:38:40] I'd like to go back into one of those classrooms with you. I'm very taken by this idea that you were there without materials, not even paper and pencil.

NG: [00:38:52] Well, paper and pencil that, if you brought your own.

NOBLE: [00:38:55] If you brought your own. But each, the students didn't necessarily have their own.

NG: [00:38:59] Right.

NOBLE: [00:38:59] How on how on earth did you teach? What did you do?

NG: [00:39:04] Well, because you have a small class, you can individualize a lot. And you know, as an elementary teacher, you take the student from where they know to whatever the next step is.

NOBLE: [00:39:15] Yeah, yeah.

NG: [00:39:16] So, uh, the kids are great. I mean, particularly as a male teacher, you never have discipline problems in class.

NOBLE: [00:39:24] Okay.

NG: [00:39:25] Now, I know some of the females do, because that's just part of the culture.

NOBLE: [00:39:28] Yeah.

NG: [00:39:29] And it's a female teacher. I can goof around.

NOBLE: [00:39:30] Yeah.

NG: [00:39:31] Kind of stuff. Um, so I felt I always had a really. Teaching was fun because I'm free to do almost anything I want and.

NOBLE: [00:39:42] Yeah, yeah.

NG: [00:39:42] And, uh. And the kids are great. And you just see progress. I mean, you know. So even when I left Micronesia and I was coming back to the U.S., I'm comparing that teaching situation I had to what teaching is like in California. And I'm going.

NOBLE: [00:39:59] Night and day.

NG: [00:40:00] I don't think I want to ready to be a teacher in California.

NOBLE: [00:40:04] Yeah, yeah.

NG: [00:40:05] You know, because you have big classes, you have discipline, you have, uh, you know, 20 different subjects you're responsible for teaching and, uh.

NOBLE: [00:40:15] Twenty different if you're teaching English as a second language.

NG: [00:40:17] No, but see, I was an elementary teacher, right?

NOBLE: [00:40:20] Okay. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

NG: [00:40:21] So I think that was one big influence of my Peace Corps experience when I came back, that, um, for the first two years, I wasn't teaching. I, um, had a friend who worked for Wilderness Press, so I, he hired me to help with making maps for his hiking guides. And then, because of my noncompetitive eligibility, that helped me get a job with Social Security Administration. But after a year of crunching numbers for them, I said this is not what I want to do. So.

NOBLE: [00:40:59] But, but before we go on to post, to that interim between Peace Corps.

NG: [00:41:04] Right.

NOBLE: [00:41:04] Um, I'm not sure we're completely finished with your time there in Micronesia. Um, you had some, what did, what did you do to keep yourself sane? Did you have a transistor radio to listen to or something? How did you, did you have books? Did Peace Corps provide you with anything?

NG: [00:41:25] There was books around, so I did a lot of reading. Um, when I, where I was living in Langor, there's, uh. So Arno Atoll is unique in that it has three separate lagoons. Uh, so where I was, was way at the end of, of the atoll, but it was like a ten minute walk to a very nice reef. So at any time you want you could go out, unless it was really high tide and just, you know, go snorkeling on the reef.

NOBLE: [00:41:57] Okay, that doesn't sound too bad.

NG: [00:42:00] Um, we did have a transistor, transistor radio so we could get, uh, broadcasts from Majuro. We could get broadcasts from Kwajalein. We had Armed Forces radio.

NOBLE: [00:42:11] Oh, yeah. Yeah.

NG: [00:42:12] Which we could listen to. Um, at the end of my first year, the district rep, peace Corps rep, Mr. Haslett said, Ken, we never hear from you. So I'm giving you a walkie talkie.

NOBLE: [00:42:24] Oh.

NG: [00:42:25] So, uh, supposedly I was supposed to talk on the walkie talkie to the Peace Corps volunteer at the nearest village.

NOBLE: [00:42:33] Oh, okay.

NG: [00:42:34] So once a week, we're supposed to talk.

NOBLE: [00:42:36] Contact each other.

NG: [00:42:38] Although that didn't work out very well.

NOBLE: [00:42:40] So if you're alone on this atoll, there aren't other Peace Corps volunteers right around you. There might be a couple of days walk. Who did you hang out with? Who did you socialize with?

NG: [00:42:52] Well, partly the kids. Um, I had brought a, uh, like, a kickball, but we used to use it as a, as a volleyball. So there was a net. So, you know, anyone could come and play volleyball. They're very good at sports. Um, so they played this version of, like, softball as well.

NOBLE: [00:43:14] Mm hmm.

NG: [00:43:15] Um, sometimes I'd hang out with my adopted family. Again, I think we had a very nice relationship.

NOBLE: [00:43:21] Oh good. Yeah. Were there children in that family?

NG: [00:43:24] Yes. So I think in, in the Marshall Islands, it's such a small place that everybody is related to everybody. And everybody gossips about

everybody. And you're the new kid on the block. So they're going to gossip about you.

NOBLE: [00:43:40] Eyes are upon you.

NG: [00:43:41] But I think part of the problem with that, not so much the gossiping, is that, uh, problems get swept under the rug. You know, no one wants a confrontation if they can help it. So as a result of that, of course, you have strong teachers, you have weak teachers. Weak teachers essentially get transferred from village to village to village. So no one village gets stuck with that particular weak teacher and sort of everybody knows who they are, I guess, over time.

NOBLE: [00:44:14] Mm hmm.

NG: [00:44:15] Um, another sort of result is that if you're on the outer island, there's very little accountability. So, you know, if the fishing is good and I don't show up at school, no one's going to say, okay, you don't get paid for today because, okay, I was never sick. I never missed a day of school, right? And they said, okay, of course. I mean, as a Peace Corps volunteer, it doesn't matter. But as a native teacher, right? There's no accountability. The only accountability is who passes the high school entrance test.

NOBLE: [00:44:46] That's right.

NG: [00:44:47] So if nobody passes, then obviously that's sort of like big question mark. What's going on at that village? What's going on at that school? And, uh.

NOBLE: [00:44:56] And you didn't get sick all that time?

NG: [00:45:00] Uh, no, I didn't say that.

NOBLE: [00:45:02] Okay.

NG: [00:45:03] But, I mean, okay, so when I initially was out on Langor, of course, I'm cooking for myself for the first time. You know, you got to

figure out, okay, this canned food can stay out of the can for X number of hours before it goes bad.

NOBLE: [00:45:15] You didn't have electricity, right?

NG: [00:45:17] No. No electricity, no running water.

NOBLE: [00:45:19] Right. Right.

NOBLE: [00:45:20] How did you heat? So you had to boil your water?

NG: [00:45:24] No. I mean, I think when we, we arrived in Majuro, that was one of the big question marks. You say, okay, you guys are all going to get diarrhea at some point because you're going to drink the water. And, you know, so I think that, uh. I remember when we left San Francisco and landed in Hawaii en route to Micronesia. So we left foggy San Francisco. We arrived in Honolulu. It's 10:00 at night. We get off the plane and it's like walking into a sauna.

NOBLE: [00:45:56] Oh, boy. Yeah.

NG: [00:45:57] Oh, gosh. You know, we're going to live in this for two years, you know?

NOBLE: [00:46:01] Yeah.

NG: [00:46:02] Uh, so then again, we arrived in Majuro and.

NOBLE: [00:46:06] Was that like Hawaii? Hot?

NG: [00:46:08] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:46:08] Humid?

NG: [00:46:08] It's tropical. Yeah. So the question. Okay, who's going to be the first to drink the local water? You do it, no, you do it. Yeah. I mean, okay, it

wasn't quite like that, but it was sort of like that because we knew at some point you're going to have to do it.

NOBLE: [00:46:22] Well, if you're a guest in someone's home and they offer you something, isn't that usually the time where you don't want to refuse?

NG: [00:46:29] Yeah, but yeah, you don't want to refuse. But, uh, so to answer your question, no, you don't usually boil the water. Um, so, uh, you have lots of rain in most, most of the islands. You have a wet season and you have a dry season. So the wet season is about nine months of the year. So the rain water is caught in catchments. So we have big concrete tanks. So the water pours off the school roof and, or whatever it's caught in, into the catchment. So hopefully that makes you through the dry season when it's not raining so much. Uh, so you have water from there that you use for washing, for drinking, for cooking. And you also have an aquifer. So because freshwater is lighter than saltwater, so it rains the water, the freshwater seeps into the ground, but it sits above the seawater.

NOBLE: [00:47:29] Oh.

NG: [00:47:30] So people have dug wells so they can get fresh water that way. And sometimes it's quite drinkable and sometimes it's kind of murky depending on the tide situation.

NOBLE: [00:47:40] Mm hmm.

NG: [00:47:42] And they're having a big problem with that now because with the sea levels rising, they have higher and higher tides. So the salt water is washing up onto more and more of the land, and it's inundating the freshwater aquifer and destroying the native vegetation.

NOBLE: [00:48:02] That's right.

NG: [00:48:03] So. Um, so again in the Marshall Islands there, the average height above sea level is like probably less than ten feet. So when there's a typhoon, it just washes over the whole place.

NOBLE: [00:48:19] Yeah. Did you experience any, um?

NG: [00:48:21] No. There was.

NOBLE: [00:48:22] Powerful storms?

NG: [00:48:23] There was one storm that we had about 40 mile an hour winds, and people were worried. People were kind of listening to the radio really hard. But they do get typhoons there every few years and it's bad news. Where were we?

NOBLE: [00:48:39] Oh, we were talking about your health.

NG: [00:48:42] Okay. So. Yeah. So when I was living by myself at first, you know, there's one issue where I ate something that I shouldn't have eaten, and I got sick, and.

NOBLE: [00:48:50] And you're so isolated out there. How do you, if you needed a Peace Corps doctor, how would you?

NG: [00:48:57] You're not going to get one. Um, so again, isolation is physical and mental. So like I say, if you're sick, you're in trouble. Um, there was one volunteer in the group before mine who, um, someone had caught a shark and dragged it up on the beach.

NOBLE: [00:49:19] Mm hmm.

NG: [00:49:20] And he decided he wanted to open the shark's mouth and take a picture. So he had, there were two Peace Corps volunteers in that village. Um, so they opened up the shark's mouth, they put a stick in there and the stick broke with the guy's hand inside the shark's mouth.

NOBLE: [00:49:40] Oh.

NG: [00:49:41] So Carl was in a heap of trouble.

NOBLE: [00:49:45] Yeah.

NG: [00:49:45] So, um, fortunately.

NOBLE: [00:49:48] And the shark is still alive?

NG: [00:49:49] No, the shark is dead, but it doesn't matter. Um, so fortunately, at that village, actually, that was a village where I was my third year. They had a working shortwave radio so they could call in to Majuro and say, hey, we need a medevac. So they were able to send the seaplane, there was one seaplane at that time, to medevac him. Uh, so that's. Where I was, we didn't have a shortwave radio.

NOBLE: [00:50:18] Right.

NG: [00:50:19] Because it was a small village. So if I'd gotten really sick, they would have to get word to a village that did have a radio and say, hey, we need a medevac.

NOBLE: [00:50:29] And that would be hours before that message would get through.

NG: [00:50:31] Yeah, so who knows? Um, and then my third year in the Peace Corps, there was about a week where I had some sort of, like a stomach flu or something. And if I could have quit, I would have quit. I was, that's another part of the story. But so my third year in the Peace Corps after, when I was extending.

NOBLE: [00:50:55] And why did you decide to extend?

NG: [00:50:57] Well, because I liked the place overall. I liked the kids, and I didn't feel I was ready to go back because I knew going back to the American classroom is going to be so different.

NOBLE: [00:51:08] That's right. And were you still eligible for the draft?

NG: [00:51:10] No, because my draft number was like 200 something. So I knew that wasn't a problem for me, thankfully. Um. So my third year I was

sent to a different village, a different atoll entirely. So I was on Mili Island, Mili Atoll. And they had had, because it was a big village, they had had a lot of Peace Corps volunteers there before me. And uh, so my adopted family was great because I had met one of their relatives in my previous assignment. So when I was transferred to Mili, I said, okay, this is your family. They're going to take care of you. And they were great.

NG: [00:51:57] But for the most part, the other people in the village say, okay, you're the new Peace Corps. That's nice. So I was very much taken for granted. Not by my kids, not by the students, but by the rest of the community. They'd just say okay. And before me, they had some very good, strong volunteers. And so they'd say, okay, you're just another one. They didn't know I was the last one.

NOBLE: [00:52:20] Oh that's right. And did you know, at that point?

NG: [00:52:23] Yeah, I knew there was no more teachers coming out.

NOBLE: [00:52:25] Yeah.

NG: [00:52:27] Uh, so part of the problem there was the shortwave. The generator for the shortwave radio went out after one month.

NOBLE: [00:52:37] Oh.

NG: [00:52:37] So for the last eight months I was there, there was no radio contact at all. For the last six months I was there, I got no mail at all.

NOBLE: [00:52:46] Oh.

NG: [00:52:47] Because you're dependent on these, uh, tramp steamers to come out to pick up copra and to bring out your mail.

NOBLE: [00:52:54] Yeah.

NG: [00:52:55] So either the ship wouldn't come, the weather was bad, the ship got rerouted, or the ship would come out and Peace Corps hadn't put my

mail on board. So I'm just going, oh. And then I got sick. And at that point I was ready to go.

NOBLE: [00:53:11] Yeah.

NG: [00:53:12] But there's no way to get off your island.

NOBLE: [00:53:14] Right.

NG: [00:53:15] There's nowhere to go. So you're just like, okay.

NOBLE: [00:53:20] And so you just had to let time take care of your illness, and?

NG: [00:53:23] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:53:24] Eventually you bounced back?

NG: [00:53:26] Yeah. So, you know, by then, okay. You're used to the humidity. You're used to the mosquitoes. You're used to eating the same food, you know, limited food. And, uh. But again, so from my first year where I have a village was really welcoming. My third year I had a village which was just the opposite.

NOBLE: [00:53:49] Yeah. How disappointing.

NG: [00:53:52] Yeah. So. But getting back to the high school testing. So at the end of my second year, even though I wasn't the full time teacher in that classroom in my home village, again, I said, okay, all the seventh graders take the test. All the eighth graders take the test. They all passed.

NOBLE: [00:54:11] Wow! All of them?

NG: [00:54:13] All of them passed.

NOBLE: [00:54:14] That must have made you feel wonderful.

NG: [00:54:15] And third year, the same. All the seventh graders take the test. All the eighth graders take the test. They all passed.

NOBLE: [00:54:20] Oh my goodness.

NG: [00:54:21] You know. So really, that was.

NOBLE: [00:54:24] That's gratifying.

NG: [00:54:25] That's something I can, you know, say yeah. That's because, okay, yeah. There were good teachers ahead of me who contributed to that, of course. But, you know, I'm the one that got them through that test.

NOBLE: [00:54:37] You got them over that test and out to further their education.

NG: [00:54:40] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:54:40] It's really making a difference.

NG: [00:54:41] There was a big debate in Peace Corps at that time, too, that does Peace Corps really belong here?

NOBLE: [00:54:47] Mm hmm.

NG: [00:54:48] Because you know, the, the con argument is we're just Americanizing these people and is that what they really want? You know, because we're here introducing American curriculum. We're here as Peace Corps volunteers teaching about American culture.

NOBLE: [00:55:05] Mm hmm.

NG: [00:55:05] You know, and so the counter argument was, well, what's left of their native culture, right? The Spanish have been here, the Germans have been here, the Japanese have been here. The missionaries are still here. And yes, they do still have elements of their, their native culture. And we're trying to respect that. Um. But to the extent that they're going to

move ahead in the modern world, it's going to be through education. And we're here as teachers to try and open that door for them.

NOBLE: [00:55:36] Right. So let them go into secondary.

NG: [00:55:40] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:55:40] Secondary school. Um, is there anything else you'd like to say about your time there in, uh, Micronesia?

NG: [00:55:55] Well, I think another sort of element is that they had, the people had more contact with the American military and American officialdom. Uh, so again, as Peace Corps volunteers, we're out there working at the grassroots level. And there was a certain amount of novelty to that, I guess, in that, um, there was concern about nuclear fallout, okay? The U.S. had been doing all this nuclear testing.

NOBLE: [00:56:24] Yeah.

NG: [00:56:25] People had been moved off those atolls, um, before the testing. And actually, one of the volunteers in my group, Joe Mozerkowitz, was assigned to Bikini Atoll. They were trying to resettle Bikini Atoll, and he was the first volunteer to go with that group, uh, to live on Bikini. And after a year at the Peace Corps doctor said, no, we're not sending you back.

NOBLE: [00:56:50] It's too much radiation.

NG: [00:56:51] Yeah. So, um.

NOBLE: [00:56:53] Are you still in touch with him? Has he been?

NG: [00:56:56] Unfortunately not. Yeah. But another concern was, well, there's migratory fish that go through there, right? So are those safe to eat?

NOBLE: [00:57:06] Yeah.

NG: [00:57:07] Good question. You know, so, um. So I think, you know, as Peace Corps volunteers, we had a little more access to information and we could try and allay some of those fears, perhaps. Um, and then, uh, since then, I'm still in contact with a few of the volunteers that trained, served together.

NOBLE: [00:57:29] In the group. Yeah, yeah.

NG: [00:57:31] So about four and they're, you know, sort of a network. They're in contact with a couple of others. Um, actually, Kathy Oliverio was a volunteer in my group, and she is, uh, she stayed and got married in the Marshall Islands.

NOBLE: [00:57:49] To a Marshallese person?

NG: [00:57:51] Yes. And her husband was the first Marshallese representative to the United Nations.

NOBLE: [00:57:59] Oh, my.

NG: [00:58:00] How about that?

NOBLE: [00:58:02] Wow.

NG: [00:58:03] You know, so, uh.

NOBLE: [00:58:06] That's very impressive. You asked that question about whether Peace Corps belonged there, that that was a burning question for Peace Corps. What about your opinion there? Do you think it was good that you were there?

NG: [00:58:18] Overall, yeah. I mean, I'd heard in, not in my district so much, but I'd heard that some volunteers had resigned, like in protest in, in another district in Micronesia, just so even.

NOBLE: [00:58:31] In protest because they thought that they were?

NG: [00:58:33] The U.S. didn't belong there. And you could see that, that, um, I think it was my second or third year there. The United States started offering a school lunch program.

NOBLE: [00:58:50] Oh.

NG: [00:58:52] And since, because most people live off the land, they don't have a salary.

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

NG: [00:59:00] So it's very rare. You know, so as a teacher, you're one of the few people who has a salary.

NOBLE: [00:59:05] Yeah. Even as modest as it was it was more than.

NG: [00:59:08] So unless you have, you know, like a business or you're a teacher or you're a government official, you live off the land, you live off the ocean. So all the people essentially qualify as impoverished people. And here's the U.S. with freebies. Oh, free school lunch. Free school lunch. So we're all kind of going, really? So in a way, yeah. Here's the U.S. maybe intending well, maybe not, but essentially they're undermining the local economy, the local culture. Here, we're giving you canned food from the U.S.

NOBLE: [00:59:43] The implied message being you can't take care of your kids well enough by providing them with what they need.

NG: [00:59:48] No, but I think the message is seeing how generous Uncle Sam is.

NOBLE: [00:59:52] Ah.

NG: [00:59:53] So when you come to vote, you want to be independent or do you want to become U.S. territory?

NOBLE: [00:59:58] Oh, I see.

NG: [00:59:58] We're going to take care of you, right?

NOBLE: [01:00:00] Uh huh, uh huh.

NG: [01:00:00] Is sort of the message I was getting. Um, and so, yeah, we could see. Yeah. Well, is Peace Corps doing the same thing? Well, you could argue that it was, you know, here's the American way and. You want to turn back the clock and, you know, be Marshallese of 200 years ago or something, I don't know. I mean, it wasn't, you know, vote yes, thumbs up or thumbs down, but you could interpret it that way. So.

NOBLE: [01:00:34] And yet you were helping kids to pass that exam and be able to further their education, and training teachers to perhaps improve their methods of teaching.

NG: [01:00:44] Well, that was I think one of the goals. Yeah, one of the achievements.

NOBLE: [01:00:49] Yeah.

NG: [01:00:51] So whether or not you accept that, you know, do you belong there or not? So I mean that was our, our program, you know, to improve the education.

NOBLE: [01:01:00] You had a trip back to the States, probably between your second and third years. What was that like coming home and then going back?

NG: [01:01:09] Um. Well, again, I think my, my family was supportive of my going into the Peace Corps. And, you know, I, my father had died in an accident when I was in 11th grade.

NOBLE: [01:01:21] Oh, sorry.

NG: [01:01:22] So my mother was still sort of, um, had her hands full raising my younger brother and sister. And then also at, uh, she went back into

nursing as a, uh, as a school nurse. So, uh, you know, everyone's kind of doing their own thing. And then my brother was off in the military.

NOBLE: [01:01:44] That's right.

NG: [01:01:45] In Japan. Um, so, you know, it was nice to be home, but, you know, the grass is always greener sometimes. So, you know, going back to Micronesia for me wasn't an issue, was that.

NOBLE: [01:02:00] When you went back and you entered Micronesia the second time, your eyes were more open. You had, you knew what you were going back to more or less.

NG: [01:02:08] Right.

NOBLE: [01:02:10] The coldness of that third community was.

NG: [01:02:12] Actually I remember, um, flying back into San Francisco and there's this cloud of pollution there, and just going, ugh. Back home. I mean, when you're living in it, of course, you don't notice it at all. But flying in, you're going, oh gosh.

NOBLE: [01:02:31] Yeah, yeah. That was a reality check right there about your own home.

NG: [01:02:38] So after I returned home. So I was working for a bit for Wilderness Press, and then I was working for Social Security and unhappy with that job. So I resigned.

NOBLE: [01:02:51] The desk job?

NG: [01:02:53] Right. It was at the programing, Regional Programing Center. So it wasn't at a district office where you have direct contact with the public, but it's just doing paperwork, crunching numbers.

NOBLE: [01:03:04] Yeah.

NG: [01:03:04] Um, which is necessary. But I decided I didn't want to do that. So I saw, um, a teaching opportunity in English as a second language at Berkeley Adult School.

NOBLE: [01:03:18] Uh huh.

NG: [01:03:19] And at that time we had hundreds of thousands of Indochinese refugees being relocated in the U.S. So there was a big demand for that.

NOBLE: [01:03:27] And we're now in 1980, somewhere around there?

NG: [01:03:31] No, um, let's see. Came back. Yeah. So around 1980 is when I started teaching at Berkeley Adult School.

NOBLE: [01:03:37] So there would be Hmong refugees from Thailand.

NG: [01:03:41] Hmong, Laos. Right.

NOBLE: [01:03:42] Yeah. Yeah.

NG: [01:03:43] Vietnamese.

NOBLE: [01:03:44] Cambodians.

NG: [01:03:45] Cambodians. And again, at that time, there's no teaching materials for these people.

NOBLE: [01:03:51] Even in the United States?

NG: [01:03:52] So most adult ESL teaching materials at that time were geared for people going to college.

NOBLE: [01:04:00] Oh.

NG: [01:04:00] Coming to the U.S. to go to college.

NOBLE: [01:04:02] Yeah.

NG: [01:04:02] And here you have these people who don't even read their own language.

NOBLE: [01:04:08] That's right.

NG: [01:04:08] And there's nothing to teach them.

NOBLE: [01:04:11] Yeah.

NG: [01:04:11] So if you're lucky, there's like a bilingual dictionary, which the government came out eventually with these bilingual dictionaries.

NOBLE: [01:04:18] But even if the person is illiterate in their own language, that bilingual, right.

NG: [01:04:24] So, you know, I figured, okay, I've taught English as a second language before. I can probably do that. Um, so I was hired part time at Berkeley Adult School to teach ESL to these Indochinese refugees.

NOBLE: [01:04:39] And how big were your classes?

NG: [01:04:41] Oh, humongous.

NOBLE: [01:04:42] Oh.

NG: [01:04:43] We had 50, 60 people in the class.

NOBLE: [01:04:46] Oh, my. How can you teach a language that way?

NG: [01:04:48] Well, you do your best.

NOBLE: [01:04:49] Oh.

NG: [01:04:50] So, uh. After I'd done that for a couple of years, uh, San Francisco State had like an outreach program, and they were trying to recruit graduate students and say, okay, you get enough people together

and we'll come out and teach a class in your community. So they came to Berkeley and said, you know, we're offering a master's degree program in education. So I signed up for that. And so I was working part time, going to school part time. And so I was working towards a master's in education with an ESL emphasis.

NOBLE: [01:05:26] Mm hmm.

NG: [01:05:27] And as I was reaching the end of that, again, I found that, I'd heard that Peace Corps had a program in China. And I knew that, that my job at Berkeley Adult School would never be a full time job, because they don't.

NOBLE: [01:05:41] They keep you part time.

NG: [01:05:42] It's cheaper for them to have part time teachers.

NOBLE: [01:05:45] They don't have to pay benefits.

NG: [01:05:46] No benefits, no pension.

NOBLE: [01:05:47] Yeah.

NG: [01:05:47] Yeah. And so I called Peace Corps and say, I hear you have a program in China. And he said, well, we don't have a program, but the United Nations Volunteers has a program. So they said if you meet their qualifications, you can be a Peace Corps volunteer assigned to the UN Volunteers and go to China.

NOBLE: [01:06:09] And what would their qualifications be?

NG: [01:06:11] Right. So, as you know, for Peace Corps, you need to be 18 and an American citizen. So the UN at that time, there were a thousand UN Volunteers worldwide, and the qualifications were a master's degree or three years related work experience. So I was nearing the end of my master's.

NOBLE: [01:06:34] Right, you had both of those.

NG: [01:06:35] Both of these.

NOBLE: [01:06:36] Yeah.

NG: [01:06:36] Over three years teaching experience. So Peace Corps said, okay, fine. Go ahead, apply. And we'll submit your application to the UN. So, uh, I got a call from the Peace Corps. No, I got a call from the United Nations, and they said, um, we liked your application. We've submitted it to the Chinese, and the Chinese have turned you down.

NOBLE: [01:07:03] Oh.

NG: [01:07:05] I said oh.

NOBLE: [01:07:06] Why?

NG: [01:07:06] They never say why.

NOBLE: [01:07:08] Ah.

NG: [01:07:09] So they said, we have an English program in Malaysia. Do you want to go to Malaysia? And I said, okay, I'll go to Malaysia. So about two weeks later, they called me back and said, well.

NOBLE: [01:07:20] And this is still UNV, right?

NG: [01:07:22] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:07:22] Yeah.

NG: [01:07:23] We've resubmitted your application to the Chinese and this time they said yes. So where do you want to go?

NOBLE: [01:07:29] And you had your choice of what area of China?

NG: [01:07:32] You don't have a choice of area, but either China or Malaysia.

NOBLE: [01:07:36] Oh, I see, in that sense where. Okay.

NG: [01:07:39] So okay, I'll go to China. So, okay. fine. So okay, we'll, uh, we'll let you know when it's all been processed and so forth so.

NOBLE: [01:07:51] So now you're going to go in not as a Peace Corps volunteer exactly, but as a UN Volunteer. So the, the whole idea of training might be quite different or non-existent. How?

NG: [01:08:02] Exactly. So, um, the arrangement was that Peace Corps would be responsible for my transportation to and from my assign, China in this case. And afterwards, they would, you know, give me medical coverage, that normal Peace Corps sort of benefit. And the UN would be responsible for me while I was in country.

NOBLE: [01:08:27] Mm hmm.

NG: [01:08:27] Uh, as far as, uh, pay and so forth.

NOBLE: [01:08:30] Okay. Housing, accommodations and all that.

NG: [01:08:33] Right. Um. So the Peace Corps called me and said, well, we're waiting for your visa to come through from China, but we think it's going to be soon. So we're going to fly you out to Washington, D.C. So we did that. And so I'm doing paperwork in Washington and they said, well, your visa is still not here, your visa is still not here.

NOBLE: [01:08:57] And where, where were you living while you were in Washington?

NG: [01:09:01] Oh, some hotel.

NOBLE: [01:09:02] They put you up. Yeah.

NG: [01:09:03] And so the person I was liaising with said, okay, I got an idea. So he calls the Chinese embassy and says, okay, I want to talk to somebody in your mail room. Okay. So he's talking to the person in the mail room. Do you have any paperwork related to, you know, this and this and. Oh yeah? Okay. And so it had been sitting in their mail room. My visa had been sitting there. So, okay, you got your visa. So then they, they shipped me off to Geneva to go through the UN processing. So I was there for about three days and then.

NOBLE: [01:09:36] And now Peace Corps paid you to go from Washington to Geneva?

NG: [01:09:39] Right.

NOBLE: [01:09:39] Yeah.

NG: [01:09:39] But the, the glitch was I had to transfer planes in Paris, and I had like 30 minutes to transfer planes.

NOBLE: [01:09:50] On your way to Geneva?

NG: [01:09:52] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:09:52] Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

NG: [01:09:54] And, of course, there's no way you can transfer planes in 30 minutes. So I missed my flight.

NOBLE: [01:09:58] You're going through customs in France and.

NG: [01:10:01] Oh, and at this time, Charles de Gaulle Airport was just a real zoo. It was just you, you know. And I don't speak any French, right?

NOBLE: [01:10:12] Yeah.

NG: [01:10:13] So, you know, I finally get, get to China.

NOBLE: [01:10:15] Where did you land? You flew from Geneva, what? You had to go through some processing in Geneva.

NG: [01:10:22] Yeah. So Geneva, the plane went to Frankfurt. Frankfurt to Delhi. Delhi to Beijing.

NOBLE: [01:10:29] Okay. So then you get off the plane in Beijing.

NG: [01:10:33] Okay. So at that time there were, I was the 11th UN volunteer in China. Ten of us were teaching English and one guy from Burma was doing well pumps.

NOBLE: [01:10:46] Oh.

NG: [01:10:47] So the, uh.

NOBLE: [01:10:48] And your, your facility with Mandarin Chinese went back to two years in high school?

NG: [01:10:54] And a little bit of community college.

NOBLE: [01:10:56] Okay.

NG: [01:10:56] Right. So, um, so essentially there's no training for UN volunteers. They assume you know what you're doing. Um, and we were just sent individually. We never said, okay, you're together, we're going to train you guys to. And we're.

NOBLE: [01:11:12] But you spent a few days in Beijing with the UN people?

NG: [01:11:16] Right. With the UN people, and they set it up so we could borrow films from the, the British consulate. And there was also a teacher from the school I had been assigned to who also met me in Beijing.

NOBLE: [01:11:32] And what school, what city? What part of China were you assigned to?

NG: [01:11:37] I was assigned to the Chengdu College of Geology, which is, Chengdu is the provincial capital of Sichuan Province.

NOBLE: [01:11:48] Uh huh.

NG: [01:11:48] So sort of central western China, um, 3 million people. Although, uh, the Chinese educational system is quite a bit different from ours. Um, they have what they call key schools. So the key schools. In California, we have something a little bit similar. We have the University of California, which has ten campuses, but it's geared to serve the top one-eighth of all the high school students in California. So below the University of California, we have Cal State.

NOBLE: [01:12:30] State, right.

NG: [01:12:30] So there's about 29 Cal State campuses. Um, again, they're all four year universities. They're all comprehensive universities, but they take sort of the next tier of high school graduates. And then we have about 130 community colleges, uh, which are, initially they were geared toward people getting a two year degree. So in China you also have this sort of three tier system. So at the top you have what are called key schools like Beijing University, Tsinghua University. They get the best students, they get the best facilities, they get the best professors, they get the best funding.

NOBLE: [01:13:08] Mm hmm.

NG: [01:13:10] And then below that you have what are comprehensive schools. So it's a little bit like Cal State. So they get sort of the second best group of students. And then at the bottom you have third tier schools, which tend to be sort of technical schools. So Chengdu College of Geology is one of the third tier schools. So for a high school student in China, again you take a national exam if you want to go to university. It's sort of like our SAT or ACT. And as part of the application, you indicate where you would like to study and what you would like to major in. So then everybody takes the test and then the key schools go through and select who they want.

NOBLE: [01:14:02] Oh.

NG: [01:14:03] Say okay, you're accepted here. You're accepted here. We're done. We've taken as many students as we want. And then the second tier universities go through and choose from who they want.

NOBLE: [01:14:14] From who's left. Yes.

NG: [01:14:14] And the third tier students they go through and, you know, choose what's left. So since I was at a school of geology, most people in China don't want to be a geologist.

NOBLE: [01:14:33] Hmm.

NG: [01:14:34] Because most people in China live in the countryside where life is hard and it's not as cosmopolitan. So most people would prefer to be in a big city.

NOBLE: [01:14:44] Yeah.

NG: [01:14:45] But if you're a geologist, that means you have to go out in the field.

NOBLE: [01:14:50] That's right.

NG: [01:14:51] You have to go camping. You have to go hammer rocks. You have to go out in the desert and look for oil. So. So I'm at a school where you have students who are already considered sort of third caliber students.

NOBLE: [01:15:06] Yeah.

NG: [01:15:06] They're studying a subject that they don't really want to study necessarily. You're at a school where the professors don't necessarily want to be there.

NOBLE: [01:15:17] Oh, dear.

NG: [01:15:18] Where they got less funding than more prestigious schools. And here you are. You're the new kid on the block. You're going to help them improve their education system, right?

NOBLE: [01:15:28] The Peace Corps volunteer.

NG: [01:15:29] Sure, the UN volunteer. So in a way, you have sort of two and a half strikes against you in that you don't have the most motivated students necessarily. You don't have the most motivated faculty necessarily, or the best funding, and everybody has low expectations. So you kind of go, okay, what are we doing here? Um. So when I arrived in China.

NOBLE: [01:16:05] And you're alone, you're sent alone to this location?

NG: [01:16:08] Right. But again, that's, okay. I'll get into that. But, um, because of all the delays and so forth, when I arrived, it was like in the middle of the term. So the term had already started.

NOBLE: [01:16:22] Yeah.

NG: [01:16:23] Right. So the, well, let me describe the foreign language department at my school. So there were 30 English teachers, Chinese teachers of English.

NOBLE: [01:16:34] Yes.

NG: [01:16:36] And 20 of them had majored in Russian.

NOBLE: [01:16:43] Oh.

NG: [01:16:44] Because when they were going to university, China and Russia were friends forever, right? Until they weren't friends forever.

NOBLE: [01:16:51] Right. And so that was everybody's second language, Russian.

NG: [01:16:54] Right. So when they, they had all mastered Russian, and now they're told, no, you're an English teacher.

NOBLE: [01:17:00] Oh, how difficult.

NG: [01:17:01] So their English was modest. And then so you had the other ten teachers who had actually were younger and actually majored in English. So they were sort of the backbone of the, the English department. Um, so they said, okay. Um. For the rest of this term, you're going to be working with the English teachers. Said okay, fine.

NOBLE: [01:17:28] Teaching the English teachers or?

NG: [01:17:29] Yes. Working with the English teachers.

NOBLE: [01:17:31] Improving the English of the English teachers.

NG: [01:17:32] Okay. What can I do for you, right? I'm here to help you. What can I do for you? Said okay, um, we've heard of this book. What was the book? Um, Megatrends. So you're not familiar with Megatrends?

NOBLE: [01:17:47] I'm not.

NG: [01:17:47] Okay. It used to be a big, uh, bestseller back in the day, I guess. They said, can you get us copies of Megatrends? We'll study that.

NOBLE: [01:17:59] Huh.

NG: [01:17:59] I said okay.

NOBLE: [01:18:00] What is, what kind of book is it?

NG: [01:18:01] It's sort of a business book. It's like, um, we can sort of get a glimpse of the future by seeing what's on the cutting edge today.

NOBLE: [01:18:11] Oh, okay.

NG: [01:18:11] And we can get an edge, an idea of that, by looking in newspapers and journals and seeing, you know, what's the hot topic.

NOBLE: [01:18:19] Huh.

NG: [01:18:20] That was kind of the essence of that book. So I said, okay, so I wrote home and said, send me 30 copies of Megatrends. And so for the rest of the term, I would sit there with the English teachers and we would read through Megatrends.

NOBLE: [01:18:35] Okay. And make sense of it and increase their.

NG: [01:18:37] This is helping their English? I don't know.

NOBLE: [01:18:39] Well, was it? Were they picking up new vocabulary?

NG: [01:18:42] I imagine they were. [phone rings]

NOBLE: [01:18:44] Oh, I'm going to have to turn this off for just a second. [tape break] Okay. We're back. We're talking about, um, the students requesting Megatrends as the book that they would use in helping themselves to learn English.

NG: [01:19:00] Right. So in, in all the time I was in China, I was never asked to visit another teacher's classroom.

NOBLE: [01:19:09] Ah.

NG: [01:19:10] And the, the head of the department, Mr. Joe, was sort of an old fashioned traditionalist, uh, I guess, sort of teacher. And his English was not that good anyway.

NOBLE: [01:19:24] Yeah.

NG: [01:19:25] So like I was saying, there was not much motivation really to improve.

NOBLE: [01:19:31] Yeah.

NG: [01:19:32] And it wasn't just at my school because at, uh, at one time the UN said, okay, we're going to bring all our ten English teachers together and have a meeting. And we all had the same experience. And, uh, at that time in China and a lot of other Asian countries, they're using what we call a grammar translation method.

NOBLE: [01:19:54] Mm hmm.

NG: [01:19:55] So the concept is, the emphasis is on reading. And okay, so you sit there with your bilingual dictionary and you translate from this language to that language. And the feeling at that time was that we're not an open society. We're not going to have much contact with foreigners. All we want to do is read their journals.

NOBLE: [01:20:18] Ah, okay. Not converse.

NG: [01:20:20] Right. So the emphasis on reading so we can, you know, read your technical journals, um. So that style is changing thankfully, I think. Of course, in the West we don't teach that way anymore for the most part. So, uh, that was sort of frustrating for me. But some of the young, some of the teachers said, okay, we want to have free talk. So they would come to my apartment once or twice a week and we'd have free talk, which, which was conversational. And I think that, that was fun for me and I think fun for them.

NOBLE: [01:20:57] Yeah.

NG: [01:20:57] But so they got to know me, I got to know them. But again, to what extent that influenced their classroom, it's sort of hard to say. Um, but I think in China, there's a saying, the nail that sticks up gets hammered down. So, um, individualization is frowned upon. So everything comes from the top down. So since Mr. Joe was not really big on doing anything innovative, the department didn't do anything that was innovative. And not just his school.

NOBLE: [01:21:30] They wouldn't support you in what you might want to do.

NG: [01:21:33] Well, in my class, I could do kind of what I wanted. Um, so after the first term, I think every term I had a different class. It was sort of interesting. Um, Mr. Joe would come to my apartment and said, big smile on his face, and said, Mr. Ng, let's talk about your teaching assignment. And I said, okay, let's talk about my teaching assignment. And he said, we would like you to teach this class. I said, okay, fine. We would like you to teach this class. Okay, fine. We'd like you to teach this class. And I say, Mr. Joe, the UN agreement says I can only teach so many hours.

NOBLE: [01:22:09] Oh, yeah.

NG: [01:22:09] I would love to teach all these classes, you know, but. But so he said okay. So he would kind of retreat. He said, okay, well how about this class then. And I said okay, fine. So, uh.

NOBLE: [01:22:21] And you'd have how many teachers in your class?

NG: [01:22:25] Well.

NOBLE: [01:22:25] Teacher, students.

NG: [01:22:27] See, it was. That first half term was really the only term when I was working with Chinese teachers other than in free talk.

NOBLE: [01:22:36] Oh, I see.

NG: [01:22:37] Because then they would give me all the advanced students who no one else wanted to teach. So they would say, okay, we have graduate students. Okay. We have 75 of them. We have.

NOBLE: [01:22:50] In one class?

NG: [01:22:51] Well, they're broken up into three sections. So for one term, that's all I had. I had three sections, because my class size is limited to 25.

NOBLE: [01:23:01] Okay.

NG: [01:23:01] So okay, you have 25, 25, 25, okay. You have, you know, so many hours with each group. You're good. So I did that one term. One term I was working with, uh, faculty members who were preparing to take the VST, the Visiting Scholar Test. So for, uh, Chinese academics who want to study overseas, they have to pass an English test if they're going to the U.S. or Australia or so forth. So, um, I taught the VST class one term. And another term, the school had signed some joint agreement with a university in Germany, so they were about to send a dozen Chinese professors to go to Germany. And I said, okay. We want you to teach them English. I said, okay, why not German? No, I didn't say that.

NOBLE: [01:24:00] Yeah.

NG: [01:24:01] But that's what I was thinking.

NOBLE: [01:24:03] It could be that in Germany the classes were going to be taught in English.

NG: [01:24:06] Yeah, so that was going to be their common language.

NOBLE: [01:24:08] Yeah.

NG: [01:24:10] So I remember with that class, they were all petroleum geologists. So remember I was talking about getting films from the British Embassy?

NOBLE: [01:24:17] Oh yes.

NG: [01:24:18] So okay, I was looking through their catalog and they had a film about, um, drilling for oil in the North Sea. I said, okay, great. Here's a film I can get.

NOBLE: [01:24:27] Yeah.

NG: [01:24:28] So I request it from the British Embassy, and they sent it in the mail. And I'm showing it to my class, and they're talking about how they build this drilling rig. And then it's towed out to the North Sea and it's anchored, and then they start drilling different directions looking for oil, you know. And so film was over and I said, okay, any questions? And one professor raised his hand. Now, you have to understand that asking questions in China is like the opposite of asking questions in the U.S.

NOBLE: [01:25:00] Yeah.

NG: [01:25:00] So in the U.S., you know, ask questions. We want our students to ask questions.

NOBLE: [01:25:04] That's right, that's right.

NG: [01:25:05] Because, you know, do you understand? What don't you understand?

NOBLE: [01:25:07] Right, how do you know if you don't? Yeah.

NG: [01:25:09] But in China, if you have a question that implies that the teacher didn't do a good job of explaining it, right?

NOBLE: [01:25:15] Oh dear. Yeah.

NG: [01:25:15] So questions. So here's a question. And so he says, you know on that ship pulling, pulling the drilling rig out to the sea on the front, it said BP. He says, what's BP? I'm just going, oh, okay. British Petroleum, you've heard of British Petroleum? Okay. British Petroleum, you know. So at the time I was in China, again, there's not much contact with foreigners.

NOBLE: [01:25:44] Right, right.

NG: [01:25:45] Particularly Westerners.

NOBLE: [01:25:46] So it's so easy for us to make assumptions that we're all, we all have a common frame of reference, and then we discover that that's not there.

NG: [01:25:54] So as I, as we were discussing outside the library, actually, there was an earlier Peace Corps UNV at the same school that I was assigned to. Susan Sharp, um, was a geology major from Stanford.

NOBLE: [01:26:08] Hmm.

NG: [01:26:09] And she was sent to this school. She was a geologist, right? You go to a geological college. And she was frustrated there. Um, because she is teaching English but her background's in geology.

NOBLE: [01:26:24] Geology. Right.

NG: [01:26:25] So I actually, I met her before I went to China.

NOBLE: [01:26:27] You did?

NG: [01:26:28] Yes, she was living in the Bay area, San Francisco Bay area. So I had a chance to meet her and talk with her. Um, and at my college, there were also, um, three Australian college graduates who were there, as we call local hires. So they had like a letter of introduction to a Chinese professor who had studied at the University of Adelaide.

NOBLE: [01:26:59] Hmm.

NG: [01:27:00] So he helped them. They had all majored in Chinese, and they had this letter of introduction. He helped them get hired as English teachers. So of course, they're fluent in English, British English, Australian English.

NOBLE: [01:27:13] Yeah.

NG: [01:27:13] But they don't have any experience teaching. They don't really care about teaching. So they're there to, you know, improve their Chinese.

NOBLE: [01:27:20] Chinese, yeah.

NG: [01:27:21] I mean, they're nice people.

NOBLE: [01:27:23] Yeah.

NG: [01:27:23] But you know, you know, but you know, we, I scratch their back. They scratch my back at times. But so we had had fun together. And there was also one Japanese teacher from Japan. So he was a retired school principal. Um, but he didn't speak any English. So when we talked to him, it had to be in Chinese.

NOBLE: [01:27:43] Yeah.

NG: [01:27:44] So he was sort of interesting.

NOBLE: [01:27:45] So did you find that, um, the Chinese that you brought with you from years earlier in California was adequate?

NG: [01:27:55] Um. I could kind of get by. I had a phrasebook, which I relied on a lot. And the UN paid for a teacher.

NOBLE: [01:28:05] Hmm.

NG: [01:28:06] But again, I think, first, a lot of people in China at that time working with a foreigner is not something they wanted to do, they were just, they had this concept of spiritual pollution.

NOBLE: [01:28:19] Oh yeah.

NG: [01:28:20] And, you know, to come in contact with foreigner made, made you suspect, right? That you're going to be polluted now because, because of whatever.

NOBLE: [01:28:28] Mm hmm.

NG: [01:28:28] Uh, so they eventually found a retired elementary school teacher to teach us Chinese.

NOBLE: [01:28:33] Ah.

NG: [01:28:33] But again, the Australian ladies were taking class with me, and their Chinese was so much better than mine that it was kind of hard to keep up with.

NOBLE: [01:28:42] Yeah, yeah.

NG: [01:28:42] So that was kind of frustrating for me, um, that the Chinese lessons were not very helpful.

NOBLE: [01:28:48] And you were in China for how long?

NG: [01:28:51] Two years.

NOBLE: [01:28:52] Two years. And, and you were in Chengdu for the whole time?

NG: [01:28:55] No. Actually, in the summer there was no teaching for me to do. So we were free to travel. And I traveled a lot.

NOBLE: [01:29:03] Within China?

NG: [01:29:03] Within China. Um.

NOBLE: [01:29:05] Where did you go?

NG: [01:29:06] I went almost everywhere except to the northeastern part so.

NOBLE: [01:29:13] Northeastern would be like Dalian up there?

NG: [01:29:15] Right.

NOBLE: [01:29:16] Yeah.

NG: [01:29:17] So I went to.

NOBLE: [01:29:19] Did you get up to? Yeah. Oh, you did. Xinjiang?

NG: [01:29:22] I've been to Xinjiang. I've been to Kunming. I've being to Hangzhou. Uh. Climbed Huangshan, Yellow Mountain, went down the Yangtze River to Wuhan and to Guilin. So again, the UN pay was pretty good. And, but again, at that time the Chinese had a dual currency system. So they had what was called convertible money, which you could convert to dollars or francs or whatever you wanted. And most of our pay was in non-convertible money. So you had to use it in China.

NOBLE: [01:29:57] In China. Yeah.

NG: [01:29:59] So some people kind of got around that they would, you know, buy rugs and take them home or. So I bought gold coins.

NOBLE: [01:30:07] Oh, uh huh.

NOBLE: [01:30:10] And when you were back in, uh, at your post at the geology college, um, you're living in an apartment?

NG: [01:30:20] Well, most of the time. But initially, see, the, the apartment had been provided for Susan Sharp, the previous volunteer. So I.

NOBLE: [01:30:32] And was Susan also a Peace Corps volunteer slash UNV?

NG: [01:30:36] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:30:37] Yeah.

NG: [01:30:37] So of the, um, ten English teachers from the UN, about half of us were Americans and half were from UK or Mauritius, places like that. Um, but the school had given Susan's apartment to the three Australian teachers. So when I got there, I was given a room at the university guest house, which was not as good. Um, you know, we had a, uh, you didn't have a private bathroom or a private shower or. I mean, I can't complain. I

mean, I was a little bit depressed when I got there, I admit, because I was, um, just because of personal reasons. I was away from my girlfriend.

NOBLE: [01:31:18] Hmm.

NG: [01:31:20] Um. But then I said, hey, look, compared to what you had in Micronesia, this is a whole lot better.

NOBLE: [01:31:28] Right.

NG: [01:31:28] So how can you be complaining about not having a private bathroom or, you know, you have running water, you have electricity.

NOBLE: [01:31:36] And you're on the campus of the college?

NG: [01:31:38] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:31:38] So you don't have to spend an hour getting to and from campus.

NG: [01:31:41] No. That's correct. Um, well, again, in China at that time we had what's called the iron rice bowl system. So.

NOBLE: [01:31:50] What was that?

NG: [01:31:52] Uh, everybody is assigned to a work unit. Now, it might be an agricultural commune. It might be a factory, it might be a school. And the school is responsible for you, your housing, your medical care, your family, for the rest of your life.

NOBLE: [01:32:13] Oh.

NG: [01:32:13] So that's the iron rice bowl. They, they fill your rice bowl, or not. And the trade off is you don't have any individual freedom to work where you want, to move where you want, to live where you want. Although that's changed since the 1980s.

NOBLE: [01:32:30] Mm hmm.

NG: [01:32:31] Um, so. It was very strange situation to me in that sometimes you would have, you'd be talking to a teacher and, you know, he's married and said, well, my wife is teaching in a, she's not even in the same province. Her work unit is, you know.

NOBLE: [01:32:48] Oh.

NG: [01:32:49] A day away on, on the train. So the only time they see one another is during holidays or something.

NOBLE: [01:32:54] Yeah, yeah.

NG: [01:32:54] And sort of the converse of that, you have people in the same work unit who were enemies to the death during the Cultural Revolution. You had people on the left, people on the right, and yet here they are for life. We're in the same work unit.

NOBLE: [01:33:11] Yeah.

NG: [01:33:11] And they know who they are. I mean, eventually you kind of know, okay, this guy doesn't like this guy, but when you show up, you don't have a clue.

NOBLE: [01:33:20] No.

NG: [01:33:20] Right, who these people are or what their alliances used to be.

NOBLE: [01:33:25] Yeah.

NG: [01:33:26] So.

NOBLE: [01:33:27] It takes a long time to figure those things out.

NG: [01:33:29] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:33:32] Are you glad you did it?

NG: [01:33:34] You know, the first year in China overall I think was, was good. The second year was just kind of more of the same. And, uh, I mean, I was there because I had committed for two years, but one year probably would have been enough.

NOBLE: [01:33:48] Mm hmm. So you've, you've had volunteer experience in these two radically different places, Micronesia and China.

NG: [01:33:57] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:33:58] Um, it's clear that you contributed a lot. Um, did you, what did you come away with? In what way were you benefited by that? What did you learn?

NG: [01:34:12] I think, um. Well, I think career wise it helped me focus on that, instead of being an elementary teacher, which is what I was when I went to Micronesia, that I was able to say, okay, I don't want to try and master a classroom of 30 kids, 35 kids, and teach 20 different subjects. That if I can just focus on teaching English as a second language, that's more doable for me. So I think that was important. I think also, um, just as the Chinese didn't have much contact with Westerners, Westerners at that time didn't have much contact with the Chinese.

NOBLE: [01:34:51] Yeah.

NG: [01:34:51] And in fact, we were growing up, you know, the communists are our enemies.

NOBLE: [01:34:55] That's right.

NG: [01:34:55] They're going to, you know, bomb us and we're going to bomb them. And I think, again, at the grassroots level, when you get over there, it's, you see through all the propaganda. You know, they're people too. They have needs, the same needs you do. They, they live in a much less

free system. And yet, uh, at the same time, they don't lock their doors at night. We do.

NOBLE: [01:35:22] Yeah.

NG: [01:35:22] They don't have gun problems. And we do. I mean, they have other problems, but I think it's, uh, just widens your eyes to travel. Not as a tourist, but actually to live there and see what the normal life is for these people.

NOBLE: [01:35:41] Yeah.

NG: [01:35:42] And I think that's, uh, very important.

NOBLE: [01:35:46] Do you see yourself, or have you ever gone back to either Micronesia or China?

NG: [01:35:50] I've been back to China, um, a number of times. Actually, uh, I ended up marrying one of my students from China.

NOBLE: [01:35:58] Oh, you did? So that girlfriend you left behind at home.

NG: [01:36:02] No, no, no, I wish.

NOBLE: [01:36:04] Past tense.

NG: [01:36:05] No. Um. So, uh, she was one of my graduate students in China. And after, um, she left to go back to her city where her work unit was, that we maintained a correspondence. And then she met an American professor, and he offered her a chance to come to Oklahoma and do her PhD with him.

NOBLE: [01:36:27] Ah.

NG: [01:36:28] So, um, I acted as her financial guarantor because I guess he couldn't offer her enough money, just as a, as a grad student to make the

U.S. government happy. So she had to get someone else to guarantee that she wouldn't become a ward of the state or something.

NOBLE: [01:36:47] Oh yeah, yeah. yeah.

NG: [01:36:48] Um, so since then we got married. But in China, we didn't have any sort of relationship other than teacher student.

NOBLE: [01:36:55] Mm hmm.

NG: [01:36:56] So because of that, I've been back to China several times to visit her relatives.

NOBLE: [01:37:01] Yes.

NG: [01:37:02] It's been big, big changes. Although I've never gone back to Chengdu.

NOBLE: [01:37:06] Uh huh.

NG: [01:37:08] So. And Micronesia, I've not been back. It's just too remote. It's hard to get to.

NOBLE: [01:37:15] Are you in touch? You said you were still in touch with a few of the volunteers from, from Micronesia?

NG: [01:37:20] Right.

NOBLE: [01:37:21] Yeah.

NG: [01:37:23] And I'm, yeah, I'm still active with the returned volunteer group in the local area.

NOBLE: [01:37:28] Yes. And your local area is, uh, Riverside, right?

NG: [01:37:32] Well, it's called Inland Empire. So Riverside County stretches all the way out to Nevada actually, it's a big place.

NOBLE: [01:37:38] Yeah.

NG: [01:37:40] So, uh. The sites that, when I was teaching at Illinois at one point.

NOBLE: [01:37:47] Really? Where?

NG: [01:37:52] A variety of schools, um, Louis University is, uh, in Romeoville. I've taught in community colleges in the Chicago area. And I was teaching at a, uh, Olivet, is a private religious school south of Chicago. All the Nazarene. So I was teaching a class on third world Asian history. I guess they had a three course sequence. So one term would be Asia, one term would be Africa, one term would be South America. So I was asked to teach the Asian term. So I had a former Peace Corps volunteer come out and talk to the class, and actually he had served in Africa.

NOBLE: [01:38:40] Mm hmm.

NG: [01:38:41] But I figured anything, you know.

NOBLE: [01:38:43] Yeah.

NG: [01:38:44] Get a new face in there and.

NOBLE: [01:38:46] There are commonalities.

NG: [01:38:47] Yeah. So, yeah. A couple of years ago I guess the local Peace Corps recruiter started this sort of informal group of RPCVs. So we get together every couple of months and just have a dinner. Or sometimes she'll have a recruiting event and say, can you guys come and share your experience?

NOBLE: [01:39:10] Right, right.

NG: [01:39:10] And so we've done that. We've done a project with Habitat for Humanity.

NOBLE: [01:39:16] Oh, excellent.

NG: [01:39:16] Things like that.

NOBLE: [01:39:17] Good, good. That's great. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your experience as a volunteer?

NG: [01:39:26] Well, I think like a lot of people, we find it sort of a unique challenge. But there's also many positive things that you can take away from that if it works out. And it makes you grow up in many ways. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:39:42] Thank you, Ken.

NG: [01:39:42] All right, my pleasure.

NOBLE: [01:39:43] Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]