

Paul Gilman Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Paul Gilman served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali from 1997 to 2000 on an agriculture project and as a volunteer leader.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Paul Gilman

March 5, 2017
Portland, Oregon

By Phyllis Noble

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

NOBLE: [00:00:04] This is Phyllis Noble. Today is March 5th, 2017. I'm interviewing Paul Gilman, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali from 1997 to 2000, in an, in a, working in the agriculture sector. Hi, Paul.

GILMAN: [00:00:23] Hi.

NOBLE: [00:00:24] We are in Portland, Oregon, this morning. Um, Paul, let's get started by talking about who you were before you joined the Peace Corps. Where were you born?

GILMAN: [00:00:34] I was born in Evanston, uh, outside of Chicago. Um, my parents were, uh, graduate students at Northwestern.

NOBLE: [00:00:44] At Northwestern? Yeah. And did you have brothers and sisters?

GILMAN: [00:00:47] Um, I have a younger sister. She's, um, a couple of years younger than me. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:00:52] So then when you, as you got older, did you go to school in Evanston?

GILMAN: [00:00:56] Uh, well, my, my parents ended up leaving the States to go teach in Zaire, which is now Congo. Um, so, so when I was about two, um, I moved with them to Congo. And so I ended up doing, uh, my elementary school education there.

NOBLE: [00:01:16] And were you in an international school or were you going to school along with Congolese kids?

GILMAN: [00:01:22] Um, I was going to school with Congolese kids. So.

NOBLE: [00:01:26] How unique.

GILMAN: [00:01:27] Yeah. My parents made the decision to send my sister and I to, to the, the same, uh, schools that the their, um. Zairian colleagues at the university were sending their kids to. So they were good schools, but they were the local schools rather than the international ones.

NOBLE: [00:01:45] Yeah. So, um. So you were in Zaire then from age two until?

GILMAN: [00:01:51] Um, we moved to the States, uh, when I was 11.

NOBLE: [00:01:54] Okay. So that would be like first grade through fifth grade or so.

GILMAN: [00:01:58] Right.

NOBLE: [00:01:58] In, uh, so in Zaire. And so. Wow. You must have picked up, uh, some languages. Uh.

GILMAN: [00:02:08] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:02:08] From your fellow students. What were you speaking?

GILMAN: [00:02:11] Yeah. So when I was, so when I was real little, um, we were in Kisangani, which is in the sort of northeast part of the country and the, uh, the main language in the city anyway there was, was Swahili. And so, um, but from a, from a young age, I mean, in, in a country like, like then Zaire people speak all kinds of different languages. So I was exposed to lots of different languages, and I spoke French and English and Swahili and some Lingala, which is kind of sort of a national lingua franca there. Um, uh. So yeah, I was exposed to a lot of different languages from a very young age.

NOBLE: [00:02:54] How very unique. Wonderful. And then when you were 11, you came back to the States. Your family moved back to the States?

GILMAN: [00:03:01] Yeah, yeah. So for me, it was, I mean, I guess it was moving back since I was originally born in Evanston, but it was really moving to the States for the first time.

NOBLE: [00:03:08] For the first time for you. Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:03:11] Um, so yeah, so I was, I was, uh, um, we ended up in Billings, Montana. Um. And so, yeah, it was a big change from, from, when I. For my later elementary school years, I was in Lubumbashi in Zaire, which is in the southern part of the country.

NOBLE: [00:03:28] Oh, wait. So, so you were in Montana for just a couple of years?

GILMAN: [00:03:34] No. So from, from Zaire, we moved to Montana.

NOBLE: [00:03:37] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:03:37] And I did my junior high years there.

NOBLE: [00:03:39] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:03:40] And then we moved to Tennessee.

NOBLE: [00:03:41] Oh, I see.

GILMAN: [00:03:42] Did my high school there.

NOBLE: [00:03:43] Okay, so when you're talking about Lubumbashi, we're still talking about, uh, uh, before you came back to the United States.

GILMAN: [00:03:49] Right. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:03:50] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:03:51] So, yeah. So the, the Zaire segment was, was Kisangani and then Lubumbashi.

NOBLE: [00:03:57] I see.

GILMAN: [00:03:57] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:03:58] Okay. And then Montana. And so junior high in Montana.

GILMAN: [00:04:04] Yeah. And high school in Tennessee.

NOBLE: [00:04:06] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:04:07] Um, and then uh, and then I went to college in, in Ohio. So.

NOBLE: [00:04:14] Before we go to college, um, what was it like being in high school? What sort of things did you get involved in?

GILMAN: [00:04:21] Well, when I was in, when we moved to, uh, to Billings, um, so this was, this was, uh, I was in sixth grade. Um, it so happened that the public schools there had a very good music program. And one of the things that my parents used to talk to me about moving to the U.S. from Zaire was that that you can learn to play a musical instrument, because my grandfather had been, was a violinist. So, um, so anyway, I got interested in playing the French horn of all things when, as when we

moved to Billings. And so when I was in high school, I was very serious about playing the horn, and I used to, I took, I had private lessons and practiced a lot on my own. And, um, so that, that was kind of my main focus. I, uh, like I would say that kind of got me through high school.

NOBLE: [00:05:12] What were your parents doing meanwhile?

GILMAN: [00:05:14] Uh, my parents were, uh, my, my, in high school, my mother was teaching at the university in, uh, this was in Clarksville, Tennessee. Um, and my father was writing fiction.

NOBLE: [00:05:30] How wonderful.

GILMAN: [00:05:31] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:05:33] Um. Did you have summer jobs?

GILMAN: [00:05:36] Um, I did, yeah, I did. I worked, um, uh, not through, throughout high school, but my junior and senior years in high school I worked at a fast food place to save money.

NOBLE: [00:05:51] So you got your taste of that?

GILMAN: [00:05:53] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:05:54] And then, um, you graduate from high school and you, you go to. Where did you go to college?

GILMAN: [00:06:02] I went to college at Oberlin, uh.

NOBLE: [00:06:05] Ah, yes.

GILMAN: [00:06:05] In Ohio and got into the conservatory there. So I was studying music.

NOBLE: [00:06:09] Music at Oberlin.

GILMAN: [00:06:11] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:06:11] Wonderful.

GILMAN: [00:06:12] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:06:14] Um, what about languages? Had you, were you able to maintain your, um, Swahili and other, uh, lingua?

GILMAN: [00:06:25] Yeah. So, so, you know, through elementary school, I studied in French and mostly spoke French with my friends. And so I had a very solid, um, you know, knowledge of French. And so, in spite of the fact that from, uh, sixth grade all the way through high school, I never really had an opportunity to speak French, I held on to it. And I did, I did study other languages in high school. I studied some German and Spanish. Um, but it wasn't until college that I had an opportunity to start speaking French again.

NOBLE: [00:06:59] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:07:00] Um, so and then I did, the, the Swahili and Lingala I didn't retain, so.

NOBLE: [00:07:05] Right, right. But the French you did. And did you continue academic study of French?

GILMAN: [00:07:10] Not, I did, I took. I didn't. Since I knew French, I took other languages when I had the opportunity. So I studied some German in college and some Spanish, and I lived in the French speaking dorm.

NOBLE: [00:07:21] Oh, fun.

GILMAN: [00:07:22] In college. And that was just based on my knowing French. So, so I was, I was trying to take steps to maintain my, uh, my language skill.

NOBLE: [00:07:32] Yeah. Very good. So your major was music?

GILMAN: [00:07:34] Yeah. Yeah, I majored in French horn performance. Um, and, uh, yeah, sort of explored other things, like I was because of my experience growing up in Zaire, I was interested in African history, so I, I took some, there was some Ghanaian professors at Oberlin at the time who were Nkrumaists. So they were, they were interesting for me to take some classes with them, um, as sort of electives. Um, but yeah, my, my, my degree ended up being in a Bachelor of Arts in music performance.

NOBLE: [00:08:06] Wow. So and then what happened next?

GILMAN: [00:08:09] Well, then, uh, I left college and moved to Seattle. I, I had sort of gone into college with the idea of being a professional orchestral musician and left college, uh, knowing that I didn't want to do that.

NOBLE: [00:08:24] Oh.

GILMAN: [00:08:24] Too many other things in the world that I was interested in. And it seemed very limiting to kind of focus to be to play an orchestral musician, you really have to, you have to, you have to focus on that as your goal and work very hard to it. And to me that felt limiting. And so, um, so I kind of took a little time off, I guess you could say, moved to Seattle with a bunch of friends of who were, who were doing the same thing. It was, this was the late '80s, early '90s in Seattle. It was, jobs were easy to get. You could live there cheaply. There was a lot of exciting arts and music going on, so it was a fun place to go. Um, and I ended up just, I had a job driving a donation service truck, picking up clothes off of people's front porches for, I did that. I ended up doing that for a number of years. Um, I had a, a fantasy from the time I was in junior high of living in a pickup truck and driving around the country. So I did that. I bought a truck and I drove around the country. Um.

NOBLE: [00:09:27] And were you still with your French horn?

GILMAN: [00:09:29] I had my always, my horn was always around.

NOBLE: [00:09:31] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:09:32] I was always kind of playing it. Um, and, you know, I have to. Practicing more or less degree, depending on what else was going on in my life. But yeah, it was always there. Um, and then I eventually ended up going back to, uh, school, back to college and, and getting an another undergraduate degree, this time in electrical engineering.

NOBLE: [00:09:57] Wow. Where did you do that?

GILMAN: [00:09:58] At the University of Washington in Seattle.

NOBLE: [00:10:00] Huh.

GILMAN: [00:10:01] And that was driven by I, I sort of always knew in the back of my mind that, I mean, this is one of the reasons that I, I didn't finish my music studies was that, uh, I wanted to figure out a way to live in Africa again. And it wasn't clear to me exactly how I was going to do that. And so I.

NOBLE: [00:10:19] But you needed some skill.

GILMAN: [00:10:20] Right. Um, being a French horn player wasn't going to get me there.

NOBLE: [00:10:24] Right.

GILMAN: [00:10:25] Um, uh, and so I, and I got, I developed an interest in renewable energy and I thought, well, I could, it'd be interesting to do like do solar energy in Africa. And so I thought I should get an engineering degree to do that. And so that kind of motivated my decision to, uh, to go to engineering school.

NOBLE: [00:10:49] Did it take another whole four years to get the bachelor's degree in electrical engineering?

GILMAN: [00:10:54] Yeah, it did, I. It had been four years since I had graduated and got my first degree, and I had taken some math and science courses, uh,

at Oberlin. But I had to redo all of that, so I just, I just kind of plowed in. And went through went through a whole 'nother four year undergraduate.

NOBLE: [00:11:13] Well, good for you. Not many people would be willing to do that. It takes a lot. It takes a lot of strength to put yourself through that.

GILMAN: [00:11:20] Yeah. Yeah, it was interesting because at that time I actually met a few other people who were doing the same thing that I was, that they had studied arts in undergraduate, taken some time off, and then gone back to get engineering degrees. And so it seemed like I was part of a trend without really knowing it.

NOBLE: [00:11:38] Yeah. So, um. And you were in Seattle?

GILMAN: [00:11:43] Right.

NOBLE: [00:11:44] And, um. When you finished that degree, by that time, you're, what, 20, 26 or something?

GILMAN: [00:11:52] 29, yeah. 28, 29.

NOBLE: [00:11:54] Oh, that's right. Because you'd put in all those years, uh, working at picking up, uh, donations.

GILMAN: [00:12:00] Right.

NOBLE: [00:12:00] Right, right. So now you're 29 and you've got a degree in electrical engineering.

GILMAN: [00:12:06] Right. So the, the, you know, part of my thinking about getting back to Africa, so to speak, was to, uh, get this electrical engineering degree because I had been interested in the Peace Corps, and I looked into it and felt like I wouldn't really be qualified. Like they wanted people with technical skills. And without, like, actually going to a Peace Corps recruiter and talking to them, I just decided that I would do this, get this degree.

NOBLE: [00:12:38] Mm hmm.

GILMAN: [00:12:38] Um, I mean that was part of my motivation for, um. So. So I had, I sort of knew that I wanted to apply to the Peace Corps when I finished the degree. So toward the end of my degree then I did go talk to a recruiter.

NOBLE: [00:12:51] Mm hmm.

GILMAN: [00:12:52] And um, began the long application process. Um.

NOBLE: [00:12:58] What was that like? You said long application process. How long did that take?

GILMAN: [00:13:04] Yeah, I think it was. I think it was close to a year from the time I sort of started the process to the time I was accepted and placed.

NOBLE: [00:13:13] Um, were you, uh, given a choice of what part of the world? Were you able to indicate that your preference was Africa?

GILMAN: [00:13:21] Um, I think I was, I think they. I was able, there was a form where I could put a preference, and the recruiter made it clear that that may or may not be taken into consideration.

NOBLE: [00:13:32] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:13:33] Um, and then I think the ironic thing about it in the end was that I was placed in Mali because of my language skills. And they were, you know, they, I was in the agriculture program, so my electrical engineering had no bearing on it. And I think when I had looked into it earlier, there had been an appropriate technology sector, and I was sort of excited to be part of that. Um, but that, that didn't exist by the time I actually applied. Um, so, yeah, I was, I was placed in a French speaking African country because I was a fluent French speaker.

NOBLE: [00:14:09] Yeah. How interesting.

GILMAN: [00:14:10] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:14:11] And in agriculture. Had you had any background in agriculture?

GILMAN: [00:14:14] No, I was, you know, joking with my friends that give me a house plant and I would kill it. I had no, no experience or real interest in it. But I was willing to learn, so.

NOBLE: [00:14:27] Of course. And you wanted, you wanted to be in Africa in some sort of useful way.

GILMAN: [00:14:33] Yeah. And, you know, Mali wasn't my first choice. I had been in Central Africa, which was very different. And, and my impression of Mali at the time was, was, you know, it's an arid desert country and it's very predominantly Muslim. And I wasn't really experienced with that. Um, and, um, it, it. My impression of it was very different from the, my, what I had experienced as a kid in Zaire, so. But I was, you know, I decided to go for it.

NOBLE: [00:15:04] All right. Meanwhile, where are your parents?

GILMAN: [00:15:08] Uh, my parents have been moving around, so they were, at that time they were living in Montana again. Um, and my mom, my mom was actually doing international work, so she was consulting, uh, in public health. Um, so she, she was traveling around. And I had actually had an opportunity to visit them when she had a job in, in Malawi. Um, so I did, I did travel to Africa, um, one time before I was in Peace Corps.

NOBLE: [00:15:41] Peace Corps, yeah.

GILMAN: [00:15:42] So that was my sort of going back to Malawi and smelling the smells and seeing the sights that were familiar to me from, from a kid.

NOBLE: [00:15:50] Because Malawi would have, Malawi would have been, um, closer to the Congo, certainly, than Mali.

GILMAN: [00:15:57] It's geographically more similar, yeah. So the, the climate is more similar.

NOBLE: [00:16:01] That's right. Yeah. So you get accepted to a program for Mali and off you go training. Was there a staging somewhere in the United States first before you went over?

GILMAN: [00:16:14] Yeah, we had a three, I think it was a 2 or 3 day staging in Washington, D.C. So that's where I got to meet my, my cohort.

NOBLE: [00:16:22] Okay. And what was your, talk about your cohort a little bit. How many people and who was in it?

GILMAN: [00:16:27] Um, let's see. I want to say there were 28 or so people.

NOBLE: [00:16:31] Oh, nice and small.

GILMAN: [00:16:32] Yeah. It was, it was a, um, not a big group. And it was mostly young recent graduates, so in their early 20s.

NOBLE: [00:16:44] And you were?

GILMAN: [00:16:46] I was 29.

NOBLE: [00:16:47] 29, yeah.

GILMAN: [00:16:48] I think. I think there was one other person who was around the same age as me. And then and in, in our group there were, it was like the group, the age group was pretty narrow.

NOBLE: [00:16:59] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:17:00] Um. And I think there were, it was mostly women. I think there were, uh, were there 5 or 6 men in the group?

NOBLE: [00:17:10] Oh, interesting, to do. And they were all preparing to be agriculture volunteers?

GILMAN: [00:17:15] Uh, no. So this was divided between agriculture and natural resources management. So the way they did it at that time is they had two incoming groups per year. And, and, the, the. Each group had 2 or 3 sectors. So the other sector was the health and the small business sector. Or maybe there was another sector in there. So our group was the NRM, Natural Resources Management and Agriculture. So we were all going to be in one of those.

NOBLE: [00:17:44] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So you have staging in Washington.

GILMAN: [00:17:47] Right.

NOBLE: [00:17:47] Do they give you all kinds of vaccinations, or had you?

GILMAN: [00:17:52] Right. We did, we did. I think we did some vaccinations. I kind of remember doing some in Seattle before, but yeah, we did. Or maybe, yeah, maybe I'm mixing that up. But yeah, we did vaccinations there. We watched a lot of orientation videos.

NOBLE: [00:18:10] About Mali, about Peace Corps?

GILMAN: [00:18:11] About Peace Corps. Just kind of preparing us for what to expect. You know, I think there were videos with interviews of returned volunteers and that kind of thing, or volunteers at their sites and some sort of team building stuff. And I was really not looking forward to that part of the experience. And so it was, I was, it was hard for me to just play along.

NOBLE: [00:18:34] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:18:34] Um, but, but, yeah, it was um, it was a good group of people. So it was, it was my first exposure and I was a little standoffish, I think, suspicious of everybody. I think we all kind of were, um. But. Yeah. So. So that was a couple of days.

NOBLE: [00:18:51] A couple of days. And then you all flew together, I suppose?

GILMAN: [00:18:55] Yep, yep.

NOBLE: [00:18:55] From D.C.?

GILMAN: [00:18:56] We did. We flew, I think, out of Dulles, and we were all flying as a group and had to get all our luggage in a big pile and, and, uh, we were. Yeah, we all were seated around each other on the big plane to Paris.

NOBLE: [00:19:13] So it wouldn't have been a charter flight I'm thinking. There's only 28 of you or so.

GILMAN: [00:19:18] No.

NOBLE: [00:19:18] You would have had ordinary.

GILMAN: [00:19:20] Yeah, we were just on a regular commercial flight.

NOBLE: [00:19:22] Yeah. To, did you say to Paris?

GILMAN: [00:19:25] To Paris.

NOBLE: [00:19:26] And then?

GILMAN: [00:19:26] And then from there directly to Bamako.

NOBLE: [00:19:28] Uh huh. Any time in Paris?

GILMAN: [00:19:31] No, no, we just hung out at the airport for the short layover.

NOBLE: [00:19:35] And you were quite comfortable in French. Were your fellow trainees also fluent in French?

GILMAN: [00:19:43] Uh, most were not, but there were a couple. There were actually, um. There was one other person in our group who was a native speaker. He spoke French and English. He was a dual national. And then there were a couple of other people who had studied French and were quite comfortable with it.

NOBLE: [00:20:08] So you get to Bamako and right away you must have noticed some differences between, um, your surroundings in Mali as compared to what you'd experienced before in Congo and Malawi. What did you, what were you noticing?

GILMAN: [00:20:26] Yeah, well, I think, I think it was, I mean. I was dealing with being in this big crowd of people, which kind of I'm not comfortable with. So I was sort of coping with that and sort of having to experience landing in Mali as part of this big, big group of people. And then there was just a lot of, you know, we were, we were greeted. The Peace Corps staff came out onto the tarmac and met us and sort of herded us into a group, um, separated us from the rest of the passengers. And they, I think we handed them our passports and they sort of managed the whole process through customs. So we were shielded from the usual sort of chaotic experience when you fly alone.

NOBLE: [00:21:13] Mm hmm.

GILMAN: [00:21:13] Um, and then they had kind of identified a couple of us to sort of help lead, um, the group through the process. And since I had had some experience that I kind of, I don't know if they identified us or if we self identified, but we, there were, you know, everybody was some having different. Some people were pretty overwhelmed. We were all very tired. And um, so I remember that like at a certain point, we were getting luggage off of the carousel after we had gotten through customs and everything. And that was chaotic, because there's all these people around and there's all these touts trying to sell you or get you to, you know, have them get your bags off the carousel.

NOBLE: [00:22:00] Oh, and you'd pay them to have them pick up your suitcase.

GILMAN: [00:22:03] Right. And you sort of don't know who to trust and who not to because you don't have any perspective yet. And so I, since I kind of knew how to navigate that a little bit. So I, um, so me and a couple of the other volunteers were kind of pulling the bags off of the carousel and putting them into piles and, um. Uh. And yeah, it was just, it was loud and hot and

just kind of overwhelming. Um, but they, they shuttled us through pretty efficiently. And then and then they got us out into the Peace Corps bus that was waiting out in the parking lot.

NOBLE: [00:22:38] Ah, okay.

GILMAN: [00:22:39] Um, and actually, for some, I remember it's like sitting out there with just a couple of other people for a while. So I don't remember the process, but somehow we were getting led out, uh, one by one or something? I don't remember exactly, but, um.

NOBLE: [00:22:58] That was a while ago.

GILMAN: [00:22:59] Yes. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:23:00] So I've never been to, uh, Mali. I'm wondering what the, what it feels like to be in Bamako. Are you at a high elevation? Is it, um, you mentioned it's hot.

GILMAN: [00:23:14] Right.

NOBLE: [00:23:14] Is it, is it a dry? Is it dry?

GILMAN: [00:23:16] It's, it's hot and dry and dusty. Um, it's on a river. So in the rainy season it can also be pretty relatively humid. Um, uh, and we got there in January, so it was in their cooler season. So it wasn't as overwhelmingly hot as it can be. But for somebody just getting off the plane from the States, it feels.

NOBLE: [00:23:41] Especially in January.

GILMAN: [00:23:42] Yeah, right. It feels, it feels hot and just kind of dry and dusty.

NOBLE: [00:23:47] Dusty. Yeah. So you get on a bus and the bus takes you someplace where you're going to do training.

GILMAN: [00:23:54] Right? So that.

NOBLE: [00:23:55] Was the training in Bamako?

GILMAN: [00:23:56] The training, yeah, was at. The Peace Corps had a training site there called Tubaniso, which means, uh, the home of the doves. Um, and it's, it's on the edge of town on the river. Um, it's a really nice, really nice place. It's kind of a, a farm, um, that, that has been used as a training center for many, many years. And unfortunately, now it's all, they've shut all that down in the last couple of years because of the security situation.

NOBLE: [00:24:24] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:24:24] But, um, so yeah, we get in this bus. It was a, you know, a large, uh, minibus by African standards or a smallish bus by American standards. So we're all kind of packed in there. Um, and it's, it was evening, so it was still daylight. We could, we could, or actually it was getting, it was towards sunset, I guess. Anyway, I remember going through the city, you have to drive through the city to get there. And so there's all these people out and noise and stuff, and we're all kind of looking out the window going, okay, this is our new home.

NOBLE: [00:25:01] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:25:02] Uh, and by the time we arrived at the training center, it was dark. Um, and so it was, you know, time for everybody to go to bed. And so they have, they have these mud huts that they built at the training center for the volunteers to stay in during training. So we're each assigned a hut. And they had a whole, the Malian training staff was all there.

NOBLE: [00:25:24] You had a hut all to yourself?

GILMAN: [00:25:26] No, no, we, we were assigned. I think there were four to a hut.

NOBLE: [00:25:28] Oh, okay.

GILMAN: [00:25:30] Um, so part of. We get off the bus and we're all hot and tired and it's dark and we can't really see where we are by then. And then, uh,

and they're grouping us into who's going to be staying in what hut, um. And then, and then, then they had the, the, um, they had to teach us how to go to the bathroom because, uh, they had these pit latrines that they used with just a hole in the ground. So you had to squat.

NOBLE: [00:26:00] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:26:01] And then instead of toilet paper, as in many Muslim countries, they use a little kettle of, of water that you use to clean yourself after you go to the bathroom. Uh, and so they had to give us a lesson about how to do that. So they had a male, uh, instructor and a female instructor to, you know, divided the group up into women and men. And so, so it was sort of comical and a little intimidating all at the same time. And then.

NOBLE: [00:26:31] Had anything been said about this in Washington in your brief three days?

GILMAN: [00:26:36] I don't remember that. I remember that being sort of like, okay, this is, um, uh, not, not what I was expecting. Um, uh. So. Yeah, then, and then it was time to go to bed. And so we all turned into our huts and.

NOBLE: [00:26:55] Finally get to lie down.

GILMAN: [00:26:57] Right. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:26:59] So then you're in. You're in, uh, you're in this training center and you wake up in the morning and there must be some central place where you gather.

GILMAN: [00:27:12] Yeah. So then, then. Yeah, I mean it's in the training center was very nice. There was an outdoor covered area that they used as a classroom. And then they had a series of smaller structures for smaller groups. And so we all met in that the main, we called it a hangar. There's all this, uh, pseudo English that, that Peace Corps volunteers speak. That's kind of a mix of various languages. So, so when I'm talking to people who aren't Peace Corps volunteers, I have to remember not to use the, like a hangar is a, is a French word. But anyway, so it's a, it's a, it was

an open like a structure with a metal roof. And um, that was big enough for the whole group to be in. So that was kind of our main meeting point. So we, uh, that's where we were assembled. And, um, you know, laid out the schedule for the next three months of training.

NOBLE: [00:28:11] And so what did transpire in those three months of training? More French for those who needed more French?

GILMAN: [00:28:19] Yeah. So for those who needed French, they got French and then and then those. And it was sort of depended on what site you were going to be in. So this, the training process is, I, um, I think it's a pretty impressive program, but it can be frustrating for the volunteers to go through. I guess you're not technically volunteers, for the trainees to go through. Um. Because you kind of don't know where your site is going to be yet. And so some of the decisions about what training you need are dependent on the site. And so you might start down one track and then things change in course.

NOBLE: [00:28:53] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:28:54] And so and we're all kind of trapped in this place for three months. And so it can be, it can be a frustrating process. But, but, uh, so for me, um, I ended up being placed in the north of Mali, which had been closed to Peace Corps for, for, uh, several years before I arrived. And the crew of volunteers who had arrived six months before me were the first, were among the first, that crew was the first to send people to the northern part. So there were a couple of volunteers up there when I arrived, and then they were sending a few more up. And so we needed, we had different training requirements because the culture is different up there and language is different.

NOBLE: [00:29:39] Oh, interesting. So what was the language?

GILMAN: [00:29:42] So the language that I initially started learning was Bambara, because that's the language that's spoken in a large part of the southern part of the country. And then, and then when, when they decided to send me up north, then they, I switched to Songhai [also called Songhay]. Uh.

NOBLE: [00:30:01] Oh, how frustrating that would be.

GILMAN: [00:30:04] Yeah. Um.

NOBLE: [00:30:06] It takes a long time to master an African language.

GILMAN: [00:30:11] Right. I mean, luckily, Bambara and Songhai and those languages are, are related. So like the grammar, grammatical structure is similar and so on. So it wasn't a huge leap. But, but, yeah, it was. You know, I started in Bambara and then I had to stop and start over again in Songhai. And so my Songhai was not as strong as it would have been had that.

NOBLE: [00:30:29] Had you been able to start with it from the beginning. Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:30:32] Um, but also, yeah, because I spoke French, I could use that as a crutch too, um. So yeah. And then we learned, uh, for me, learning gardening skills. So, you know, I, I was going to be working with women's gardening associations in a town called Ansongo in, in the north of Mali. Uh, so I needed to learn Songhai, and I needed to learn how to grow things in an arid climate. Um, and I needed to learn some cultural things. So, um.

NOBLE: [00:31:06] What sorts of cultural things?

GILMAN: [00:31:10] Um. Well, you know, this. So. Um. For most of the other parts of Mali, they had had volunteers going there for a long time. And so they had, um, the training program was sort of based on the experience of volunteers and, and the cultural things that they taught were based on that region. But in the northern, in the northern regions, things were different. So we were, they were kind of improvising a little bit to get us covered. But it was things, just things like what to wear and, and, uh, how, like customs and families, like how to, how to, um, be respectful when you're visiting a family and or how to interact with people when you go visit a village. Um, and so some of those things apply to anywhere in Mali. And some of those were very locality specific.

NOBLE: [00:32:08] Yeah. I'm imagining there would be some, also some things on what not to do and what not to say.

GILMAN: [00:32:15] Um, yeah, I suppose. Yeah. I don't really remember a lot of the specifics of that. Um, but it was things, um, I think there was a big focus kind of on volunteer safety and like sexuality, you know, and so like, just kind of being aware of gender roles and, um, how to respond to aggressive behaviors and how to understand them. Because sometimes people sort of expressing themselves aggressively might mean, we might misinterpret it as Americans. And there's things, things like that. Um. And things about like the joking cousins, uh, custom, which is really strong in, particularly in the southern part of Mali, but in parts of other, other parts of West Africa where you, based on your name, you're given a, you have the right to basically tease anybody who has certain other names.

NOBLE: [00:33:15] Oh.

GILMAN: [00:33:15] Um, and it's a real, it's a, it's a tension diffusing mechanism that is a really powerful thing in Mali. And so, uh, so we were all given Malian names as part of our training so that we could participate in that part of the culture. Um.

NOBLE: [00:33:32] Did that name stay with you when you went up north?

GILMAN: [00:33:34] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:33:35] Ah.

GILMAN: [00:33:36] Yeah. And, yeah, that was my name when I was in, I was Ali Touré when, when I lived in Mali and, and, uh, a lot of, uh, people that I lived with and worked with didn't know me by any other name. Um, uh, and that's part, part of the culture, the sort of. There's a culture of welcoming visitors and strangers in that part of the world. And so traditionally when a visitor came they would be given a name by their hosts, and so that would, that was the Peace Corps' way of sort of, uh, acknowledging that tradition. Um. So, uh, yeah. Um. But then, as it turned

out, in the north of Mali, the joking cousin thing and so on is not as strong. And um, so it didn't turn out to be that relevant to where I went. Um, so I had to do a little discovering that kind of stuff on my own, which, which we all did.

NOBLE: [00:34:43] Sure. Did you have the sense that, um, training gave you what you needed?

GILMAN: [00:34:51] Um. Yeah, I mean I don't, I think. I think a lot of what the purpose of training more than sort of giving you specific skills, aside from the language skills. I mean, the language training I thought was really good. Um, was just kind of preparing you for something that was going to be, like, mysterious and difficult, you know, and so, and so I don't know if this was intentional, but I kind of felt like the training process was a little bit of a weeding out process. Like, if you could make it through training, then there's probably a good chance you'd make it through the actual service because, you know, we, a few people dropped out during training and they always made it clear that you're welcome to change your mind at any time, you know?

NOBLE: [00:35:36] Okay. Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:35:37] Um, and then it was kind of like an acclimation period too, like, okay, we're living in Mali and we're learning how to talk to Malians. Our training staff there was just phenomenal. They were really great people and very experienced. They've been doing this for years. Um, and so, and they understood Americans and understood our anxieties and so on. So they kind of helped us kind of navigate a lot of that kind of stuff. Um.

NOBLE: [00:36:03] How did they teach you Songhai?

GILMAN: [00:36:07] Uh, we just. Well, there was one other person who was, who was going up north with me, and so we had.

NOBLE: [00:36:14] Oh, just the two of you?

GILMAN: [00:36:15] Yeah. Well, but they, they, for all, the all the languages. So people were learning several different languages. And so each language group would have an instructor and each group would be 4 or 5 people at the most. And we'd each go into these little groups and they, we'd. It was just kind of going through, uh, learning some basic grammatical stuff and learning vocab, practicing vocabulary, and having conversational practice. And kind of learning, starting with the kind of stuff that you'd probably encounter when you first arrive in your, at your site. So how to go through greetings and talking about food and how to buy stuff at the market and, and that sort of thing.

NOBLE: [00:36:55] Is Songhai a written language?

GILMAN: [00:36:58] Uh, it was not traditionally written, but they've developed a writing for it.

NOBLE: [00:37:02] And are they using, uh, an alphabet that's like ours?

GILMAN: [00:37:06] Yeah. So there's the, most of the Malayan languages have a sort of a national, nationally adopted, uh, writing system that they use for education. Um, so they, uh, that's the one that we use. So it's, it's basically the alphabet that we're used to using with a few additional characters.

NOBLE: [00:37:27] But it's not Arabic script?

GILMAN: [00:37:28] No, no. It can be written in Arabic and, uh, Malians who are, who know how to write Arabic, write Songhai in Arabic, uh, or using the Arabic alphabet. But, but we learned it using the our Western alphabet.

NOBLE: [00:37:45] Yeah. Okay. Well, yeah, that certainly would make it easier.

GILMAN: [00:37:48] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:37:48] To begin to grasp the sounds.

GILMAN: [00:37:51] Right.

NOBLE: [00:37:53] Is there anything else you'd like to say about training before we go up north?

GILMAN: [00:37:57] Um. I don't know, I don't think so.

NOBLE: [00:37:59] Okay. You must have had some sort of swearing in ceremony at the end of training.

GILMAN: [00:38:04] We did, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:38:06] And then you're assigned to Asongo?

GILMAN: [00:38:10] Ansongo, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:38:11] Ansongo. And, um, how did you, how far away is that from, um, Bamako? And how did you get there?

GILMAN: [00:38:20] So it was, it was, it was pretty, as far away as you could get. It was out there. It was the most, at that time it was the most, the furthest away. I don't know that it was the most isolated, but it was. So you had to go on the main highway out as far as it went toward the east and a little bit north of the main capital. And then the pavement ended at the Niger River, and then there was a ferry to go across the river into the city of Gao.

NOBLE: [00:38:48] Ah, yes.

GILMAN: [00:38:48] And then from there it's all dirt roads. And it was a two hour. So that drive. It's hard to, I can't remember the distance. I think it was 700 miles or something from Bamako to Gao, and then it was another 60 miles or so from Gao on some dirt road.

NOBLE: [00:39:04] So you went from Bamako to Gao on a, in a vehicle of some sort?

GILMAN: [00:39:09] The Peace Corps, the Peace Corps drove me out.

NOBLE: [00:39:11] Okay.

GILMAN: [00:39:12] They had, uh, a fleet of four wheel drive vehicles.

NOBLE: [00:39:15] And you'd put your vehicle on a ferry to cross the.

GILMAN: [00:39:18] To cross the river.

NOBLE: [00:39:18] The, which, which you refer to as the Niger. And of course, in Nigeria, we called it the Niger in English.

GILMAN: [00:39:25] In English, it's the Niger.

NOBLE: [00:39:26] Right. But you were all calling it the Niger.

GILMAN: [00:39:28] The Niger River, right, because that's.

NOBLE: [00:39:31] *Rivière*, uh, or *le fleuve Niger*. *Le fleuve* because it flows into the ocean ultimately.

GILMAN: [00:39:37] Right.

NOBLE: [00:39:38] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:39:39] Yeah, yeah. So, so then you get to Gao and then from, that's 700 miles right there.

NOBLE: [00:39:44] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:39:44] Wow. That would take how many days?

GILMAN: [00:39:47] Well, in the, in the Peace Corps vehicle, it would be, uh, we'd usually do it in a couple of days because there was in Mopti, which is kind of midway between, was a Peace Corps, uh, we called it a stash house, which more Peace Corps-ese. But, uh, a Peace Corps guest house where volunteers who could come in from their sites, um, to, when they came into the main regional capital.

NOBLE: [00:40:15] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:40:15] They'd stay there. So they, usually if the Peace Corps took us, which they only did at the beginning and end, um, we'd stop in Mopti and then go to Gao. So it would be an overnight in Mopti and then.

NOBLE: [00:40:28] And then another overnight in Gao.

GILMAN: [00:40:29] And then another overnight in Gao, and then down to Ansongo. So it could be done in a, in a, if. Yeah, it would be a very long day in a Peace Corps vehicle to go all the way. But typically it would be two days.

NOBLE: [00:40:41] Two days. Uh, and then how far away from Gao is Ansongo?

GILMAN: [00:40:47] So it was it's 60 miles on a very, at that time, it was a very bad road. And so it would take, um, it would take a couple hours.

NOBLE: [00:40:56] On an unpaved road.

GILMAN: [00:40:58] Right.

NOBLE: [00:40:58] Yeah, yeah.

GILMAN: [00:40:59] On a, yeah. A very sandy road, a beautiful, beautiful road. Um, so yeah, the, that. Um, I think I went up with a group of people and stayed overnight in that guest house in Mopti, and then the two of us who were going up further north then went together, and we dropped the Gao volunteer off. Um, and then I went down and they dropped me off in Ansongo.

NOBLE: [00:41:27] Oh, so when you went to, when you were in Ansongo, you weren't there with a Peace Corps buddy. It was just you.

GILMAN: [00:41:34] I was by myself. Yeah, yeah. The nearest volunteer was two hours away.

NOBLE: [00:41:41] In Gao.

GILMAN: [00:41:41] In Gao, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:41:43] Well, that's pretty isolated.

GILMAN: [00:41:46] Um, actually I should mention, that's not true. Because when I first arrived there, there was another volunteer there, but he ended up staying for just about six months. Um. Uh, and then moving to a different site. So. So when I first started, he was there all alone. He had been there for six months previous to me, alone. And then when I arrived, then, uh, we were there in the town together. He was a health volunteer, and I was an agriculture volunteer.

NOBLE: [00:42:15] Did you share a house?

GILMAN: [00:42:16] We didn't. He helped me find a house.

NOBLE: [00:42:18] Okay.

GILMAN: [00:42:18] And he actually, we, we were in kind of different parts of town because we wanted to, we wanted to have some independence and not be, uh. Um. We wanted to be able to. The town was kind of divided into a couple of different neighborhoods, so that meant he could have kind of focus on his neighborhood, and I'd be in my neighborhood. And, um, but we did end up spending a lot of time together, and it was a bit of a struggle for, for both of us to kind of get established. So.

NOBLE: [00:42:49] Yeah. Yeah. I would think it would be helpful in some ways to have another American that you could, um, sort of pore things over with in the beginning when you're just getting started.

GILMAN: [00:43:03] Yeah, it kind of, you know, it's hard to say. In some ways it was good. In some ways it was a distraction because it was easy. It was easy to go over there and hang out with him and.

NOBLE: [00:43:15] Have a beer. Or maybe you couldn't have a beer.

GILMAN: [00:43:17] Uh, well, that's. Yeah, I mean, that, there. Beer was definitely, alcohol was definitely frowned upon.

NOBLE: [00:43:24] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:43:25] But it was, it was available. Um, and so you had to know who, you know, there was a Christian doctor in town, had a fridge, you know, and so, um, uh. But, but it was, we were, um, we spent a lot of time just kind of talking and processing what was going on.

NOBLE: [00:43:47] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:43:48] And in, in, in, in so doing, I think. Yeah, I would probably have been better off spending that time, uh, meeting my, uh, going and meeting with my women's association. So there's a lot going on at this time. Um, that, and to tell this story is is hard because I can tell it now with hindsight. So I kind of understand more what was happening than I did at the time. Um, so I'll sort of tell it from the perspective of where I am now, which is that, uh, the Peace Corps hadn't been in Ansongo. As far as I knew, they hadn't been there ever. You know, I think they, I think they had had volunteers there before, but there was no sort of history of that. Um, and so we didn't have any experience of previous volunteers to draw on.

GILMAN: [00:44:42] And, and so it was kind of, and the Peace Corps staff didn't have a network in the, in the town. Ansongo was a town of about 10,000 people or something at the time. And uh, um, so they kind of put us, assigned the volunteers with the, the government, uh, you know, the health agents for my colleague and the, um, the agriculture agent for me. And then the idea was that then that that government agent would work with us and help us figure out what to do. And, uh, and, you know, in some cases that works really well and in some cases it doesn't. If the personalities aren't, don't mesh or the volunteer or the agent isn't very motivated, you know, it's like anywhere else, things like that don't, sometimes work better than others.

GILMAN: [00:45:34] But so in my case, what happened is that they, the, um, there was a big push to promote women's, women in development. And so there

was, the people in living in Ansongo who were kind of interacting with the international aid world, knew that to get bank loans, small bank loans to do, to do little development projects, the best way to apply for a bank loan was to present yourself as a women's association. And then you could get, um. Uh, you get a loan to start a garden or to buy a few goats or whatever the project might be. And so I was assigned with, to a women's association that had received a loan to start a garden, but they hadn't really started any work on it.

GILMAN: [00:46:23] And, and it was they had been given this land that was just, it was just an arid piece of sandy, rocky, uh, desert on the edge of town. Um, that was, you know, um, maybe 100 yards from a well that had been dug for a men's association that was supposed to plant a date farm and use the well to, uh, water the date farm. Um, but they, the men's association hadn't done any work on it. And so the women's association had negotiated with the mayor and the village chief to get some land on the edge of that. And so, so, you know, by the time I got there, all I knew was that there was this group of women who were supposed to be working on a garden, and there was no gardening going on, and I had to try to.

NOBLE: [00:47:18] But there was some money?

GILMAN: [00:47:19] They had, they had some money. They had, uh, received a loan. So they had bought some wheelbarrows and shovels and watering cans and things and some seeds. Um, and so I was supposed to work with the government extension agent to help these women do their gardening, and but I couldn't figure out why they why the women weren't going to the garden, and, um, it wasn't clear to me what they wanted to grow. And there were all these animals around, cows and sheep that were being herded around that would eat anything that was there. And there was no fence around the garden, you know.

NOBLE: [00:47:56] Oh, oh dear.

GILMAN: [00:47:56] So there were just all these problems and nobody seemed to be doing anything. And I didn't feel like I, it was my place was to start, you

know, them. I kind of wanted to be working on something that was kind of already in motion and supporting it. Um, so it took me a long time to sort of untangle the story of what was going on.

NOBLE: [00:48:21] Yeah. And you're a man, and it's a women's organization.

GILMAN: [00:48:27] Right, right.

NOBLE: [00:48:27] That seems to be one more complicating factor.

GILMAN: [00:48:30] Right, right. And, and, um. Yeah. I mean, without going into all the gory details of it, I mean, the women's association had been formed by a man, um, who was kind of working the system. Um, and so I, I ended up kind of interacting with him. Uh, and then he would, and he was a mover and shaker, and he, like, he was a teacher, and he created a library and filled it with books. And so he had done a lot of good stuff for the town. But he's also very political and, um, so, so, I mean, I, um, it took me a while to get to the point where people understood who I was. They, all they saw was this white guy showed up and is living in, you know, has a, has a couple of rooms in one of the buildings in town and nobody knew why I was there, and they were very suspicious.

NOBLE: [00:49:29] Ah.

GILMAN: [00:49:30] Um, and so it took me, I think, six months before I was able to make contact with this guy, the librarian, who, he like, he sent people over, like he was kind of sending spies over to find out who I was and ask me questions. And then they'd go back and report to him, and then.

NOBLE: [00:49:53] Oh, so, so Peace Corps did not introduce you to this guy and sort of?

GILMAN: [00:49:57] No, they, they introduced me to the agriculture extension worker, which was logical. He was, he was the person who was responsible for, for kind of managing the government's intervention with these women's associations. But he wasn't, he wasn't very effective for, for a number of reasons, not because he was incompetent or anything, but

just because it was a really difficult environment. And so, so this librarian, and the agricultural, the extension agent was placed. He was a government worker and he wasn't from the town. He was placed there from somebody, you know.

NOBLE: [00:50:33] He'd come in from elsewhere.

GILMAN: [00:50:34] Yeah. This was his government job. And so, so he, he, he knew, he knew the local people and he understood the politics better than I did. But he wasn't the best, he, I don't know. He, he didn't, he didn't end up playing the role of my guide, um, for whatever reason. And so this other guy, the librarian, uh.

NOBLE: [00:50:56] Who was really key. And it would have taken you a while to figure out that it's the librarian that's the guy that you need to communicate with.

GILMAN: [00:51:03] Right. Um, yeah. All the, all the, like, government, I mean. I'm talking about government workers, but there was one little mud building that was the government office, you know, and all the government workers sat under a tree. Uh, that was their office. And then they would go off and, you know, distribute seeds or, or these are, the these are the, the agriculture people. Um, so it's, it's, uh, I mean, physically what it looked like was hanging out under a tree, uh, talking, listening to these guys talk about their workday and then. And so the librarian would come over and say hi to these people to kind of keep tabs on what was going on, because he was a, a leader in the town. And he, he, he knew all the government agents. And so, so I had met him there through that. Um, and so I knew who he was.

GILMAN: [00:51:57] Um, but he reached out to me and then he sent, so he had this women's association that he had helped form. And so he sent that, he sent the, the leaders of the women's association to meet with me, which was very unusual. I mean, these, these women and they were all older women. Uh, and so these, this group of three women came, came to my house one day and they were like, well. You know, they're all, they're wearing their, their, uh, head coverings and, and, and these beautiful

colored wraps, you know, and, and they're speaking to me in Songhai, which I sort of knew moderately well. It was a very, uh, kind of mysterious meeting. But they came over and they asked me to help them with their garden, and so. And so then I said that I would. And that was, like he had, the librarian before I understood this, he had sent them over to kind of see how I would respond.

NOBLE: [00:52:57] Oh, yeah.

GILMAN: [00:52:57] And then and so then when I said I would work with them then, then I started working with them and I went to some of their meetings and kind of figured out what they were doing. And, um, and so then in the end, in the end, what I ended up discovering was that, um, I mean, the whole system was just broken. And the Peace Corps, the Peace Corps was, we weren't aware of that. And so, um, in order for Peace Corps to be, have a presence in that part of the country and be effective, Peace Corps really needed to have a better understanding of what was going on and, and work differently, uh, to place the volunteers and so on. Um, and I realized that I, you know, I did. I started, I planted, I planted, I helped the women plant some trees around their garden and, and actually those trees are still there now.

NOBLE: [00:53:50] Huh.

GILMAN: [00:53:50] Like I can look, go on Google Maps and see the trees that, you know, some of which I've planted, are there. And the garden, I don't think, ever became a garden. Um, but those trees are really important because they use them. They're fast growing trees and they, they cut the limbs and use them for firewood and then.

NOBLE: [00:54:07] Ah.

GILMAN: [00:54:08] Um, so, you know, it would have made more sense to maybe have a little tree plantation there than a, than a garden. But anyway, um, about a year into my service, I was getting, I mean, well, from, from the beginning to through about ten months, I was having a really hard time, uh, because nobody was, I didn't have anything to do. And, and, you

know, it took, it took, it wasn't until 6 or 8 months into my service that these women came over to ask me to help work with their women's group. And so in between, up until that time, I was just incredibly bored and, like, trying to figure out what to do and going around and meeting people and trying to, you know, just trying to figure out what's going on.

NOBLE: [00:54:57] And then after the other Peace Corps volunteer left, you're all alone up there.

GILMAN: [00:55:03] I didn't have any.

NOBLE: [00:55:03] Trying to figure out. Yeah, yeah. That's a, uh, very psychologically excruciating situation to be in, I would think.

GILMAN: [00:55:12] Yeah, I mean, I did, I didn't, I made friends with the guy who lived. I was, I was living in this two story mud building, which is amazing, like hand built, uh, kind of mud structure that they have.

NOBLE: [00:55:26] And, and of course you don't, do you have a phone?

GILMAN: [00:55:28] Oh, no. No. There was a phone at the post office. That was the one phone in town. I think the hospital had a phone. Um, but yeah, there was a solar array with batteries that powered the phone. And there was this tall antenna that that, uh, it was. So it was, it wasn't. There wasn't a phone line. It was through radio signals and or microwave or whatever it was.

NOBLE: [00:55:54] So communication. To communicate with somebody, you had to go over to see them face to face.

GILMAN: [00:56:02] Oh, yeah. To communicate with, to communicate with anybody in town meant going over.

NOBLE: [00:56:08] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:56:09] And if you think, you go to where you think they are. So if I wanted to meet with the librarian, I'd go to the library. And if he wasn't

there, then I'd ask if anybody had seen them. And then, you know, walk around until I found him.

NOBLE: [00:56:20] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:56:20] Um, and then to communicate outside of Ansongo, I had a mailbox, so I wrote letters. Um, and then if I needed to communicate with the Peace Corps office in Bamako, then I could call them. But I had to go stand in the post office just where all the mailboxes were. And it was a very small room with the, with the postmaster standing there, and make my call.

NOBLE: [00:56:46] Make your call.

GILMAN: [00:56:46] And the phone maybe would work or maybe not. So. Um, yeah. So yeah, communication was all, um, yeah. This was, I was probably the, in the last sort of group of volunteers that didn't have cell phones because by the time I left in 2000, then cell phones were starting to appear. Um, um.

GILMAN: [00:57:08] So anyway, what I ended up, I ended up sort of deciding that what I wanted to focus on was, uh. I thought it was important that Peace Corps, Peace Corps was thinking about pulling out of the northern region because we were having such a hard time. And I thought, well, I didn't, there were, there had been three other volunteers before me, and then there were the two volunteers in my group. So that was five people who had just like invested a lot of energy, uh, in trying to make things work. And I didn't want to lose that. And so I, uh, talked to the Peace Corps director and said, you know, look, I think I'd really like to try to figure out how to fix it and make it possible for volunteers to be up here rather than, uh, just abandoning it. And so she said she said, okay, well. And she asked me if I would take that on, and I said that I would.

NOBLE: [00:58:02] This was sort of the close to the year, end of the first year?

GILMAN: [00:58:06] Yeah. It was in, yeah, around the, around my year.

NOBLE: [00:58:10] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:58:10] My year point, because I had kind of given myself an ultimatum at about 3 to 4 months. I had told myself that if by, if by the 10th month, I wasn't, like I gave myself a few things. I said if I didn't, if I didn't have friends and I didn't feel like I was doing something productive, then I would leave. And that kind of freed me up because I had been, I was just really anxious about, uh, how I was going to survive.

NOBLE: [00:58:44] Yeah.

GILMAN: [00:58:44] And so, so by giving myself that out, you know, I was like, okay, I'm, I can leave if I, if I get, make it through those eight months and leave, then I don't get to feel bad about it. I just feel like I gave it a try.

NOBLE: [00:58:56] Your best shot.

GILMAN: [00:58:57] Right. And so. So then, uh, so it was in. And that kind of freed me up to think about different ways of making it work. And so, so it was kind of during that period that, as I was figuring out more about what was actually happening in the town and why, why people weren't interacting with me or didn't know who I was, and I started thinking about how to avoid that happening in the future and so on.

GILMAN: [00:59:18] Um, so then, then in my, my second year, uh, in Ansongo then I ended up spending more time focusing on, on meeting with people and to talk to them about that. Like, you know, we'd like to, we'd like to keep. We, or, you know, asking them if they thought it would, Peace Corps, uh, Ansongo would be a good place for Peace Corps volunteers to be. And, uh, what, how, how they thought, what role Peace Corps should play. And so I was asking, asking people like the librarian and other leaders in the town and, and people who were working in the government agencies and sort of trying to trying to build a, a model for how.

NOBLE: [01:00:04] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:00:05] Things could be better.

NOBLE: [01:00:06] It almost sounds like that is critically necessary. And I wish that had happened before you got there.

GILMAN: [01:00:13] Right, right. And the thing is that the Peace Corps just isn't equipped to do that because they're based in Bamako. And they could send, they send people, you know, all the way out to Ansongo for a 1 or 2 day visit.

NOBLE: [01:00:25] Yeah. But you can't, you can't figure things out that way.

GILMAN: [01:00:27] So, um, yeah. So, uh, then, um. Uh.

NOBLE: [01:00:36] So you were meeting with the, the women's association and other people too?

GILMAN: [01:00:42] I met with women's associations and I, and then, you know, when I learned that there were all these really great gardens that were commercially successful gardens along the river, where the water, there was easy access to water. And, of course, most of those were, were men were, it was just like a guy had a piece of land on the river and became a gardener. And they had, they knew how to grow stuff in that climate. Um, and so I met with a lot of those gardeners to find out what they were doing. And then in the process learn more about sort of gender roles and like it, it was really not appropriate culturally for women to be gardening.

NOBLE: [01:01:27] Oh.

GILMAN: [01:01:27] There's a tradition against women, like handling hoes and things, you know, so.

NOBLE: [01:01:32] Oh, my! Well, whose idea was it then that the women ought to have a gardening?

GILMAN: [01:01:36] Well, it's sort of an international idea about promoting women in development and the sort of, uh, general theory is if you teach a woman to

grow food, then she'll feed her family, you know, and there's some logic to that in a general way.

NOBLE: [01:01:52] But the women who lived in Ansongo might not have thought that was what they needed.

GILMAN: [01:01:57] Right. And, and then, and then the reason, like all the, all the women in these associations were older women, you know. And, and it wasn't appropriate culturally for young women to go out of the household, especially to meet with a male Peace Corps volunteer.

NOBLE: [01:02:15] Right, yeah.

GILMAN: [01:02:16] You know, and so this is something that you struggle with as a Peace Corps volunteer, because culturally, it's not, it's counter to what I feel that gender roles should be.

NOBLE: [01:02:26] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:02:26] But that's the way things were there. And so it was important for me to understand that and understand that, that, that's, that's what was going on. That's why the women who were in the gardening association were not physically strong enough to do the work because they were older women. And, um, uh, although they were plenty strong. They could do, they could pull water out of a well much better than I could. Um, and they, they weren't, uh. It wasn't culturally. I mean, they, they, they wove mats. So they were, they, they were a gardening group. But what they really did is they wove mats and that's how they ended up paying for their loan was not by selling produce from their garden, but by weaving mats and selling the mats.

NOBLE: [01:03:15] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:03:15] And that that's something that they do traditionally. And so it made sense for them to do that. So um, so anyway, I did I did my best to try to get a better understanding of, of the situation of gardens in Ansongo. Uh, and then.

NOBLE: [01:03:33] I want to interrupt you for just one minute. Um. Was, was the idea of gardening to provide, um, healthier nutrition for the families? Did they do, they need to grow? I'm not being able to, I can't talk. Um. Was the idea somehow to improve the nutrition that people had there, to start eating things that they didn't usually eat because they weren't being grown?

GILMAN: [01:04:07] Yeah, well, it wasn't, it wasn't very clear. I mean, there's two ways. There's two ways that a garden can be useful in that, in that environment, right? It can either be to grow healthy food for yourself and your family, or it can be as a way to make some money.

NOBLE: [01:04:22] That's right.

GILMAN: [01:04:22] You grow, grow vegetables to sell in the market. And Ansongo had a weekly market and people came from all over the area and they sold, there was produce that they sold there. It was like onions, a lot of onions, some carrots and lettuce. And not the healthiest, like not the most vitamin rich vegetables, but that's what you could. Those were market vegetables that you could sell. Um, and it wasn't, I mean, there wasn't like a gardening program that had like a defined goal. And it was just kind of this vague idea that, that the bank, the, the, the small development banks that had been set up to provide loans for these kind of groups were under some national program that was driven by some international program, you know.

NOBLE: [01:05:11] Ideas coming from the outside.

GILMAN: [01:05:13] Right. So, so, so they, to qualify for a loan, you needed to be a women's association and you needed to be doing some gardening. And so it wasn't clear what.

NOBLE: [01:05:22] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:05:23] And there were, there were, there were periodic interventions. Every once in a while a, a crew from some international NGO or

something would come in and do a training about gardening or, you know, come to inspect the garden. Like that happened maybe once or twice when I was there. Um, but it never was clear to me, and certainly not to the women, you know, what the real purpose of the garden was.

NOBLE: [01:05:49] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:05:49] It was kind of something they were being asked to do in order to get this loan.

NOBLE: [01:05:52] Yeah. Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:05:53] Um. So, um. Um, so yeah, in my second year, I kind of was spending more time, I'm sort of kind of going around and meeting with people. And I was also meeting with people in Gao because there was the one other volunteer in my cohort was in Gao, and she was also doing gardening, and she was having a bit of a easier time of it, just because Gao is a bigger city and there's more resources. Uh.

NOBLE: [01:06:27] And she's a woman working with women?

GILMAN: [01:06:30] Yeah, yeah. I don't think she was having any better luck with the gardening association than I was, but she, um, she had made a friend with a woman who was a government agent who and had developed a good personal friendship with her. So that was helpful.

NOBLE: [01:06:50] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:06:50] Um, but she wasn't, she wasn't, in terms of, like, what? She wasn't having any more success than I was in terms of, like, sort of providing technical support to a women's gardening association.

NOBLE: [01:07:06] For probably the same reasons that you were running into these frustrating situations.

GILMAN: [01:07:10] Right. So, so I was, I was going to Gao and talking to her as another Peace Corps volunteer and also meeting with people. So Gao

was the regional capital. So talking to the people at the regional level about Peace Corps, and there are also some international NGOs that were, that had offices there. So I was meeting with them and kind of, kind of doing some networking, trying to figure out if it made sense for Peace Corps to continue staying there, and if it did, then how, how to go about it and identifying partners and so on.

GILMAN: [01:07:44] And then when as that was happening, there was a huge rainstorm in Ansongo. It doesn't rain very often in that part of Mali, but when it does, there might be 1 or 2 rainstorms in a year. But there are these massive rainstorms, and they're usually preceded by a big dust storm. And, and, uh, um, and then this huge dump of rain and, and it just inundates everything. And, um, there had been a flood like that in Ansongo that had damaged a lot of houses, including the one that I lived in. Um, so I was.

NOBLE: [01:08:21] Before you got there?

GILMAN: [01:08:22] I was out of town. I was in Gao.

NOBLE: [01:08:24] Oh, oh.

GILMAN: [01:08:26] And, and then heard that there had been this big rainstorm in Ansongo and, and so, uh, so then I had to go back down to Ansongo and get all my stuff moved out of my half-crumbled house and.

NOBLE: [01:08:41] And how did you do this? How did you get from Gao, between Gao and Ansongo?

GILMAN: [01:08:47] Well.

NOBLE: [01:08:48] You're not using the Peace Corps vehicle, and now you're on your own?

GILMAN: [01:08:51] Right. So typically, I would use, uh, the public transport, which which were these old '70s era Land Rovers pickup trucks that were, they, they'd stuff like 17 people into the back of.

NOBLE: [01:09:06] Into the back of the pickup truck? Standing up or sitting down?

GILMAN: [01:09:10] Sitting all hunched over, scrunched on top of each other, along with all their sacks of whatever they were carrying.

NOBLE: [01:09:14] So you might be sitting on top of a sack of something.

GILMAN: [01:09:16] Yeah, yeah. And just scrunched in and can't move. And then on this, this horrible dirt road that had lots of sand patches and, and.

NOBLE: [01:09:26] I can see the dust in your face.

GILMAN: [01:09:28] Yeah. No, it's just incredibly unpleasant. I mean, that's just part of life in that part of the world is like, transportation is just uncomfortable.

NOBLE: [01:09:36] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:09:36] So that would, and with luck, that would take two, 2.5 hours. It could take longer if the truck broke down.

NOBLE: [01:09:42] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:09:44] Um, and then, uh, I did. So Peace Corps was phasing out motorcycles during the time that I was there, but they, they had some motorcycles left over that they were, at the very end. They were sort of giving them out to some volunteers on a case by case basis. So they ended up giving me one because I was far away. But, but, uh, it was a hard road. It was, it was not. I had ridden motorcycles before and felt relatively comfortable on them, but I wasn't comfortable riding on, in that, these, these sand pits that were just, I mean, you had to be a really skilled rider to make it through those without falling. And um, so I, so I wasn't, um, and so somewhere in there, they gave me a motorcycle that I could use to go back and forth to Gao. So I think maybe on that trip I had ridden my motorcycle.

GILMAN: [01:10:41] Um, but then when my house was damaged, then there was a Peace Corps, uh, vehicle that was stationed in Mopti, in that city midway between Bamako and Gao.

NOBLE: [01:10:55] Right.

GILMAN: [01:10:55] And there was, there was a Peace Corps volunteer leader stationed there. So that's a third year volunteer who plays kind of a more of a leadership role, who, who, uh, was, had, was in charge of that vehicle and had a driver. And so he came up to help me when my house was, you know, uh, damaged. So, so.

NOBLE: [01:11:17] Your house was damaged? In what way? It's a mud house.

GILMAN: [01:11:21] It's a mud house. So the foundation was, uh, got wet. And since it's just a mud foundation.

NOBLE: [01:11:28] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:11:28] Then it, then the house. My house didn't completely collapse. A lot of houses did collapse, but it, it sort of, it. Some of the walls cracked and settled in. And so it was, it was no longer safe to be in and.

NOBLE: [01:11:43] Yeah. And you had all your stuff in there.

GILMAN: [01:11:45] My stuff was all in there. So. Yeah. So the, so the.

NOBLE: [01:11:48] I'm assuming you had no electricity?

GILMAN: [01:11:49] There was no electricity.

NOBLE: [01:11:50] Right, okay.

GILMAN: [01:11:50] Yeah. Um, so the, the Peace Corps volunteer leader came up, came up and helped me with the Peace Corps vehicle and helped me get all my stuff out. Um, and then that my librarian friend helped me find another house to live in.

NOBLE: [01:12:07] Oh, good.

GILMAN: [01:12:07] Um, so I moved into that house, and then, another mud, mud house, and then, uh.

NOBLE: [01:12:15] Did you have to pay for these, uh, for residing in these dwellings?

GILMAN: [01:12:19] Um, yeah. Yeah. So we received a stipend from Peace Corps, which is I think it was roughly about \$100 a month to cover our living expenses. And, um.

NOBLE: [01:12:29] And out of that, you had to pay rent for?

GILMAN: [01:12:32] No, I think, I guess that was in addition to rent. So we were allowed up to some amount of money for rent, depending on whether we were in a city or in a village. And so I was in a town. Um, it was a little different in different, depending on whether, like if you were in a village, then typically the villagers would build you a house and, and then, um, that would be their community contribution. And but in my case, I rented a house. And so the Peace Corps paid for the rent for my house, and it had to be within their requirements, however they determined that. And then there were some requirements, like the house was supposed to have mosquito netting or screens on the windows and things, even if that wasn't typical for the houses in that area. Um, so, so, yeah, the house. So I was renting that house. So when, when I moved out, then I just broke my lease and.

NOBLE: [01:13:26] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:13:27] Um, and rented another house from another landlord.

NOBLE: [01:13:33] Did, um, before we go on with your work, but, uh, did you cook for yourself? How did you, how did you manage food?

GILMAN: [01:13:42] Um, well, I ended up. So the typical way, I don't know what's typical. In Mali what was typical is that you would set up an, make an arrangement with a family. Usually you would have, live in, in a family compound. Uh, and, and eat with the family.

NOBLE: [01:14:00] Uh huh.

GILMAN: [01:14:01] Um, so I didn't do that, I was, I, so I did, I had different arrangements. So at first I was, I ate with the family that lived downstairs from me. So there were, the downstairs tenant was a policeman from a different part of Mali who lived, who was stationed in Ansongo. And he was a nice guy. So I just ate with him. Um, and I guess I paid. I can't remember if I paid him or not for that. This is Malian hospitality. It's like you feed strangers, so, you know, um. And the real trick for me, actually, was getting access to water, because the water came out of wells and the quality of water wasn't great. Um, and it's not appropriate for a man to pull water from a well. Um.

NOBLE: [01:14:50] Oh, that's a woman's role.

GILMAN: [01:14:52] Yeah. And so I had to, I struggled with that. I would, sometimes I would, and the guy downstairs had two wives and there was a well in the yard. And so sometimes I would wait until they were like, one of them went out to market and the other was inside doing something. And I would sneak out.

NOBLE: [01:15:08] And you would draw the water for yourself?

GILMAN: [01:15:10] Draw water for myself.

NOBLE: [01:15:11] Oh!

GILMAN: [01:15:12] And then eventually I.

NOBLE: [01:15:13] Because I'm assuming you could not ask another man's wife to draw water for you.

GILMAN: [01:15:17] No, I could, I was supposed to ask.

NOBLE: [01:15:19] Oh, really?

GILMAN: [01:15:20] I was supposed to ask them to do it. But it was a lot of work. It was like the wells were like 30 feet deep or 20 feet deep. So, so. And those women worked so hard. They, all day long they were cooking and pounding grain and, you know. And I was like, I don't, I don't, I. It wasn't culturally appropriate for me to think this or feel this at all, but I just didn't feel comfortable.

NOBLE: [01:15:43] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:15:44] Asking, having her interrupt what she was doing. I mean, she probably would have felt honored to do it, you know. But, but I, I, it just, I was not comfortable with that. I just wanted to be able to pull my own water. I just wanted to do, you know, I'm an American, so I just wanted to be independent. Uh.

NOBLE: [01:16:01] And then you would boil it, when you get it?

GILMAN: [01:16:03] No, because I didn't really have a way to boil.

NOBLE: [01:16:05] Oh, you didn't have a little.

GILMAN: [01:16:07] I didn't have a.

NOBLE: [01:16:07] Kerosene stove or anything?

GILMAN: [01:16:08] No, I had, I had. I had a little, funny little stove that was like a wick. It was like a, it didn't work very well. Um, so I didn't really have a way to cook. Um. Uh, so we would, we would, we would run the water through a cloth to filter it, to get any large like cysts or anything like that out of it. And then we would put a couple drops of bleach in it. So that was how we treated the water. Um, and then I eventually, eventually there was a woman who lived across the street who I asked to draw water for me, and I paid her to do it. And so then I, then I felt I felt better about, okay, and I

just had a schedule where she came in twice a week. And so this was just so I'd have water to drink in, in my apartment.

NOBLE: [01:16:57] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:16:58] Um.

NOBLE: [01:16:58] But you ate your meals.

GILMAN: [01:17:00] And so then I ate my meals with the family downstairs. And then when, when I started making friends with the librarian, then I wanted to eat my meals with him because he was he spoke Songhai with his family, and he was a local family. So hanging out with the policeman downstairs was fine, but he wasn't a local guy. And so. Um, so then I started going over to his house to, which was a little bit of a walk. And, you know, it was stressful for me. I, I, I would just go over there every day and wait and sit and sit in his compound, and he'd be doing whatever he was doing. He was always meeting with people, and the kids would be doing homework by lantern out in one part of the courtyard and the women would be cooking. He had two wives at that time.

GILMAN: [01:17:53] Um, and I, you know, I would just kind of be sitting there not really being active and, and then part of the household and then, and then eventually he'd come over and sit with me and we'd chat. And I didn't always have a lot to talk about and, um, um. But, but, um, so that's how, that was how I ended up doing my food for the rest of the time that I was there.

NOBLE: [01:18:18] Yeah. Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:18:20] Um. And then eventually what happened is that that I was, I was, I was having some success. I was making some progress kind of figuring out how to, um, finding organizations that would host Peace Corps volunteers both in Ansongo and in Gao and, uh, piecing together like what, what should be involved in a training program. And I was, I was working with volunteers in other parts of the country. So as part of Peace

Corps, you have these in-service trainings, they call them. So every, every six months or something.

NOBLE: [01:18:56] Oh, you'd be called in to the capital city or someplace?

GILMAN: [01:18:58] Right. And we'd all meet up and it'd be a chance for everybody to share ideas. Yeah. And so I use those as opportunities to tell other volunteers about what was doing, what I was doing and get ideas from them.

NOBLE: [01:19:10] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:19:10] And talk with the headquarters staff about it and check to see if they had, they supported the idea. And so eventually then at the end of my second year, I, uh, wanted to stay a third year to, to be able to like, get this set up. And so then I was given a position to be a Peace Corps volunteer leader and set up a new regional office in Gao that would be kind of in charge of coordinating what was happening in Gao and making sure that there was region specific training and all that kind of thing.

NOBLE: [01:19:46] Yeah, yeah.

GILMAN: [01:19:46] And then I also set up sites for new volunteers, um, working, working with the Peace Corps staff in Bamako. So I spent my third year doing that. Um, so then, then I was, then I moved to Gao, to the regional capital. So this is a city of like 60,000 people.

NOBLE: [01:20:03] Yeah. In your third year.

GILMAN: [01:20:04] In my third year.

NOBLE: [01:20:05] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:20:06] Um, and, uh.

NOBLE: [01:20:10] Did you, did you go home in between your second and third years, as some volunteers do?

GILMAN: [01:20:16] I did, I did. They, they, I got a paid trip, so I went home. I went back to the States, um, and there were a couple of weddings happening, and so I.

NOBLE: [01:20:27] Timing was good. Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:20:28] Yeah. Um. Uh, so, yeah. Came home and, or flew back to Seattle, I guess, and bought a one of those Greyhound bus tickets where you can, it lasts a month or something.

NOBLE: [01:20:43] Oh.

GILMAN: [01:20:43] And went to the various weddings around the country and visited friends and then, and then went back, um, to finish up my service.

NOBLE: [01:20:56] So that third year you were mostly, um, working as Peace Corps staff almost? Although you're still a volunteer.

GILMAN: [01:21:03] Right.

NOBLE: [01:21:04] You're setting things up and facilitating things.

GILMAN: [01:21:06] Yeah. So then I was focused on setting up. So we decided, we decided that we would, we would kind of restart the northern program and focus, stay in Gao and maybe some villages near in the immediate surrounding area of Gao so that the volunteers could be closer together. Because everybody seemed to agree that it made sense for volunteers to be close enough to each other that they could help each other out.

NOBLE: [01:21:33] Okay.

GILMAN: [01:21:34] Kind of work more as a team.

NOBLE: [01:21:35] So that brought an end to Peace Corps' presence in Ansongo.

GILMAN: [01:21:39] When I left Ansongo, we didn't, they didn't replace. In fact, we didn't. For that next round of volunteers, we took a break. So we didn't take, send new volunteers to the Gao region until we got the regional office set up.

NOBLE: [01:21:53] Oh, good.

GILMAN: [01:21:53] And until, until we got some sites set up that were better organized.

NOBLE: [01:22:00] Good, good.

GILMAN: [01:22:02] Um, and uh. And so then then. Yeah, I was going to meet then, you know, my third year, I was sort of meeting, going to meet with the governor, meeting with the mayor, meeting with the heads of all these NGOs that were headquartered in Gao, meeting with a lot of local small NGOs. Those were like young, recent college graduates who were coming back home and trying to get a career started. Some of them, a lot of real good energy people, motivated people to work with. And, and, um, meeting, going out to some of the outlying villages and meeting with the, the village leaders to talk to them about hosting volunteers and what it would mean. You know, it was like a lot of, a lot of meetings and back and forth discussions. And so I think I ended up setting up, um, like five sites. Uh, so then when that, when that cohort of volunteers arrived, then I was involved in their training a little bit. Um.

NOBLE: [01:23:08] So they would have had some training in Bamako, and then they'd finish their training in Gao?

GILMAN: [01:23:14] They did.

NOBLE: [01:23:15] More site specific.

GILMAN: [01:23:16] We did, uh, we did a part of that three month initial three months training. There was like one week that you went to and did a onsite training. So we, we shipped a group of volunteers all the way up to Gao. So that was something that I didn't get.

NOBLE: [01:23:29] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:23:29] Um, so they could come and see what it looked like and meet some of their partners. And, uh, so I was, I was organizing those, those trainings and, um, uh, it was fun. It was, I felt, it felt productive and it felt constructive. It felt like it was going to lead to something that, you know, I was hoping that it would sort of establish a more solid foundation for Peace Corps' presence in the region.

NOBLE: [01:24:01] What a, what an interesting story and what a leap from your first few months were. It must have been so depressing when you couldn't figure out why things weren't happening. To in the end, um, being able to set up things so the new volunteers coming in wouldn't have to go through what you did.

GILMAN: [01:24:21] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:24:21] And that everything would be much more, people would be much more productive with their time.

GILMAN: [01:24:25] Yeah. And I think it's a real testament to the potential of Peace Corps. You know, not everybody has a great experience in Peace Corps and, and, but. But one of the things that that is possible when, when things work well is, is you can have a lot of creative latitude, you know. And so I had the support of the Peace Corps staff to sort of, um, pursue this idea and, and it allowed me to be creative and, and, um, feel, feel productive. And so I, um, I, uh, and. Yeah, like you say, to turn what started off as a really sort of difficult and challenging experience into one that that was very positive.

NOBLE: [01:25:09] And satisfying and productive. Wonderful.

GILMAN: [01:25:12] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:25:13] And then your time in Peace Corps comes to an end. You've now had three years in Mali. And you've now got, um. You're still in music. Did you have your French horn with you?

GILMAN: [01:25:26] I did. I did, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:25:28] In Mali?

GILMAN: [01:25:29] I did, yeah. And I, I played it some, um. Yeah. One of my, one of my, uh, memories of that is of playing my horn when I was in Ansongo in that second story couple of rooms in the mud structure. And I was playing my horn, and one of the policemen's wives was downstairs sweeping the courtyard. So there's kind of the rhythm of the swish, swish, swish of her sweeping. And so and I was just kind of improvising and playing and then, and then I stopped and I realized that she was humming the tune that I was playing.

NOBLE: [01:26:02] Oh, as she was sweeping.

GILMAN: [01:26:04] Yeah. But yeah, I brought the horn and, and played it a little bit on and off while I was there.

NOBLE: [01:26:09] Oh, terrific. Yeah. So. So here you are now. You must be 32 or so?

GILMAN: [01:26:16] Right.

NOBLE: [01:26:17] And you've, you've got your music and you have your degree in electrical engineering, which wasn't that applicable after all, in, in Peace Corps work. And you've got some, uh, experience thinking about agriculture and gardening and, and not gardening and, um. How did all this pull together for what your choices were after Peace Corps?

GILMAN: [01:26:43] Um, well, I came back from Peace Corps sort of not knowing exactly what I wanted to do. I felt like I wanted to continue doing work abroad. Um, and so in my fashion, I sort of took some time off and traveled a little bit. Um, and. Um. I ended up, uh, I ended up kind of falling

back into the work that I had gotten before Peace Corps, which is being a technical writer, which has nothing to do with any of this. Um, and it's sort of easy, easy work for me to get that, that pays well. So I was back in Seattle being a technical writer, and then I, um, I got laid off of my job and then that. So that forced me to sort of focus on finding another job. And I ended up getting a job, uh, at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, which, which is, does research on renewable energy. So this I'm finally getting to what my initial interest in all of this was.

NOBLE: [01:27:45] That's right, you had said that you were thinking about renewable energy with your, um, degree in, uh, electricity.

GILMAN: [01:27:54] So, so, what. Uh, so, so they had a small international program at the lab, and they were, they were very interested in my Peace Corps experience and in my, and in particular in my sort of, uh, I don't know, call it grassroots level or my experience sort of on the ground because they were, they were all very familiar with sort of the bureaucratic high level workings of, of the energy part of international development. So they were, they were very interested in my experience, having seen what those programs look like on the ground.

NOBLE: [01:28:29] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:28:29] And so I think I was hired, uh, because of that. So I think that, that, um, that in a, in a, in a completely unpredictable way that Peace Corps experience gave me, um, some job experience that, that has been useful. Um.

NOBLE: [01:28:49] What do you do now?

GILMAN: [01:28:50] Well, I still, I still work for the lab. I'm now a consultant, so I'm a freelancer. Um, and I do, I do software training, um, and I do a lot of the training. Uh, some of it, I've been doing international training. Um, so I continue to keep my foot in sort of doing international stuff. Um, so it's kind of loosely related. The software that I, I work with is software that like solar energy planners and engineers could use for building solar energy

systems in Africa or somewhere else. So there's, there's a loose connection somewhere in there. Um.

NOBLE: [01:29:38] Did your, uh, experience in, um, your three years in Mali somehow affect the way you view the world?

GILMAN: [01:29:55] Yeah. I think, you know, because I went a little bit older than a lot of my cohorts. I wasn't fresh out of college.

NOBLE: [01:30:05] Yeah.

GILMAN: [01:30:05] And because I had already lived in Africa and, um, it wasn't, as, I don't know, mind blowingly, uh, dramatic a, uh, sort of opening of my eyes.

NOBLE: [01:30:23] Mm hmm.

GILMAN: [01:30:23] Um, but, but, um. I don't know. For me, it just, it, it just gave me another perspective, you know, another perspective on how development works or doesn't work. Um, and another perspective on how Americans interact with the rest of the world, you know, just kind of being part of a group of Americans that's living in Mali and watching how my fellow volunteers were experiencing things. Um, gave me a perspective on that. So I'd say it's sort of, yeah, widened, widened my perspective. I didn't, I don't think it really changed it very much.

NOBLE: [01:31:12] Yeah. You had such a strong foundation and beginning in Africa to begin with.

GILMAN: [01:31:17] Right.

NOBLE: [01:31:18] Um, any other thoughts about Peace Corps?

GILMAN: [01:31:22] Uh. Yeah. And I mean, just it's, it's, it's a complicated. It's a complicated, um, experience being a Peace Corps volunteer. You know, it's not. I don't regret doing it for a minute. Um, and it wasn't all positive

and it wasn't all negative, you know? So, um, I guess that's my overall feeling about the, about the whole thing is. Uh, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:31:57] Thank you very much, Paul.

GILMAN: [01:31:59] Sure, you're welcome.

NOBLE: [01:31:59] I very much enjoyed hearing your story.

[END OF INTERVIEW]