

Imhotep Simba Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Imhotep Simba served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from May 2017 to August 2019 on an urban youth development project.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Imhotep Simba

January 10, 2020
Reston, Virginia

By Charlaine Loriston

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

LORISTON: [00:00:02] Today is January 10th, 2020. My name is Charlaine Loriston and I served in Guinea from 2016 to 2017. And today I have the pleasure of interviewing Imhotep Simba, who served in Ecuador from May 2017 to August 2019 in urban youth development. Hi.

SIMBA: [00:00:26] Hey, how are you? Pleasure to be here. Thanks for the opportunity. And looking forward to it.

LORISTON: [00:00:32] OK, cool. So before we begin, can you please let your listeners know more a little bit about your background? Where do you come from? Basically, what was your life like before Peace Corps?

SIMBA: [00:00:42] Peace Corps. OK, so as you shared, my name's Imhotep Simba. I was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, specifically in the Upton community of West Baltimore. I grew up in a single parent household with my mother and sister, older sister. I knew my dad. I know

my dad. Didn't have the best relationship, you know, however he was there and he made his best contribution. Proud graduate of Baltimore City Public Schools. I attended Furman L. Templeton, John Eagar Elementary School, Mount Royal Middle and some West Side High School and Francis M. Wood Alternative as well. I guess a little bit more prior to the Peace Corps. Yeah, so grew up in West Baltimore, a single parent household, tough neighborhood.

SIMBA: [00:01:49] I learned quite a quite a few lessons the hard way, but thankfully I was able to to learn from those lessons. And those things really kind of propelled me forward where I had an opportunity to go to Coppin State University. Coppin State, yes, Coppin State University, which is an HBCU in West Baltimore as well. Graduated from there in 2015, cum laude, which was like huge because, like, I wasn't always a scholar. So that was pretty cool, especially just growing up, like growing up in poverty honestly. Like, I never thought I would have went to college. So to like even go one day and then like graduate and then like graduate with honors, was just like unheard of, unprecedented.

SIMBA: [00:02:41] After that, after I graduated, I served as a program manager with a nonprofit called Concerned Black Men National, and I was their program manager for the CBM CARES National Mentoring Initiative in Baltimore, where I served there for two years working with middle school boys in southwest Baltimore.

LORISTON: [00:03:05] OK, so here you are. Were you the first person in your family to graduate from college?

SIMBA: [00:03:10] I was. My mom actually attended Bowie State University. However, she did not complete her degree, so I have the honor of sharing I was the first to do so.

LORISTON: [00:03:23] So how did you find out about the Peace Corps? Was it in school?

SIMBA: [00:03:29] I think the first time I literally heard about the Peace Corps was when I was a child, maybe in middle school or so, from a

caseworker of mine. I was involved in a program called The Choice, well, I was involved in a lot of youth programs, mentoring programs, all that were free. But it was one particular program called the Choice Program, which is a nonprofit based out of the University of Baltimore County, UMBC. And essentially AmeriCorps volunteers make their commitment to service domestically for a year. And I had a caseworker who's an AmeriCorps volunteer, and her and some of the other volunteers were chatting about something, maybe life after AmeriCorps or whatever the case may have been. And that was the first time that I heard about the Peace Corps.

SIMBA: [00:04:25] I really didn't understand what it was, but I do recall I'm hearing about the Peace Corps. Afterwards Peace Corps came full circle in undergrad, after hearing about it from one of my professors, in addition to one of my mentors who shared the Peace Corps as an alternative and opportunity to travel, but also to serve and make a greater contribution to the global community.

LORISTON: [00:04:53] So what was it about what you learned from, you know, hearing about Peace Corps in middle school and whatever your professors had to share with you? What was it that sparked your interest?

SIMBA: [00:05:07] I think it really goes back a little bit before either. Despite growing up in the inner city, in the hood, honestly, I grew up in a very unique household. And I grew up in a household where my mom really stressed the significance of us not only being African Americans, but people of African descent. So that was really important to my identity, but on a bigger scale, she made my sister and I aware and anybody who she really came in contact of, you know, there being a bigger picture and things being a lot bigger than Baltimore, being bigger than Maryland and the U.S. So, you know, when things were challenging or, you know, we might not have food or we ain't have like the clothes or whatever we may have wanted for, you know, back to school, when we was waiting in the Thanksgiving line or we was down there waiting in the line with the homeless to get like something to eat.

SIMBA: [00:06:07] Like she always said, like, yeah, you know, like things are tough, you know, they're not the most comfortable when it was super cold. We was waiting on a bus or walking somewhere, she said like things could be a lot worse. And she referenced various challenges people from all across the globe were going through, especially, you know, people, our people on a continent. But she made references to people from everywhere suffer like where we were from what we saw every day. So that was a really significant thing. I mean, you know, just being introduced to that like global perspective from my early age really influenced things. And also, you know, being a part of those mentoring groups or youth programs. And I never had the opportunity to travel abroad prior to the Peace Corps, but I had the opportunity to travel up and down the East Coast, and that's where the traveling thing really came from. But also really just finding it fascinating, you know, traveling and seeing different things, meeting people from different walks of life. And that's something I really enjoy.

SIMBA: [00:07:13] So when I went to undergrad, I declared I became a global studies major, but that was after I figured out that they didn't have like a graphic video game design program at Coppin. So I was like, I'll be a global studies major. And, you know, it was a really small program at Coppin State. There were a handful of people in the global studies department, not a lot of funding, never had the opportunity to go abroad. So I figured out some things I wanted to kind of do after like, you know, life after undergrad. And ultimately, I wanted to become a Foreign Service officer for USAID, and I kind of made a plan and working backwards from that goal. And it was OK, grad school, Georgetown. And then before that, to even build up my profile and become more competitive, I was like, I need to go abroad. And I was thinking about what was applicable for me based upon my circumstances, not really having the funds, resources, and not really knowing anybody who personally had gone abroad. And now, you know, Peace Corps came full circle.

LORISTON: [00:08:23] When did you apply, around what time prior?

SIMBA: [00:08:28] I'll say I applied several times. I applied four times, in total four times. The first time I applied I want to say it was my junior year of high school. Not high school, I apologize, my junior year of undergrad. It might have been like end of junior year going into my senior year, but I definitely applied twice before I graduated in 2015. So sometime during my junior year, but I want to say maybe it was like the spring or like summer of junior year going into senior year. And I definitely applied again in my senior year. Unfortunately, I applied like three times and I didn't even get an interview. But, you know, everything worked out. That's why we here so.

LORISTON: [00:09:08] How did it make you feel each time that you were not invited to serve?

SIMBA: [00:09:16] Honestly, I think the second time was like the hardest for me. Was it the second time? Yeah, yeah, I was trying to, I think for me, it was a lot of pressure. I've always been, not always, but from being a young adult, I've always been a planner. I put in a lot of work and I always like to have things set up well in advance. I wasn't really one to just kind of like go and figure things out. So I was really trying to make sure that I had, you know, the next plan, the next steps, ready after undergrad. And so I applied to the Peace Corps and I was like doing my due diligence. I met people who like worked at Peace Corps, were former Peace Corps volunteers. And, you know, after the first time I didn't get it, I was like, alright, maybe my app was off. And then I, you know, met some people who provided guidance, and I followed everything they shared and I still didn't get it.

SIMBA: [00:10:11] And then I went to a happy hour. You know, I met all of these like RPCVs or whatever and they shared their perspective and experience, and I was just disappointed based upon what they shared. And I was just like, you know, people got all types of experiences and perspectives on their service. And I'm like, this is something I really want to do and like I can't even get an interview. So I mean, I don't think it was about, you know, so much as getting in per se, but I think I was kind of hurt based upon the sentiment that I felt that I received at that event based upon the Peace Corps and people's attitudes. And this was

something I really wanted to do and I had been chasing and pursuing like consistently, and I couldn't get an interview. So I was emotional about that, honestly. And I remember leaving that happy hour and shedding a tear or two, surprisingly enough. I'm not really emotional, but I remember, I recall that.

SIMBA: [00:11:09] So it was frustrating. It was frustrating. And obviously at one point I was a little sentimental about it. But you know, anything you want in life, if you pursue it, if you really want to, you'll continue. And perseverance is key. And you know, like I said, that's why we're here and, you know, I overcame and I completed that journey.

LORISTON: [00:11:31] What was it about those conversations that disappointed you?

SIMBA: [00:11:38] Um, my perspective is a little different after completing that journey. But initially, you know, people, I don't know, not it wasn't everybody, but people had a lot of negative things to say about their Peace Corps service or some of the people they served. And I was like, damn, you know what I mean? Like these people like sharing all of this energy. And it's like, you know, these people are like, they did it. And I'm like, I really, you know, I think about like, I ain't really I never had. I hadn't traveled abroad at that point, so I really didn't know what to expect. I just had this idea. And I thought about like other people who grew up in poverty and it's like I grew up in poverty too. But my life a little better, like, you know, I'm in college, so I want to share some of the things that helped me to get here with other people. And I don't know, I just felt like I had a little. I may have had some things, a little bit more things in common than some of the other people I met, who I also thought were like super privileged or whatever. And, you know, just their perspective on it.

SIMBA: [00:12:43] It's like, yo, I really want to do it. I really want to contribute for my own personal reasons and those just being like, yo, obviously I don't. I grew up in the U.S., but like, I grew up in poverty, I remember. And I just said, like, you know, just me and my mom not having. I ain't even really going to what it means to grow up in poverty in the inner city in Baltimore and the relentless and merciless and shameful violence that

comes along with that and really just trying to survive. You know what I mean? It's like food and being hungry and stuff too and not having, but it's literally like trying to survive. You know what I'm saying, with your life? But that's neither here nor there. But, you know, overcoming those things. I just felt like all that effort I put in it and following the things that people shared who were close to the Peace Corps, I felt like I should have, you know, just got an interview minimum.

LORISTON: [00:13:32] So the final time that you applied and you finally get an interview, what was that feeling like for you? And then what happened thereafter?

SIMBA: [00:13:43] It was exciting. It was exciting. I remember I was out. I took, I had taken a mentee of mine, this was when I was a program manager with Concerned Black Men National. And I had taken a mentor, a mentee, I apologize, to some event at like M&T Bank Stadium, home of the Ravens. Shout out to Lamar Jackson, Action Jackson for MVP. We're going to get this done tomorrow. I'm sorry, I had to put that on a record because we playing tomorrow. But so we were at this event and I got the email and I was like, wow! What's that? No, I'm sorry, my bad. That's, I fast forwarded too much, that's like when I got it. But when I initially got the interview like I was, I was happy and I was happy because, like, I knew. Just like that was the last thing, like I had not, I hadn't got in three times and I knew like if I got an interview, there was no way I could be denied.

SIMBA: [00:14:45] Like I just was that confident. I knew myself and I knew why I was doing it. So I was like, wow, I got an interview. And I didn't know, like, I was getting in, but I was like, this is the opportunity to bring everything full circle. And I like to think that's what I did. I delivered it. And, you know, thankfully, things played out. And yeah, then fast forward to we was at the stadium and getting a green light that, you know, you've been accepted.

LORISTON: [00:15:12] So how long did it take between the application and the actual acceptance?

SIMBA: [00:15:17] That's a great question. I don't recall offhand. I know it wasn't two weeks, but I also know it wasn't six months. So maybe two to three months. It wasn't a lot. Actually, but I know for a fact it might have been somewhere. It was between the fall and the spring. It was between the fall and the spring. It was, if I left in 2017, I applied somewhere in fall or winter 2016. And then I got the green light that I would get accepted in like maybe early winter or spring. I don't know, something like that.

LORISTON: [00:15:56] OK. So you're invited to serve. Did you get an opportunity to choose where you were to serve?

SIMBA: [00:16:03] Yes, thankfully. You know, obviously I'm maybe a couple of months or whatever removed from my Peace Corps service, but thankfully we live in a new day and age. It was 2016 when I last applied and got in, 2017. And thankfully in the Peace Corps today, unless there's been a major update, you can pick the country of service and what you're interested in serving and also a program. So I'm very appreciative and I had that privilege to do so. And so for me specifically, I wanted to continue working with youth. I'm just based upon my experience growing up in Baltimore, and really just being a youth like and being a part of those programs were extremely pivotal for me because I felt like it's been multiple times when I could have been a thought on a shirt or whatever you may have it. And so I felt like I wasn't necessarily supposed to be where I was.

SIMBA: [00:17:03] But because of those programs, I continued on, I survived. And so for me, every, and it was like a few other things that I experienced as a youth. I really wanted to like, give back and work with youth. And that's what I did. And I wanted to continue that on a global scale. So I chose a youth development or a youth, yeah, the youth and families program. And I was a Latin American regional concentration or whatever in undergrad, so I had the opportunity to put both together serving in Ecuador.

LORISTON: [00:17:40] So were you already Spanish speaking then?

SIMBA: [00:17:44] No, that's a great question. That's a great question. So this goes into a whole other thing. Great question. So I took Spanish in high school. I took Spanish in undergrad. And high school was a joke. Like I said, like a lot of, not just myself, but everybody. Like everybody was trying to survive. So Spanish like everybody, nobody really took it seriously. Like it was a dream, you know. And it wasn't a dream. Like nobody, everybody was trying to worry about getting home alive, and nobody really thought about like, you know, like, oh, I'm going to go somewhere. I'm going to actually need to speak Spanish. And even particularly specifically pertaining to Baltimore, West Baltimore. I went to West Side High School, which is located in southwest Baltimore, but so that's southwest. But we could just talk about West Baltimore.

SIMBA: [00:18:35] So Baltimore is a predominantly African American city and especially West Baltimore. You really won't see a lot of Latinos. It's not a large Latino population unless you go closer to Patterson Park, which is on the east side. But in general, it's not a lot of Latinos. So Spanish wasn't relevant for inner city youth growing up in the hood. And because I couldn't really think too far past like outside of that and never really thought I would travel, I ain't really take it serious. And by the time I got to undergrad, I took a class, but I didn't really have nobody to practice with. So I say all that to say that I didn't speak great Spanish upon arriving, but thankful I had, you know, the years under my belt to qualify.

LORISTON: [00:19:23] Oh, so that's how. So Ecuador, there was a requirement that you at least had exposure to Spanish? Got it.

SIMBA: [00:19:31] Exactly. I wasn't too far removed. I took several years of Spanish in undergrad and therefore I qualified, in addition to high school as well.

LORISTON: [00:19:42] OK, so here you are. You get your invitation to serve. How did you break this down to your family? How did they respond? I mean, what were you experiencing at the time before actually packing your bags to go?

SIMBA: [00:20:01] So I was excited. I told my mom. She was happy. I think everybody, like everybody who I shared that like, like I said, I applied four times total. It was several years in which, matter of fact, I mean, it might have been approximately four years, maybe three years, in which I was relentlessly pursuing this opportunity and the Peace Corps. And so a lot of people had, people who knew about it was like, well, God damn Simba, the hard work paid off. You finally got it. Man, people went, people were super excited. You know, like people were super excited because it wasn't like a mystery and it didn't come out the blue. Everybody, anybody worth mentioning who was close to me knew that this was something I was pursuing. So people were super excited.

SIMBA: [00:20:47] I had several, a couple, not a lot actually. I think it's two. I touched base with a few friends, but there were two significant like departing or going away celebrations I had that were really meaningful. Because growing up, I really didn't even have like birthday parties. Every day, like all the holidays, was just another day. Birthdays was another day, so I really didn't grow up having like celebrations. But to have those two kind of like gatherings. One was an emergency contact meeting that I organized, honestly. That wasn't a celebration, but there were important people there, my mentors, my mom's son, his mom. And, you know, just even like a good family friend of mine who also is like a broker who like. He essentially like he's the one who manages like everything financial for me, including a policy. Like it was great, like it was friends and family.

SIMBA: [00:21:51] But it was also things, you know, people who I put a lot of faith in. And I just wanted to organize that because I ain't know what to expect, like first time abroad, you know, like nobody else personally who did it. I'm like, look, if I don't come back, this goes here. I wrote, I had my will signed off and everything. Like I might have exaggerated, but I didn't really know what to expect. So that was one gathering, and I had my favorite food. Like, we had some bomb food at Kumari's restaurant. Shout out to Kumari, on Charles Street in Mount Vernon. And just the other celebration. It was great. I really ain't know thing about Ecuador either, by the way. So it was a lot of things like now I wish I'd done differently to better prepare. Because I knew after I went, I wasn't

coming back for two years straight, so I tried to prepare for that the best I could without knowing what I knew.

LORISTON: [00:22:49] Like what? Can you explain what you mean by how you would have, if you had the chance to turn back the hands of time, what would you have done differently?

SIMBA: [00:22:57] If I did it and I had the resources, and I had a fair amount of resources, like a little program manager, I had a nice salary or at least for that time, come in fresh out of undergrad. My parents never even had a salary, so I was doing great, couldn't tell me nothing. But if I really did it again, I would have purchased everything brand new, every. Because what I ended up doing, and they held me up for a while and it was good. I ended up taking clothes like I already had, which was great, and I feel like it's traditional and you know, like people do it. It's not like everybody's like, hey, let me just buy a whole new brand-new wardrobe and go to the Peace Corps. But I say that because I guess had I been a global traveler and had I been exposed to like other things or countries that were like middle income, middle to low income, I would have known that they aren't the U.S. and therefore you can't necessarily find your same exact shoe, especially if you have big feet.

SIMBA: [00:24:01] I wear like a 10 and a half, which is, I think, is normal here. But this is the U.S. mixing whichever race, ethnicity in the world. But going to Ecuador, that's not necessarily the case. And I had huge feet, and so that was, you know, that was a challenge finding, you know, things. Just shoes, boots, everything to put on my feet, but also the quality. I think that was more so than anything, quality that I could believe in and trust and I have faith in, that would last me. Because, like I said, I knew for a fact once I left, I did not plan to come back. And I know it that I really didn't have in mind, you know, having visitors. I extended. I told everybody, look, I'm not coming back. Everybody's like, oh, when you come back. So like, I'm not, I can't really afford it, you know what I mean? I can't really afford to come back. So after I go, I'm out.

SIMBA: [00:24:51] But listen, if you ever come through, you got somewhere to stay in Ecuador. And I just told people that, but I ain't really thinking. I'm

blessed to say that I had approximately like 20 visitors, so people actually took me up on that. But, you know, I knew I wasn't coming back. I didn't plan to come back. So with that, thankfully I had visitors to bring me things. But if I went through those two years with like no visitors, like a lot of, not a lot, but several, you know, specifically shoes and boots and things I have brought that ran down eventually. So I would have just bought everything new, but put a little extra couple of miles with and say I want it or whatever.

LORISTON: [00:25:34] So you started in May of 2017. Where did you have your staging?

SIMBA: [00:25:39] My staging took place in Miami. Miami, Florida. It was actually my first time going to Miami as well, so that was pretty dope. And it was kind of a little shock. I was like, damn, like this lower Latin America it sounded like. They're speaking an awful lot of Spanish here. And I was like, we didn't even leave the country yet. Why am I getting hit in the head with all this? But it was dope. It was awesome. I enjoyed Miami a lot and I look forward to returning.

LORISTON: [00:26:05] How many people were in your group?

SIMBA: [00:26:07] Approximately, I would say approximately 50. To be more exact, it was like 47 or so.

LORISTON: [00:26:13] And were all of you in the urban youth development program.

SIMBA: [00:26:17] So there was approximately 50, 47 or so. Two cohorts. One cohort, Omnibus 118. In this cohort, there were two programs. There are in Ecuador in general, however, in this cohort there were two. There was the youth and families program and there was also the community development program.

SIMBA: [00:26:40] And something else that was really notable with staging. I was extremely surprised by the diversity of the cohort. Because like from my knowledge, my perspective, what I had heard and seen, I guess, just like the traditional Peace Corps history, the majority of volunteers, RPCVs,

are Caucasian. They're white. And so, you know, that was, I was like, OK, like, I'm going to be a super minority here. Which I didn't have a problem with, I'm coming from a black city. But thankfully, you know, I met my fair share of people in life and especially undergrad, interning in Annapolis with the Maryland General Assembly, interning at like the World Trade Center Institute. But this was going to be something different, and it was an extremely nice mix. So that was a very great feeling to start off my Peace Corps journey. Again, it was people from all walks of life, every, every. I feel like a lot of ethnicities were represented in that cohort.

LORISTON: [00:27:42] How many days did you stay in Miami?

SIMBA: [00:27:44] We stayed there maybe three days or so. That may be three days, two nights, something like that. Maybe it was longer. I really recall, something like that.

LORISTON: [00:27:54] Were there any trainings during your staging that took place?

SIMBA: [00:27:58] I don't recall them, but there were several trainings to prepare us for departure and also maybe like some scared straights. Like, oh look, if you ain't serious about it, like don't get on that plane. I'm joking around maybe. They really did put an emphasis like, you know, it's the last time before you guys depart. So, you know, if it's really not for you, you know, it's like this is the last chance. And they didn't blatantly say that, but like, that's kind of like the tone. And from that, only one individual left. There was some gentleman, I mean, that was the only person who left prior to staging. Or during staging.

LORISTON: [00:28:35] So I remember in my staging that this was when I received my official Peace Corps passport. So as someone who never traveled abroad, was that your very first passport? And if so, how did you feel when you got your passport in your hand?

SIMBA: [00:28:53] That's a great question. So despite not traveling abroad, I was ready before I even went to Peace Corps. I had a passport when I was

an undergrad, I was just waiting for the right opportunity. So I had a passport several years, you know, before the Peace Corps.

LORISTON: [00:29:11] Just never used it.

SIMBA: [00:29:12] Never had an opportunity to use it. So when I finally, I think I didn't get my. For me personally, I don't think we got our passports until we were in country, actually. Oh, I forgot. Don't. I forgot, but maybe I don't even remember. But the one thing I do remember when I got my Peace Corps passport was I was disappointed. I was disappointed because my personal passport, some Walgreens or Rite Aid employee ain't do their job.

LORISTON: [00:29:40] You liked the picture better.

SIMBA: [00:29:40] And they allowed me to smile and I think I have a great smile. And so I was extremely impressed and I said, that man looked good. He looks great. I looked outstanding in my regular passport, but unfortunately somebody started doing their job and I had like this straight face that I really didn't like that, honestly. So it was dope, like, oh this is a Peace Corps passport. I got two passports. Like, you know, it wasn't a diplomatic passport, but it was like, it was dope and like the idea. But I was a little disappointed.

LORISTON: [00:30:09] The idea of legally having two passports.

SIMBA: [00:30:11] Yeah, like having a Peace Corps passport, whatever I thought that meant at that time. But the picture was just like. But it was dope. It was cool.

LORISTON: [00:30:19] So you get on, was it a direct flight to Ecuador?

SIMBA: [00:30:23] It was from Miami. It was a direct flight.

LORISTON: [00:30:26] What was it like for you getting out, stepping off of the plane? What were the sounds, the smells? You know, what did you see? What was the shock factor like when you realized, I'm in another country?

SIMBA: [00:30:43] OK. That's a great question. So we got there at like, I don't, I don't remember. But it was early morning, maybe 12:00, 1:00, 2:00, 3:00, something like that. But the thing that really stood out was this weird smell to me, and I don't know if it was really a weird. I asked a few people, and apparently it was just me. Maybe it was just the difference in the air quality or whatever the case may be. Quito is actually one of, maybe it's changed. They share like, it's the highest capital in the world, and if it's not the highest, it's definitely one of the highest. So the altitude plays a very significant role and factor for a lot of people. Pardon me. When they travel to Quito, especially if they are coming from a sea level city, which most, you know, cities on the East Coast of the U.S. are. Maybe the closest thing to prepare you for Quito.

LORISTON: [00:31:42] Miami?

SIMBA: [00:31:42] No, for Quito, specifically, in Ecuador would be.

LORISTON: [00:31:46] Oh, it's higher.

SIMBA: [00:31:46] Exactly. Maybe mile high Denver. But Quito is however many meters higher. And so maybe that's just what it was. It was the air, a little, whatever. But that's something. I don't know if it was the smell or whatever, but that's what really stood out to me upon arriving in Ecuador. It was like the biggest thing.

LORISTON: [00:32:07] Did you have an opportunity? Oh, go ahead.

SIMBA: [00:32:10] I'm sorry. And the airport was really modern, so it wasn't like what people think or at least what I thought. And a lot of people think about Peace Corps, middle of nowhere. No, it was super modern. So it was like, I don't know, stepping off of, going to any.

LORISTON: [00:32:23] You had air conditioning.

SIMBA: [00:32:24] Yeah, it was. Yeah, it was extremely modern. So I just wanted to add that for the record. It wasn't like what we think, middle of nowhere, small plane, dirt road.

LORISTON: [00:32:36] Who, if anyone, did you all meet anyone at the airport? Did anyone from Peace Corps staff meet with you upon landing?

SIMBA: [00:32:45] Yeah. So I guess surprisingly, and I thought it was standard. Apparently, it's not. But our country director was actually there upon arriving. The deputy country director. Several key staff from the pre-service training were there as well, in addition to several PCVLs. PCVL stands for Peace Corps volunteer leaders. And so we were embraced. Like we arrived and those people were there to help us with our bags, show us to the shuttle, and we went to the hostel. So those were some of the first people that were notable upon arriving.

LORISTON: [00:33:32] So you stayed at a hostel with all 47 or 46 volunteers.

SIMBA: [00:33:37] We were deep. It was like 47. I think it might have been like two more people who ain't, who never showed, that might have took away from that. Maybe two or three, whatever, something like that, who didn't show and then like the one kid who dropped.

LORISTON: - [00:33:50] So this was in Quito, specifically where you landed and where the hostel was?

SIMBA: [00:33:55] Quito. Uh-huh. Yeah.

LORISTON: [00:33:57] And is that where you had your training?

SIMBA: [00:34:01] So we went to a hotel that was by the Peace Corps like headquarters.

LORISTON: [00:34:11] You said hotel or did you mean the hostel?

SIMBA: [00:34:13] We went to. So when we arrived, we stayed at a hostel. And the Peace Corps, I didn't know it at the time, but the Peace Corps

headquarters was like two blocks away. But we stayed at a hostel maybe. Did we get there during the week? I forgot. We stayed there for, like, maybe we arrived in the middle of the week and we went back and forth until the end of the week until the weekend came and then we went to our host families. But no. Where we stayed and the training center were in two different parts of Quito. The training center was in a community called Monteserrin and that is a really exclusive neighborhood in Quito actually. It's a neighborhood where some of the well-to-do, maybe even elite, stay. A lot of diplomats live there. President Correa lived there at one time. The U.S. ambassador had a home there. And that's where the training center was. So no, where we originally arrived and where we trained were two different locations.

LORISTON: [00:35:16] And so after your first weekend, you went to a host family.

SIMBA: [00:35:19] I believe so.

LORISTON: [00:35:20] So how were they assigned to you? How did your initial meeting with this new family?

SIMBA: [00:35:28] Do an icebreaker, you know, the Peace Corps standard and spirit, some gnarly activity. I remember this activity, though, and this was actually a really significant moment in my service. This is a really significant moment that I actually documented, really. So I remember that day. I forgot what we did in the morning, but for me, by the time it was coming towards 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. when training was over, it had been a long day. Part of the day was in English, part was in Spanish. I wasn't where I would have liked to be and should have been. So it was frustrating. Really didn't catch all of the things they said in Spanish. And to end the day we had an activity and essentially we were provided a half of a flower. This was a paper flower, by the way, with the stick on the end that was like, whatever, the foundation, stem, leaves. So it was this stick and like half a flower.

SIMBA: [00:36:30] And we were told that we were supposed to find the other half in the garden out back. And once we found it, this would essentially tell us who our host families were and help us find them so that we could go

off to our first weekend. So I had this half a flower and we all get up and we move. We leave the training center to go to the garden out back. So everybody's searching around for their other half of their flower. So I'm searching, searching, searching. And I finally find mine. So I pick up the other half and I read it. There's a letter there from my host family, soon-to-be host family, the family that I would be meeting, and there's a letter there. And so I go through it and read it. Um, and what's next?

LORISTON: [00:37:28] What, is it in English?

SIMBA: [00:37:30] What's notable. It's in Spanish, of course. And unfortunately, because my skills weren't necessarily where I needed them to be, this brought a very extremely heavy feeling to me. And this feeling was one of being.

LORISTON: [00:37:57] Not ready?

SIMBA: [00:37:59] A little bit heavier than just not ready. Not ready is, I don't know. The feeling was a brother who may be, an illiterate brother who just came home from being incarcerated, who received a letter from his family, maybe after just returning to where he lived or whatever the case may be. He received a letter from his family after being removed from them for so many years. However, because he doesn't have the skills and capacity to do so, he can't transcribe and understand what his family is trying to convey to him. And that's a really heavy feeling.

LORISTON: [00:38:51] Yeah.

SIMBA: [00:38:53] And I don't, that's how I felt. I read, I tried once, I tried twice, I tried three times. And honestly, in addition to that, I was super prideful. Everybody else is reading theirs, they're ha, ha, ha, hee, hee, hee. And honestly, I'm still looking there reading it. I was honestly super prideful, and I really didn't want to ask anyone else like, you know. And I think that feeling also kind of contributed to the sentiment of being like this gentleman who just coming. Because the idea of like, OK, you're supposed to be meeting like your family, or your family has a letter for you but you can't read it, but you don't really want to ask somebody, you

know, and prideful. Thankfully, I had a colleague who offered to read it for me. His name was Eric. And so I was appreciative and I took him up on it. But that was a really heavy feeling for me at that moment. I will never forget. One of the few low points for me, but that was a very significant moment in my Peace Corps journey. And after that I turned to look at this mountain and I didn't know the name of it, but it's called Wawa Pichincha. But I turned and I looked and I said, this is where the journey begins. This is where I ascend. And yeah.

LORISTON: [00:40:21] I do want to go back to this letter, when you finally learned what it said. First of all, what did it say? And how did you then connect to the family that wrote it to you?

SIMBA: [00:40:36] That's a good question. By the time I could actually read it, whew. That was a nice little ways into my service. So I didn't have it for that long. But what it did say, from what Eric conveyed, it was, hey, essentially, you know, hey, welcome to the family. We're really, really excited to meet you, and we really look forward to building and embracing you as one of our own. That's paraphrasing it, but that's what it shared. And it was, you know, that was dope and pretty cool and meaningful because like, these people really didn't know me from like Adam and Eve. But, you know, like they were really excited about me coming and they were looking forward to like embracing me as family. And for me, I was like, I know it was like host family, I was like, I don't really. And they were really, you know, they just put all of this excitement and things into this letter. So it was pretty dope.

SIMBA: [00:41:33] And it was tough. My host mom came to pick me up, Rosa. And we had our. She was super small. I was super tall. She was like, wow, *eres más grande! Grandotte!* That just means like, you're very huge. You're very big, tall, whatever. She was super *pequeña*, very small, *pequeñita*. And so that was, she was just kind of stuck on that. I wasn't really stuck on it, but she was like, wow. You're supposed to be my host son. I think she made some joke to another host. Nobody's going to believe it. He came out of me. He's too big. But yeah, it was nothing but love. And I came home and I had my first dinner. And, you know, thankfully my host dad and my host brother spoke a little English.

So we were able to make it do what it do. And they were awesome. I don't know. We'll see where the interview goes. But my host family, my host family from pre-service training, they were probably. There's another host family that I have from El Valle de Chota, and I'll share more about them later. But they, my first host family, probably had to be one of the best.

LORISTON: [00:42:46] How long were you in training for and did you stay with that host family throughout your entire training?

SIMBA: [00:42:53] Great question. So training took place in Quito, which is the capital of Ecuador, for three months, which is, I assume, standard for all Peace Corps volunteers no matter where you are in the world. So we went through pre-service training, PST, for three months there in Quito. However, for me personally, they thought I could benefit from a few additional courses, Spanish classes, so I stayed a few, a couple of weeks after our swearing-in. And however, my site was also in Quito, so I didn't. My site wasn't in the coast or in the Amazon. I was staying local. So I think that also helped because I didn't really have to go that far. Whereas most of my colleagues were going all over the country, I stayed in Quito, so I didn't go too far after. I just went to El Valle de Los Chillos, which means the Valley of Los Chillos, which was maybe an hour, hour and a half, driving from where we studied or trained.

LORISTON: [00:44:09] What was your training like? What did it include, in addition to language training?

SIMBA: [00:44:15] So it was language. It was technical training. It was cultural training. It was safety and security. Um, let me think. Medical health. I'm trying to think what am I missing? We had so many different. Training was long, but it was super informative for me personally. I was really, it was a lot of days that I was tired and I was frustrated, like whatever. But training was super informative and helpful for me. Um. I don't feel like it prepared me for everything for going to site. Like, I know that for a fact. Like even going to site like. But like I said, it was super helpful because it was a lot of things that I wasn't necessarily familiar. Like I said, I never traveled abroad, so you know, the language classes, but from people

who are actually, you know, like Latino, because that's something I really didn't have when I took those Spanish classes in undergrad, in high school.

SIMBA: [00:45:20] Cultural competency training. Even, you know, being mindful of our own privilege and things like that. And I think that's something that, you know, was super enlightening that I wasn't aware of, that I was appreciative of, you know, growing up in the inner city, coming from the hood, you know, really thinking a lot of things are against me and people who look like me. Which they are, but not even really being mindful and aware of, you know, the privilege I have being a heterosexual, a straight male, you know what I'm saying? You don't think about those things, you know, compared to males who prefer, you know, who prefer the same sex. Like, you don't really think about how much privilege you have just by being straight and their experience.

SIMBA: [00:46:20] You don't think about the privilege you have being able, an able bodied person, as opposed to those who don't, who have disabilities. Male as opposed to female. It's just a lot of things that I wasn't really aware of that training really helped to bring to my attention and other things for other people. So it was good. Didn't necessarily prepare me a hundred percent for what I was going to experience in site, but I was appreciative of it.

LORISTON: [00:46:50] And what do you mean by technical training?

SIMBA: [00:46:53] Technical training? So technical training simply refers to the program in which you'll be serving. There are few programs in the Peace Corps. Don't quote me on all of them right now, but there's the youth and family program. There's the TEFL, teaching English as a foreign language program. There's the community development program. There's the agricultural program. There's the business development program. And there's one more I'm missing.

LORISTON: [00:47:20] Health.

SIMBA: [00:47:21] Health. Did I say community development? That's what I meant, health. But anyway, so those are approximately six programs. Technical training just refers to the program in which you'll be serving.

LORISTON: [00:47:34] OK.

SIMBA: [00:47:34] So for me, technical training was related to youth development. And youth development specifically with Ecuadorians.

LORISTON: [00:47:46] I'd like to move beyond training in a moment, but I do have two questions for you. What was that first dinner like and was it something that?

SIMBA: [00:47:59] My first meal, I don't recall even my first like dinner dinner, what we think of as dinner here in America. But I remember the first thing I ate in Ecuador when I got off that plane into that hotel. I was honestly a little disappointed, but it was a part of integration, getting adjusted. You know, we have full meals and we eat a lot here where we're used to a lot of things. We're very privileged when it comes to the options we have to eat. Whether you eat any and everything or you're vegetarian, like myself, we're extremely privileged. My first meal was, uh, a sandwich. It was kind of like this bread bun or something with guacamole on it. And I said, it was, you know, that it was like how you would put like peanut butter and jelly and it was spread on there and it wasn't even like guac from the store. It was like all natural guac, which is like great. However, it was all natural guac that was super bland.

SIMBA: [00:48:58] So it was like this bun or a piece of bread with guac on it. And then the other side with guac on it and they put it together, and that was like supposed to be a sandwich. And I got a glass of juice and there was stuff floating in it. And I was like, was this floating in my juice? Like, I was a little annoyed. Like, it's fruit. It's like it's all natural. I don't know about that. What's that? It's like, no, see, you guys aren't really used to all natural. This is pulp. And they had to explain. I wasn't really too convinced, but that was my first night. And the truth is, I grew to love those things later in my service. And that was like a great breakfast for

me when I actually had breakfast, actually. But when I arrived, I was disappointed. I was like, oh my God. But it grew on me for sure.

LORISTON: [00:49:51] And the second question. We talked about the food, but what was it like living? Your first night sleeping and laying your head down with your host family?

SIMBA: [00:50:05] That's a great question. I can't really recall the first night to the T or exactly, but I do recall my room. I had my own room. I mean, their home was nice. They lived in like a three-story home. They rented out like the second floor to another family. We lived on the first floor. I had my own room. It was four walls. I mean, I'm not constipated. But when it was lights out and it was dark, it was dark. There were no windows to let light in, so that was a little unique and different. But you know, I had my own room. It's cool. I mean, I had my own room before I left, too, but I thought it was dope. I ain't really know what to expect, where we would be going like. It was definitely way far removed from what I originally thought, middle of nowhere and all types of wild, stereotypical things. And I was impressed. I was impressed by the room and just their home in general.

LORISTON: [00:51:03] How many of you swore in as volunteers? Well, let me rephrase. Did the majority of you make it to swearing-in?

SIMBA: [00:51:11] The majority did, yes.

LORISTON: [00:51:14] And you stayed a few weeks extra to get additional language training. Were you all assigned a counterpart at your new location that you would be living in for the next two years? And if so, did you meet them while you were still in training? How did that happen?

SIMBA: [00:51:33] How did we meet our counterparts essentially? OK. So yeah, thankfully, so towards the end of our pre-service training, we were informed of where we essentially would be serving the next two years. And then not too long after that, I think that following week, we met our counterparts.

LORISTON: [00:51:53] Did you have a choice?

SIMBA: [00:51:54] And this was before swearing-in.

LORISTON: [00:51:56] Ah, OK. Did you have a choice or did you have any input in terms of where you went?

SIMBA: [00:52:03] Where you would serve? Um. Unfortunately, I mean, and that's so selfish, but you got to keep in mind like the bigger Peace Corps and the ten core expectations and being willing to go and serve where you're needed and whatever. But no. So unfortunately, no. After we got to country, we didn't have an option to where we wanted to serve. For me, which was a bummer, I would have preferred to serve elsewhere, specifically at an Afro Ecuadorian community. However, I was informed that there were no Afro Ecuadorian sites available to serve in, so that was disappointing.

LORISTON: [00:52:45] Was that because they weren't open for volunteers or they just were filled?

SIMBA: [00:52:50] There had been no site development. Well, specifically in Ecuador, there are two places where you can find large Afro Ecuadorian communities. Afro Ecuadorians are throughout the entire country, but there are any time, but you can primarily find them in two communities. One community is El Valle del Chota. El Valle del Chota, that just simply means the valley of El Chota, and that is a very small community. Well, first off, it's a valley. It's located in the Sierra, and the Sierra is the middle region in Ecuador that is essentially where the Andes mountains runs through. So it's the mountain region or the Andes region. El Valle de Los Chillos is north of Quito in the province of Pichincha and the province of Imbabura. Yeah, and so that's El Chota, that huge Afro Ecuadorian community. One of my favorite places. I'm actually returning there.

SIMBA: [00:54:01] Sorry, really quick. So I told everybody I wasn't going back like, I won't be back here until 10 years from now. Like why 10 years, why so long? I told them, like I was sending my son back, like I would definitely send my son back. I have a six year old. His name is Levi

Simba, I said I would send him, you know, on his first trip abroad, I will make sure I send him to Ecuador and I would leave him for a summer. So it wasn't Peace Corps all the way, but I would leave him for a summer and I will come pick him up, in 10 years. I am actually going back in a couple of weeks, in February. Like this is how much like El Valle de Los, not El Valle de Los Chillos, but El Valle del Chota *es todo para mi*. It's everything to me. It's a very special place and one of my favorite places during my service.

SIMBA: [00:54:49] But just to move on from that, so El Valle del Chota and a province called Esmeraldas. Esmeraldas. This is a province, and it's where the largest concentration of Afro Ecuadorians can be found throughout the country. And thankfully, after I completed my service as a Peace Corps volunteer, I had built the relationships and I had that opportunity to go to Esmeraldas with a few additional volunteers who were also African American and a few of my friends who are Afro Ecuadorian from the province of Esmeraldas. And that was extremely significant and important, being African American and wanting to visit that place, because it was also prohibited unfortunately.

LORISTON: [00:55:44] To Peace Corps?

SIMBA: [00:55:44] For Peace Corps volunteers. It was completely off limits. But to also embassy staff as well. They needed specific authorization to go to the province of Esmeraldas. But for me, it was really important being African American to build that relationship, to see who those people are, to see their circumstances on a bigger scale when it pertains to the African diaspora. And it was one of, it was an awesome moment. And the vibes and everything, like just the experience there. I honestly wish I could have served in Esmeraldas, hands down. When you just talk about like a real need. That's an entire other comment, interview. But yeah, unfortunately, they didn't have any.

LORISTON: [00:56:34] Did they express why it was off limits? Was it due to crime? What was the issue?

SIMBA: [00:56:39] So, so, so. There were several factors, but crime being one of the biggest ones they expressed. So I served in 2017. In 2016, there was an earthquake that actually hit the coast. I'm sorry, I didn't share that. Esmeraldas is on the coast. There are three regions in Ecuador. There's the coast, La Costa, there's the Andes Mountains, La Sierra, and there's the Amazon region, La Amazonia or Oriente. Esmeraldas is in the coast. It's on the northwestern coast of Ecuador specifically. And unfortunately in 2016, the northwestern coast between Manabí, which is a province, and Esmeraldas were really shaken up by that earthquake. There was a lot of damage that unfortunately. Peace Corps and the embassy had shared the crime in that region had gone up as a result of that, in addition to other challenges that you know, just people face.

SIMBA: [00:57:47] The reality is indigenous people and Afro Ecuadorians were some of the most displaced and faced the biggest challenges in the country of Ecuador. And therefore, this province was a place for our people. But unfortunately, they were disadvantaged, and as a result of when people are disadvantaged, people make the most of what they have and they figure out a way to survive. And so I'm sure those things influenced.

LORISTON: [00:58:19] Not dissimilar to Baltimore.

SIMBA: [00:58:21] Similar. Exactly, exactly. You know, people figure out, you know, the best way to survive amongst other challenges. People are plagued with lack of education opportunity, health issues, health care, and things of that nature, unfortunately. So Esmeraldas is also on the, I'm thinking like the *frontera*, the border with Colombia, and unfortunately, there's apparently a lot of drug trafficking up there. And so it was for crime, safety, and a few other things, but it was off-limits the entire time of my service. So I never went there. But it was somewhere I always wanted to go, always wanted to go. And thankfully I had the opportunity after my Peace Corps service. And I have to say, for the record, I did not have one issue or problem while I was there.

SIMBA: [00:59:18] Maybe it's because maybe I looked, well I looked like them, but they were all one. You know what I'm saying? We're all people of

African descent. And so that's what we have in common, coming from the diaspora. However, when I spoke, it was like, all right, he ain't from here. You're black, but you ain't from here. But anyway, even despite that, you know what I'm saying? After speaking and I spoke Spanish, but my accent wasn't from there, but it was still nothing but love. I had no problems whatsoever. It was nothing but love there and nothing but *vibras positivas*, positive vibes. Nothing but love there for sure.

LORISTON: [01:00:02] So let's go into your entry now into your community. You said your community was in Quito, but was that the Valle del Chota?

SIMBA: [01:00:15] No, so El Valle del Chota is the Afro Ecuadorian community. I lived in El Valle de los Chillos.

LORISTON: [01:00:23] Sorry, yeah.

SIMBA: [01:00:23] That was my. So that's the entire valley. To be more specific, I lived in Conocoto closer to like a smaller community within or like border. It's all Conocoto, but like another smaller community you could call like La Paz. Or I was like between La Paz and La Romania Numero Uno, La Romania number one. And so but overall, I lived in El Valle de los Chillos. That was the valley. And then the community of, pardon me, Conocoto. So that's where I lived. And I crossed the bridge and I worked on the other side of the highway. There was a highway that separated where I lived and my actual site where I worked and I went over to that community, which was called La Romania Numero Dos, number two. That's where my site was located. And my site was called Casa de la Niñez Numero Dos. And that just means home of children number two. Thankfully, interestingly enough, during my pre-service training, we had like a practicum and I had the opportunity to work or to get some experience working with Ecuadorian youth in Casa de la Niñez Numero Uno.

LORISTON: [01:01:46] Was this like a orphanage, or what kind of facility was it?

SIMBA: [01:01:51] So Casa de la Niñez Numero Uno was essentially a community center that was open to youth who had been victims or youth

who were exposed and or exploited for child labor. And it's complex. It's complex. Totally understand. It's hard. Essentially, these were children who were instructed by some adult sometimes, and occasionally their parents, to sell various things on the street. And not drugs obviously, there were other cases, but this is that's when you were talking about adolescents and things for the most part. Most of these kids were kids that you could see out selling like *carmelos*, like different like candies and things to essentially help and support their families so that they could eat at the end of the night.

SIMBA: [01:02:44] So I understand that, especially when you think about the culture and an indigenous culture having a very significant influence on the people of Ecuador, but specifically in the Sierra region and things of that nature. And everything is collective. So I understand that, however, that's unfortunate because things come with a price. You could see kids at all times of the day, during school hours more than night. And unfortunately, even on occasions, you know, going out with friends, going to a few *discotecas*, which just means clubs. You could see kids out at like 1:00, 2:00 in the morning.

LORISTON: [01:03:23] Selling things?

SIMBA: [01:03:24] Selling just anything. Gum, cigarettes. And it's like it's cold, you know? Well, cold for there anyway, not cold for the U.S. But you know, it's like, where are your parents? Like you should be in the house, you know what I'm saying? And so this center was a center for those type of children. And that was during my pre-service training. My actual site and counterpart was Casa de la Niñez Numero Dos. And this was a rehabilitation center specifically for males. Number one, Casa de la Niñez One, was for males and females and those were younger children. Maybe. I don't know. I don't know. Maybe 2, 3 to say, 15 or so, don't quote me, but younger children.

LORISTON: [01:04:18] Are you saying that there were children that young out in the street selling?

SIMBA: [01:04:23] Yeah. No, it wasn't a thing like here in the U.S. or at least in Baltimore, you see teenagers, squeegee boys as they call them, what I was. You know what I'm saying? They teenagers and they hustling. These were children, not teens. These were children. And I'm not saying that they were all strictly children, but it was the norm. It wasn't unusual to see children, single digits, hustling. You know what I'm saying, and not just with their parents. A lot of times they weren't with their parents, and I assume that they would all meet up at the end of the night and gather everything that they had made. But these were children walking out in these streets and on these busses. You know, just alone selling these, going person to person and making these little pitches to sell their products and goods. But yeah.

SIMBA: [01:05:10] But so at Casa de la Niñez Numero Dos, this was a rehab specifically for male youth between the ages of 8 to 18 who had problems with drug addiction or experiences living in the street. And that was my counterpart. That was my counterpart. And it was crazy for me like, you know, things kind of came full circle because I remember when I had my own similar challenges growing up. You know, thankfully I never have been homeless, but you know, when you're only sleeping, eating and taking a shit in your house and you're spending the rest of your time outside, you're not, you aren't homeless, but you're living, but you're living in the street when you spend it. Well, I can't even estimate. You're supposed to sleep for eight hours. Sometimes you'd get that. Whenever you take, you got 16 hours in a day, you're spending 12, 14, whatever, and you're literally out in the streets like you're living in the streets.

SIMBA: [01:06:18] And so I remember that I remember living in the streets, and I remember what that experience was like growing up in Baltimore. And, you know, I remember people getting high. It's a lot of details, you know, but I remember those experiences and it was crazy that everything came full circle and I was at this rehab in front of these kids, you know? I don't know, delivering these the same sessions I received when I was a child but. I don't know. It was just crazy. It was super crazy for things to come full circle and. It's kind of being in this environment, and that's going to be my counterpart.

LORISTON: [01:07:05] You know, I'm glad that you mentioned, you know, how you were able to reflect even on your own childhood, and not necessarily things that you personally experienced, but just observed.

SIMBA: [01:07:17] Now honestly, to just keep it a hundred, it was the same exact thing I experienced, not even like it wasn't even one of them stories like, oh, I remember my friends like. The truth, no filter, like that was me. Like, I remember getting high when I was young. You know what I'm saying? Like, I smoked for? I ain't even going to get into that, but I remember going to rehab. I remember personally going to rehab.

LORISTON: [01:07:41] Wow.

SIMBA: [01:07:42] And so for me to, like, be one of those same people who was getting high, went to rehab. Thankfully, completed rehab, graduated. But then, like I never thought like, that was a moment in time in my life when I was younger, adolescent, and then I'm like coming back to a rehab, but I'm coming there to like, lead the way, to provide assistance. And everything like that. That was super crazy for me. And I really stood out of line. So like I said, like my Spanish wasn't great, but you know, those first couple of months and experiences, you know, we couldn't have the most profound convos, but it was various experiences and things and concepts that were shared that we could relate to despite not being able, them being able to fluently speak English, and me not being able to fluently speak Spanish. But it was bigger things, you know, that were human that we were able to relate on.

LORISTON: [01:08:39] So can you describe what were some of the types of activities that you specifically worked on at the center? Or the house rather.

SIMBA: [01:08:50] Yeah, at the center, it was a center. It was open 24 hours a day, rehab center. There were three official projects that I worked on during my time at Casa de la Niñez Numero Dos. One was a life skills session, that was probably my favorite and the most important of the three projects there. This life skills session touched on numerous topics such as positive communication, decision making, leadership. We just,

we touched on so many things that were essential to these children's lives. You know, a lot of times when you're out there in the streets, you know, family, what does family mean, you know, and how can we? Obviously, family has a total different connotation in a Latino culture, as it does to our culture here in the U.S. And that can go on escalate to a whole other level in conversation when we think about how we perceive the world and our act. That can even go so far as capitalism versus communism.

SIMBA: [01:10:02] But you know, just that project was important because it really provided a space to really address the issues that happened every day, you know, like why kids were getting high. You know, how do they overcome those things? How do you overcome, you know, just saying no to friends? They're like, yo, let's cut school, let's get high. You know what I'm saying? How do you really mitigate that? What are the long-term impacts of, you know, consuming these foreign substances? Goal setting. You know what I'm saying? When you're out there living in the streets and you're living day to day, you're not really necessarily. You've got these dreams and aspirations, but they go to the wayside, you know, when you're consuming and indulging in these things. So, you know, just having a vision, you know, talking about various opportunities, goals, and those things were essential and fundamental. And this was just a small part of their larger therapeutic experience at the center. But that was my favorite and the most important work I think I did there.

SIMBA: [01:11:14] But in addition to that, I also taught English classes like I feel like most volunteers do, no matter what sector, to the youth as well, which was pretty dope. And I also led physical education classes as well, where life skills was also implemented. But the physical education class was just the outlet to really get them engaged through sports. I had an opportunity to introduce football and baseball. They already played basketball there. They weren't great, but they played basketball. Ecuavoley is like the soccer, ecuavoley, like the national sport. But yeah, really introduce a life skill such as discipline. The discipline to stay your assignment, to work together as a team, teamwork, you know, work ethic. And not even just, you know, the basics to get up every morning and to warm up, go for a five to 10 minute run, stretch, do drills. You got

to have a lot of motivation and drive to do that every day, you know, 20 or 50 push ups.

SIMBA: [01:12:30] And a lot of these kids coming like from the streets, they, you know, not all of them, but some are super drugged out. They ain't work out in forever, you know what I'm saying? They, some kids like, they can't even move and they have like bigger issues and they're having like withdraws because they haven't gotten high or, you know, just engaged in whatever they did prior to coming to the center. And so it was a really big deal and it wasn't just easy and just, you know, how you think, oh, it's a gym class or whatever. Like, man, you're dealing with people who got bigger challenges and issues. So just running for five to 10 minutes or doing 20 pushups, not just a granted. And maybe just in general, like when we think on a bigger scale, as guys we think, oh, you should be able to do that. But you know, you're out there living that life, you're not really necessarily doing these things and taking care of your body. So it can be a lot more challenging than one would think. So those were my three projects. A life skill group session, physical education classes, and English classes.

LORISTON: [01:13:32] By the end of your service, now that your language skills were improved, how were you better able to communicate with the youth about your own experience? Or did you even share that at all?

SIMBA: [01:13:44] Oh, those were. So those are my projects that, like the indirect projects, were like cooking. We had like a few cooking sessions in the cafe at the center. But I had so many like informal conversations. And maybe that's where some of the greater, I don't, I don't know if more was learned in the group sessions or in these informal conversations during art hour. But I wouldn't say towards the end or anything. You know, like the conversations got more, they were just throughout because like I said, I found a way, like I was. I was adamant and I always found a way to make a point. And I also utilized my resources, one of my other counterparts who spoke a little bit of English. And I always found a way to convey my message.

SIMBA: [01:14:41] So things were meaningful. I think like as my language skills improved, it was easier for me to personally communicate without depending on others and being so much as animated. But things were always conveyed. But I think as my language skills improved, I learned more about the culture and bigger topics and themes that were taking place in Ecuador, things that I always wondered about for the majority of my service that I really didn't necessarily understand initially. But I was able to then later in service, speak for myself, but also engage in a meaningful conversation with the people, the friends and things that I built that Ecuador during that time, to really obtain a better understanding. Because I would have to say the biggest challenges of my Peace Corps service hands down was the language and cultural difference.

LORISTON: [01:15:43] What was it about the cultural difference?

SIMBA: [01:15:46] I mean, everything. And not everything. But I mean, it's just, it was my first time abroad. I have my own personal identity like how I perceive myself. Then it's like how the U.S. perceives. You know, just identity is a really big thing for any and everybody, you know, so I have my own thing. And then, you know, how you perceive or how you perceive yourself, how your community or country perceives you. And then you go to another country and it's how they perceive you. But it's also how you perceived them and learning how to navigate, to embrace and build with those individuals. So a lot of things you know, we do here in the U.S. that they don't do there. And it's a lot of things they do there that we don't do here.

SIMBA: [01:16:34] A very basic one, you know, if you come in and, you know, running late or something, whether you're going to work, going to a class or whatever or you're in a rush? You know, you just kind of come and go to where you're going and get to your work and you interact with somebody later. And maybe it's like you need to collaborate on a project or you need something. And it's like, oh hey, Sanchez, whatever, whatever, whatever. Jose, hey, da da da da. But they're, you know, speaking is principal and you make sure you speak with as soon as you see somebody. You know what I'm saying? It's not even just about you

seeing somebody, like, if you don't see somebody, I mean, you don't look for. But you make it, it's not just when you need something, like you speak every time. And so that's a difference. You know, you have to be mindful of that. And if you don't, you know, you can rub people the wrong way and you can, you know, you may not even know. And people are not going to necessarily call you out.

SIMBA: [01:17:31] Things are different. People are a little bit more straightforward and direct in the U.S., where things were a little bit more laid back, reserved, and at times we could say passive. So if you don't speak, you know, you may offend somebody and they're not going to say, well, hey, why didn't you speak? You know what I'm saying? But they, you know, you might ask for something and they might not hear you, you know what I'm saying? So it's just being mindful and navigating and being respectful and building, you know, just adapting to survive. You know what I'm saying? And that has a lot of different meanings. And that's not always just like physical, but that's also. I don't know, as a human, you know what I mean? You always got to worry about your life, but you got to worry about other people's feelings and well-being as well. And sometimes those things, you can hurt those things, and not necessarily survive it.

LORISTON: [01:18:25] So we talked about the program and the work that you were doing. Can you share a little bit about the community itself? Did you develop any close relationships with people in your community? What were some of the cultural activities that you partook in, if you did at all?

SIMBA: [01:18:43] Oh, so it's a great question. I lived. And that's another thing that threw me off, had I did my research, I would have known it wasn't what I had in mind. I thought I'd be in the middle of nowhere, whatever, whatever. But a key phrase or key title that I knew prior too, I was an urban youth development volunteer. So I lived in a small suburb, or it was still inside of Quito, but I perceived as the suburbs because you had to go through a toll. So I say that to say, interestingly enough, for the most part, people kind of kept to themselves. Or at least compared to what I was used to growing up in Baltimore, where you know, people were just out, especially when it was nice. Summertime in Baltimore,

when people outside, you know, people are super open and social, but things were a little bit more reserved and people weren't as social. Like if they ain't know you, they weren't really super social.

SIMBA: [01:19:41] It might have just been my identity and the things that come along with being a person of African descent. And if I didn't speak, I could have been mistaken for an Afro Ecuadorian being from El Chota or Esmeraldas. And unfortunately, there are a lot of stigmas that come along, so people may have been, you know, thought I was trying to harm them or take something from them. So that might have been a cause, but I wouldn't say that was like, that's why. In general in the Sierras, things are a little bit more reserved and laid back. So if people don't know you, they don't necessarily. People will speak, but they're just not super outgoing how people are here in the U.S. or in La Costa, in the coast of Ecuador. So I say all of that to say.

SIMBA: [01:20:33] In my community, Conocoto, I really didn't like go out and do a lot like culturally or within that community because everybody, like had their, and everybody lived in like these huge compounds. I was the only person kind of walking the street. Everybody else drove. I was the only one walking the street or on a bike. So that was one thing. But I did develop a bigger sense of community. And I think also something that was interesting. My community was more so my counterpart, because it was a 24-hour center. So building relationships with the chefs, Chino, my good friend Byron, those were like. And the youth, that was like my, that was one small community. That was my community. But then the bigger community. One of my favorites.

SIMBA: [01:21:22] And I developed relationships with, like some of the people at the tiendas. Tienda is just like a store, like a corner store. My guy, Shay David, he was an Argentinian, *Argentino*, who was a, he had like these bomb arepas, but I used to kick it at his spot. That was later in service. I used to stay kicking and drinking or whatever. Then we would catch up. But I would have to say. And I traveled extensively, so I knew people all throughout the country, extremely well versed in the country of Ecuador. Traveled to every region except for like the Galapagos. And that's because that was just super expensive. But I have to say one of the

biggest communities that I felt integrated and I felt home, that I loved and I wish was my site and I could. That was like for me, was.

LORISTON: [01:22:16] Esmeraldas?

SIMBA: [01:22:16] No. El Valle del Chota. That was home, that was everything for me. I have so many memorable experiences there and it was something like none other. So I mean, I had meaningful relationships throughout the entire country. I can't say like, oh, where I lived was like, that was my community. That was everything. You know, I had people I knew there, but I was a traveler. I couldn't stay at one place. But the one place, no matter where I went, that I went multiple times was El Valle del Chota. That was, that was really home for me, like a home away from home.

LORISTON: [01:22:54] Do you think that maybe you felt very comfortable there because everyone looked like you?

SIMBA: [01:23:00] That's a great question. I think. I don't think it was just people. I think it was just the energy. And like it was, it was home. I was received. I think, I mean, obviously, people looked like me. But it was the overall experience. Maybe it was also how they also perceived me as well. Because me, I'm a super social guy, and I think that was one of the challenges as well, you know, and it kind of took a toll. You know, I'm super social. And then in Sierra, people weren't social. And so, you know, just being social and wanting to talk, curious, whatever. People are also, you know, and they'll answer questions, but different things, just how you communicate. You can come off loud or like you can be super excited. People might be like, oh, people want to be like, oh, why is he talking? It's just a lot of things can be interpreted a different way.

SIMBA: [01:23:55] And so after a while later in my service, I just kind of took a step back. Because I really, you know, people are more reserved. And so I kind of picked that up. But I also didn't want to like offend anybody as well. Because like I said, you know, people, you can offend people and they won't say anything. And even a tone, as simple as the tone. And that tone is like reprimanding someone, but just how you say

something can have a big impact and you'll never know the impact that it had. So I think later in my service, I kind of, I definitely wasn't the same person, as social and outgoing. But every time I was in El Valle del Chota, it was home. It was love. Honestly, they challenged me and they brought out a lot of things. And especially when it comes to that, first off, in Ecuador in general, a party is not a party unless you're dancing. And that's 10 times true in El Valle del Chota. And I was cool, nonchalant. They like, boy, you're going to get up and dance. *Baila ahora, oh si*. So it just made it like, this is how we do it. You're going to dance.

SIMBA: [01:25:04] And I pulled like two all-nighters there, like, that's how I party at night. It's like years even before, like in the U.S., but El Valle del Chota. That was, that was everything. That was home. And that was my other host family. Like I had a host family in Nyon, where I started pre-service. I had a total of four and those were the best. The one from pre-service training and my host family in El Valle del Chota.

LORISTON: [01:25:32] So you found them and you just adopted them as your family?

SIMBA: [01:25:36] No. It was a weird mix. So I remember going to El Valle del Chota during pre-service, because we went there. First we visited an indigenous community, and oh, I'm blanking on it, in Otavalo, a community and school. But then after that, we went to El Valle del Chota further, to get the indigenous perspective first in Otavalo, and then the Afro Ecuadorian perspective, those two groups being minorities and extremely disadvantaged. So that was the purpose of the trip, just to expose us to these communities, because that wouldn't necessarily be the norm for all of us. So I went there and I automatically, like as soon as I went there, I got embraced from day one. And so thankfully, you know, it wasn't a long trip. Maybe it was a day or two there. We hadn't really spent a lot of time there. But from that, I built, you know, I built some meaningful relationships.

SIMBA: [01:26:34] I was able to keep in touch with one of the community leaders there, which was a young lady who, her name was Eliana. Her name is Eliana. Extremely respected. She's probably like, what, 28, 29 now. She's extremely respected, one of the most influential people, well-

respected and most notable people I've met in Ecuador hands down, just in general, but especially that was Ecuadorian. Extremely intelligent. She went against everything that it meant to be Afro Ecuadorian. When, you know, people think about Afro Ecuadorians as being people who are like, just futbolistas, like people who play soccer, athletes, like drones, thieves, people who just are like jugo de coco, like coconut juice. And not really, you know, not really been good for much, they say like that they're lazy or whatever. And she went against everything, like she put on for her community. She was involved in politics. She was the, if you came to El Valle del Chota, you saw her first. She was respected even among the elders, like she.

SIMBA: [01:27:41] It's not that she demanded respect, but whatever she did, everybody respected her across the board. And this was just within her community, this didn't even really go in. And she spoke English and she spoke it fluently. English is a thing. English is held on a pedestal in Ecuador, and this is among all Ecuadorians. She spoke English and she spoke it fluently. She didn't have the accent that we had, but she spoke and you can understand it. And she wasn't just an Ecuadorian. She was Afro Ecuadorian. And then she was a woman on top. She was a young lady. So she went against everything. On top of that, she was getting her masters and I could go on and on. But that was my whole sister. She's fam. When I said, I'm going back, I'm going to touch base with her, like most significant. And she shared a lot with me when I went back, every time I went back, and she, I don't know. El Valle del Chota, *estola parte de mi*. It was a very special place. Sorry, that was a bit much for me.

LORISTON: [01:28:47] It's OK. Do you have any, um, anything you wish to share to your listeners that we haven't discussed about your experience? Maybe a story you wish to share or maybe something that you hoped that?

SIMBA: [01:29:08] Go ahead.

LORISTON: [01:29:08] Yeah. Or something that you would hope that they would take away from what it was like for you as a Peace Corps volunteer in general. So if you would like to share that.

SIMBA: [01:29:21] So I'm not going to share any more stories because I'm longwinded and this might get a little long, but I'll attempt to keep it brief. Alright, I lie. I'm not. But I'm not going to take ten minutes. I hope not. But I think if I could just share, I would first want to start off by just saying the impossible is nothing. And I will also just like to say thank you to like all the individuals who could make my Peace Corps service in Ecuador reality. Because that was a significant, you know, like I said, I never traveled abroad, really ain't have the means. So for me to have the opportunity to go there, it was just, it's priceless. And it's already paying dividends to like myself and my community. Like, I share that with every. My son knows more about Ecuador than he does about California. But I just want to thank like all of the people who contributed in one way or another, from the staff in Peace Corps to some of the individuals at Peace Corps HQ who had greater pull. But everybody, my mentors, family, everybody, thank them.

SIMBA: [01:30:31] But when I say impossible is nothing. I just say like, you know, like coming from the inner city. Like I said, the makeup traditionally of Peace Corps has been, you know, people who come from privilege. Well, really ought to get into the color because it's just the obvious fact that they've been predominantly white. So we could get past that. But people of privilege. And privilege too, not just about privilege like economically, obviously, but one sort of privilege to travel and be, you know, learn these various languages, whatever. So I say all of that to say it's like, you know, I had, like I'm coming from Baltimore City. No traveling, no funds. Like, I'm coming from nothing. You know what I'm saying? And I really didn't get into like all of the details of my growing up. But to go from that, and people who know me and if you don't like, look this up, find me, we can have that convo off the record.

SIMBA: [01:31:27] But to go from that and have the opportunity to just go to another country and have the opportunity to be able to add that value. I think it's crazy. It's unheard of, you know. People who know me know that story. Hopefully, people can connect the dots. If not, please find me. I'm more than willing to share, but it's just like you can't put anything past anyone. And I honestly think and I would encourage and hope that more

people from different walks of life go abroad and represent and share that narrative of what it means to be American. It's not what they thought in Ecuador what they think and the rest of the world, people being Caucasian with blue eyes. Yes, obviously they are part of America. Some of the people who founded America. Not the first people in the Americas, but some of the people who founded the U.S., yes, they did look like that, but they were far from, you know, what those people, what they look like in the U.S. today. And there is no one face. And I think that's a strength for America, and I think it's awesome and dope.

SIMBA: [01:32:34] But I want those different faces to really go abroad to change that narrative and perspective and just let people who don't necessarily have the privilege. Because, you know, it's people who have different experiences can relate when we're talking about development to those people and they share their experiences that are beyond languages. And so I think that's what I would share. You know, I'm appreciative for the opportunity. Impossible is nothing. And, you know, a lot of people talk about what's gone wrong, but what's your contribution? I'm going to the JFK quote. I think I can look up cliché, but what's your contribution to the world and humanity? And that's it. Peace!

LORISTON: [01:33:26] How would you say your Peace Corps experience influenced your future plans?

SIMBA: [01:33:32] Um.

LORISTON: [01:33:32] If it had any influence?

SIMBA: [01:33:34] Certainly. Definitely want to continue in international development.

LORISTON: [01:33:39] Do you still want to work with youth?

SIMBA: [01:33:40] Certainly. No ands, ifs, or buts about that. You know, like I said, it's a blessing that I'm here. Not super religious, but I'm appreciative of that. And I'm here because of some of the people who

invested in it and me and mentored me and taught me some of the soft skills to kind of navigate the world to get to where I am today.

LORISTON: [01:34:05] Mm hmm.

SIMBA: [01:34:06] And I think it's only right to pay that forward because had it not been for them, I'm almost certain that I wouldn't be where I am. I wouldn't have made it to the Peace Corps. I wouldn't have made it to underground, wouldn't have graduated. Wouldn't have had that job. It's just a lot of things that wouldn't, I don't believe, would have come into fruition had it not been for them. So it's only right to pay it forward. So I definitely plan to continue with youth, but I definitely want to continue in the international development field and just my ultimate goal is to contribute to ending extreme poverty. Obviously, I don't believe it'll end in my lifetime. But I want to be a part of making that contribution to say, one day, not even. It'd be dope if you know somebody like, actually remember my name one day. They're like, remember Imhotep, you know, that'd be dope. I want to say.

LORISTON: [01:34:54] You want to know that you did something.

SIMBA: [01:34:56] Yeah. Like, people can verify and say, you know what? He wasn't just talking about this and that he was putting in the work. Obviously, Peace Corps, but bigger than Peace Corps, like that's how he lived his life and he paid it forward. You know, you check those sources and my credibility like, that's what I want to do. So that's what I'm doing now. I'm actually at DAI, one of the largest implementers for USAID. So just bridging that gap. Had it not been for the Peace Corps, I probably wouldn't be there today. So certainly paying dividends, for sure.

LORISTON: [01:35:32] Well, Imhotep, I would like to thank you so much for sharing your story. And that's it.

SIMBA: [01:35:40] Thank you. Peace.

[END OF INTERVIEW]