

**Jimmy Cloutier Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Jimmy Cloutier  
**Interviewer:** Randolph Adams  
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**Biographical Note**

Jimmy Cloutier served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Armenia from August 2015 to September 2017 in a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) program.

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Oral History Interview

with

Jimmy Cloutier

November 14, 2019

Reston, Virginia

By Randolph Adams

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

ADAMS: [00:00:03] Today is November 14, 2019. This is Randolph Adams and I am interviewing Jimmy Cloutier, who is a Peace Corps volunteer in Armenia from August 2015 to September 2017 as a TEFL volunteer. Good day.

CLOUTIER: [00:00:26] Hi.

ADAMS: [00:00:27] Ok, let's start off with a basic question. What was your life like before joining the Peace Corps? Well, your childhood, your education and other experiences that might have been relevant to becoming a Peace Corps volunteer.

CLOUTIER: [00:00:43] Um, so, I'm. It's a broad question. I don't know if it's really relevant to me being a Peace Corps volunteer, but I went back to this experience a lot to my Peace Corps service. My family immigrated to the US when I was six years old. So I learned my mom actually was the one

who taught me how to speak English. And because I learned English at a very young age, I developed an interest in learning languages and in grammar and writing and reading and then more broadly in education. So when I was in Armenia, um, I was able to relate to a lot of the students that I was working with, because a lot of them were, were, um, they were around the age that I was my learned English so I could relate to them with that. And I think I have a knack for teaching English as a second language because I myself had to learn English when I was young. But yeah, my family immigrated to the US when I was six. We came from Quebec to Richmond, Virginia. And I had more or less a normal childhood. We kind of lived in a in a poor area of Virginia when we first came here. But that's because my parents were trying to save as much money as possible. And, you know, and then we moved when they bought a house and normal childhood from there, um, I went to a specialty high school. Um, it was in Virginia. We have governors schools. So you sort of apply it's not like a charter school or anything like that. It's not a private school. But you applied to it. There's a certain number of slots for the county.

CLOUTIER: [00:02:51] And then you if you do well, you get in and it's like a just a more specialized education. And I was a literary art student. The school was Appomattox Regional Governors School, I should say that which is down in Petersburg, about I was about a 30 minute bus ride from where I lived in Chesterfield. Um, and so, yeah, I went to this specialty school and literary arts. It was there that I met, um, Kelly Jackson, who would eventually become my future wife. It was there that I heard for the first time what Peace Corps was. I had an English teacher who, who had wanted to do Peace Corps, but because of life circumstances, she never was able to. But that's when it piqued my interest. When I heard about Peace Corps for the first time, I thought, you know, the opportunity to live in another country and you fulfill a public good. Um, that appealed to me. Um, so I went into, into college and like I said, I met my future wife at Appomattox. Um, she and I both went to college together. That was sort of a happy accident. We weren't really planning on going to college together. But in college we both decided we both wanted to be the Peace Corps. We both wanted to do it together. So around right after I graduated, I finished college in three years. She finished in four years. So after I graduated after three years, we got married and after she finished college, after four

years, we applied to the Peace Corps. We were accepted pretty early and. Yeah, that was sort of that was I guess that was my life before Peace Corps and I studied English at college in college, too, so.

ADAMS: [00:05:00] Did you have a specific country or project in mind?

CLOUTIER: [00:05:04] We knew. We had heard. We've been to a couple of, like, info session Peace Corps processions, and we'd heard that it can take a really long time if you specify a certain country. So when we applied, we purposely said that we would go wherever because we just wanted the process to be quick. I assumed, because I speak French, that we might get somewhere in Africa, but because she didn't, I think later I learned that for her to be placed in either Spanish speaking countries or French speaking countries, they kind of want you to have a strong foundation in that language beforehand. She didn't have any experience in French, so we were assigned Armenia, I think just because that's where they needed they needed folks. And I remember when I first learned, uh, of the placement, I was thrilled that we got accepted. But my second reaction was, where is Armenia? I had no idea where I had, like, this general feeling that it was in Eastern Europe. Um, so it was a, it was a pleasant surprise. And I in some ways, I'm glad we went to a country where we really had no notions about because we got to learn about a new area of the world. And we had no preconceived stereotypes or ideas of how service should be. We came to Armenia with a blank, with a blank slate.

ADAMS: [00:06:51] Where you're both consigned to TEFL program?

CLOUTIER: [00:06:53] Yes, we both applied. Actually, I applied to travel. I think she applied to CYD. She studied social work. So she's more interested in, uh, in working in youth development, sort of.

ADAMS: [00:07:13] Is that what CYD means?

CLOUTIER: [00:07:14] Yeah. Community youth development. Sorry. So and but I specifically, specifically applied to TEFL. I had been teaching, I had been doing a lot of tutoring at school in college. So it was a good fit for me. I think they didn't want to separate couples in terms of their assignments. I

hear that in some countries they do. But in Armenia it was just easier to keep the couples together that they were both assigned the same project. Um, so, yeah, we were both assigned to be English teachers. And I think at first I mean, I don't want to really talk for Kali, but I think she was a little bit disappointed. Um, but, she was just happy to get into Peace Corps and pursue Peace Corps. The education background has helped both of us professionally in our careers. So it was a happy accident.

ADAMS: [00:08:15] And what about your friends and family? How did they react to the two of you running off?

CLOUTIER: [00:08:21] Uh, so my family and law were, were perfectly OK with it. They're a military families. So I think the idea of their kids going abroad was not was not a concern. And especially for Kali. She wasn't going into a war zone. So her brother was serving in Afghanistan at the time. So it was I don't think we had much of a reaction from them. My family, they took it a little differently. They knew that I was interested in service. And I think my dad's reaction, it was there are poor people in the U.S. So if you want to you want to do community service, you can do it in the States. And generally they, they like the kids closer to home. And before, before we left for Armenia for our honeymoon, we went to Spain. And so we spent two months in Spain hiking El Camino de Santiago, which is a pilgrimage, and in the north of Spain. And my dad had a hard time with that, just us being gone for two months. And Spain is a relatively safe country. So when he found out we were going to Armenia, which is just north of Iran, uh, he was understandably like, we're. I read about that and I tried to. I tried to point out that Armenia is a very safe country. It didn't help, I think at the very end he just sort of had to accept that we were going to do what we were going to do our thing.

ADAMS: [00:10:15] Other than look at where Armenia was, did you prepare yourself in any other way to go into service?

CLOUTIER: [00:10:23] Yeah. So language wise, I knew that learning the language beforehand was going to be very hard. This army is not a very widely spoken language. What I could find online wasn't very helpful. So I knew that we were going to get language training there and we would learn best

being immersed in the culture. But I did. I read a lot about the history beforehand. Peace Corps gave us this list of books to read before going to Armenia to get an idea of the of the history, the culture. Um, and I read the vast majority of those that are that were on the list. So I had a pretty good idea of the of the history and the socio political climate at the time. Um, the book that was most helpful was by Thomas de Waal. It was a book called The Black Garden about the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the conflicted region and the way the book was useful, because that's an ongoing conflict right now. So it's good to know about that. But it sort of chronicles the history of Armenia since the 1990s, which is a lot more relevant to how the country functions right now than, you know, reading about Armenia in antiquity. Armenia is a very old country, so the history is very long. His book was The More Modern History, so it was more useful to knowing what challenges might be facing.

ADAMS: [00:12:11] Moving on a bit, where and how were you trained to prepare for your assignment?

CLOUTIER: [00:12:17] We arrived in country and we spent some we spent three or four days. I think we spent a few days in a little resort called Aghveran. If I remember correctly, I might be wrong about that. But that was sort of the orientation where we met our language cultural facilitators, which is the fancy, fancy word, fancy title for our language teachers. We met the Peace Corps staff and we sort of met the other volunteers and we kind of, you know, got to meet who the who our peers would be. And after that, we went to our training villages and my partner and I and we went to a village called Baghramyán.

CLOUTIER: [00:13:13] And the hub was, it was a little city called Artashat. And there were about five villages around Artashat that different by different volunteers were assigned to. My cohort, we were maybe. Let me think here. It was a small group, so, um, I think we were about a dozen in all. Actually, we were we were eight and we were a very small group. We were eight and all in Baghramyán and I think each village had around eight to 10 volunteers. So we would spend and we got assigned to host family there. And then in these little villages in Baghramyán, we had our

language classes in the mornings, usually about eight to 12. And afterwards we would go to our Artashat, which was the much larger I say city, but it was just a much larger village that was sort of in the middle of all these other villages. And there we would meet with the volunteers from the other villages to do larger trainings on how to teach English, or the kids would meet for how to do community youth development projects. And then on all we had also like a I forgot what they were called, but it was like the CYD and TEFL were trained separately. But on Wednesdays, everyone would get together and we would have like just larger cultural training, Peace Corps training as a whole. So that was that was sort of our training. And we got really close to the other volunteers in Baghramyán. And, um, I mean, we're still close to them. And, and, yeah, we would usually finish training around for four or five, go back to our villages. The volunteers would kind of hang out together and then we would sort of talk to our host families, immerse as much as we could.

ADAMS: [00:15:32] The technical training you received, you had already been a TEFL instructor, tutor and language background.

CLOUTIER: Kind of.

ADAMS: So was it still useful to you?

CLOUTIER: [00:15:45] Yeah. So, so before going into Peace Corps, I had I was actually working with college students with disabilities. So college students taking college level classes who had autism or Down syndrome. It was like a special program. So they didn't leave with a bachelor's degree. But I got a special certificate and then I had just would do like language tutoring with international students, usually from Saudi Arabia and South Korea were the ones we were getting at VCU. So I had a little bit of ESL English as a second language education training. But really, Peace Corps was where I really learned how to become an effective English teacher. And post Peace Corps, I volunteered with the International Rescue Committee doing ESL, teaching English as a second language to refugees. And I was drawing a lot on the Peace Corps training I had received. So I would say that, I mean, the training was really fantastic. And in and I don't have TEFL, I didn't have a TEFL certificate outside of Peace Corps. And I and I

studied English literature, not English education in college. So but I feel like I got the education I would have had if I had studied ESL in college. Um, and I mean we did my classes with real students. It was very, very thorough. And I left train the three month training, feeling very confident that I could teach English and I in my host village. And I've left Armenia feeling very confident that I can teach ESL in the US. Very good.

ADAMS: [00:17:52] Uh, just to wrap up the training section, two more questions. One is, were there any strengths and weaknesses of your training? It sounds like certainly the technical aspects of TEFL or ESL we're fine. Were there any issues that in retrospect, you thought they could have done better?

CLOUTIER: [00:18:19] I feel like if you had asked me at the time, I would have been able to find the little things that I thought were missing. Um, but looking back on it now, I, I think given how short of it a period of time we had to train. I was very happy with the training we received. I'm not going to speak for all the volunteers in Armenia. In fact, I know some of them had complaints, but I'm, I'm happy with the training I received. I wish I had learned the language better than I than I did, although I don't think that has that is a reflection of the Armenian teachers. I think it's more of a reflection on my own self study. One of the challenges of serving with them, with a spouse, with a partner is you have each other when it comes to the language. So I know that if I had been placed in a host family all by myself, I probably would have talked to them a whole lot more in Armenian. And it's not like, you know, my wife and I would just sort of go to our rooms afterwards. We were involved with the family, but we had this joke where I learned grammar really well so I could like I could make full sentences and language, but I had a hard time learning the vocabulary and my wife learned the vocabulary very well, but not the grammar. So I would sort of go to her to be like, hey, what's, what's that word that I'm looking for? And then she tell me and then I'd say the sentence or she would tell me what she wanted to say. And I'd be like, Oh, tell me the vocab for and I'll be able to make the sentence. So we relied on each other in a way that I think we were a lot more independent than other volunteers in some ways because we had each other. But I don't think we learned the language as well as we as we could have. And another of the



of the couples, there were only two couples in our group. They spoke Armenian with each other. So they were trying to do like, you know, one hundred percent immersion. And they learned it much better than we did. So in terms of training, I think in retrospect, I wish I had learned the language better during those three months and really over the course of my whole service. Um, but that's really that that was on that was on me and my partner were there.

ADAMS: [00:21:14] Were there volunteers or trainees who were asked to leave or left during the training program?

CLOUTIER: [00:21:22] I don't remember if anyone was asked to leave. Trying to think, but, but we did have volunteers who left during the training, we had what we had one person leave after like the first week, I guess he realized it wasn't for him. We had one trainee who got very sick in the country. Um. We lost a good chunk. We're a small group of about 30, so I think I don't want to give the wrong number, but I feel like, like we lost maybe four trainees and eventually we would lose about a third of the group over service and most of them left within the first six months. So if not in training when they got to their permanent sites. And that was always just kind of sad to see them go, but everyone sort of had a reason.

ADAMS: [00:22:36] Good, again, moving on now into your actual service. What was your initial assignment to? Where your placement was, what was your reaction to just finally starting your service?

CLOUTIER: [00:23:00] And so in, we left a permanent site at some point in November, but a few weeks before we were, we moved there permanently. We had a site visit. We met our counterparts. And then we took the train with our counterparts to the village, the site. And then we met our future host family for our permanent site. And the initial reaction to our site was not very good. So our permanent site was a little village called Aragatsavan. It was maybe it's, it's on the train line between Yerevan, the capital, and Gyumri, which is the second largest city in the country. And so we took a train from Yerevan to this village, and it is a post-industrial village. There used to be a big factory there, a big gravel factory, and that got shut down after the collapse of the Soviet Union. So the whole the industry of the village just

sort of had just almost changed overnight. And the village has since the industry is mostly agricultural, it's mostly apricots, actually. But it was it's just very it was not a very green village. It was very rocky desert. As I remember getting there the first night. The first day it was it was raining. It was cold. All the buildings were they weren't in very good shape. We get to our to our host family who lived in and I know like a Soviet era apartment building, very small, cold. And we didn't leave with a very good first impression of the village itself. We liked the host family. They were very friendly. It was a mother and her two kids, six year old and named Husapek. And I want to say he was 15 at the time, Edik. And so they were like teenagers, kids. And we were excited to be teenagers and kids because our host family in Baghramyan was, they were, they were adults that the kids there were actually older than us. So it was nice to be like around teenagers. And I'm an older brother. So it was like nice to be around to be an older brother again. And and they were just very friendly, very patient with our Armenian and understanding. But the village itself, it just seemed a lot poorer than Baghramyan was. And Baghramyan wasn't like this very fancy village either. But, um, and it just wasn't a very pretty you try not to have expectations, but everyone does. Right. Um, and so we get to this site and it's just not very picturesque and by any means of the word. And we and we get back to our training villages and we talk to some of the other volunteers who were assigned in villages near us. And they had the same sort of reaction. Right. I was just poor postindustrial. That was our initial reaction.

CLOUTIER: [00:27:09] But then when we finally did move to our permanent sites, I don't know, things changed like it. It quickly became home because we got along with our host family. I got along with my counterparts very well. I I immediately liked a lot of the students that I was working with. And it just and I remember the day we moved, it was it was sort of the opposite in terms of whether it was not raining. It was nice and sunny. And we took the, we took the main road in as opposed to the train and the train passes these, these like broken down factories. And it passes like the big trash pit that's outside the village. So it's like you're coming in and it's like, uh, this doesn't look very nice, but the main road passes all the. The apricot fields, and it was November, so the trees were changing, and so we passed these like orange and yellow fields and it was immediately so much

prettier, like the village itself, the apartment. No, it was still the apartment that we had been to. But we saw a different side of the village. And our host family took us to their garden, which was, you know, this beautiful little garden in the middle of the village, which was very strange. But so our second our second impression was much better. Um, and eventually we really just fell in love with our village. We never really wanted a lot of volunteers got site changed sites for a number of reasons. And we I mean, never once did it cross your mind that we wanted a different site. So much so that there was an incident in our village where two families got in a in a feud. One of them, I don't remember what sparked it, but one of the families went to the other families bakery and they burned the bakery down. They drove two cars into it and lit the cars on fire. And so then there was this big scuffle right outside of our apartment building, like we were watching it from the windows. And then these gunshots go off and we found out that someone was killed from one of these feuding families.

CLOUTIER: [00:29:53] And we did not want to tell the Peace Corps staff about it because we didn't want to be moved. We were afraid that if they found out this had happened at our village. That, that they would, they would reassign us. And we didn't want that. And so we didn't really tell the security officer. But what happened? Because obviously this made the news and I mean, as a small country. So he found out about it and he called us and we were like, well, we were going to tell you. He called us maybe two days after it happened. And we were like we were going to we were going to tell you, but we just wanted to kind of get a feel for what the village was going to be like. And we made it clear to him that we did not want we did not want to be relocated. But he pulled us out of the village for a few weeks while they did an investigation. And actually, I think it was only about a week. And so we went back to our site and that was this weird little episode.

ADAMS: [00:31:02] Do you know what Peace Corps staff played in terms of did they take you out to the village or did you have to go out yourself?

CLOUTIER: [00:31:15] Well, we met our counterparts in in the capital at this conference, Peace Corps organized conference training. And then we went back to our village with our counterparts, Peace Corps staff. Did not

accompany us on our first site visit, and then when we actually moved there permanently, they organized drivers for us and some of those drivers were permanent Peace Corps staff drivers. I think there were there were two, two or three main drivers that Peace Corps hired that they were full time like staff members. But the driver who took us was, was a driver that was often contracted. He was actually the driver that I that we had in our in our in our what is it, training village. He's the one who took us from back to our day shot. So he was sort of staff, but not really. But staff did do site visits beforehand to make sure that the sites were OK. And then while we were there, they, um, the region there was a regional director and writer director, regional manager for each province in Armenia. She came and visited, um, she came and visited us to sort of see how we were we were doing in our sights. But other than that, they were they were pretty hands on which, which I think was a good thing because it forced us to kind of to figure it out on our own. And, and that forced us to, um, to integrate into our sites a lot faster than I think we would have if they had been holding our hands.

ADAMS: [00:33:20] Moving on to the job assignment now. I know it was TEFL, but what was your actual workday like?

CLOUTIER: [00:33:28] So it was more or less just a normal school day the way it is here. I was assigned to two counterparts, Tamara Markarian and Christina Cyropian. Tamara had been teaching for quite a while. She was she was want to say she was in her 40s. So she was a relatively young teacher in comparison to other teachers. But she'd been teaching, I think, for about ten years. Um, Christina, the my other counterpart, she was straight out of college. She this was her was it her second year? First year? It was either her second or first year. She was very new. So I had a very different experience with both of them. But work day wise, um, I left in the mornings. I usually left with my host brothers. We went to school together, um, and I would attend an English class with my counterparts and we would use Tamara kind of like to do things sort of on the fly. She liked to improvise a lot of her lessons. So we would sort of discuss a little bit before class. We had five minute breaks between, between lessons, sort of what we're going to do the next. We weren't planning out in huge detail, but just our area. You know, I'll, I'll do this assignment with them or I'll

teach this material. She I tried to let her do most of the teaching because we were there to teach English, but we were also there to help the counterparts learn better teaching methodologies.

CLOUTIER: [00:35:22] They do a lot of teaching from the books and a lot of readings. And I wanted to get them talking so I would sort of walk around the classroom and try to engage the students in conversations to actually get them to speak English. And Tamara was, was good about letting me do that while she was teaching the grammar. And the more like the formal stuff, I guess you could say, because she had a curriculum that she had to go through. I really just wanted to make sure that the kids could speak and weren't just pretending that they knew what was going on, you know, because it's easy to just fill in the blanks and, oh, it looks like this kid knows what they're doing. But then when you talk to them or you ask them questions or you say, can you read this sentence to me, then, you know, you realize, oh, they're not really understanding. And over time, we really developed a routine. Um, I would try to do some lesson planning with her. Um, so I would sometimes go to her house after school or they she had a planning period and I would plan with her during, during those sessions. But she was also a mom and she was busy and so I didn't have as much time as I would have liked with her to like sit down and lesson plan and talk about, like, teaching strategies. But I think she saw how I interacted with the students. And so she was learning from me in the classroom itself. And I also learned a lot, a lot from her. My other counterpart, because she was newer, she was a lot more comfortable, less in planning with me. So I would actually go to her house once a week and we would lesson plan for the whole week. And she didn't teach as many classes, so I didn't have as many classes with her.

ADAMS: [00:37:26] How many classes did you teach?

CLOUTIER: [00:37:29] So I taught, um, third grade through 12th grade with the exception of eighth. And fourth. Those were another was another English teacher that I was not she was not my counterpart, she was the, she was actually like the vice principal, p'vokhtnoren, which means little director. Um, so I would eventually I eventually partnered with her in my second year, but first year I didn't really interact with her all that much. But I went

to all those classes and there were two of each. So there are two third grade classes, there are two seventh grade classes to 12th grade classes. And then when in my second year, they, you know, the third graders became fourth graders. I went to the fourth grade classes, but I didn't go to the fifth grade classes. So I followed the students through those two years.

ADAMS: [00:38:30] So but they were in daily classes.

CLOUTIER: [00:38:35] They were it was like block schedule. Right. So I would have like the third graders Monday and Wednesday, for example.

ADAMS: [00:38:46] Any one day then what, three to five classes or?

CLOUTIER: [00:38:52] So. I'd be in school from like eight to 12. And that was the first block of the school was divided in. There were too many students to have all the all the grades all at once, so on. So Christina, who taught third grade in sixth grade, she had her classes in the afternoons from one to three. Tamara, who had all the other grades taught in the morning. So eight to 12. So I had like a lunch break between 12 and one, basically. But usually I would I would stay school that whole time. We weren't really required. We it was really up to us how much we wanted to teach. Our program director, um, she told us our Peace Corps program director told us to do maybe like ten hours a week to start. Right. So you're not overworking yourself. But I found that if I wasn't really doing anything, I was just going to stay, you know, in my apartment or whatever. So I liked to be at school and to be working with the kids. There were some days, for example, when they did testing, there is really no need for me to be there. Um, so I would. And they would do I mean, they tested a lot. I felt like so I would not go to classes during the testing periods and I would hang out with my host family. So usually I was at school from like eight to three. And later I took on clubs, which I would do either during that lunch break, twelve to one or after school.

ADAMS: [00:40:53] What kind of clubs?

CLOUTIER: [00:40:56] So I taught I did English language clubs, actually my partner and I did them together so we would do one English club, for example, for

third through fifth grade. We would do them at her school. Her school was recently renovated. So it was really nice. And so my kids would go to her school and we would host clubs there together.

ADAMS: [00:41:24] So you worked on more than one school?

CLOUTIER: [00:41:26] I only worked at one school, but my wife, she taught in the second school. There were two schools in the village. And, yeah, we did clubs. We started with clubs at her school. But eventually I started doing some of we started defining some of the clubs because there were too many students or there weren't enough students like the third graders, didn't want their parents, didn't want them walking all the way to the second school. So I started just doing my third graders at my school and the younger kids, they loved clubs, they loved coming clubs, the older kids.

ADAMS: [00:42:07] What did you do in the club?

CLOUTIER: [00:42:09] We it was really getting them to talk and we played like English playing games. So, I'm trying to think of some of the activities we did like one of them that we would do as the kids would get in. There would be like two circles, one circle facing our one circle facing in. And they would have to talk about a topic for like a minute. And then after a minute, the inner circle would rotate. And so you'd have like a different conversation partner. We play board games. We played, we had a spelling bee. We played off all kinds of things, especially with the younger kids, and they loved it. And I think they really just like hanging out with us. The older kids, it was harder to get them to come to clubs. So we would only really get there really dedicated students who wanted to really learn the English, that really wanted to learn English, and we would do readings with them. But again, mostly just conversation, because that's what was missing from the classroom, is they weren't doing enough talking.

ADAMS: [00:43:17] How did the role of your own language evolve or play into what you were doing?

CLOUTIER: [00:43:23] So because I was teaching English and I tried to make it as immersive as possible, I was speaking English even with my third graders, you know, and I tried to not speak Armenian like it was it was kind of funny with my third graders. I in class, I'd be like when they would talk to me in Armenian, be like, I don't understand. You gotta you got to talk to me in English. And so they would try and then outside of school, though, sometimes I would I would in during that lunch break, all the kids would sort of congregate into the into the courtyard of the school and they'd be playing like tag or soccer or whatever. And I would go out there, just hang out with them and sort of build rapport. And when I was out there with them, I would speak Armenian. And so they'd be like, wait, you speak Armenian? I thought you didn't know Armenian. So I kind of gave myself up. But I think they really enjoyed. Hearing me speak Armenian, because I never learned the language that well, and so I spoke in a broken Armenian and they saw, oh, if he is willing to speak Armenian and he is terrible at it, I'll be able to speak English with him, even though I'm terrible at it. Um, and so that it was good. The Armenian played a role in that way where it helped me build rapport and it helped me show them that you don't have to be embarrassed about speaking the language. So, so you know, or even terribly. And they spoke a lot of slang and I didn't you know, so there's a lot of stuff I didn't understand. Um, but my language really improved with my host family at school. I really and especially in the classroom, I tried to maintain, maintain English.

ADAMS: [00:45:32] Were you expected to live your full two years with a host family?

CLOUTIER: [00:45:38] No, we were expected to do three months with them through the winter because winters in Armenia are very difficult. It gets they compared it to Chicago weather. So it was not rare for it to get to like in the negative 30s Fahrenheit. In the summer, it's the opposite. It gets very, very hot. So like 80, 90 degrees. So we did our first three months with our host family, a lot of volunteers, a lot of the host families want the volunteers to stay with them for two years. And I think that if I wasn't married, I would have they would have pressured me more to stay, stay with them. But because I was married, they, they sort of allowed calling, I think, sort of understood, right, like they need their privacy and all that. But



what we did is we moved into an apartment that was in the same building as our host family. So we were neighbors with them. And so we would see them every week. And that was great. You know, just we maintained a really good relationship. I still have a relationship with my host family. We Skype with them occasionally.

ADAMS: [00:47:08] What about non-work activities? What, what did you do for leisure time?

CLOUTIER: [00:47:15] So leisure time I Peace Corps was actually really lenient with the Armenian cohorts. I'm talking to a volunteer right now and we have a volunteer from Armenia who is doing a second service in Sierra Leone. And he is saying that there are a lot stricter on what they allow the volunteers to do. We were permitted to go to Armenia, such a small country that was easy to get to the capital. So we were permitted to go to the capital and hang out with, with volunteers. They didn't like it. You know, it's not like they encouraged it. But I would say, you know, maybe once every other month we would go down, maybe once a month, really, we would go down and hang out with the other volunteers. And often we would mix like project second year projects we're working with within those meetings. So it wasn't just, you know, for fun, but so we did get to see a lot of our peers. We also visited other volunteers at their site villages. We wanted to see as much of Armenia as we could. We hung out with our host family a lot. I, I love playing chess in Armenia. Armenians are very good at chess. So I think I had read and I don't know if this is true because Armenians sometimes like exaggerate certain things. But I think that I had read that Armenia has the most like grandmasters in chess per capita. And that's not surprising if they have a very small, small population. But they're very good at chess. And I fancy myself pretty good at chess. And I got my butt kicked by like eight year olds, you know, like they're good. But that's, that's what I did a lot during my free time as I play chess with my host family. My host mother was really good. I played chess with some of the teachers. We also like we helped we did holidays with them and we helped them in their garden. We helped pick apricots during apricot season and then we also got to travel outside the country. The great thing about Armenia is it's not really in Europe, but it's sort of I guess it kind of technically is in Eastern Europe, I don't know. But we travel to like Georgia

and from there, like a flight from Georgia to Germany and Denmark are really cheap. So we got to go see a little bit of Europe. So that was nice. You know, we actually we get a little bit of money from Peace Corps every month. So we were able to save enough of that to actually travel through Europe a little bit.

ADAMS: [00:50:19] That being the vacation time?

CLOUTIER: [00:50:21] Yeah, that was during vacation time.

ADAMS: [00:50:27] Looking back at your service, what do you think were your main accomplishments?

CLOUTIER: [00:50:40] It's hard because in some ways when we left when we left Armenia, my wife and I were really emotional and my wife asks me, do you think we did enough? We were like on the plane, like flying out. She goes, do you think we did enough? And I turned to her and I said, no. So there's like so much more I wish I had done. And yet at the same time, I feel like we did do a lot. And I spent a lot of time talking about what I did in high school. But we also did these, these posts, these secondary projects. And I wish I had brought my description of service because I'd be able to like sort of go through that. But one of the big projects we did was called Border to Border. And this was a project we did with all these other volunteers. And it was in the third year. And like the border to border was in its third year. I did it in my first year in Armenia, and it was about raising awareness about the importance of health. And so the what the project was, there were three teams and the. Hiked from one border of Armenia to a city called Yeghegnadzor in the middle of Armenia. So my team left from the border with Georgia and hiked for three weeks. I don't remember the it's in my description of service, but it's something it was something like 400 kilometers to Yeghegnadzor. And along the way, we stopped in villages, usually villages. I mean, almost all of them villages that had no Peace Corps volunteers. So Peace Corps was new to them either because they were inaccessible. A lot of them are very remote. And we went and taught them about dental hygiene, nutrition, smoking. Kids start smoking at a very young age in Armenia, so teaching them about the harms of smoking and teaching them about social health. So like not

bullying your, your peers and including people that are different in your groups treating. So the session I led was gender equality, cheating, you know, being nice if you're a boy, like treating girls equally, there's kind of a gender gap. And in Armenia. So we went to these villages and we did these trainings in Armenia. And so my Armenian I actually my Armenian improved for that.

ADAMS: [00:53:33] Was this during school breaks?

CLOUTIER: [00:53:35] Yeah, it was during the summer. And I think we visited a total of 30 villages along the way. So this is quite a bit, I don't know. But is that possible? 30. I wish I had my description of service, I could give you like the actual number, but we've I it was a lot we visited a lot of villages along the way. And we hiked we could have gone to them by, like, taxi or like other transportation. But we wanted to sort of like walk the talk ride. So we showed them that you can be physically active to maintain your health. And, and they also just got a kick out of seeing a bunch of us with these big backpacks like hiking into their villages. And so that was oh, I'm really proud of that project. I thought it, it was very successful. And I learned a lot. Like I said, I led these sessions on gender equality. And so it was these open discussions between, between students in those villages. And some of them were young. And I was sort of they just sort of listened politely. But some of them, they were teenagers and they actually got into like discussions. And the girls were able to discuss what it was like to be a girl in Armenia, which, you know, there's the gender norms are very like concrete in Armenia. And so and the boys had never heard the girls talk so openly about how they felt. And so there was a lot of some of them got a little contentious. And I had to sort of, you know, calm them down. But it was I thought. I'm very proud of that project. I felt like a lot of kids got a lot out of it, even if it didn't change any minds on certain issues. It got them thinking about these, these things. Another project I was very happy to be involved in was called GROW and there's an. It's an it stands for something, but I forget what it is, but it was like about environmentalism in Armenia and so it was a summer camp.

ADAMS: [00:56:00] You said it called ROAD?

CLOUTIER: [00:56:02] GROW, like growing trees. And so I was a camp counselor for that. And we did all these like environmental activities and we picked up trash and we learned about like the water cycle and all these different things. And I was in a village. What was village called? Gavar. Yeah. No, no, no, it wasn't Gavar. It was, it was Goris I went down to this village far away, really far away from my village, and so I got to see, like a whole other part of the country. But, and the school, the kids, were at their school. They didn't learn English. They learned French as their second language. And I speak French. So I got to, like, speak French with them and see how they were doing. And they really enjoy, like speaking to two native French speaker. And, um, so it was like it was fun because I got to do environmental stuff, which I'm very passionate about. But I also got to, like, speak French with these kids and build a really strong connection with, with all these, like, young students down there. So I was proud of that project. But really to choose, like, my proudest moment in Armenia or my proudest accomplishment, it's really building rapport with the students that I taught both at these camps and through border to border, but also in my village. And I am Facebook friends with. All of my students, I am in contact with them regularly,

CLOUTIER: [00:57:58] So, it feels, you know, I'm seeing them grow, I'm seeing them learn English better. Some of them, you know, I'm able to communicate in English with them through Facebook. And so they got to sort of learn about the United States, they learn a little bit about Canada through, through me, but about the world outside of Armenia and. Like I was saying, gender norms are very concrete in Armenia, right, so women are expected to go to college, but really just to make themselves a more attractive bride, bride and then they're expected to get married young, have kids, raise kids, be a homemaker. My wife and I, we already don't have a traditional relationship by American standards. So over there was like, wow. And we played it up a little bit because we were trying to show them that, you know, it's OK to live outside of the box, too. And like, I grew I had a ponytail. I grew my hair out because I wanted to show them, like, you know. Over there, boys get buzz cuts, right. It's OK to have long hair. And so, like, we were trying to really to broaden what's acceptable. And because I had a strong rapport with them, they, they never made, like, bad assumptions about us. Right. Like, I think if I if we had been too contrarian

and we weren't building relationships with people, they would have they would have had stereotypes about us and they would have not been interested in us. But we build a rapport. And then we started to like show them this is how our relationship is and we're not interested in having kids we want to adopt. And like they're like, oh, why? And so we got to both with adults and with teenagers and kids, you know, sort of have these discussions that I think broaden their outlook on life. Um, I think that is what I'm most proud of.

ADAMS: [01:00:22] Moving on, what about lessons learned in your because of your service or anything you've taken away that you feel is something that's affected you?

CLOUTIER: [01:00:37] Yeah, I mean, it's, it's hard to, like, go through everything that I've learned. I, I don't look at the US the same way after being in Armenia, you know. We lived in a very close knit community. I spoke earlier about that, that the incident that happened in the village between these two families and when law enforcement came in the village wanted nothing to do, even, even the victims, you know, even the people who had lost a family member, they did not want law enforcement involved. It was sort of an internal village matter and they wanted the village itself to take care of it. It was such a close knit community. And, you know, I wish we had all these issues, all these problems that we ran into. And the community was always there to help us. Even people that that didn't get along. Like my host family didn't get along with all the other families, but they collaborated on things. And so seeing that that strong community. We don't see that in the US and. I think I don't know that that's changed the way the way I look at what the social ills that are affecting the US right now. And we live in a in a pretty polarized time. And I go back to people when these things come up in political discussions, come up with my friends or family in the States, I usually go to that, that we just don't have a very strong sense of community. And they sort of push back. And I'm like, you don't get it. Like when you're in Armenia and you're living in one of these communities, you see what community really means.

CLOUTIER: [01:02:37] It means you helping your, your neighbors, regardless of what you think about them. It means. You know, sometimes you're, you're doing

you're sacrificing your own comforts for somebody else in a very real way, and because they're, you know, it's a pretty poor community when you're giving away food, that that means a lot. You know, it's not it's not a it's more than just charity. That's a big lesson that I that I sort of taken away from Armenia, but. More broadly, I'm in the middle of applying to grad school, so I've been thinking about this, one of the one of the things I realized in Armenia that I'm interested in continuing to work in service and in international development. That's what I want to go into grad school for. But what I noticed in Armenia, Armenia is in conflict with its neighbor, Azerbaijan, over this conflicted area, Nagorno-Karabakh and. I wonder about this, the sustainability of the development work we're doing in Armenia while the country is still in conflict, and while there remains these underlying problems in the in the society and in politics and economics as a whole. So corruption, it's getting better now in Armenia since my service. But why was there corruption was a big problem. And I and I was wondering, you know, I'm doing all these things in my school, like I'm getting on books and computers and stuff.

CLOUTIER: [01:04:40] But until these underlying issues of corruption and are solved or conflict with its neighbor, like, how sustainable is that development because. I don't know that that affects the whole country and it prevents it from allocating its resources where they really need to go, especially the war, like money's going to go towards defense when it should really be going towards education. And so the way I look at international development and the way I look at politics has sort of shifted and realigned a little bit on postal service. And yeah, as I'm applying to grad school and I'm thinking about that and I. As I get into my career where I want my focus to be in terms of international development and I think that solving sort of macro issues is just as important as being in these in these communities and helping people locally. Although I also I also think you can't just have the macro either. You need people on the ground interacting in these local communities. But that was a reason I didn't we had these it was called small grant assistance or small project assistance. And there are grants that you applied for, um, to like build a computer lab or. And I intentionally did not want to do a grant because I was afraid that that money just wasn't going to be used properly. Even at the local level, you see a little bit of corruption with like the school directors or the or the

or the like the mayor of the village. And I so I wanted to make sure that I did my work people, the people, because I, I really had no influence on these larger issues that were affecting the country. And I didn't want to contribute that to any in any way. And other volunteers who did do grants, they ran into exactly what I was trying to avoid there. There are school directors were misusing the funds and a lot of them were able to navigate that. But I didn't I didn't want to deal with that.

ADAMS: [01:07:27] One of the questions that I was going to ask you was how Peace Corps experience influenced your plans for the future, but I think you've sort of already talked about that in terms of your potential graduate learning. So. And also, the three goals of Peace Corps, you've sort of touched on all three already. Your work, how you tried to share your, your knowledge of the U.S. and Canada as well as them getting to know you. So you, you really seem to have integrated the three goals the Peace Corps hoped volunteers would engage with. And you've talked about it. So at this point, it's and you're recently returned. So you really haven't had much chance to have a continuous involvement other than it sounds like you are on Facebook. So, yeah, that's not going to go away for what is their friends of Armenia? Are you familiar with friends groups?

CLOUTIER: [01:08:44] I believe there might be one. I haven't looked too much into it. I'm still in touch with most of the Peace Corps volunteers. And so that I guess that's why I haven't looked for friends of our immediate group, because when I when I talk about Armenia, I kind of have my group already. But and when I was when we were in Armenia, we were looking to see if there was any organization back in the US like that that could give us resources and we couldn't really find anything. So but that's a good question. I'd like to learn more about that.

ADAMS: [01:09:28] National Peace Corps Association has a directory of all of the friends of service countries. That's one place you could look for it. Yeah. And I know there are quite a few Armenian groups in the country simply because of the issues with Turkey and other things. So they do exist and have to do a little research on that. And also regional groups. As I said, there's a group in Richmond, there's a group here in Northern Virginia that

could get involved and all sorts of both social and community service activities.

CLOUTIER: [01:10:06] Yeah, I think one of the reasons my wife and I have, have put that off a little bit is we don't know how much longer will be in Richmond. So getting involved in that group, if only for a few months, um, most of the schools I'm applying to are in Virginia. We are also thinking about doing another Peace Corps service. But, but, that's, that's very that's good advice, at least for connecting to Armenian groups who are not the ones I was in contact with the my group and the one before and after me.

ADAMS: [01:10:47] Do you have any last minute statements you'd like to make, any overall comments?

CLOUTIER: [01:10:54] I don't know. I mean, I could talk about Armenia for and Peace Corps forever, and it's. Maybe that's why I should find a group to because when you talk to people who aren't Peace Corps volunteers, I don't they can relate to a to a degree, but I think it's, it's really an experience you have to have lived through to fully understand. But no, I guess I don't really have anything else to add. Um, my wife also wants to be interviewed, so I'm sure she'll talk about things, maybe some of the same things. But she, she had a very different experience from me, too. I think both, uh, we both had a positive experience, but she faced different challenges with her counterparts and, and her accomplishments. She was involved in different projects. We were involved in some of the same projects. But she also did some of some different ones. I did some different ones. So, even within the same community, the service can be very different.

ADAMS: [01:12:12] Very good, Jimmy, I thank you for your time and I will now end this.

CLOUTIER: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]