

John Rex Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

John Rex served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia from 1962 to 1964 as an English teacher (Ethiopia 1). He also served in Namibia from 2003 to 2004 as a teacher (Namibia 22).

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

John Rex

May 23, 2006
Buffalo, New York

By Frieda Fairburn

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

FAIRBURN: [00:00:07] I don't think so. My name is Frieda Fairburn, and I'm speaking to John Rex in Buffalo, New York. John has had two Peace Corps experiences, and he's going to tell us about them. So John, going way back before you actually got into the Peace Corps, when did you first hear about the Peace Corps experience?

REX: [00:00:30] I think along with other Americans, I read about it in magazines and the newspaper. In 1961, when the Peace Corps was very new, it was widely publicized as these adventuresome young Americans who were going out to save the world and it looked pretty good.

FAIRBURN: [00:00:50] Looked pretty good. So you went immediately to your Peace Corps recruiter?

REX: [00:00:57] I was a senior at Bowdoin College, fall of 1961. And I remember at some point during the winter we had a recruiter come to the campus. She was an African American woman, I don't remember her name, who spoke in the Bowdoin College Chapel, and I was one of the people who listened eagerly and spoke with her afterwards and got my application.

FAIRBURN: [00:01:24] Immediately?

REX: [00:01:26] Within a relatively short time. I was, I think it was, it was wintertime. I was a senior and at that point I didn't know where I was going from there.

FAIRBURN: [00:01:34] But there was something that was attractive about Peace Corps.

REX: [00:01:36] Oh absolutely.

FAIRBURN: [00:01:36] In addition to getting out of Buffalo. No, where's Bowdoin College?

REX: [00:01:40] Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine.

FAIRBURN: [00:01:41] Oh. Need I ask more. No. OK, so when you went home that semester or whenever, and you started to talk to your parents, what did they say?

REX: [00:01:54] A good question. I really don't remember.

FAIRBURN: [00:01:58] Couldn't have been too negative.

REX: [00:01:59] I was juggling some other possibilities and thinking of graduate school in this and that and the other thing. Uh, but I, the idea of going into the Peace Corps really did appeal to me.

FAIRBURN: [00:02:10] Do you recall the process? Did you ever have to take a written test?

REX: [00:02:14] Absolutely. I remember, and of course, that's all written up in this so that helps me remember.

FAIRBURN: [00:02:21] Good.

REX: [00:02:22] I had to go into, uh, from Brunswick, Maine to Portland, where there was a written test being given on a particular, must have been a Saturday afternoon. And it was like taking a standard examination of whatever it was I knew about anything. And I had to fill in a written application and I had to go to the Brunswick Naval Air Station for a physical.

FAIRBURN: [00:02:47] Uh huh. Do you recall on the written exam a language portion? Or maybe?

REX: [00:02:52] No, I do not.

FAIRBURN: [00:02:54] I was a couple of years after you. So maybe, maybe it wasn't.

REX: [00:02:58] Yeah, I've never had much experience with other languages and I didn't then.

FAIRBURN: [00:03:04] OK, fine. All right, now, anything else about the application process or the vetting process?

REX: [00:03:13] Well, the written application, the test, and the physical. And I remember I was living off campus at the time and somebody came to do a security check and talk to my landlord. It was an elderly couple and they were partially deaf. And apparently I wasn't supposed to know that this person was doing a security check, but they misunderstood and called me to the door to meet him. So I did know, and so they were checking up on me, going around asking questions.

FAIRBURN: [00:03:43] Obviously you passed.

REX: [00:03:45] I did pass. And um.

FAIRBURN: [00:03:46] How long was it before you heard anything?

REX: [00:03:49] Uh, I received a telegram, you know, a real honest to goodness telegram saying that I had been selected to go to Ethiopia. And I immediately raced around to find a map to find out where Ethiopia was, because we Americans are so poorly informed on matters of geography, and was very pleased. And, you know, that our group was to come together in Washington, D.C., that July. So, you know, I had about a month after graduating from college.

FAIRBURN: [00:04:19] So you were actually, you were still in college when you were notified.

REX: [00:04:23] When I was notified.

FAIRBURN: [00:04:23] Then you had your graduation, then you, within.

REX: [00:04:25] I had about a month at home and then I was off to Washington, D.C.

FAIRBURN: [00:04:29] So parents thought that was a cool thing to do?

REX: [00:04:32] I think they did. I don't remember any particular reaction on their part, you know. I, uh, I don't know. Maybe they were happy to get rid of me.

FAIRBURN: [00:04:41] Or perhaps they were the type to encourage your independence?

REX: [00:04:46] To a certain extent. Yeah. And I come from a, you know, typically dysfunctional family. I guess I'll put it that way, kindly. So for me, setting out on my own was a very desirable thing.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:04] You have siblings?

REX: [00:05:05] I have three older sisters.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:06] Older sisters. And so you were the boy, I guess.

REX: [00:05:09] I'm the only boy, yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:10] Maybe that made a difference, I don't know, I'm reading things.

REX: [00:05:12] Uh, well, in terms of family systems, the youngest is always the adventuresome one who steps out.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:18] Yeah, because the sisters had to go through all that.

REX: [00:05:21] Yeah. My oldest, two older sisters are twins, and the middle one. And, you know, the family had a lot of problems and, you know, I won't go into all that.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:32] No, no, that's quite alright.

REX: [00:05:32] But I was feeling a great need to.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:37] Distance.

REX: [00:05:37] Establish my independence, and I'm sure that was one of the factors that encouraged me to do what I did.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:41] How about your friends or classmates?

REX: [00:05:44] There was one other Bowdoin person who took the test the day I did, and who ended up in the Peace Corps, and I have not had any touch contact with him since that time.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:51] He didn't go to Ethiopia?

REX: [00:05:52] No, he did not go to Ethiopia. So we just kind of separated.

FAIRBURN: [00:05:56] Right, no reason for you to hang out. You don't really have to do that. So and your other friends at home, your hometown?

REX: [00:06:03] Well, it was interesting because I did see people I had been in high school with and that kind of thing, and that's probably the last time in my life that I did. I mean, once I was off to Ethiopia and my life went elsewhere, other than one reunion, which we had back in the '90s, I haven't seen or have been in touch with these people.

FAIRBURN: [00:06:22] OK. The need wasn't there for them or you.

REX: [00:06:25] Right.

FAIRBURN: [00:06:27] OK, so you had only a month. You probably didn't have too many things to worry about back at home that you had to settle or anything.

REX: [00:06:35] No, it's relatively simple, and I'm comparing that with my later experience. The Peace Corps advised us that we could pack up a, what do you call? A trunk?

FAIRBURN: [00:06:47] Foot locker or something?

REX: [00:06:47] A foot locker to ship to Ethiopia. And of course, we didn't know what we'd need, but I remember I had my little portable typewriter. That was one of the things.

FAIRBURN: [00:06:55] That was a good thing.

REX: [00:06:57] Which of course, nobody's never even heard of today. But I had a, uh, FM radio or AM FM battery radio, which cost a lot of money, you know, in those days. And it was very big. I mean, this is before space technology.

FAIRBURN: [00:07:09] You're smarter than I was.

REX: [00:07:10] And uh, and you know, some basic books, kinds of things, and they all got stuck in the trunk. And uh, and we did that. And, uh, but then it was off to fly to Washington, D.C., for, uh, what was then, uh, ten weeks of intensive training in Washington. Washington, D.C., in the summer of 1962 was a hotbed of Peace Corps training. I think each university had a large group. Our group started out, I think it was nearly or over 300 to go to Ethiopia for the first time. And other universities in Washington had other comparable sized groups. It was a massive drive to just inundate the world with Peace Corps people.

FAIRBURN: [00:07:54] Oh my goodness. Well, Ghana was number one, right?

REX: [00:08:00] In 1961, I think it was.

FAIRBURN: [00:08:02] And so what were you for this?

REX: [00:08:04] We were Ethiopia I, the first group.

FAIRBURN: [00:08:06] And this was in the summer?

REX: [00:08:09] Summer of 1962.

FAIRBURN: [00:08:11] '62. Thank you. OK.

REX: [00:08:13] 1962.

FAIRBURN: [00:08:14] OK, all right.

REX: [00:08:15] Washington, D.C., in the summer.

FAIRBURN: [00:08:17] Miserable. So what was the center of your training?

REX: [00:08:21] We were at Georgetown University. It really was a dawn to midnight kind of affair. It was intense. We were up at six o'clock in the morning on the field, running a mile and doing calisthenics. And the press made a big deal out of the physical training. I remember that. You know, these are Americans who are in good physical shape and all that

sort of thing. And we enjoyed it. But, you know, at the same time, they were trying to teach us language and trying to make us aware of Ethiopia in a diplomatic way. I remember speaker after speaker who had been there and who knew the situation got in front of our group and would say things like, it's a beautiful country, you know. And a great deal of what we needed to know, of course, wasn't said and we didn't learn.

FAIRBURN: [00:09:10] And you were taking courses, classes, or just short workshop kind of things?

REX: [00:09:16] No, there was a regular class schedule each day and it was broken down into segments. You know, so many hours of language training, so many hours of health and safety training, so many hours of Ethiopian. And a good number of hours specifically to the task that we were preparing to do. So I was going to be teaching English as a second language, and they were actually teaching us to teach English as a second language since most of us didn't have specific training in that to begin with. The assumption at that time was that anybody with a BA degree could do anything.

FAIRBURN: [00:09:53] Right.

REX: [00:09:53] It's not true.

FAIRBURN: [00:09:54] No, it wasn't then either.

REX: [00:09:55] But that's the way people were thinking. And uh, yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:10:02] So how many languages were emphasized there?

REX: [00:10:07] The only language that was being taught at that time was Amharic, which is the language or was the language of the emperor and of the dominant group in Ethiopia. Even though we all knew that many of us would be in areas where that was not the language that was being spoken.

FAIRBURN: [00:10:23] Did that prove to be the case?

REX: [00:10:24] That did prove to be the case.

FAIRBURN: [00:10:25] For you.

REX: [00:10:27] The Ethiopians that they brought in to teach us were absolutely wonderful people and we became very close with them. In fact, one of them was my roommate through training. But I think due to a number of reasons, we learned very little language that any of us retained. And when we got to Ethiopia, we were teaching in English and a lot of people wanted us to speak English, and our students were around us speaking English, and we were around Americans because we were kind of grouped in groups of Americans.

FAIRBURN: [00:10:58] Really? Oh, well, we'll get to that.

REX: [00:11:00] Yeah, we'll get to that, because that's a big difference. So in our particular group, one, most of us did not learn very much of the language.

FAIRBURN: [00:11:11] When you got there did you pick up some greetings so you could be kind of?

REX: [00:11:14] Well, we picked up the greetings in training, I mean, you know, and we had phrases like, you know, where is a railway station? We all knew how to say that, except for the only railway station in the country is in Addis Ababa.

FAIRBURN: [00:11:25] And you weren't near there. OK.

REX: [00:11:28] And we weren't there.

FAIRBURN: [00:11:30] What about the socialization within the group? I mean, 300 is a huge group.

REX: [00:11:36] Yeah. Most of us, of course, were younger. I was 21 years old when I went in. I was a young college graduate and, uh, we had a few

older people, older then was like 40s and 50s, even up to the 60s. There were a few. And I really remember them with great respect at this point because most of them have passed on and I'm one of them now. But we were young and we were idealistic. We had, for the most part, great admiration for President Kennedy, you know, and Sargent Shriver came and spoke to us, and he was wonderful.

FAIRBURN: [00:12:16] It's good to be in Washington. They're right there.

REX: [00:12:18] Absolutely. Our director, Harris Wofford, later became a senator and so on. And who was with us for the whole time we were in Ethiopia and he was with us through the training period. And I think there was a lot of chaos. I mean, there's a lot of confusion and admittedly so. And the whole point was we were kind of working our way through it. The other thing about training was that there was always this huge shadow of deselection that's hanging over our heads. That we were told, you know, we would be sent to Ethiopia if we successfully completed the training. And, you know, we had, if I remember correctly, each of us had to meet with a psychiatrist at some point along the way.

FAIRBURN: [00:13:09] Yes. Or a psychologist.

REX: [00:13:11] And we had to kind of justify any irregularities in our behaviors. And there was always a certain amount of suspicion about, you know, who had this irregularity in their behavior.

FAIRBURN: [00:13:25] Rumors, yes.

REX: [00:13:27] And in fact, when the time came for us to finish out the last week of training, they took almost all of the volunteers in our group, which is a lot, to the Georgetown Dental School and pulled their wisdom teeth.

FAIRBURN: [00:13:42] Oh yes. We went through that too.

REX: [00:13:44] That was, that was. And they didn't pull mine. I still have three. I actually had the fourth one pulled in India when I was there on my own, but I still have three of my wisdom.

FAIRBURN: [00:13:54] How did you escape? They weren't impacted?

REX: [00:13:55] They weren't, they seemed to have room for them. Yeah, they were OK. But that was a painful time for a lot of people.

FAIRBURN: [00:14:03] Going around with swollen checks and ice packs.

REX: [00:14:03] Oh, people were sore and excited and you know. But the other part was that they wouldn't swear-in or ticket to go to Ethiopia anybody who hadn't had their security clearance. So we had a number of people in our group who were held back.

FAIRBURN: [00:14:20] Really.

REX: [00:14:20] So, you know, out of the, I don't know, 300 or so in our group, you know, there were like 240 or, these numbers are not correct, who actually went, were sworn-in and went to Ethiopia. Leaving behind, you know, I don't know, 40 or 50 people in limbo. We called it limbo, because they hadn't had their security clearance and they wouldn't sign them up.

FAIRBURN: [00:14:44] Were any deselected you think for psychological reasons or health reasons?

REX: [00:14:50] We didn't know. That was all a matter of rumor because it was all.

FAIRBURN: [00:14:54] As I recall, it was a couple of years later, somebody was deselected and they would disappear.

REX: [00:14:59] They would disappear.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:00] They did not come and say goodbye.

REX: [00:15:02] Exactly.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:02] You'd say, whatever happened to?

REX: [00:15:04] Yeah, yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:05] Wow.

REX: [00:15:05] That, no, that's what I recall. And so rumor takes over. And you know, and there were rumors of, oh, she's a lesbian, you know, I still remember that. I do remember that. Oh, she must be a lesbian, you know? Or, you know, they discovered he has a child by a woman that he's not supporting, you know, and that kind of stuff.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:26] Oh my goodness.

REX: [00:15:27] But it was all rumor and we never know. We never know. They just disappeared out of sight. It was not a kind of a gentle procedure, and it was a huge relief to make it through. And at some point in this interview, I want to address that gay lesbian issue.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:42] Sure.

REX: [00:15:43] Part of it, because that's an interesting sideline.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:46] OK, so obviously you got through training OK?

REX: [00:15:49] I did, I did.

FAIRBURN: [00:15:50] Was there any, did you do some practice teaching kind of thing?

REX: [00:15:54] In our training?

FAIRBURN: [00:15:56] In the training situation, yeah.

REX: [00:15:57] Somewhat. I mean, not to a real class, but to each other.

FAIRBURN: [00:16:03] Really?

REX: [00:16:03] No, I mean, we didn't get out and teach a class of students as such.

FAIRBURN: [00:16:08] Anybody talked to you about educational methods?

REX: [00:16:10] Yes.

FAIRBURN: [00:16:10] Or stuff like that?

REX: [00:16:11] Yes. We had Jesuits of Georgetown University, and I still remember the lecture that was repeated almost every day, that communication requires a sender and a receiver and a response and, you know, all that sort of thing. And it was helpful. We were taught in the lotto frieze method of teaching English as a second language, and it's a matter of substitution drills and we did the substitutions. I can still do some of them from memory because I did this so many times.

FAIRBURN: [00:16:43] I buy bread. I eat bread. I use bread.

REX: [00:16:44] You know, the lesson is interesting, is the lesson interesting?

FAIRBURN: [00:16:47] Oh, that's.

REX: [00:16:48] You know, I can do those lessons even today from memory.

FAIRBURN: [00:16:51] So that part of it actually was practical for you.

REX: [00:16:53] It was very practical. Yeah. I mean, had I not had that, I don't know what I would have done when I got to Ethiopia.

FAIRBURN: [00:16:59] You would have been OK.

REX: [00:17:02] Oh dear.

FAIRBURN: [00:17:02] Yeah. All right. And did you make some good friends among the PCVs there?

REX: [00:17:06] I did. I did. In training, yes, but much more so because I was with a group of 12 in a village for two years.

FAIRBURN: [00:17:14] Oh, really?

REX: [00:17:15] So those people really became family.

FAIRBURN: [00:17:17] Yeah. Did you ever, once you got, you went through Addis I suppose?

REX: [00:17:21] We flew to Addis Ababa and we were there for 10 days or something for more training before they actually sent us out.

FAIRBURN: [00:17:30] And then did you ever see that whole group together ever again?

REX: [00:17:34] They brought us together for a few meetings.

FAIRBURN: [00:17:37] Oh, really?

REX: [00:17:38] In the course, yeah. I think we were together in January. You know, we arrived in September. We were together in January. We were. And whether it was all of us, I'm not even sure at this point. I mean, because it is a very large group.

FAIRBURN: [00:17:54] And a large country.

REX: [00:17:55] And a good number went to Eritrea, which of course now is a separate country. The civil war had not heated up to a huge extent at that point.

FAIRBURN: [00:18:07] OK, so when you were there, you felt you were prepared, from what you had been through?

REX: [00:18:14] Yes. The answer to your question is yes. I felt, and I think most of us felt we were prepared. It took a while to find out that we weren't.

FAIRBURN: [00:18:24] You felt prepared.

REX: [00:18:24] But, I mean, we were young and idealistic and self-assured. And, you know, we walked in like, well, here we are, and we're going to do the job, you know? We're going to change the world.

FAIRBURN: [00:18:33] Have they given you background on the tradition in Ethiopian schools? Was it the British method or?

REX: [00:18:38] Yes. And even more of that when we got to Ethiopia. It was very much the British system. And some of the people who were key in that system spoke to our group and talked about. Some of these things I guess we had heard before, but we really weren't familiar with it in a way that we would accept them. For example, that the students expected to be given notes and to take notes, that teaching was a matter of dictating. And the students were expected simply to write what you said and memorize it and then regurgitate it on an examination.

FAIRBURN: [00:19:13] We'll talk about that later cause I think.

REX: [00:19:15] That's a huge issue. But the formality of, you know, in the classroom when the student, when the teacher walked in, the students will stand up, you know. Little things like that we're just not used to and takes some adjusting. It really does.

FAIRBURN: [00:19:29] OK. All right. So then there you are in Addis Ababa, and the group met together for 10 days, more or less.

REX: [00:19:38] Whatever it was.

FAIRBURN: [00:19:38] And then you were sent off to your assignment?

REX: [00:19:41] Off to our assignment.

FAIRBURN: [00:19:42] Did you know what it was in advance or did they tell you when you got to Ethiopia?

REX: [00:19:45] They told us when we got to Ethiopia. Yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:19:47] So then when you got to where you going you realized the Amharic was, well, not going to be very useful.

REX: [00:19:55] I mean, those of us who remained in the highlands, Amharic is the pretty much the dominant language in the highlands. And the way the school system works, what happens with many of the students is that, you know, they'll learn whatever it is, their tribal language is. And then in order to go to elementary school, they have to learn Amharic because that's the language in elementary. And then in order to go to high school, they have to learn English. And if they happen to be Muslim, they have to learn Arabic. And if they have, you know, I mean, some of them would know four or five languages.

FAIRBURN: [00:20:26] Yeah. So what was your official assignment?

REX: [00:20:31] I was assigned to teach English as a second language to grade nine, principally, and with some classes of grade 10, at Haile Mariam Mamo Secondary School in Debre Birhan. I was in Debre Birhan with 11 other volunteers. There are two schools there, so some of us were at the Haile Mariam Mamo, which is a government secondary school. And the other, which was a teacher training school, and teacher training was for students pretty much at the same level. I mean, you know, these weren't graduate students or anything.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:08] Secondary probably meant they did better on the entrance exam?

REX: [00:21:13] Uh, I, I'm not quite sure how some of them ended up being in the teacher training school.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:18] Altogether, how many of you were sent to that?

REX: [00:21:20] There were 12 of us.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:21] Wow.

REX: [00:21:21] So we had one married couple. And we established households. There was a household of four single women, one of whom was Marian Haley Beil, who was in charge of the Peace Corps people in Rochester.

FAIRBURN: [00:21:38] Oh. Yes.

REX: [00:21:38] And I was in a household with four guys, and there were two guys who had a household close by. And the six of us all ate together. We hired a cook and so on, and so that accounts for six, 10, 12. That's 12. But on times like Christmas and Easter, we all got together and we actually became very close.

FAIRBURN: [00:22:03] Now this, of course, is different from many volunteers' experience. Some of them, of course, have been off all by themselves or with maybe one person within five miles of them or something. Did you enjoy your situation or did you kind of envy those who are out there in the bush?

REX: [00:22:22] At that time, in our experience, there wasn't anybody out in the bush. I mean, all of our 300 were sent out in groups, as far as I know. I mean, there may have been some isolated cases of. It was a very good and powerful experience for me.

FAIRBURN: [00:22:41] Good.

REX: [00:22:42] Having come from a family that wasn't too functional, it was great. It was great to be with people who were.

FAIRBURN: [00:22:50] So did this enable you to get to know Ethiopians or did it hinder you from getting to know Ethiopians?

REX: [00:23:00] Ah. I think we got to know them in a different way. Let me put it that way. I think all of us were sponsoring students and we had the students living in our compound with us. And of course, we hired servants. I mean, we had a cook and we had a Zabagna guard and we had women doing laundry. And I mean, all of that was part of the system. You know, it was assumed and expected that we did that.

FAIRBURN: [00:23:26] When you said you were sponsoring students, you were responsible for their room and board?

REX: [00:23:34] All of the students at the Haile Mariam Mamo Secondary School came from other places. I mean, and basically they measure distance by how long it takes to walk, you know. If you say, you know, how far away is your home? Two days.

FAIRBURN: [00:23:47] Oh.

REX: [00:23:48] Two days is about 40 miles of walking. And you know, you figure at least 20 miles a day is a good walk. And so they were on their own, living independently. The Ethiopian government paid each student, if I remember correctly, \$15 Ethiopian per month. And so they would support themselves. And that, at that time, was the equivalent of. I think, an Ethiopian dollar, and gee, I hope I get this right, was worth about 40 cents.

FAIRBURN: [00:24:17] Oh my god.

REX: [00:24:18] So it's fifteen times forty cents. So, OK. And so what the students would do is they would band together, you know, five or six, and mostly boys. Girls don't have the freedom to do this stuff. So almost all of our students were boys.

FAIRBURN: [00:24:34] Boys of what age? They would be late teens?

REX: [00:24:35] Uh, well, I mean, uh, in my classes in grade nine and 10, they would range from probably the youngest were maybe 14, 15, up to 19,

20. It was quite a range. I mean, some of them had not been to school until they were 10 or 11 or 12 years old.

FAIRBURN: [00:24:55] So where did the idea come from that you should sponsor these students? Were teachers already doing that? Or are you just?

REX: [00:25:01] Well, of course, we. Actually the teachers before we got there were Indians from India. Our headmaster was Indian. And although the Peace Corps made a point of saying we weren't replacing, you know, people who needed jobs, actually we were. And some Ethiopians. And um, and yes, the Indians did to some extent sponsor Ethiopian students. The Ethiopian students coming in from the countryside really had little or nothing. You know, they were not getting any support from their homes. And so for most of us sponsoring students, which most of us were doing, meant giving them a stipend, say equivalent to what the government would give. I know we had two students living in what had been the cookhouse in our compound in the back, and they were, you know, in and out and always.

FAIRBURN: [00:25:57] They were feeding themselves?

REX: [00:25:58] They were feeding themselves. One was a Muslim and one was a Coptic Christian, and they had only one pot and they had to cook separately because Muslims don't eat Christian food and Christians don't eat Muslim food. But they, I mean, they were compatible and, you know, they were ninth graders, I guess. Yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:26:15] So you would assume that all of the students in the school had that kind of a situation or some lived at home perhaps?

REX: [00:26:23] For the most part, yeah. For the most part, they were living.

FAIRBURN: [00:26:26] Sounds like it was crucial.

REX: [00:26:26] They were living independently, yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:26:29] And that went on for the two years you were there?

REX: [00:26:32] Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:26:34] And the same young men and are you still in touch with them?

REX: [00:26:36] I'm not now, no. I was for maybe 10 years after, but they've been through civil wars and.

FAIRBURN: [00:26:42] Well, yeah.

REX: [00:26:43] And all kinds of things. And I've been through some changes in my life. So, no, we've lost touch.

FAIRBURN: [00:26:49] But that's an interesting way to do it. So how about getting to know townspeople, village people out there?

REX: [00:26:56] We did that and it varied. Of course, language was an issue. You know, interestingly enough, we could talk to students because they had some English, but there were a lot of people in the community that didn't have English. And we were the first Westerners who had been in this town. I mean, not too far away there was an army base and there were some Israelis there training soldiers. Interesting.

FAIRBURN: [00:27:21] Yeah.

REX: [00:27:22] And there was a mission not far away with missionaries trying to convert them to conservative Christianity. And they invited us once. And for most of us, that was enough. Thank you very much. That's not why we were there.

FAIRBURN: [00:27:37] But certainly nightlife. Was there any nightlife like ours and things there? There are all those Muslims.

REX: [00:27:42] No, no. Debre Birhan at that time, we pretty much stayed home.

FAIRBURN: [00:27:49] Well, it's a good thing you had each other.

REX: [00:27:51] Absolutely, absolutely. There were hyenas out at night. You know, we wouldn't go out alone except with a student or with somebody with us. We always carried a rock because you could, you know, fend off the hyenas and um.

FAIRBURN: [00:28:04] Did you have any transport?

REX: [00:28:06] Yes. The Peace Corps issued us driver's licenses when we got there. For the first, I don't know how many months, we actually had a Land Rover that was assigned to Debre Birhan and which we used to drive to Addis Ababa to get food and move our stuff around when we were shifting around. After I don't know how many months, I know we had it at Christmas, so you know, we had it for at least September through December. But after that, the Peace Corps recalled it and said, you know, OK, you're on your own, so we had to take the bus.

FAIRBURN: [00:28:38] Oh, there was a local?

REX: [00:28:40] Yeah. Debre Birhan is on the main road north and there were busses. Yeah. But that was not easy, I mean.

FAIRBURN: [00:28:51] But no motorcycles, no scooters?

REX: [00:28:54] No, no. Out of our group of 12, I think at least seven or eight of us had horses.

FAIRBURN: [00:29:00] Oh, cool.

REX: [00:29:00] I know I did, and I rode every day. School was in the morning and we had like a two or three hour break.

FAIRBURN: [00:29:07] Sure.

REX: [00:29:07] And I would ride every day and in the afternoon.

FAIRBURN: [00:29:10] That's great.

REX: [00:29:11] That was a good life. It really was good.

FAIRBURN: [00:29:13] So this is kind of open country?

REX: [00:29:15] Oh, very much so. Oh yeah. Oh yeah, very much, and very beautiful country.

FAIRBURN: [00:29:19] It was beautiful after all that, right?

REX: [00:29:21] Oh, yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:29:23] They didn't lie.

REX: [00:29:24] Yeah, no. I mean, it's a plateau. But yeah, I mean, not far at all was something almost the equivalent of the Grand Canyon. You know, where you have these incredible canyons and valleys and no roads into them. I mean, Ethiopia really until the last century didn't have the wheel, because what good is a wheel if you're going up and down cliffs? I mean, you can't do it.

FAIRBURN: [00:29:44] Was there a rainy season?

REX: [00:29:46] Absolutely. Yeah, yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:29:47] Horrendous or just?

REX: [00:29:49] It rains pretty hard, yeah. It rains pretty hard in, uh, July, August, September, which would be the time when you're off from school. The tin roof of the school was such that if it was raining, you couldn't teach.

FAIRBURN: [00:30:04] Oh, right, yes of course.

REX: [00:30:05] You know, the noise. The noise is incredible.

FAIRBURN: [00:30:07] OK. And otherwise the weather was mild? You're on a plateau, though.

REX: [00:30:14] Well, of course, people tend to have stereotypes of Africa, and you assume, well, hey, you're going to Africa, it's going to be hot. I still remember when we started school in September of 1962, we were walking to school in the morning and there were puddles because it had rained and there was ice on the puddles.

FAIRBURN: [00:30:33] OK.

REX: [00:30:34] So we really weren't prepared for the cold. You know, we didn't bring a lot of sweaters and, you know, I went out and bought a blanket. I think I spent forty Ethiopian dollars, which is a lot of money from my allowance, and it's on my bed there today.

FAIRBURN: [00:30:48] Oh, very good.

REX: [00:30:48] I'm still using it. It survived my marriage, my divorce.

FAIRBURN: [00:30:53] So it must have heated up about March or so, March, April?

REX: [00:30:58] It heated up, but it was not super hot. I mean, it was because of the altitude. We were living at 9,500 feet.

FAIRBURN: [00:31:06] Oh, nine thousand feet.

REX: [00:31:07] Right. It's almost two miles high. And uh, so you know.

FAIRBURN: [00:31:13] Well, that's impressive. OK, so you obviously enjoyed that aspect of it and the associations and the relationships there, where you were sent. So how about the school?

REX: [00:31:27] The school, as I said before, the headmaster was an Indian. It was run in kind of a traditional Indian manner with the British system with dictating of notes and, uh, our particular school happened to have the first, uh, student strike. [tape break]

FAIRBURN: [00:31:55] Starting to tell us about the student strike.

REX: [00:31:58] Student strike at Haile Mariam Mamo school in Debre Birhan. And my ninth graders did not strike. I think it was 10th and 11th graders, if I remember correctly, and by strike it was, they refused to go to classes. They stood outside the classroom and they had complaints against their teachers, including their Peace Corps teachers, things that they had said or done that they felt put down or insulted or whatever. And you know, from our perspective, a lot of this was misunderstanding. You know, one of the teachers apparently had used the phrase, you're acting like a bunch of monkeys.

FAIRBURN: [00:32:39] Oh.

REX: [00:32:41] And they had said she called us monkeys. And you know what in America would pass as a harmless comment really became an international incident.

FAIRBURN: [00:32:51] So it was all personal kinds of things?

REX: [00:32:57] This actually has been written up in a book. There's a whole chapter on the Debre Birhan strikes in Kennedy's Quest for Freedom. I can tell you more about that. And I remember at some point along the way going into Addis Ababa when Harris Wofford was our director, was having a gathering of people, which just happened to include Bill Moyers, who was at that time working for the Peace Corps as a troubleshooter and with whom I spoke at some length. I refer to this as my interview with Bill Moyers, about our student strike in Debre Birhan. I didn't realize at the time that, you know, he was there to troubleshoot. I mean, there were some big issues. Our strike was one of them. Another one apparently was an issue among some of the African American volunteers who were feeling some kind of tension, and I just don't know any of the details on that one. But um, there was a lot going on. And of course, when you're out in the countryside, you don't even know.

FAIRBURN: [00:34:08] Sure.

REX: [00:34:09] And we didn't have email and we didn't have cell phones. I mean, we were pretty isolated. Yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:34:15] So how was it resolved?

REX: [00:34:17] The student strike? I don't think anybody was satisfied. I mean, you know, there were negotiations and the Peace Corps tried to step in and talk to people. And at some point they were going to reassign all of us volunteers to different places. And then they ended up getting a new principal for the school. So it was one of those situations which probably nobody won. You know, it was a lose-lose situation, and that's unfortunate. But we, all of us, except for a couple who had chosen for other reasons to move to other places. I think 10 of the original 12 were there the second year in the same school.

FAIRBURN: [00:35:01] But it just kind of like faded away?

REX: [00:35:03] Well, you know, the semester ended, the kids went home. When they came back and school started up in May, oh gosh, we had a new principal. I think what had happened was the principal was there and said we should all go someplace else and instead they. So yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:35:21] So did Peace Corps then suggest some sensitivity training or some additional cultural information?

REX: [00:35:31] For us? I don't remember that. I think, you know, we were pretty pigheaded, actually.

FAIRBURN: [00:35:39] OK.

REX: [00:35:41] No, I mean, we were pretty self-righteous. We thought we were right, you know? And we were some of the time, you know? But no, I mean, we were, you know, we were kids. We were learning.

FAIRBURN: [00:35:58] And what did you learn from this? Apparently nothing if you're pigheaded.

REX: [00:36:00] Well, we did. We did.

FAIRBURN: [00:36:02] I'm sure you did.

REX: [00:36:03] The problems did not recur the second year. And you know, when we left, more volunteers came in to take our places. And as far as I know, the Peace Corps was there through some years.

FAIRBURN: [00:36:15] OK. How about your fellow teachers who were not Peace Corps? You weren't all Peace Corps there.

REX: [00:36:20] Well, as I said, a number were Indians, people from India. And, you know, they were much more careful in the things that they said and did and kind of separate from the community, you know?

FAIRBURN: [00:36:34] So all the American teachers in your group were teaching ESL?

REX: [00:36:39] No. Different subjects, math and science and so on. Emphasis on ESL.

FAIRBURN: [00:36:46] Yeah. Well, yeah. You can't do without teaching the English. OK. All right. So before we leave the end of your first year, were you healthy all that time?

REX: [00:37:01] You're speaking of just the first year or the first two?

FAIRBURN: [00:37:03] Oh, just through to the end of the first year, because you said that was the end of the first year when you had the.

REX: [00:37:09] At some point I had pneumonia and I'm not quite sure when it was. I think it was in the second year.

FAIRBURN: [00:37:15] Did you have to be?

REX: [00:37:17] No, no. I didn't know. I didn't know I had pneumonia until I had, I actually was very sick and recovered, and then I was sick again. And then I recovered and then I went in and had some tests and they told me I had had pneumonia.

FAIRBURN: [00:37:30] Did the doctor come visit you occasionally or get your booster shots or anything like that?

REX: [00:37:36] No. We had good medical care. I mean, I had no.

FAIRBURN: [00:37:40] Well, did you have to go to the doctor or did the doctor come to you?

REX: [00:37:43] We would have to go to Addis Ababa, you know.

FAIRBURN: [00:37:47] How often would you get to Addis?

REX: [00:37:50] We needed to go there to shop for food, so somebody from our group would go just about every weekend. I mean, not the same people.

FAIRBURN: [00:37:58] Was it considered a pleasure to go?

REX: [00:38:01] Yes and no. I mean, it was a pleasure in the sense that you were getting away and that there were some opportunities to go to restaurants and, you know, see some people and do things. But it was not easy. I mean, you had to get up before the sun rose and go to the bus station and sit on the bus to wait until it was full because nothing left until it was full. And you know, and going the 80 miles or so, it would take three hours.

FAIRBURN: [00:38:27] Oh, yes.

REX: [00:38:28] Three or four hours. And then, you know, and then if you're talking about buying groceries, you know, canned goods or whatever, and then you got to load it onto the bus and get back in darkness of night. And so that was not easy. But I mean, people would go like on

Saturday and stay overnight. The Peace Corps had a hostel room for the guys, room for the girls, you know? And the guys would go in and, you know, do their talking and the girls would go and do their talking and then the girls would have stories about what the guys said and what they heard. You know, I mean, we were very young.

FAIRBURN: [00:39:06] Well, of course.

REX: [00:39:07] And those of us who stayed over, I mean, I was doing watercolors. You know, I still do them. I've got one hanging over my bed here, and enjoying that. And Peace Corps had provided us with a footlocker of books, which was wonderful, quite a variety of different things, but most of us did a lot of reading. There wasn't such a thing as television. I don't remember in the two years I was there ever calling home. Never used the telephone. In order to get paid, we had to, we received a check from the Peace Corps, but we had to then go to the bank and the bank was in Addis Ababa so we're talking about a major transaction. So that wasn't easy. We were being paid the equivalent amount of an Ethiopian who had an equivalent education. And the irony of that situation, if I understood it correctly, was that there were very few, if any, Ethiopians who had college degrees. So we actually were making more than they were and some of the volunteers were able to save money. I mean, it wasn't a huge amount of money, but it was more than the Ethiopians had, let me put it that way.

FAIRBURN: [00:40:18] I can't remember what it was, the equivalent of? I know it was less than \$200. It was maybe a 180 or 100 and, per month.

REX: [00:40:25] But I mean, knowing that our students could live on, you know, seven dollars a month. I mean, we're talking about a lot of money.

FAIRBURN: [00:40:30] But you didn't pay rent where you were?

REX: [00:40:35] No, we didn't.

FAIRBURN: [00:40:36] Gas or electricity or?

REX: [00:40:37] Peace Corps paid for the rent. I don't remember paying any of that. Um, I think we actually found the house. When we first went to the town, they didn't have housing for us and they put us temporarily in what were American houses that had been built for the school. But they told us, you know, you can't stay here. This is just temporary. You've got to find housing for yourself. So we actually went out and found our own houses, which worked well because it put us right in the middle of, you know, where we wanted to be, you know?

FAIRBURN: [00:41:07] A good location. OK. Did you do any traveling between the two years.

REX: [00:41:14] Oh yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:41:14] Some time off. Where'd you go?

REX: [00:41:15] Traveling was a very important part. The first Christmas holiday break a bunch of us traveled together. Gosh. No, I think the first, the first break actually the Peace Corps took us, brought us to Asmara, and I think we went by bus one way and flew the other way or something like that. But then the summer break, a bunch of us traveled together and again, notice I'm saying, you know, there was six or eight of us who would all travel together. And we went to East Africa. We went through Kenya, what was then Tanganyika, now Tanzania. Zanzibar, which was not a part of Tanganyika. And that particular trip, which was great, and Uganda, we got to Uganda and we went to national parks and Ngorongoro Crater. And a lot of the basics.

REX: [00:42:10] And in the course of our travels, three of those countries were having revolutions just as we were leaving.

FAIRBURN: [00:42:18] One step ahead.

REX: [00:42:20] Zanzibar, they had a revolution. And Tanzania, Uganda, and which was actually a big deal, you know? And you know, we're having a revolution. But of course, you know, we didn't even know it and the people back home didn't know it, so it really didn't make any difference.

And then, uh. OK. And, you know, my memory is pretty foggy, but we did do that and I'm not quite sure. But the summer a bunch of us went to Egypt and Sudan, Egypt and Sudan and. So the Tanzania thing must have been one of the other breaks.

FAIRBURN: [00:42:57] That sounds like they're right next door to you, but of course they're not.

REX: [00:42:59] No, no, no. That took a lot of planning. And uh, but it really got us out there. And, you know, we would have, you know, three or four guys and three or four women. And, you know, we depend a lot on each other and we were like family. We really were, you know, and even as I say, even to this day, for some of us, it's still there.

FAIRBURN: [00:43:22] So went back to your school and continued in similar fashion? Make any changes to you or to what you were teaching?

REX: [00:43:32] The second year, I was basically back to doing what I had done before, and if I remember correctly, I had students who were interested in art, because I was doing watercolors and I had a group that was doing art. I had a drama group that put on some plays. Tried to figure out how to do that. They have a tradition of improvisational drama, which is marvelous. And sometimes it would be in English. They had one, uh, which students did which went on for hours. It was a crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And they managed to improvise that over a period of many hours.

FAIRBURN: [00:44:09] Oh my goodness.

REX: [00:44:09] And we did a production of the second, uh. Yes. Abraham and Isaac, the Brome of Abraham and Isaac, the medieval play, which I thought would be acceptable both to Muslims and to Coptic Christians, and actually we didn't have any religious outcry. So I guess it was, I guess it was OK, probably because nobody understood what the characters were saying.

FAIRBURN: [00:44:35] They preferred to do kind of classical drama rather than?

REX: [00:44:39] Well, they have a long tradition of kind of country drama, improvisational drama. And do it very well, I mean.

FAIRBURN: [00:44:51] Comedy at all?

REX: [00:44:51] A lot of comedy, a lot of ad lib comedy and buffoonery and stuff like that, which we saw some of. But I mean, a lot of that was in their language so of course we weren't able to understand what they were saying. Yeah.

FAIRBURN: [00:45:07] It was just pantomime for you.

REX: [00:45:08] Yes.

FAIRBURN: [00:45:09] And then you did some art classes?

REX: [00:45:11] And we did art classes and our group started a library. And so some of us took responsibility for monitoring and developing the library. I mean, you know, and this is sort of the stereotypical Peace Corps thing, you know, you come in and you.

FAIRBURN: [00:45:25] What can I do? What can I do?

REX: [00:45:26] We had this idea, you know, that the school with 700 or however many students ought to have latrines somewhere because they didn't. You know, you just went out in the field during the break. And we pushed for that. And if I remember correctly, it never went anywhere. They were still going in the field when we left. But I mean, you know, you just kind of go with the flow.

FAIRBURN: [00:45:48] Good. All right. So it was time for you to leave.

REX: [00:45:53] Summer of 1964, right.

FAIRBURN: [00:45:55] Did you consider staying on or was it not even an option?

REX: [00:46:00] I considered it partly because I really didn't know where I was going to go from there. It was still up in the air. The Peace Corps at the time, it seems to me, was not encouraging people to stay on. I mean, they, you know, they made a big deal out of, you know, this is a two-year hitch and this is what we want from you. And you know, when you're done, you're done. And unless you have a particular reason for wanting to stay.

FAIRBURN: [00:46:25] So you really hadn't given much thought to it. Here summertime is creeping up. You're leaving. You hadn't really said, hmm, where am I going?

REX: [00:46:33] No, I liked teaching and thought that I would continue with teaching. I had not trained as a teacher in the U.S. My undergraduate degree was in psychology and I have a lot of work in English and theater and things like that. But I wasn't certified as a teacher. I hadn't trained to be a teacher. But I figured when I got back to the U.S., I would be a teacher. And one of the things that kind of pushed me in that direction was the fact that the Vietnam War was heating up. And I was aware that if I got a teaching job, I could get a deferment and not be drafted. And that's exactly what I did.

FAIRBURN: [00:47:15] Oh, did it work? It worked for you. Didn't work for everybody.

REX: [00:47:17] Yeah, yeah. The superintendent, you know, wrote the draft board and said I was essential to the community.

FAIRBURN: [00:47:23] So where did you go back?

REX: [00:47:25] Well, I ended up, my family lived just outside New York City in Mount Kisco, New York, and I ended up going to an employment office in New York City, which sent me to Akron, New York, which is about 20 miles east of Buffalo, and they hired me on the spot as a promising young returned Peace Corps person who's been, where, in Ethiopia? Where is that?

FAIRBURN: [00:47:47] They didn't require any graduate study and educational?

REX: [00:47:52] No, they didn't. And neither did the State of New York at that time, in 1964. You know, I had to agree that I would pick up courses along the way. And I, you know, I immediately entered night school at the University of Buffalo. And I think 1966, so two years later, I got my master's degree in teaching English. So you know, but some of the credits towards my certification came from my Peace Corps service.

FAIRBURN: [00:48:23] Good.

REX: [00:48:24] You know, they were good about that.

FAIRBURN: [00:48:25] Did they give you credit for your time in Peace Corps too? They were generous sometimes.

REX: [00:48:29] They did. Well, speaking of the school?

FAIRBURN: [00:48:32] The school in terms in terms of your salary?

REX: [00:48:34] Yeah, the starting salary for a teacher at that time was \$5,000 a year and the increments were \$200 a year and I started at \$5,400. A big jump.

FAIRBURN: [00:48:47] Well, yeah, you could buy a car too at that rate.

REX: [00:48:50] You could do a lot with \$5,400. Yeah, I mean, it's hard to believe that. It really is.

FAIRBURN: [00:48:57] OK, so when you came back, you slid right back into American life?

REX: [00:49:04] Pretty much so. I was setting out again on my own, starting out in a completely new community in Akron. You know, I started out with renting a room from somebody in the town and eventually got my own apartment outside of the town. I was going to school at night. People told me if I wanted any sort of social life, I should join the Methodist choir, because that was how you could have a social life in

Akron, New York, which was funny. I was a smoker and of course, Methodists didn't smoke. And when I discovered that half the choir went in the basement to smoke during breaks, I thought that was kind of fun.

FAIRBURN: [00:49:44] Fell right in with them.

REX: [00:49:48] And almost immediately, the first or second year I was back, there was a person here in Buffalo with the international something or other, who was trying to organize a group of returned Peace Corps volunteers. So, you know, we had very early on something called the Peace Corps Service Council. And those of us.

FAIRBURN: [00:50:11] So it's a local thing?

REX: [00:50:13] For Buffalo. And those of us who were listed in the letter were kind of picked, you know, I mean, we, it just sort of happened, you know, called to a meeting and said, you know, now this is what we're going to do. And we were all young and in transition. I mean, very much in transition, starting new jobs, you know, going to school here and there, and really not into organizing at the time. I mean, so you know, we got together a few times. But in 1966, when we had one of these gatherings of returned volunteers, I met the woman who was to be my wife, who had just returned from Liberia, serving in the Peace Corps in Liberia. And we hit it off largely because we shared that African experience and we had a lot in common there. Not so much in common in other ways, but of course, we didn't find out until we were married.

REX: [00:51:10] And, uh, Barbara doesn't like me telling this story. She always hated when I would tell the story, but I have to tell it because she's from Buffalo, Polish Catholic heritage, and her maiden name is spelled P-I-S-K-O-R. And that is pronounced Peace Corps. And she was Miss Piskor in the Peace Corps. And so I married the Peace Corps. And I don't know why, but Barbara never liked me telling that story, so if she hears this tape she's not going to be happy. But we're divorced now, after almost 25 years of marriage. And so that's that part of the story. So I was married. I taught school in Akron Central School for 27 years.

FAIRBURN: [00:52:00] Akron is a kind of a, it's a village really, it's not a town?

REX: [00:52:04] It's the village of Akron. But the village it, the school is one district, which happens to include the Tonawanda Indian Reservation. You know, it's the area around Akron and it's a world unto itself. You know, I think the superintendent in Akron, this little village in what was then 2,400 people, makes more money than the superintendent in Buffalo.

FAIRBURN: [00:52:27] Really.

REX: [00:52:28] I mean, so you begin to get a sense of there's huge political issues going on.

FAIRBURN: [00:52:33] One central school that's K through 12? It's one building?

REX: [00:52:36] Well, when you drive by it's one building. There were then, I don't even know now, but there were then two principals. I mean, there's a high school principal and an elementary school principal. They're connected and they share the swimming pool and the gymnasium and the auditorium are shared. I don't want to go into that, but I had some very good experiences there. I directed plays and did a lot of things that I liked and but I really burned out in my last years, you know?

FAIRBURN: [00:53:07] How many years are you there?

REX: [00:53:08] Twenty seven years. You know, the last few years were very, very hard for me because I just had lost it. I just wasn't going to do that. And I had gotten very much involved in the Unitarian Universalist Church, and had been their religious education director. I mean, all this while I was teaching school, and while, you know, we had two children and were raising two children and going to soccer games and doing all that stuff. So I was very much the suburban dad, you know, driver, whatever. And my involvement at Unitarian Universalism got deeper and deeper and I was doing summer camp work and, you know, programs and a lot of this sort of thing, and eventually what that led to was my

going off to California to go to seminary. And I took a leave of absence from teaching, which was, you know, testing the water kind of thing.

FAIRBURN: [00:54:12] And when was that?

REX: [00:54:13] 1991. I drove to California, left my family. My daughter was still in school. And this all gets very complicated, kind of beyond the context of this, but just to give you some idea of how I got from here to there. And while I was in seminary, and this is an important part of my life, I started to become the authentic person that I hadn't quite become before and started coming out as a gay man. And in all sorts of different ways, my life was changing and ended up fairly soon in a divorce. Not, and people don't believe me when I say this, but not really based on sexuality, but based on a lot of a lot of issues that just weren't working. You know, we'll get that on the record.

REX: [00:55:17] And so there I was, you know, in seminary and since 1991, I've spent, I've moved a lot of times, let me put it that way. In 1993, part of the way through seminary, I made arrangements to do a year of independent study in India. And had an incredible year of traveling and working in India. I wasn't just wandering aimlessly. I mean, the whole time I was there, I was being supervised by Indians and, you know, preaching and volunteered with Mother Teresa and worked in Calcutta.

FAIRBURN: [00:55:59] It's not a proselytizing experience.

REX: [00:56:01] Not at all.

FAIRBURN: [00:56:01] It was just an educational, self-education.

REX: [00:56:04] It was educating. There's something in India called the Brahma Samaj, which is theistic Hinduism, monotheistic Hinduism. And I was welcomed as a Unitarian because there are some historic relationships. It was a powerful learning experience for me, let me put it that way. And it connected me with the Unitarians in northeast India. There are about ten thousand Unitarians, tribal people.

FAIRBURN: [00:56:34] This major change, I mean, well this series of major changes perhaps, any connection with the fact that you went off to Ethiopia as a child, a young man? Just the beginnings of?

REX: [00:56:49] Well, I'm the youngest sibling, you have to understand. We're the ones, we're the ones who step out. So I think, I've always thought that the Ethiopia experience empowered me to do things I couldn't have done otherwise. I don't think I could have had such a good year in India without the Ethiopian experience behind me. And that, of course, continues on into other things that I've done. Just the day to day living conditions. You know, people say, well, we returned volunteers, you know, we can stand anything and, you know, we've done that. We've been there and we've done it. And there's some truth in that. You know, it does empower you to do things that you couldn't otherwise do.

REX: [00:57:44] But I, you know, just a quick run-through. I had a congregation in Fredericksburg, Virginia, for three years and that was an appointed three-year position. And when that finished, I went back to India for a six-month ministry and lived with tribal people. And I described that experience as beyond the Peace Corps because there I was on my own. I was. I had no Americans with me and I didn't have the government, U.S. government behind me at all. And it wasn't a missionary situation, but it was religious, very specifically to train church workers and to train teachers.

FAIRBURN: [00:58:20] And this was where?

REX: [00:58:22] In the state of Meghalaya in northeast India. It was among the Khasi tribal people, ten thousand of whom are Unitarians. But they're Unitarians in their religion of one God, which is very different from one you can find in the USA. And I was living in their villages. I mean, we're talking, you know, bamboo huts and, you know, no running water and no toilets and beyond the Peace Corps. And it was absolutely wonderful for me. Uh, I, let me just go back a few years. In 1995 after years of being sick, my son died at the age of 25. And after he died, I had life insurance money from his dad. And I had already been in touch with these tribal people, and we had used a certain amount of money to build a hostel

for, actually it's like a dormitory for girls going to school in this very isolated area.

REX: [00:59:31] So when I was there in 1998 in my ministry, I actually visited the villages that these girls were from and I had these parents coming up to me and speaking through an interpreter saying, you know, my daughter lives in your son's dormitory, which was very, very moving. It was a very, very powerful experience. So I did that and this is all kind of outside of the Peace Corps, but it's related to the Peace Corps. I mean, the Peace Corps kind of got me there. I came back to the U.S. and had a part time ministry in Jacksonville, and then I ended up having a full-time ministry in Palm Beach. And that one didn't work out so well, and I ended up resigning. And I said, OK, I've had enough of this, you know, and it's really, really hard work and there are stresses here and politics here that I just don't want to deal with and I'm getting old and I think I'll retire. And so I did. And I was financially independent that I could do that. You know, that wasn't an issue.

FAIRBURN: [01:00:27] That was recently?

REX: [01:00:28] That was 19, uh. Not 19. 2000. I got my years mixed up. 2003. So three years ago.

FAIRBURN: [01:00:36] So you've been retired since or had you been dabbling elsewhere?

REX: [01:00:39] Well, I've been retired. Once I retired, I was able to hook up with the returned Peace Corps group in South Florida. And I think I retired in March, and in April I went to a big picnic and there were a whole bunch of people my age or older who had been in the Peace Corps and then who had gone back in.

FAIRBURN: [01:00:57] Uh huh.

REX: [01:00:58] OK, so we're looking for, how did I happen to go back in? That's the how did I happen to go back in story. And that particular story is that I had, you know, resigned a position and retired and there I was,

living in Florida, and I hadn't figured out what where I was going to go from there. And these people are all saying, oh, the Peace Corps is so great and you can do it, you know? And so I did, I applied. And the recruiter was very encouraging, you know, with my experience and the training I'd had and my ministry and my teaching and all that. He said, oh, you know, we need you, you know, you have to do this and this is really important. And the hard part, of course, was getting physical clearance, getting the medical, the medical clearance. You know, getting into the Peace Corps is very different today from what it was 40 years ago. There were pages and pages and pages of stuff to fill in. Um, you know, with questions about every possible aspect of your life. And if you answered yes to any of them on the medical, you had to get a doctor to certify that, you know, you were cured and all that.

FAIRBURN: [01:02:10] I don't know that the medical process is different for, right now, if it is different between age groups? I mean, you're talking about 20 year olds versus 50 plus year olds. I felt that too because they would not even let you make the application until you'd done the medical.

REX: [01:02:28] Right, right. Well, the questions like, you know, have you ever had counseling? Well, of course I've had counseling. I mean, I'm in the ministry, you know, ministry's doing counseling. If you're going to do counseling, you have counseling. And I've actually had a lot of counseling and it's been a very good part of my life. But I had to get a counselor to write me off as being.

FAIRBURN: [01:02:49] He's OK.

REX: [01:02:49] Sure. You know, I have an irregular heart. I had to spend, you know, like three or four thousand dollars of my money, because it wasn't covered by the Peace Corps and it wasn't covered by my insurance, to get an EKG and stress. I had to do a stress test and echocardiogram and everything, and I had to have the doctor certify, you know, that this, you know, regurgitating valve is not going to kill him in the next two years, which is basically true.

FAIRBURN: [01:03:15] That is true. But aren't you glad they did that?

REX: [01:03:16] They did that. Well, hey, I made it through. And so I mean, that took months. But the day the doctor cleared me on my heart, actually, and faxed that information to Washington, was they. [tape break]

FAIRBURN: [01:03:38] John Rex, tape two. You were saying as we got interrupted there that the Peace Corps was swift in accepting your application in 1990?

REX: [01:03:51] In 2003.

FAIRBURN: [01:03:53] OK, so then what happened?

REX: [01:03:58] Well, the day I got my medical clearance, I got a call that said, you're going to Namibia this time around, Namibia. And of course, I had to check the map to find out where Namibia was this time. It used to be South West Africa, didn't become Namibia until 1991, and until Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt went there this year, most Americans had never heard of it. How are we doing?

FAIRBURN: [01:04:23] Say something.

REX: [01:04:25] Are we moving ahead?

FAIRBURN: [01:04:26] Keep going.

REX: [01:04:27] OK. Yeah. Yeah, the little red lights.

FAIRBURN: [01:04:29] Yeah, you're fine. OK.

REX: [01:04:32] But it sounded good to me. I was happy to have the prospect of going back to Africa. But the whole process was so different this time, you know, starting with the application, which we've talked about already. But I was sent a ticket to go from Palm Beach to Philadelphia. We were in Philadelphia, I think, for two days of orientation in this country. There were in our group 45. I think there were supposed to be

46 and somebody didn't show up. 45 trainees, two married couples, two people older than myself. One woman, I think she was 77, and a guy who ended up being my roommate much of the time, who was 73 and who was going in for his second successive Peace Corps. He had been in Ghana and talked a lot about Ghana, which of course one.

FAIRBURN: [01:05:30] Is inclined to do.

REX: [01:05:31] Yeah, we're inclined to do. And a few people, you know, just younger than I was, but mostly in their 20s and 30s. I mean, mostly younger people setting out in their lives as I was 40 years ago. And we, uh, in Philadelphia, we sat around tables and did the process sorts of things, you know, getting to know each other and heard people from Washington tell stories about how wonderful the Peace Corps is. And um, and I do remember hearing a number of times that the Peace Corps is open to all religions and races and sexual orientations. And you know, and I had been out as a gay man in my application, so it wasn't any secret. And I was comforted by the fact that people acknowledged, you know, the Peace Corps as well. But it was interesting to me because nobody else in the group was out. And of course, when you're with a new group of people you don't walk in the room and announce what your sexual orientation is so. So that was sort of a non-issue.

REX: [01:06:39] But I say that because when we got to Namibia, which happened very quickly, I mean, that's two days later. In my memory, the subject was never mentioned in training. Um, there was a lot of training on AIDS. HIV AIDS is a huge issue, and the Peace Corps today is the largest group in the world doing training on such matters. And we had doctors come in and we put condoms on bananas, and boy, we did all that. And but no mention that I remember in any way of gay and lesbian issues, which kind of surprised me. But, you know, I could live with that. But that, combined with the fact that Namibia is, it's kind of traditional African where it's very anti-gay. I mean, the country itself, the culture. It's 23 percent HIV positive, which is. And of course, most of that is spread heterosexually or even possibly some of it is drugs or illegal drugs.

REX: [01:07:48] And of course, the other part which you don't hear about is, of course, no matter where you go, there are gay people, so gay and lesbian people. And uh, so I'll just jump ahead a little bit. But when I did get to my assignment and here I am, the only volunteer out in Karibib, in a fairly isolated situation, and feeling very isolated and not having anyone really to relate to. And in the way of having an intimate conversation, I mean, let me put it that way, or you know, just expressing feelings.

FAIRBURN: [01:08:19] Soulmates.

REX: [01:08:20] No soulmates. Zero. I noticed in the community that there were some very swishy guys, and I asked one of my students, you know, because sex is a pretty open topic in this culture. I mean, you know, there's not an awful lot to do in these towns, but drink and have sex. And he said, oh yeah, he has sex with men, you know, and he was a queen. And so my point is there were gay people in the community, but as a teacher in the school they weren't people I was in a position to relate to and I stayed very much in the closet. And, you know, having been in the closet most of my life and having come out of it.

FAIRBURN: [01:09:03] It's hard to go.

REX: [01:09:04] It was really, really hard just to go back into the closet. And we're really just talking about being authentic in your person, you know? And uh, that was hard for me. And the Peace Corps never addressed that issue there. It simply wasn't, to my knowledge, addressed. Of course, in 1962 homosexuality was considered an illness, and um, so it's more than likely that if anybody were openly gay, that they wouldn't have been accepted into the Peace Corps.

FAIRBURN: [01:09:41] I believe that's true.

REX: [01:09:43] I say that because it was a subject we didn't talk about. And, you know, speaking for myself, at that time I didn't acknowledge that I was gay. You know, I wasn't accepting of who I was. You know, it wasn't

something that I could deal with. But my guess is that many of the volunteers in those early days were gay and lesbian.

FAIRBURN: [01:10:07] I know several.

REX: [01:10:09] And I mean, the odds would give it 10 percent, and I would give it a higher rate than that. One of the volunteers in our group, I hate to pull this book out, was Dick Lopez, who writes under the name of Richard Stevenson, and Dick writes gay detective novels. This is a gay.

FAIRBURN: [01:10:29] Oh, really?

REX: [01:10:29] This is a gay detective novel, which just in the last year have been made into one, and I believe two, movies for television which have had some success. I mean, you know, he's making big on them. And I was asked to review this particular one, Shock to the System, for the Peace Corps writers, which is online.

FAIRBURN: [01:10:46] Oh yeah. Uh huh.

REX: [01:10:47] And I gave, I enjoyed it. I thought it was great. I gave it a good review and he called me, you know, and we had this long conversation about, you know, being gay in the Peace Corps. And he was naming so-and-so, you know, and so-and-so has died of AIDS and so-and-so has a partner. And so-and-so, you know, most of us of my generation ended up getting married. Many of us had children and then ended up, you know, eventually being divorced, which is a horrible thing to do to your partner. I mean, actually, you know, when you think about it.

FAIRBURN: [01:11:21] You're conforming to.

REX: [01:11:22] It's like you're conforming to a society which is asking, the society's asking you to be someone that you're not. And I mean, I went through therapy for years trying to cure myself of this terrible disease. And, you know, and until I learned that it isn't a disease, it's who I am, you know, and that I'm a good person. But I still remember Dick saying

on the telephone. He said, well, some of us were straight. But I'd like that to go on the record because.

FAIRBURN: [01:11:51] All right.

REX: [01:11:52] At some time in the future, some young person is going to hear this or read it or whatever and wonder, well, what the hell was going on in 1962?

FAIRBURN: [01:12:01] Antiquated mores.

REX: [01:12:02] 1962, you know, did they have any gay and lesbian people? Well, sure.

FAIRBURN: [01:12:06] Well, sure they did.

REX: [01:12:06] And they were hidden and closeted and fearful and scared.

FAIRBURN: [01:12:11] Silent minority.

REX: [01:12:12] And some of them, you know, never really made it. Wow.

FAIRBURN: [01:12:18] Yeah, that's true.

REX: [01:12:18] I'm a survivor.

FAIRBURN: [01:12:20] There you are. OK, well, you've sort of like also gone into the next thing, which was to talk about living the three goals of the Peace Corps.

REX: [01:12:33] Mm hmm. Oh yeah.

FAIRBURN: [01:12:35] One, providing technical assistance. You know about that. You certainly did that in ESL in Ethiopia. Do you feel you were able to do anything with that in Namibia?

REX: [01:12:46] I was an English teacher. The situation was so different. I mean, it really was so different. I was in the 22nd group of volunteers coming into the country. I was the third volunteer to come to this particular village. And I had the feeling that I was filling a slot that the other volunteers had filled and that the expectations on me were simply, well, you're going to be here for two years and you're going to do what they did.

FAIRBURN: [01:13:23] Right.

REX: [01:13:23] And what they did, because the circumstances were so abominable. I mean, they really were. I had 160 students each day. Eighty eighth graders and the rest were ninth and tenth graders, about 40 per class. I think six classes a day. Many of whom did not know enough English to understand anything that I said, but the system automatically promoted them year after year and we were required to teach in English. So it was a lose, total lose-lose situation. But you know, we'd have 40 kids in a class, 30 desks, and 10 books. And a lot of noise all around. Holes in the floor, you know, hot sun coming in. So every day that desks are moved around to escape the, you know, the hot sun. And all of that could be bearable. In fact, you almost expect it because it's the Peace Corps and it's like, oh hey, this is the way it goes.

REX: [01:14:24] Except. The behavior of the kids was really disrespectful. And that to me was the one thing that I said, this isn't working. The first volunteer who had been in this particular school, I was told, spent two years yelling. You know, she was a young woman, and she screamed a lot, and she was remembered as a screamer.

FAIRBURN: [01:14:50] Oh dear.

REX: [01:14:51] And the second volunteer, my immediate predecessor, was a lawyer woman in her 30s, and she spent her two years writing up students. And when I walked into the classroom, there was a stack about 10 inches high of papers detailing all the wrongs that these kids were doing. And I remember going to the principal the very first week because I was cleaning out the classroom, reading through these things, I was

just amazed, you know? And I said, I'm not going to do this, you know, I didn't come here to spend two years writing up disciplinary reports. So I was able to establish discipline in my classroom by being very stern and the principal even commended me on what a good classroom I had. Because believe it or not, the Namibian teachers didn't have order in their classroom. But it seemed like a totally losing situation to me.

FAIRBURN: [01:15:46] One of the benefits of being mature. Mature volunteers often can get that kind of respect which the young ones can't. But the older volunteers don't have the patience to hang in that long.

REX: [01:15:57] I just, there's no way, you know, this is not me. This is not the person I am.

FAIRBURN: [01:16:03] A waste of your.

REX: [01:16:03] I mean, I'm a minister. I'm not a policeman. I'm not going to spend two years being a policeman. And that really was the deciding factor. I mean, the isolation, the fact that the Peace Corps I felt was not supporting, and not even close to what it did 40 years ago. You know, 40 years ago. I just use this as an example, and it may sound petty, but it was important, that 40 years ago, the Peace Corps gave us TIME and Newsweek every week. And after we read them, we could use them for toilet paper. Because they were on that tissue paper.

FAIRBURN: [01:16:36] Yeah.

REX: [01:16:36] OK. Now, I think in ten weeks I got three copies of TIME magazine, and not on the tissue paper incidentally.

FAIRBURN: [01:16:43] Oh, really?

REX: [01:16:44] And I called, I finally called the office because I wasn't getting any news. I mean, I was really isolated. And I called and I spoke to the director of the Peace Corps. And uh, you know, and incidentally, making a phone call meant going to the post office and, you know, doing all sorts of complicated stuff just to make the phone call. And she said, well that I

had to understand that Washington sent packets of these magazines and since the Iraqi war had gotten to be such a big deal, their budget had cut back. So they didn't have enough copies for everyone. So they just sent them sort of at random to volunteers. So every now and then you'd get a copy. And in my answer to her was, this is not acceptable. You know, this is not OK. Because, you know, there are certain, there are a few basics you just need to pay attention to.

REX: [01:17:38] The day we were sworn in, after all this training, we haven't really talked about the training. We were given a handbook. I think it was 40 pages long single space of rules and regulations that we haven't even seen before. And things like, you know, you're not allowed to ride a horse, you know. For the first three months, you're not allowed to leave your post. You're not allowed to go, you know, we were not allowed to go to Windhoek. You know, when we did go to Windhoek, you know, we had to let them know we were coming and there were rules about what we could do at the Peace Corps headquarters. You know, who, you're supposed to greet people in a particular way and be dressed. It was weird. And you know, as an old person, I'm thinking, oh my gosh, this is terrible. The younger people adjusted really well.

FAIRBURN: [01:18:25] Yeah.

REX: [01:18:26] The younger people, for the most part, said, oh the hell with it. Yeah. Well, you know, they won't know what we're doing anyway, and just went ahead and did whatever they pleased. And I'll give them a lot of credit because they survived, you know.

FAIRBURN: [01:18:38] By 2004, you had internet communication, right?

REX: [01:18:44] If you had a computer.

FAIRBURN: [01:18:46] But they didn't have it in Windhoek at the Peace Corps headquarters?

REX: [01:18:51] They had it at Peace Corps headquarters.

FAIRBURN: [01:18:53] You couldn't go in and send emails home?

REX: [01:18:54] Oh, I could access the internet in, some of the time, not all of the time, even in the community. They had it in community. But I had to walk a couple of miles to get there and pay them to do it. But I could get on the internet and uh.

FAIRBURN: [01:19:09] So you weren't totally isolated. You could, I mean.

REX: [01:19:14] Well, I mean, that's the other part. We had to be accessible 24/7, you know, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and a lot of people had cell phones. But I mean, we had to have specifically reports of, you know, how we could be reached and.

FAIRBURN: [01:19:29] Did they expect an insurrection or something?

REX: [01:19:31] Yeah. Well, and there have been in other places, I mean, they weren't specifically expecting one in Namibia, but it was like, you never know what's going to happen next. And the justification for that, which I always thought was really funny was, and they actually said this in training repeatedly, that we must know where you are at all times and be in touch with you. Because if we can't get in touch with you, your parents are going to contact the congressman and that's going to hurt the Peace Corps.

FAIRBURN: [01:19:58] You said, relax.

REX: [01:20:00] My parents' deaths were long ago. I know, I know.

FAIRBURN: [01:20:02] But that's the justification.

REX: [01:20:02] That's sort of the mentality of it all. It's like, well, this is weird. I mean, this is so crazy, but it's much more political, in my opinion. And rather than supporting the volunteers, my sense was we were being managed and that's not quite the same thing. A lot of the managing was being done by Namibians, who are good people and I respect them, but

they're not. But they didn't seem to have a clue as to what we were responding, you know, the ways in which we were responding.

FAIRBURN: [01:20:37] What percentage of Namibia is white?

REX: [01:20:41] A very small percentage.

FAIRBURN: [01:20:44] But powerful?

REX: [01:20:46] But still having farms and things, yeah. But although the government is in the process of trying to.

FAIRBURN: [01:20:49] Many Afrikaners?

REX: [01:20:52] There are Afrikaners.

FAIRBURN: [01:20:53] And Germans?

REX: [01:20:54] Germans and Afrikaners. Yeah. But it's not a large percentage in terms of numbers. But yeah, I mean, it has been the power structure in the past.

FAIRBURN: [01:21:04] They're not exactly letting their people keep themselves, are they? OK. All right. So technical assistance was, for you, was more important in Ethiopia than it was in Namibia. How about promoting understanding of Americans by the people you served?

REX: [01:21:22] Ah, I mean, that was much harder for me in Namibia, because, I mean, for the life of me, I can't understand why America is doing what it's doing. And, you know, I so strongly oppose the present administration and their imperialistic ambitions around the world, and they're using the U.S. Army to, you know, force people to be like us. And it just seems to me our government is contrary to what the Peace Corps is engaged in. Can we turn this off for a minute? I'm going to just get a drink of water.

FAIRBURN: [01:21:51] Of course. [tape break] Ah, but in Ethiopia in 1962, did you feel any reason to, or '63, did you feel any reason to try and explain Americans to Ethiopians?

REX: [01:22:08] In some ways it was a lot easier because most of us who were volunteers were there because of President Kennedy, and we had this enormous admiration for him and what he represented in this huge, idealistic movement. But as I said, we did get TIME and Newsweek, and TIME and Newsweek were reporting some pretty terrible events in America. And our students were asking us questions like, why do they kill black people in America? You know, because that's exactly what was happening. And so it was a very different kind of situation, but it was one in which we really had to be as diplomatic as we could and to say, you know, all Americans really aren't like that. And, you know, this really isn't representing the, what we understand the ideals of America.

FAIRBURN: [01:22:56] And you had a lot less trouble knowing that that's what you felt. You didn't have to cover.

REX: [01:23:01] And I mean, hey, I was naive and idealistic myself. I mean, I had no experience with the segregation and, you know, some of the terrible things that were happening in America.

FAIRBURN: [01:23:11] OK. How about the third one, of course, which is to help promote better understanding of other peoples by Americans? I think you've probably done a lot of work on that.

REX: [01:23:21] Yes. I came home with hundreds, even thousands of slides, which is really kind of a joke now because nobody does slides. And I did take a lot of time arranging them and organizing them and putting them into whatever you call them.

FAIRBURN: [01:23:44] Carousels.

REX: [01:23:44] Carousels. And going off and doing shows to, uh, different groups in the community thinking that that would enlighten people. And of course, I learned the hard way that that doesn't always work. I still

remember one of the very first times I was asked by my then landlord in Akron to go to, I think it was a Batavia, to an elderly group of people, and I had pictures of Ethiopia and villages and schools and so on and talked about it. And then my landlord showed me the newspaper article had been written on what I said, and it had quoted me as saying a whole bunch of things that I didn't say and which actually were not true and which I thought were harmful to Ethiopian-American understanding. And I complained. I said, I didn't say that. I said, you know, what? He said, well, the woman who wrote the story is deaf, and she didn't hear you. But she always writes the stories and we just, uh.

FAIRBURN: [01:24:46] Oh!

REX: [01:24:46] And that's a true story, and that gives you some idea of how America gets its information.

FAIRBURN: [01:24:50] Yeah. She wrote it up like it was a social occasion, and she was just writing a little blurb.

REX: [01:24:56] Yeah, she had some stereotypical things to say about Ethiopia, which weren't true. And she said I said them.

FAIRBURN: [01:25:02] Oh dear.

REX: [01:25:03] But I did that. Of course, I did that on my own for a couple of years. And then when I was married and my wife had been in Liberia and we did this together a couple times, and we joined with other volunteers at different times here in Buffalo, in the area, and tried to stay connected. And uh, I think, you know, those are very explicit attempts to foster understanding. But I think the much more subtle day to day, just simply the way you understand the news and the way the world is working. And awareness of the fact that there is such a place as Ethiopia, which doesn't make it into the news unless people are starving to death or killing each other. But it's there and it's very important.

FAIRBURN: [01:25:53] You also raised your children to be appreciative of other people and to understand what was going on in the world and raise their consciousness. And teaching, of course, every day.

REX: [01:26:04] Yeah, and the teaching part, yes. With our children, and of course, as I say, my son had very serious problems and I can't speak to his understanding. But when I was applying to the Peace Corps the second time, at some point I was talking to my daughter on the telephone and she asked me about some part of the application process that I hadn't mentioned. And I said, how did you know that, you know? And she said, Dad, I applied for the Peace Corps when I was applying for medical school. That was my fallback.

FAIRBURN: [01:26:35] Oh, and she never mentioned that.

REX: [01:26:39] And uh, and I had not been around for that particular time. And, you know, I'd been off for one of my ministries or something.

FAIRBURN: [01:26:49] But I also know you've been active in volunteer organizations.

REX: [01:26:53] Uh, yeah, I have.

FAIRBURN: [01:26:55] You said South Florida and Rochester.

REX: [01:26:58] Rochester and, yeah, and now, of course, we're working very hard to get this one organized here.

FAIRBURN: [01:27:07] This is interesting, this group in Buffalo. I understand that people our age would be there, but there are a fair number of younger volunteers too. And that's, I think, is really great.

REX: [01:27:18] Yeah. And I think our affiliation with the National Peace Corps Association will bring in younger people because they automatically become members.

FAIRBURN: [01:27:28] Yes.

REX: [01:27:29] Free.

FAIRBURN: [01:27:29] Isn't that part of the activity tomorrow? They're going to bring in some people who are going off somewhere?

REX: [01:27:34] They're going off, and I'm hoping this will encourage them to consider when they come back.

FAIRBURN: [01:27:38] What country are they going to? Or is it various?

REX: [01:27:42] Various. I mean, they haven't told us ahead of time.

FAIRBURN: [01:27:44] That's wonderful. And that I think that happened because the NPCA, somebody raised that at a NPCA conference, that we want to be able to get a hold of these people. And then someone suggested, tell them when they're just trainees, head them up, put them into, get them in contact with these organizations. And that's one thing that NPCA has done. But otherwise, NPCA is just kind of like out there, and it's really the smaller groups that most of us feel an affiliation with, closest to.

REX: [01:28:12] Right, right.

FAIRBURN: [01:28:13] Yeah, that's kind of, it's important. Unfortunately, as I say, most of them are, most of us are older and we're kind of nostalgic.

REX: [01:28:21] Well, we are, but we have the time too.

FAIRBURN: [01:28:24] We have the time, that is true.

REX: [01:28:26] No, I was talking to my ex-wife yesterday. I told her, you know, I was going to be doing some of this interview today, you know, I said, well maybe she'd like to do that. [phone rings]

FAIRBURN: [01:28:37] OK. And you were saying your wife, was she interested in being interviewed too?

REX: [01:28:44] No, she said, well, that was a long time ago. She said, I don't, you know, I don't have anything to say, you know, I don't remember.

FAIRBURN: [01:28:52] OK.

REX: [01:28:52] So I don't think she is. I mean, I won't speak for her. But no, I don't think she would be interested.

FAIRBURN: [01:28:59] All right. Um.

REX: [01:29:02] You know, what we haven't talked about is the second training.

FAIRBURN: [01:29:05] Yes. Please do.

REX: [01:29:05] How different that was from the first training.

FAIRBURN: [01:29:08] Similarities and differences.

REX: [01:29:10] Yeah, because it was so completely different. I mean, as I said before, we trained in 1962 in Washington, D.C. There we were in the nation's capital, you know. At the end of training, you know, they bussed us all, from all the different groups, to the White House. And President Kennedy came out and spoke to us in the Rose Garden. And when we went to Ethiopia, you know, we were greeted by the American Ambassador to Ethiopia and Haile Selassie. The emperor brought us all to the palace and shook hands with each one of us. And, you know, we had quite a group. One member of our group was Paul Tsongas, who ran for president, and of course Harris Wofford, who was our director, who became a U.S. senator. Just an amazing group of people. And even when we went out to Debre Birhan, the 12 of us were honored by the governor who threw a little feast and greeted. So there was a certain celebrity status to being in the Peace Corps. I didn't. I don't. I suppose I expected it because I'd had it before. You know, based on my experience.

REX: [01:30:10] And today, absolutely none of that, you know. We went to Namibia. We were kind of held captive in this little hotel compound for about two days and told we shouldn't leave because it wasn't safe kind of stuff and then bussed out to a training facility out in a smaller town.

FAIRBURN: [01:30:39] Is that what it was, a little conference center?

REX: [01:30:42] It was a conference center, yeah, and it was quite adequate. But there were 45 of us to begin with in the training and I think there were listed 23 Namibians training us.

FAIRBURN: [01:30:59] Hmm.

REX: [01:31:00] You know, language instructors, trainers, whatever, all different. I mean, it's a whole industry, training. You know, we were the 22nd group they had trained. I mean, you know, not all the same people, but some of them.

FAIRBURN: [01:31:11] Did you have an American trainer also, the technical trainer?

REX: [01:31:17] In Namibia, there were Americans who came in to speak to us like, you know, lower embassy officials and so on. But the trainers were all Namibians.

FAIRBURN: [01:31:27] Oh, wow.

REX: [01:31:27] Yeah, they were all Namibians. So the whole program was run by Namibians, which in some ways make sense and in some ways doesn't.

FAIRBURN: [01:31:36] There was no continuity, but there was continuity within Namibia. But nobody from Peace Corps headquarters?

REX: [01:31:42] Yeah. I mean, the director of the Peace Corps obviously is an American.

FAIRBURN: [01:31:46] But he wasn't there all the time, was he?

REX: [01:31:47] She.

FAIRBURN: [01:31:48] Oh, she.

REX: [01:31:48] She dropped in and spoke to us from time to time, and she was, well, anyways. But the whole thing in training this time around was, yeah.

FAIRBURN: [01:32:05] You're alright, you're good.

REX: [01:32:05] Was home base training, where you are sent out.

FAIRBURN: [01:32:12] Oh, home stay.

REX: [01:32:13] Home stays, where you're set out to live with a Namibian family. And although I had all these years as a.

FAIRBURN: [01:32:20] The whole eight weeks?

REX: [01:32:21] No, no.

FAIRBURN: [01:32:21] Oh.

REX: [01:32:22] No. No. And I think actually the training was 10 weeks this time.

FAIRBURN: [01:32:26] Yeah. But the home stay part of it was?

REX: [01:32:28] The home stay, you know, we were together for a couple of weeks. Then we went out for two weeks and we were back for a week. Then we went out for three weeks and we came back. I mean, we were constantly moving back and forth. When we went out to the homes, of course, our group of 45 was broken down into much smaller groups. Although I was told I was going to be a teacher, and in fact, I think the original letter of acceptance said I was going to train teachers. When I got there, they said, oh no, you're going to be a community worker. So I

was put in with a group of, I think there were 12 of us to be community workers, and we were all sent to train together to what it turned out was probably one of the most difficult, shall we say, places. That particular village where we were training was especially challenging. You know, there wasn't any water during the day, you know, that kind of stuff. And I think the idea of being, well, if you're going to be a community worker, you have to, you know, suffer all the consequences of this. And we were divided into three different language groups, which supposedly had some relation to where we were going to be sent. And I was supposed to learn Khoekhoegowab, which is a clicking language.

FAIRBURN: [01:33:42] Yes.

REX: [01:33:42] And there were, I think, five of us. So we're going to learn Khoekhoegowab. And the woman who was teaching us was just a sweet, elderly Namibian teacher person. I love her dearly and I would do anything for her, but she didn't know how to teach me Khoekhoegowab, and there was no way in the world I was going to learn Khoekhoegowab. I mean, I couldn't hear the sounds, I couldn't make the sounds, and I couldn't remember the words. And it was painful. It was just terribly painful. You know, the rest of it was OK. And of course, they were very reassuring. And it turns out in the end that we were going to be teaching in English and we really didn't have to learn the language anyways. But they hold that over your heads in training. That was an issue. You know, you will be tested and, you know, you must take this seriously and all that. Well, in the same, out of the same 12 people, people were learning Afrikaans and people were learning one of the other tribal languages. I mean, you know, and they actually were doing better, you know, Afrikaans is not as difficult as Khoekhoegowab.

REX: [01:34:36] Well, about two-thirds of the way through training, I actually was sent out to the post where I was going to be posted as a community worker, which was what they called a farm, which really means it was government land where tribal people, and a lot of them were the San people, the Bushmen.

FAIRBURN: [01:34:58] Quote unquote Bushmen.

REX: [01:35:01] The Bushmen had a community of huts and there was no town there. I mean, there was a Catholic church and a school. But I mean. [tape break] No doctor, no store, no bus, no vehicle, no telephone, no electricity, and no water.

FAIRBURN: [01:35:26] Mm hmm. And your job there was?

REX: [01:35:29] To be a community worker, which in the three days I was there, meant from what the people told me, they wanted to make money. It was a relatively impossible job in a relatively impossible place, but I went along with it. I said, well, this is what they need and this is what they say I should do and this is what I will do. And then I got a call from the nurse who had reviewed my medical records. I mean, the reason they had sent me to Namibia in the first place was that supposedly there was good medical care available. And with an irregular heart and all this other stuff and being 63 years old, she said, there's no way we're going to send you to that place because, you know, it just isn't right. So on her decision, I was withdrawn from that training program two-thirds of the way through training, sent to another training center with two. Actually at that time, two other volunteers were in the other training center, and they were learning Afrikaans and they were going to be teachers.

REX: [01:36:33] So I was told I could still be a community worker, but there weren't any places for me to go. Would I like to be a teacher? And I said, well, I've been a teacher most of my life. I can be a teacher. And which meant I would not be in as isolated a position, you know, I would still be by myself, but all of that. And so I finished out my last two or three weeks learning Afrikaans, memorizing as much as I could so that when I took the test. Actually what he did was he had a little tape recorder like this one and he turned it on. He says, just talk. And for 20 minutes, I spouted all the Afrikaans I knew, and he gave me a rating of a novice intermediate or something.

FAIRBURN: [01:37:17] Oh wow.

REX: [01:37:17] Or something like that.

FAIRBURN: [01:37:19] That's good for three weeks.

REX: [01:37:20] And I figured, hey, you know, go with it. But it wasn't an issue because Afrikaans, although the people spoke it and it was used like in the grocery store and on labels and things. It's not the language of choice among the Africans because it's the language of the oppressors. So we spoke English. But during the course of our training, unlike my experience years ago, there's considerable amount of self-selection. You know, people aren't selected out, people choose to leave. And what happened in our training was that the two married couples who were there both self-selected out during the course of training, the second one just before we were supposed to be sworn-in, which made the Namibians very unhappy. But others chose to leave. I know one person had what the doctor told her was a reaction to the malaria medicine.

FAIRBURN: [01:38:27] Oh, yeah, whatever you took.

REX: [01:38:28] And I guess there are isolated incidents where people behaved in strange ways. And she was basically sent home. But as soon as people decided to leave, then it was clear that they didn't want a lot of goodbyes. They wanted. That relates to something we've said before. And so I knew that. I stayed through the first trimester of the school. I gave it my best shot. I was there, actually we were sworn in at the beginning of January and I left in May, so I was there for, you know, January, February, March, April, May. There was a piece of wisdom from one of my fellow volunteers, a woman whom I got to know and unfortunately we weren't anywhere near each other in our postings. But I still remember the conversation she had where she said something to the effect that, John, at our age, we have to be more concerned about the quality of our lives. And that phrase stuck in my head.

FAIRBURN: [01:39:36] Sure. Yeah.

REX: [01:39:36] It really stuck in my head. And, you know, here I am struggling with these 160 kids who were misbehaving in the classroom and thinking, this is not a quality of life. This absolutely is not a quality of life.

And it was a tough decision, a very tough decision, to terminate early because it's been so hard to get in in the first place.

FAIRBURN: [01:39:56] That is true. That is true.

REX: [01:39:57] And I mean, I had really committed myself to doing that. But I said, OK, that's it.

FAIRBURN: [01:40:05] Know yourself.

REX: [01:40:05] And I had earned, I had earned. I think you earn, I don't know, like two days or three days of vacation for every month you put in service or something like that. And I had earned those because I had actually worked all those days. So I went on safari and had a wonderful time seeing the animals of Namibia. And then I went back to the director and said, you know, I've made up my mind. It's time for me to go. And of course, it was instant. You know, we'll have your ticket tomorrow and you'll be out of here.

FAIRBURN: [01:40:31] They debrief you.

REX: [01:40:33] The debriefing was very quick. Yeah, yeah.

FAIRBURN: [01:40:37] Well, what I found the second time was that some of the volunteers not only self-select themselves out, but they also begin self-selecting their jobs.

REX: [01:40:48] Yeah.

FAIRBURN: [01:40:49] You know, in the old days, it was like, this is where you're going, and 90 percent of the people said, thank you, I'll go there.

REX: [01:40:55] Yeah, yeah.

FAIRBURN: [01:40:56] And then but nowadays it's kind of like, well, wait minute, I don't think I want that one. I would rather go over there. Or no, I can't

possibly live here. Could you get me a place over there by the water?
And sometimes that gets worked and they get that done.

REX: [01:41:12] Yeah.

FAIRBURN: [01:41:13] So it's a different situation nowadays.

REX: [01:41:17] But I left with enormous love and respect for the other volunteers and the younger, the younger people who are the future of America. I mean, um, you know, they've got a huge work to carry.

FAIRBURN: [01:41:30] I want more of them to be out there and to get to know more about the world and to have that experience.

REX: [01:41:35] Yeah, absolutely.

FAIRBURN: [01:41:37] It's being whittled away. OK, um. Effect on you of your Peace Corps service. Well, obviously you've already said you think that it, your first situation directed the rest of your life in many ways.

REX: [01:41:58] It did, and in ways that I don't think I can put properly or adequately in words. You know, I've always had Ethiopia as part of my perspective of the world and not just Ethiopia in particular, but the awareness that. I mean, there are people who have so much less than we do and we are so blessed and so lucky to have what we have here. And it's so unequal and unfair. So few people have so much and others, uh, and Americans just don't seem to be aware of that, you know, or don't care. You know, most recently, and I was in El Salvador last year, just a year ago now in fact. I mean, America has done terrible things in other countries and you need to kind of get out there and learn about that.

FAIRBURN: [01:42:58] Absolutely. Do you think the new affiliate you want here for western New York might want to tackle some of those problems? They might.

REX: [01:43:10] Different people have different ideas about what they want to do or we should be doing or they would be willing to do. And I think it's going to. There are some people who are going to, you know, get involved with the International Institute, with the various groups in Buffalo that are doing things. And we have one person who's, you know, compiling a list and making available information. And there are some people who, and I think justifiably say, you know, hey, I've done my part, now I'm.

FAIRBURN: [01:43:36] You personally, have you put something on the list or are you about to?

REX: [01:43:41] I'm still in reasonably good health and ready to go, and I'm sure I'll be doing things. I know I'll go back to India. I, um, I don't have any immediate plans to do it. But the memorial to my son is a place it's not easy to get to. It's beyond electricity and beyond paved roads, but it's a place I'll go to, I'm sure.

FAIRBURN: [01:44:08] I certainly hope you do, and I hope you continue your positive attitude. Any last words?

REX: [01:44:14] Oh my. Be authentic.

FAIRBURN: [01:44:22] Ah, yes.

REX: [01:44:24] Be authentic.

FAIRBURN: [01:44:26] Yes.

REX: [01:44:26] God doesn't make mistakes. Just be yourself. Go out into the world.

FAIRBURN: [01:44:31] First, learn who you are.

REX: [01:44:33] Yes. And now I thinking. My daughter gave birth to twins in March. I now have a grandson and granddaughter, so I think I'm speaking to them, you know?

FAIRBURN: [01:44:50] How wonderful.

REX: [01:44:50] You know, it's unforgivable what has been done in my generation to the world and, you know, it's going to take generations to begin to heal the wrongs. And so I'd just like you to know that there are some people who don't approve.

FAIRBURN: [01:45:11] Absolutely. And you're not alone.

REX: [01:45:14] Right, right.

FAIRBURN: [01:45:16] Well, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.

REX: [01:45:18] It has been a pleasure. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]