

Regina DeAngelo Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Regina DeAngelo served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana from 2000 to 2002 as a computer teacher.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Regina DeAngelo

March 8, 2020
Ringoes, New Jersey

By Candice Wiggum

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

WIGGUM: [00:00:02] Today is March 8th, 2020. This is Candice Wiggum, RPCV from Macedonia, 2009 to 2012, and I'm interviewing Regina DeAngelo, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana from 2000 to 2002 as a teacher, mostly of computers. Welcome.

DEANGELO: [00:00:23] Thank you.

WIGGUM: [00:00:24] And can you tell us why you joined the Peace Corps?

DEANGELO: [00:00:27] I had wanted to join Peace Corps as a kid as far back as I could, as soon as I'd heard about it as a kid, I suppose. And it took me until age 35 to actually do it.

WIGGUM: [00:00:39] That's unusual for people to join at 35. What allowed you to do it at that time?

DEANGELO: [00:00:45] It was, uh, it was a kind of a do or die. I was in a relationship with someone that had just ended. And that was about, I knew I didn't want to have kids and settle down. So I said, well, I'd better do it now. It took about a year for the forms to sit on my desk. Back then, everything was still paper. So but after that year, I got the forms out. I actually signed up.

WIGGUM: [00:01:10] And what did your friends think?

DEANGELO: [00:01:13] I remember one friend asking me, aren't you a little old for that? And he was right. He was. He didn't mean anything in insulting about it. But and I said, sure, but you are most welcome to join, especially when you have some professional experience. So and it just seemed perfect for me. It was perfect timing, at least for my life.

WIGGUM: [00:01:35] Great. And how about your parents?

DEANGELO: [00:01:38] My dad was still. My mother had died ten years before. And my dad made the requisite jokes about Africa, you know, just being kind of small minded about it. But at the same time, he's actually a very open-minded person and probably would have enjoyed doing the same thing himself.

WIGGUM: [00:01:59] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:02:01] But, yeah, he seemed pretty cool with it.

WIGGUM: [00:02:03] Cool.

DEANGELO: [00:02:03] Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:02:04] How did you end up with Ghana as an assignment?

DEANGELO: [00:02:07] They had given me a choice of South Africa, Ghana, or I don't remember where else, but it came down to those two countries and Ghana sounded a little more peaceful and pastoral to me. So I said Ghana.

WIGGUM: [00:02:24] Mm hmm. And when you got accepted and found out you were going to Ghana, how long did it take before you actually started training, got going? How did you handle all your? Because at 35, usually you have more possessions and things like that.

DEANGELO: [00:02:39] Mm hmm, yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:02:40] How did you handle all the prep period?

DEANGELO: [00:02:42] The prep was a little daunting. You know, it was bureaucratic. But the, uh, my life was pretty simple. I lived in a tiny apartment and I didn't have much stuff and it was my sister's building. So I was able to put what I had in the basement, which was great. I didn't have a car at the time, so it was a pretty simple existence, which was great. But the paperwork was almost complicated because if you have any health history, you have to really tell it like a long story. All the details. And if you've ever been to a therapist, you have to prove to them that you're not insane.

WIGGUM: [00:03:26] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:03:26] And I remember, look, I had to go back to a therapist I had seen and asked her to sort of verify my sanity. And she thought it was the silliest thing that she had to actually, you know, that she had to sign off on something like that given the number of people who've been to therapy, you know. And so that was kind of funny. But it was fine. It was, I realized, I had worked for the government years before, and I realized it was just a bureaucratic process that I had to go through.

WIGGUM: [00:04:06] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:04:06] So it was, it ended up being fine. And the funny thing is, is once you're in Peace Corps and you meet some people who would have benefited from therapy but did not get it, that's when it becomes really ironic and kind of. But anyway, that was the only, that was the only difficulty.

WIGGUM: [00:04:21] Where did you go for training?

DEANGELO: [00:04:24] We went to our host. We went to a village in our host country. So we lived with a family in a village in the western part of Ghana. We lived, I remember when I was preparing to go, I thought I should bring some gifts from America to my host family. And I thought, oh, refrigerator magnets might be nice, and wind chimes. And well, I got the wind chimes right. But there were no refrigerators because there was no electricity and at least in this village. And Ghana at the time in 2000 had been just about half electrified. So in the village where I was, there was no electricity so. They were appreciative, of course, but no refrigerator to put that on.

WIGGUM: [00:05:11] How big was your training class?

DEANGELO: [00:05:13] There were 45 people in training. And then we were placed in adjoining villages and I was in one of the really small villages, which was wonderful. And there were two other volunteers in my village, sort of walking distance. So we got to hang out on weekends, which during training is important.

WIGGUM: [00:05:37] And how did they decide how to assign you?

DEANGELO: [00:05:41] They, I had a background teaching teachers how to use computer software and build web pages. And they thought, OK, well you'll do that and you'll also teach math. And I said, you don't want me teaching math. I'm good with GUIs, I'm good with WYSIWYG, but I'm not good with math. So it was very funny that they had me teaching math, which I learned when I got there, and I panicked and I explained to them that that wouldn't work out and they were just like, fine, you'll still teach computer skills. And I was like, OK, we're good here.

WIGGUM: [00:06:17] And did you teach the students directly or did you teach the teachers to teach the students?

DEANGELO: [00:06:23] I taught the students, yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:06:25] So you had your own classes and things like that?

DEANGELO: [00:06:28] Mm hmm.

WIGGUM: [00:06:28] Yeah, yeah. What was training like? What did you do?

DEANGELO: [00:06:32] Training was thorough and rigorous and somewhat difficult, but really great. I mean, we learned everything. We had cultural training from host country nationals. We had language training. Excellent language training.

WIGGUM: [00:06:47] What language?

DEANGELO: [00:06:48] The local language, the country language was Twi, T-W-I. And even though most people spoke English, pretty much everybody who had been past maybe high school spoke English, but we were taught Twi and some other local languages. The town where I was, I was assigned in the capital city, Accra, where there were three languages, but they decided on Twi because that's pretty much the main country language. Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:07:21] And how did you spend your days in training? Like you lived with a family in the village?

DEANGELO: [00:07:28] Yes. Yeah, it was a compound house, which is what most houses are like in Ghana. It was a compound house is a group of small dwellings arranged in a circle with sort of a paved courtyard in the center and the well in the center. And so it's very much a family, very kind of intimate setting. And I had my own room and, um. The funny thing is, is that everyone had a radio and the radio played day and night, all night, and I had trouble sleeping. And so I had to ask them to at least turn it down at nighttime. And instead of turning it down, I don't know if it was a language barrier or what, but they would turn it off the minute I walked into the courtyard, and that was kind of embarrassing. And I wanted to say, guys, you really don't have to turn it off. Just down

at sleep time. But it wasn't, it just was something you did. You left the radio on at night.

WIGGUM: [00:08:32] Yeah. What was your family like?

DEANGELO: [00:08:34] They were. So my host mother was a trader and she ran a little store in the village. And once a week, she would take a four hour bus ride, four or five hour bus ride to Accra. She would get up at like 3:00 a.m., take the bus to Accra to trade for goods and bring them back to the village. And so they called her Auntie Makola. Makola meant store, store or market. And she was this really rather shy, intelligent woman who spoke no English and was constantly asking me questions through my host family sister. And the way she would ask questions, what she would say, *be sa no. Be sa no.* Ask her. Ask her this. Ask her that. Ask her this.

DEANGELO: [00:09:32] So she had this very, very intelligent curiosity. And that would lead to long talks at night over dinner where I was, where it was, it was great. You know, you were constantly being interviewed. And of course, every Peace Corps volunteer understands that you're constantly being studied and interviewed and observed. So but for her, it was more than that. And that made for some good conversations.

WIGGUM: [00:10:01] Was there any especially hard times during training as you were adjusting to?

DEANGELO: [00:10:05] Yes, there were. I mean, I went into Peace Corps. I weighed 108 pounds. And after training, I was 98 pounds.

WIGGUM: [00:10:12] Wow.

DEANGELO: [00:10:12] And that was because I was just feeling a bit sick a lot of the time because the mefloquine didn't agree with me. Mefloquine is a malaria medication that you take weekly and they didn't really adjust the dose for size. So if I had been a little more observant, I probably would have cut my tablet in half. I didn't really need that much, but I went along with it because I wanted to follow the rules and.

WIGGUM: [00:10:41] Do the right thing.

DEANGELO: [00:10:42] And do the right thing and get through training because it was rigorous and it was not easy. But when I did tell the Peace Corps nurse that it was giving me trouble sleeping, I was having trouble sleeping from the drug, she took me off it immediately. So they were very helpful in that way.

WIGGUM: [00:10:58] Good.

DEANGELO: [00:10:58] Wouldn't make you do anything unhealthy. But at the same time I was weak and tired and all of that from not sleeping.

WIGGUM: [00:11:05] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:11:07] But I got through it and yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:11:10] And did you guys like socialize together on the weekends? Did you do anything special?

DEANGELO: [00:11:18] The two, so it's interesting. When you first get there, you're just so overwhelmed by everything that you don't even realize that you have some autonomy and you could go out for a walk at night or something like that. So after a couple of weeks I thought, wait a minute, I could go out for a walk at night if I want. So I went out for a walk and I found my other volunteer friends. And the funny thing was that one of them was very, I mean, they were both 22 at the time or 23, but one of them looked very young. She looked like a baby, and her family treated her that way. So they didn't want her out walking at night. But I assured them me being the advanced age of 35 could serve as some sort of escort chaperone. So she and the other volunteer and I would go for walks around the football field in the moonlight. It was just beautiful, you know, quiet because there was no electricity and you had moonlight that you don't see here.

WIGGUM: [00:12:14] Yeah. Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:12:15] So that was really helpful for us because we were, you know, you're a bit overwhelmed by the cultural change.

WIGGUM: [00:12:22] And then you got assigned to a school?

DEANGELO: [00:12:25] Yes. And then I was assigned to my school. And the interesting thing about the school that I was assigned to was that it was an elite school in this, in the capital city, called Achimota. And this, it's a big school. It was a colonial school that had been established by the British. And then over the years, it had just evolved into an elite high school. And a few years previous Bill Clinton, president at the time, had visited Ghana and met with the president, Jerry Rawlings. And Jerry Rawlings said, you know, I was taught by a Peace Corps volunteer when I was a kid and I want a Peace Corps volunteer at my alma mater, which is Achimota High School. So he said, you will have one. And from that year forward, there was always a Peace Corps volunteer at that fancy high school, which was a really cool experience for me.

WIGGUM: [00:13:15] Yeah, which probably needed it the least in the country but still.

DEANGELO: [00:13:18] You know, they did need it. They really did need.

WIGGUM: [00:13:20] Did they?

DEANGELO: [00:13:21] A volunteer because the teachers there were as unpaid as the teachers out, almost as unpaid as the teachers out in the villages. Their pay, their weekly pay or monthly pay, was as tenuous as those who experienced in the villages.

WIGGUM: [00:13:35] So when you moved to Accra after training, did you have your own apartment? What was your living situation then?

DEANGELO: [00:13:41] So I went from this little room in a quiet little village to a palatial house in a suburb of Accra. It had three big bedrooms. Pipe water in the kitchen.

WIGGUM: [00:13:54] Wow.

DEANGELO: [00:13:54] Doors and screens on the windows and all that. So you can imagine me being in the capital, right outside the capital city, with three extra, two extra bedrooms, that I had other, I had visitors.

WIGGUM: [00:14:08] Constantly, I imagine.

DEANGELO: [00:14:08] Yes, at first, constantly. But that, it was interesting because it was a big city, relatively big city, and there was some crime. And at the time there was a rapist on the loose.

WIGGUM: [00:14:23] Oh.

DEANGELO: [00:14:23] And it was very scary to be alone in this big house in a suburban sort of town, suburb of Accra. But they took good care of me and, you know, always checked on my safety and.

WIGGUM: [00:14:39] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:14:39] But still, it was just a little scary at first. But Peace Corps was extremely vigilant about safety, so they made sure I was okay.

WIGGUM: [00:14:48] Were you the oldest one in your group?

DEANGELO: [00:14:50] I was, yes. At 35. It was a young group, and the second eldest was maybe 29.

WIGGUM: [00:15:00] And what did you do like for cooking, for shopping, for just ordinary life things?

DEANGELO: [00:15:07] My kitchen had a propane stove, so I cooked indoors and had a gas tank. And so that was, uh, that was pretty state of the art.

But there was a, there was a stand down the end of the road where I could get everything I needed.

WIGGUM: [00:15:26] And what did you cook? Did you cook local food? Did you cook?

DEANGELO: [00:15:31] Well, I would. I learned to, well, you learn to cook local food in training, so you develop a taste for that. And so I would just cook maybe. Well, I would actually make food from home because I had so much local food that I wanted something from home. So I would bake a lot.

WIGGUM: [00:15:46] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:15:46] I would bake things. But the funny thing is about the school where I was was that they would bring me dinner from the cafeteria every night.

WIGGUM: [00:15:55] Wow.

DEANGELO: [00:15:56] A big dinner. And so someone would come to my door at night with this tray, with a cover, with a fancy cloth on top of it, and hand it to me. And I would bring it in and put it down and say, OK, I have dinner. And after a while it just felt a little odd. It just felt weird that I was treated so royally, you know, and there are people around you who didn't have enough to eat. So after a while, I started giving most of it, or at least half of it, to the guard who lived next door. Next door, the people, there was a doctor who lived next door to me, and she also had some chicken coops and she had a guard who watched over them. It was a pretty big chicken operation. So he was paid a guard's salary. I imagine that wasn't much. So he would get half of it pretty much every night. So I felt a little better about that.

DEANGELO: [00:16:54] But the food was fine. Very different from home. There wasn't the kind of roughage that you normally eat at home. So if I wanted to find raw vegetables, that was always a bit of a treasure hunt, at least in my neighborhood. But I could always go into the city, take

the *tro tro* into the city or a taxi into the city and go to the big markets and get vegetables there, raw vegetables there.

WIGGUM: [00:17:22] Hmm. That's interesting that you didn't have many raw vegetables around.

DEANGELO: [00:17:26] Right.

WIGGUM: [00:17:26] Did you eat mostly meat and starch?

DEANGELO: [00:17:29] It was mostly beans. I mean, there was the, there was fufu, which is the main starch. And fufu is pounded yams or pounded yams and plantains, which at first I didn't like and by the end of the two years I craved more than anything. So even if I were not fed by the cafeteria, I could walk just a short distance down the street to the local seller and get fufu. Or I could get beans and rice, something called *waakye* or red red, which was beans and fried plantain, and it was delicious. So there was plenty of all that. I gained all the, I gained more than my weight back and I gained it in fat instead of muscle because I wasn't running like I had been when I was at home. But eventually that all went back to normal.

WIGGUM: [00:18:29] Were you ever scared?

DEANGELO: [00:18:31] I was in the city, yes. In the villages? Well, OK, in the village. It was so dark that when I would walk home at night from, say, the other volunteers house or someone's house, it was so dark you really could not see in front of you. You needed a flashlight. And one night I was walking home in the village and I heard this incredible sound next to me. Maaa. And it's just a large goat, Billy goat. But I didn't even see it next to me. That's how dark it was. So I was startled, but not afraid.

WIGGUM: [00:19:03] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:19:04] But in the city, you have all of the city things to be afraid of.

WIGGUM: [00:19:07] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So tell me about your job.

DEANGELO: [00:19:10] So Achimota was a very big school by I don't know what standard, maybe 1000 kids, and there were maybe 30 computers running an old operating system. So I had this abundance of students and not nearly enough computers so that the institutional response to that was to teach computer theory where they took notes and you talked about computers, which was pretty useless half the time, and then the other half is hands on.

WIGGUM: [00:19:51] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:19:51] So I helped devise some sort of class schedule where every student can at least share a computer once a week and get hands on experience. But we really, we actually did have to do computer theory where we talked about hard drives and RAM and ROM and mouse and all of that, and students took notes and memorized it. So that was kind of, I feel bad for the students. I'm sure they realized how useful that was. But my students were, ended up being kind of two to a computer. So they would take turns, you know, and the funniest thing was explaining how to scroll through a window. So the scrollbar on the right, you pull down and the window moves up. At least it did. Now you can change that to your preference.

DEANGELO: [00:20:49] And I said, it's like a window shade. You pull it down and it goes up. You pull down the string on the side and it goes up. Well, there were no window shades of that sort in Ghana. And I remember saying, no, down, not up. I have to, you have to push it down. And that was kind of pretty much the biggest cognitive leap for everybody, including me. But I had every level of student in my class. There were some kids who were building web pages and knew way more than I did, you know. And those kids were in the corner with a special computer that they built the web page on. So the school had its own web page and all that. And we, and I also ran the web server, I mean, the email server, which was also a challenge because I don't think I had ever run an email server before that.

DEANGELO: [00:21:38] And so email was relatively new to the school and to the teachers and everyone wanted to check their mail. And it was so this big privilege, this big kind of unique and precious thing to check your email. So I had to keep watch over the two computers in the teachers' part of the lab where people wanted to check mail and there wasn't a. Another computer teacher, a Ghanaian, who kind of also kept watch over it. He took advantage of the system. But he ended up running some sort of operation where the kids paid him something small to check email. Oh, so he had his own little business going there. But still, it was a bit of a challenge for him to just to manage that because the server would go down when the power went out and he had to reboot everything and.

WIGGUM: [00:22:38] Now, did you have a counterpart that you worked with at all?

DEANGELO: [00:22:41] Yes, I did. And she was a math teacher. So we quickly ended up not working together. And I ended up working with this teacher in the computer lab who had this little, little business. But it ended up being OK, I mean. Uh, I really ended up pretty much running it myself. And then I got another, I hired another teacher, a Ghanaian teacher, to help me and he was pretty savvy so.

WIGGUM: [00:23:09] And you could do that?

DEANGELO: [00:23:12] Mm hmm. I hired a couple of teachers, um, who had some computer background.

WIGGUM: [00:23:19] Nice.

DEANGELO: [00:23:19] Yeah. So that helped a lot.

WIGGUM: [00:23:20] Yeah. Nice. Nice. Did you go on any trips? Did you have any adventures while you were over there?

DEANGELO: [00:23:27] Oh, lots. But when you have a demanding job, you kind of don't want to. When you have something that, OK, so the whole culture, a lot of the Peace Corps culture is exploration and traveling

with your friends and doing these outreach programs around the country. But at first I was so overwhelmed that I felt that I had to really, really buckle down at my school and, you know, understand everything that was on me. But eventually I did get to travel some, but I traveled really on vacation and then we went to the surrounding countries just for pure travel, not to do any programs. But the fun thing about it was that there were all of these outreach programs like Guinea worm education, HIV education, outreach programs that were, you know, these sort of allowed junkets that you could do.

DEANGELO: [00:24:28] And a lot of Peace Corps volunteers took advantage of that and said, hey, we're going on a bike trip around the country to educate kids about HIV. Well, it was as fun for us as it was, you know, as it was hopefully useful for the communities. But I didn't do a lot of that because it was a little too party for me. And the other volunteers were different. They were on average, 13 years younger than me. So that's when I really felt the age difference.

WIGGUM: [00:24:54] Yeah, yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:24:55] So I didn't do much of that, but I did get to travel.

WIGGUM: [00:24:57] So they could bike around the country?

DEANGELO: [00:25:00] One of the programs was biking around the country. I think that was, not the whole country, but a section of the country, doing Guinea worm education. You know, how to keep your local water supplies clean so that you don't contract diseases.

WIGGUM: [00:25:19] And would you do those in English or would you do those in Twi?

DEANGELO: [00:25:22] I think they would do them in English because it was in a school. And our schools, in our schools, we spoke English. Yeah, even in primary school, you were, you were started on English in primary school. So it was pretty easy for us.

WIGGUM: [00:25:38] And you taught high school level?

DEANGELO: [00:25:40] Mm hmm. Yeah. Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:25:41] So did you use your Twi a lot when you got out of the?

DEANGELO: [00:25:45] Yeah. I use it in the market. I use it when I traveled. And then I continued Twi lessons after training just to stay with it, you know. So it was nice to be able to hire a retired woman from the town.

WIGGUM: [00:26:02] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:26:03] I had moved. The second year I had moved to a smaller town and that was because of crime in the city. And that's where I hired a local woman to tutor me.

WIGGUM: [00:26:12] And did you still teach at the same school or did you?

DEANGELO: [00:26:14] No. So then my second year, I was moved out completely because of the crime wave in Accra, and they sent me out to the western part. They gave me a choice of two schools and I ended up in Berekum, which is in the western part of Ghana, near Kumasi, the capital city. Kumasi, I think, is the colonial capital city and Accra is the capital city or something like that. But so I got to experience the big city and a small town.

WIGGUM: [00:26:44] And what were the differences for you?

DEANGELO: [00:26:49] Well, the small town was much easier to navigate. But you don't have all the advantages of the big city. Like people are not as educated, so you can't have the same level of conversation. You know, less people have traveled, so your friendships are going to be colored by that. But at the same time, I taught at a, I was again at a school. This time it was a nurses training college. So the people around me, I felt that I could make friends with and have stimulating conversation with.

WIGGUM: [00:27:30] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:27:30] So even though it was a smaller town and your interactions were much more basic, at least at my school, I had people that I could talk to.

WIGGUM: [00:27:40] Yeah. And did you still teach computers there?

DEANGELO: [00:27:43] Yes. Yeah. So my lab was much, my computer lab was much smaller. Everything was much easier to handle. My classes were 8 to 10 students.

WIGGUM: [00:27:53] Nice.

DEANGELO: [00:27:53] Yes. Everything there was easier. Much, much easier. And the students were older. So they were in college and a lot of them were even older than college age. They had decided to become nurses. So I was very glad to get, to have that experience.

WIGGUM: [00:28:12] What was your living situation there?

DEANGELO: [00:28:14] Also a big house.

WIGGUM: [00:28:15] Really?

DEANGELO: [00:28:16] Yes, also a big house with three bedrooms. So I guess when a lot of these campuses were built, for instance, the campus, my campus in Berekum, where I had moved to my second year, it was a nurses training college that had gotten a good bit of money from the Catholic Church and from NGOs. So when the money comes in, you build.

WIGGUM: [00:28:38] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:28:39] And so they built some nice big block houses, they called them, made out of cinderblock. And I was in one of those nice big houses and I got visitors there too.

WIGGUM: [00:28:51] Nice.

DEANGELO: [00:28:51] So my friends from the farther villages would come and stay with me in Berekum, which was a pretty, you know, sort of big, big town compared to where they lived out in the bush. So the funny thing was, in the beginning, we all wanted to be out in the bush. Every, when I was stationed in the big city, people felt sorry for me and I felt sorry for myself because we all had these dreams of, you know, living that stereotypical Peace Corps experience of living in the bush.

WIGGUM: [00:29:21] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:29:22] So yeah, but I at least got to experience some of that in training.

WIGGUM: [00:29:26] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:29:27] The idyllic countryside thing.

WIGGUM: [00:29:31] What was, what would you say was your biggest challenge in Peace Corps?

DEANGELO: [00:29:40] One of the biggest challenges was the constant attention that you get as a white person in Africa and feeling isolated because of that. So a lot of Peace Corps volunteers talk about being in a fishbowl and being observed. But when you are a white person in a country where everyone else is not, you will be very much observed and very much noticed and, um. Just a celebrity and harassed in a friendly harassment, not real harassment. So whatever the word is for that, you were constantly called out to. And when you're walking down the street and everyone wanted your attention and everyone wanted to talk to you about coming to America and all of that, and so that would be tiresome.

DEANGELO: [00:30:37] You just wanted, if you just wanted to go to the market and buy some vegetables and you're constantly being stopped and talked

to and constantly ask questions and not. And a lot of the time it wasn't just out of curiosity about you and your country. A lot of times it was because these are people living in a small town and they're bored.

WIGGUM: [00:30:59] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:30:59] And they see you and it's like, oh, you're my fun for today. And there were. It was. In Ghana and I think in other parts of Africa there is a culture of chiding. There is a sort of a type of humor where everyone, people chide each other and it's jocular and it's meant with no malice. And here we don't do that as much. We do chide each other, which is always a, I think, a good exercise. But there it's an art form. So people chide each other a lot. And if you are a white American, you will be chided mercilessly as you are walking down the street and you will have songs sung about you and you will be made fun of. And there's one of the songs goes of *o bruni coco mache*, and even the little kids would sing it. So it's like a taunt. But there was really actually no malice in it.

DEANGELO: [00:31:59] But as you can imagine, it got tiresome. So you would get tired of it. You would get tired of being called *ocosia*. And *ocosia* is just like the basic name you give a white person, a white girl, because *ocosia* means Sunday born and Sunday born is a compliment, but at the same time constantly being called *ocosia*, *ocosia*, you know, where are you going? *Okoye*. And so that was a challenge.

WIGGUM: [00:32:30] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:32:30] It was a challenge to stay cheerful when that happened. But then you learn to joke about it. And there was one time when I passed a group of men, this was back in the city in Accra. I passed a group of men just sitting around and they said something about the *obroni* girl who walked by them. And it was just one of those days where I was really tired of it. So I actually grabbed my butt and shook it. And they fell out laughing like it was the funniest thing they had ever seen. It was just the one time where this slight, this somewhat raunchy action got

such a laugh. So it just proved that they were playing. And I was meant to play back, you know?

WIGGUM: [00:33:20] Yeah, yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:33:21] I don't know how well that would have gone over. Well, it depends on the person, obviously, but that is one of the things that, you know, is considered culturally inappropriate. There's so much cultural inappropriateness that you can fall into and you're constantly aware of it and constantly trying to do the right thing and be culturally sensitive. But that day I was all done with that, but it ended up working out.

WIGGUM: [00:33:46] Did you ever just blow it culturally?

DEANGELO: [00:33:49] Well, like one time a woman was calling to me and saying, *ocosia*, yeah, why are you not greeting me? And she was really mad that I was not greeting her. And I just, I was on my bicycle. I was always on my bike. And I just kept riding by because I was tired and I just didn't want to greet everybody. And that's the culture. You greet. It's rude not to greet, especially at an older person. You least, at least.

WIGGUM: [00:34:17] So whether you know them or not you greet them?

DEANGELO: [00:34:19] Yes, absolutely. And in training, you know, in our village, in training, the trainers, our host country national trainers, had told the people in the village help our volunteers practice their chi. You know, greet them on the road, make sure they greet you too. They took that to a very serious degree, and that was really hard at first. But it was beautiful to be able to fit in. Once you finished training, you got your autonomy back and you were, you could go about your day the way you wanted.

WIGGUM: [00:34:57] Did you have any secondary projects that that you did?

DEANGELO: [00:35:01] Yes, um, my, another volunteer and I started a girls club where we just talked, you know, met once a week and just chatted, which was really fun.

WIGGUM: [00:35:14] And how old were the girls?

DEANGELO: [00:35:17] They were high school, early high school age.

WIGGUM: [00:35:23] This was in Accra?

DEANGELO: [00:35:25] This was in Berekum, the smaller town. And another thing was I started a scholarship program for girls. With Americans. So after a while, maybe after a year, I had a couple of visitors. And one thing that they were very struck by was the whole, was the, um, the social status of women and girls, which remains low today. And they, and I would. And it was also something that I was very interested in. It was difficult to see how girls were treated as second class. So it was important to me that my girls got computer education and were given all the, or at least told that they could do anything the boys could.

DEANGELO: [00:36:25] But after a while, I thought, let me formalize this into a program. So I wrote a letter home to people who had visited me previously and to everybody I knew, mostly women, and told them two stories about two girls that I had taught. And they were pretty moving stories. And I said, you want to help some girls in Ghana? Send some money and we'll pay their school fees to get them through high school, which is a feat in a lot of small villages.

WIGGUM: [00:36:57] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:36:58] So that ended up working out pretty well. It was toward the end of my second year, so I didn't get to see the fruits of all of it, but I handed it down to another volunteer who stayed a little longer than me.

WIGGUM: [00:37:11] Cool.

DEANGELO: [00:37:11] So that worked out beautifully. That was, that was something I was really happy to do.

WIGGUM: [00:37:18] Did you go home at all?

DEANGELO: [00:37:20] I did. My first year, at the end of my first year, for vacation I went home to the States. And it was a bit of a mind bend and I don't recommend it. It was just too strange, the cultural shift. So if I could do that again, I would say just travel around Ghana. And I did get to travel around West Africa in my second year vacation, which was a wonderful experience to see the other countries and how different they were. But going home to the United States after a year was not a good idea. Plus, it was so expensive to fly and I just blew so much money and it was such a weird experience that I thought, oh, I would not recommend this to other volunteers.

WIGGUM: [00:38:12] Did you have any health scares or any need for doctoring while you were in Ghana?

DEANGELO: [00:38:22] It's funny, a lot of people got sick. Gastrointestinal distress. I had none, which was amazing. Once I got Giardia, which was relatively common, and got over it. Once I had malaria and I got over it. I mean, a lot of people get malaria. So it wasn't a big deal there. I mean, it was a big deal because we'd not been exposed to it before. So it was taken very seriously and I was sent to a hospital to recuperate. But I mean, it came and went like any, like any infection.

WIGGUM: [00:38:58] And you never had a second episode?

DEANGELO: [00:39:00] No. Just one time. I mean, I got, well, I got sick when I was traveling, but I did not know what it was and I ended up just sleeping it off. But I was lucky. I really didn't get sick much at all. And part of it was my diet had changed so much upon arriving in Ghana. I ate foods that I really didn't eat much of at home. And the funny thing was at home I would, I had some kind of gastrointestinal problems and I didn't know what it was. When I got to Ghana, they went away.

WIGGUM: [00:39:30] Hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:39:30] And had learned only much later that it was a lactose intolerance.

WIGGUM: [00:39:34] Oh, wow.

DEANGELO: [00:39:35] Because I didn't have any cheese or dairy in the first year of Ghana.

WIGGUM: [00:39:39] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:39:40] And I didn't even know it. So it was very good that way, to take me completely out of my world. But as far as that goes, no, I really didn't have any illness. But it was, it was the psychological distress of the mefloquine and the insomnia that it produced. That was a little difficult in training, but they were great about it. They gave me Ambien to help me sleep, and they took me off the mefloquine when I said that it was serious. So it was fine.

WIGGUM: [00:40:11] Good. Good, good, good. How about friendships while you were over there?

DEANGELO: [00:40:18] So culturally, you know, when someone is that culturally alien to you, there's a lot to get over to become friends. And I am I guess what you call a social introvert. I really like my time alone. So I spent a lot of time alone to write and did not go out much. And when I did go out, I was kind of really just wanted to see other Americans. Just wanted to hang out with other Americans. But later, oh, I developed a crush on the headmistress' son. So that was, that was good. Although he didn't feel the same about me. So that didn't go anywhere. But I thought, well, here's a good way to really connect culturally.

WIGGUM: [00:41:08] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:41:09] But I never had, I did not have a Ghanaian boyfriend at all while I was there. But I think that would have been a really nice way to

bridge the cultural gap. But as far as close friendships, the closest friendships I developed were with my students, and there was one in particular who was my buddy, and I helped her through a hard time and we were close. Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:41:34] Do you want to share any of the stories about what you discovered about the girls there?

DEANGELO: [00:41:41] So the one student who I became close with, her name is Sakina. She was just a sweetheart and wanted to become a fashion designer. But her mother worked at the school, so therefore she was going to become a nurse because she got free education going to the school. So it was, it was nice to be friends with her. She reminded me what it was like at that age, you know, and it was nice to be a mentor. But what was the main? What was your question again?

WIGGUM: [00:42:14] Just you had talked about stories that it inspired you to set up the scholarship or your friendship with some of your students. I just didn't know if you had any stories you wanted to share about any of that.

DEANGELO: [00:42:25] Yeah, well, Sakina was one of those, one of those girls. Her mother was poor, you know, she was a single mom, and she had three kids and she worked at the school and she spent her free time selling toiletries to the other teachers. So she would bring a basket of things, soaps and things, and sell them just for extra money. But her kids would not have been able to go to school if she had not been working there. I had decided that I would help Sakina with her schooling once I left Ghana. And so I told her that. And the next day I met with her mom, sat down with her mom, who I was also friends with. And she took my hands and she cried. She said nobody ever cared. So it was like just right there, you know? That was worth it right there.

WIGGUM: [00:43:20] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:43:23] And then just being able to tell other people that story in that letter, I think they got it. I told it well enough that I think I got other

people to cry too. And that helped, I'm sure. And just meeting, I didn't meet other girls who were, who, I didn't personally talk to other girls who had gone through that. But I knew enough about the whole situation.

WIGGUM: [00:43:53] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:43:53] That it was just. It was, it was the norm.

WIGGUM: [00:43:57] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:43:59] So yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:44:01] And did you keep in touch with her?

DEANGELO: [00:44:02] I did, yeah, for a couple of years. But then we lost touch after a while. Well, I do have her phone number, and I've been meaning to call her, but it just hasn't happened in over the last 18 years.

WIGGUM: [00:44:14] Well, you said it was hard to come back for a vacation. What was it like when you were ending your service and coming back to the States?

DEANGELO: [00:44:22] That was the hardest part of all, coming home and reentry. The reentry was harder than anything because it was. It was American culture. It wasn't just a drastically different culture, you know? The excess and the level of wealth and the waste and the rampant, the sort of destructive capitalism that you see here was over was difficult to face. I remember going for a walk. I was staying with my brother when I'd come home and I went for a walk in his neighborhood and it was trash day and there were these bicycles put out in the trash. And I thought, wow, what people wouldn't do for these bicycles back in Ghana, you know?

DEANGELO: [00:45:24] So it was difficult. Reentry was difficult. Here I am, a 37 year old woman. All my friends are either married or, you know, far along in

their professions with real estate and spouses and all that. So that was kind of weird.

WIGGUM: [00:45:41] I was wondering what it was like for you to come back kind of mid-career?

DEANGELO: [00:45:45] Right.

WIGGUM: [00:45:46] Starting over again. Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:45:48] Yeah, yeah. But I luckily landed a job where, in a, at the Center for Language Study at Yale, where everyone was also had lived in other places and spoke other languages. And so I fit in there. That was pretty, that was pretty great. But getting used to America was really tough. I remember being afraid of elevators. And driving in a car over 50 miles an hour was just freaky. So I can only imagine what it's like for a Ghanaian to come here and see it.

WIGGUM: [00:46:29] Now can you imagine?

DEANGELO: [00:46:31] How overwhelming it must be. But the teacher I worked with Berekum had gotten to go to the States while we were working together. He had gotten some sort of fellowship to go to the States, and I sat him down to give him some advice before he went to the States. And I said, you know what race relations are like in the United States, right? Things are not all peachy. I mean, you'll be in academia, so things will be much, much easier for you. But I would suggest if you're in a city to wear your traditional Ghanaian clothing. So that everyone recognizes you as an African and not an African American.

WIGGUM: [00:47:14] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:47:15] And I don't know if he understood it, and maybe he did when he came back, you know?

WIGGUM: [00:47:20] Mm hmm. Have you ever been back?

DEANGELO: [00:47:24] No, not yet. But I will. I'd like to see all of it, the whole country and the western, and the other West African countries that I got to visit.

WIGGUM: [00:47:39] What? What's the meaning of all this in your life? What did you take out of being in Peace Corps? What has been important to you as you reflect back on that, on that time?

DEANGELO: [00:47:56] The most important thing was the, uh, culture, the expansion of my awareness of people and history and geography and everything. It changes your brain in ways that you don't even expect. It doesn't just change your brain to understand another culture. It changes you in a way that you understand so much more about the world, about every aspect of the world. The history, history, economics, relationships, politics. And it was a gigantic educational benefit to me and I wish everyone could get that opportunity because the world would be so different if everybody did.

WIGGUM: [00:48:51] How have you shared your experience or with this change that's happened, how has it affected as you've gone forward in life? You said you got a job, for example, with a language center that had other people who kind of understood that viewpoint.

DEANGELO: [00:49:16] Mm hmm. Ah. Well, what I try to do is when I give presentations about Ghana is to present it. It's easy to, for a lot of people who travel to other countries to present those other countries as if you're looking at them in a National Geographic issue. And instead, I try to show it from the point of view as these were my friends. These are my colleagues. They're not Africans. They're just my colleagues, you know? This is John. This is Victoria.

WIGGUM: [00:49:58] They're not the other.

DEANGELO: [00:49:59] They're not the other. And even Peace Corps, returned Peace Corps volunteers tend to romanticize or talk about their former colleagues in that sort of objectified way. I don't think they mean it, but it ends up coming out like that.

WIGGUM: [00:50:18] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:50:21] And I try to encourage people to go and visit. And I really like to talk to kids about it, to try to encourage them to do it.

WIGGUM: [00:50:28] So you've continued to do presentations?

DEANGELO: [00:50:31] Yeah, yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:50:32] Super.

DEANGELO: [00:50:34] And I stay, I stay involved in the culture because I love West African music. So, you know, as much as I can go to cultural events and all that stuff.

WIGGUM: [00:50:50] Mm hmm.

DEANGELO: [00:50:50] But my goal, and it aligns with that third goal of Peace Corps, is to bring, is to bring the world to back home, you know, bring your country back home. And so the more, as many presentations as I can give, I will, especially to kids to encourage them.

WIGGUM: [00:51:07] Cool.

DEANGELO: [00:51:07] Do it.

WIGGUM: [00:51:11] What place do you think Peace Corps has in the world now?

DEANGELO: [00:51:17] Well, anyone who's been in Peace Corps will say that we desperately need more Peace Corps volunteers going out and spreading goodwill about the United States, especially after 9/11. I mean, it's not even just 9/11. We are known, Americans don't realize how feared and hated we are in so many countries for our behavior over the years. At the same time, loved and admired. So if we don't send as many people out there as possible on goodwill missions, it's only going to get worse for us. And it's not going in a good direction. So

we need, we need these cultural ambassadors. Going to as many countries as possible.

WIGGUM: [00:52:06] Is there anything else you want to share about your experience before or after, in Peace Corps? Anything that we haven't talked about that you want to share?

DEANGELO: [00:52:19] There are endless stories that Peace Corps volunteers start telling once they're in, once they're going. But I think the biggest thing I would share is to encourage people to, if they themselves are not thinking of it, to encourage other people to do it. Because they, people look at it like this two years, it's so long. What a long time to be away. Two years is a blip. Two years is not even long enough to understand the culture you're living in. So. It's enough to understand it in a cursory way and get by, but not to really live it. So if there's a way to encourage more people to join Peace Corps. That's kind of the biggest thing I would, I would want to do. Or the biggest thing I take out of it.

WIGGUM: [00:53:14] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:53:14] But as far as anecdotes, I have a hundred. And they'll, they, they're always ready to come up in the right context but.

WIGGUM: [00:53:22] What's your favorite?

DEANGELO: [00:53:25] I like the story of grabbing my butt in front of those guys. Uh. I got to interview what even the Ghanaians called a witch doctor.

WIGGUM: [00:53:42] Oh.

DEANGELO: [00:53:42] So early in training you have a project that you are assigned and mine was local religions. And I wanted to understand the old-fashioned local religion or the indigenous whatever. And the thing is, is that Ghana has become so, such a target of missionaries. It has become so Christianized that almost everyone I encountered was a Christian of some sort. And that's not a bad thing. But what I wanted to study was the pre-Christian religions there.

DEANGELO: [00:54:18] So I got to interview this local fetish priest, is what he is called. And you would think the fetish priest would be an old guy, you know, living in a cave or something. It was a very young, handsome guy. He had to be 24. And I think it was handed, that position had been handed down. And he was now it. And so meeting with the fetish priests involved a bit of politicking and a bit of gift giving. It wasn't that easily given up because here you have cultural secret, you have something precious, and you're not just going to let it go that easily. If it's something of that much value to you and you could get something for it, like a bottle of gin, I don't see anything wrong with exacting that from the volunteer, and they did, happily, so. And I think I gave a little bit of money just sort of as a tip for his time.

DEANGELO: [00:55:17] But the funny part was at the end, he had a, he had some interlocutor come to me and ask me for more money. And that ended up being a bit of a quandary. And I remember my host country trainers saying, oh no, you don't give him more money. He's trying to rip you off. But anyway.

WIGGUM: [00:55:38] It will never stop.

DEANGELO: [00:55:39] Right. Yeah. So that was helpful for them. But the interview itself was so cool. I mean, he, I asked him about a local goddess whose name is Mami Wata, and I asked him, what does she do and what is her? How to? I didn't even have to ask him that many questions. What he did was he spoke to Mami Wata for me, you know, and he translated her messages through him to me, through this knocking that he did on an empty dried calabash shell. And so she spoke to him, and he interpreted it by knocking on the shell. And he knocked on the shell with the, with his toe. He had a little instrument attached to his toe. And that's how he knocked on the shell and he knocked out a message or something. I don't remember if there was anything in particular, but I just wanted to know about Mami Wata and all that.

DEANGELO: [00:56:40] Mami Wata is a water goddess, as you can imagine, who's sort of a mermaid looking thing. And she is across other countries in West Africa as well with different names. But when I asked, what does she look like, he pointed to a talcum powder container of a very, that had an image of a very beautiful woman on it. A white woman.

WIGGUM: [00:57:09] Oh, interesting.

DEANGELO: [00:57:09] With brown hair. The talcum powder tin. It was an old tin that had come from Lebanese traders. There are good many Lebanese traders who end up staying in Ghana. And so one of the many forms of or aspects of what you would call a beautiful woman would be a woman who's sort of dark haired and light skinned and their Mami Wata was that image on the talcum powder box. In fact, I think she kind of represented, she was, she was the fetish of Mami Wata for him. But he wore a white outfit and kind of had a white hat. But, you know, he wasn't very much respected anymore because local religions were going out of, going away with history, and they, Ghanaians themselves considered it immature.

WIGGUM: [00:58:06] Hmm. Interesting. I wonder if there's been any comeback since then.

DEANGELO: [00:58:11] I know.

WIGGUM: [00:58:12] As things come and go.

DEANGELO: [00:58:14] Right. That would be interesting to see. But even Chris, even the Christian missionary Christians, they don't seem to have absorbed much of the, uh, the traditional religions into their practices. It seems very by the book. Except drumming, you will have drumming at ceremonies, which is nice and you hear a lot of drumming. The nicest part about the drumming was when you live in the town where I lived. So that was in that town had electricity. Most towns did at the time after a while, after my two years there. So by 2002 most towns had some electricity and but it would go out often. The grid was still tenuous. And

when the power would go out, after maybe 15 minutes, you would hear drumming. And I never knew what that meant.

WIGGUM: [00:59:13] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:59:13] I'd love to know.

WIGGUM: [00:59:14] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:59:15] But the drumming would always come from the village, the adjoining village, far away, where people would use drums more.

WIGGUM: [00:59:23] Interesting.

DEANGELO: [00:59:23] Yeah. And drumming was actually part of the school schedule. When it was time to change classes, one of the boys would, you know, play something to indicate it was time to change classes. And I was sad to see that change into some electronic bell.

WIGGUM: [00:59:42] Bell, yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:59:43] Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:59:46] What did you bring home with you?

DEANGELO: [00:59:50] As far as my attitude or things?

WIGGUM: [00:59:53] Well, as far as anything, things.

DEANGELO: [00:59:55] Well, the attitude I already talked about.

WIGGUM: [00:59:59] Yeah.

DEANGELO: [00:59:59] The change in perspective. This huge shift in perspective I already talked about, but I brought a few. I didn't bring much as far as souvenirs, but I brought some art home. I brought a painting of Mami Wata home. And I knew an artist who, I had asked, I had

commissioned him to paint Mami Wata for me. And when he looked for an image to use for Mami Wata, he used the Old Testament. He used, uh, I forget what slave girl in the Old Testament, but she ended up having these big earrings, big slave girl earrings and long brown hair and light skin just like the Mami Wata of the fetish priest.

WIGGUM: [01:00:46] Wow.

DEANGELO: [01:00:46] So I still have that painting. The type of art that was really common was sign art there in Ghana. In fact, they've been art books published about the sign art in Ghana. And the style of the painting that he did was in that sign art. It's sort of almost very bright colors with a type of script in English. And if I had had more money, I would have bought a lot more sign art. You will go to exhibits of sign art in the United States about Ghanaian sign art and they're, friends of mine had bought me when they had traveled north. They came home with a snake for me and this snake was coiled and ready to attack. It's sort of like a guardian snake, and I still have that.

DEANGELO: [01:01:41] But, you know, I didn't bring. I brought some mud cloth home from Mali when we traveled in Mali, which is a very beautiful kind of painted cloth. And a mask for my sister. But as far as, you know, bringing. You know, that was, those were the material things that I brought home. But the love of the music was the biggest thing I brought with me. Yeah. I brought a drum, a djembe drum, home but.

WIGGUM: [01:02:18] I was wondering if you brought a drum home.

DEANGELO: [01:02:19] Yeah, I had to get a djembe drum. The nice thing about the drums is that the local artist, the local drum maker, would sculpt whatever you wanted in the image on the side of the wood drum. And you got to see it.

WIGGUM: [01:02:32] It was art too.

DEANGELO: [01:02:33] It is, yeah. I gave it to my brother. He still has it. But the music is, I mean, the artists, the musical artists, are what I, stay with,

that stayed most with me. So if there's any Ghanaian or West African music playing, I have to go and hear it because it's one. It's the best music in the world, I think.

WIGGUM: [01:02:52] Great. Well, thanks. Very interesting.

DEANGELO: [01:02:56] All right, thank you.

WIGGUM: [01:02:57] Anything else you want to add?

DEANGELO: [01:02:59] I don't think so right now. I'm sure there's things I'll think of later, but.

[END OF INTERVIEW]