

Margaret Nott Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

Margaret (Mardi) Nott served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin from June 1991 to September 1994 as a math teacher.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Margaret Nott

June 19, 2019
Austin, Texas

By Julius Sztuk

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

SZTUK: [00:00:01] Today is June 19, 2019. My name is Jay Sztuk and I'm interviewing Margaret Nott who goes by Mardi. Mardi was a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin from June 1991 through September 1994 and worked as a math teacher. Mardi, thanks for agreeing to this interview. Why don't we start by having you tell us something about your background and how you learned about Peace Corps and what made you decide to join.

NOTT: [00:00:33] So I originally grew up in Fort Wayne, Indiana, which was it's my understanding that it was the last school district in the country to integrate. And that's where some of my motivation came from. And about that time, I wanted to I realized the world was much bigger than I had thought it was. And I told my father that I wanted to travel in high school, you know, do an overseas program in high school or college. And my dad laughed and said, well, we will have no problem with that if you get paid for doing it. And within about a month, I bumped into a brochure for Peace

Corps. At this time, I was about 13 or 14 years old, and I came home all excited, letting him know that I had figured out a way to go overseas and get paid for it.

SZTUK: [00:01:43] Did you ever do a study abroad program?

NOTT: Never.

SZTUK: No, didn't get to do that.

NOTT: [00:01:47] Once he told me that I had to get paid to do it. I figured if there's a will, there's a way.

SZTUK: [00:01:55] So do you remember where you saw the brochure for Peace Corps?

NOTT: [00:01:58] No, I do not. I do not. Knowing my family, it was probably in my family's culture. It was probably in my church. So.

SZTUK: [00:02:08] Okay, so you were 13 then you decided to join, but you didn't join at 13, obviously.

NOTT: No, definitely not.

SZTUK: So there was a few years in between. Well, what situation we're in just prior to applying for Peace Corps, what were you doing there?

NOTT: [00:02:29] I was at the College of Western Worcester, Ohio, getting a Bachelor of Arts in mathematics with certification in secondary education. And I was doing it was before I did my student teaching. I started applying and, um, I called my parents and told them I was planning on doing this. And they just, unlike a lot of Peace Corps volunteers' parents, they just kind of shrugged and said, oh, that sounds like you. They just were completely unfazed.

SZTUK: [00:03:02] Was that kind of a, uh, was a did you think it was a negative thing or were they happy that you were going out?

NOTT: [00:03:11] They weren't surprised at all. They just thought, well, there she goes. Something she would do. So I applied I started applying sometime during the fall semester and I was not invited until the next fall semester. And maybe within a week of being invited, civil war broke out in, I want to say, Liberia. It's been so long. And so they had to cancel the invitation. So I had to figure out what to do in the meantime. And at the time, I was just kind of sitting and waiting for Peace Corps to invite me. So I was working at a civil defense firm as a secretary and I didn't really like that. It felt really not not, it didn't really jibe with my values. So I ended up going into going to American University and doing a semester of graduate work out there and living with a bunch of people from different countries. And while I was there, I was invited to go to Lesotho, but I had to refuse that because I would have not even finished the semester at American University. And they told me if I refused one more time, that I would no longer be invited. So when the next invitation came up, lo and behold, that invitation was to Benin. So I packed up faster than you could say boo. And I left in June of 1991 and never regretted a minute. No, I don't remember regretting a minute.

SZTUK: [00:04:56] So Benin wasn't like some place that you selected and the invitation came, did you before you you accepted the invitation or before you applied, did you did you have any thoughts about where you wanted to go? Did you want to go to Africa or was there a rule?

NOTT: [00:05:19] At that point, I really didn't care. I thought I kind of wanted to go to Africa more than any place else, but I was open to anywhere, except I kind of didn't want to go to an island. I thought I would go stir crazy on an island. So I ended up in Benin and I ended up in the city of Ouidah, which was once the largest slave trade port in all of West Africa. And Ouidah also considers itself the world's capital of voodoo. So there's a lot of learning for me in that community. So I taught math, which is what I do

now, which is what I did before I left. So the actual career path is pretty ordinary. It just has some interesting jaunts along the way.

SZTUK: [00:06:07] So the reaction, did you and did you have any brothers or sisters or anything or do I have to say this was their reaction to you joining the Peace Corps?

NOTT: [00:06:19] One of my sisters was crushed and the other one kind of had the same reaction my parents did. And the sister who was crushed eventually got to visit me. And she's the only person that was of my previous life that ever saw me there.

SZTUK: [00:06:40] So that probably changed her mind about your experience?

NOTT: [00:06:44] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:06:44] Was she afraid for you?

NOTT: [00:06:46] No. No. In fact, when I picked her up at the airport, we were riding home from the airport. And of course, there were about five people in the back seat of a Peugeot 54. And we hit some railroad tracks and a door bounced open. And my sister was horrified. But the woman who was sitting next to the door was completely unfazed, slammed the door shut and just kept talking. And my sister realized that she was in a whole other world and realized everybody's lack of reaction, indicated that that was really no big deal.

SZTUK: [00:07:26] Everyday life.

NOTT: [00:07:27] Yep.

SZTUK: [00:07:29] So you got invited to bid and you get on an airplane and went over there. Do you remember your do you remember arriving in the country and what what the initial reaction was or your initial feeling about that arriving or what was that like when you got off the plane?

NOTT: [00:07:51] When we got off the plane, I remember being pretty freaked out by all of that. I don't know what they call it in English. That's one of my I'm sure that everybody has this problem. But the *gendarmerie* was everywhere. And I had never seen so much military in an airport. And I didn't really understand what kind of military they were. And the way they searched our bags scared me. And then we finally got out of the airport and we stayed in the Sheraton, which I thought would be pish posh applesauce, which it was. But the beach was terribly desolate and it was way outside of town. So although the rooms were really chic, the actual setting was really odd. And I kind of am not a fan of Sheratons ever since.

SZTUK: [00:08:49] So what city was this in?

NOTT: [00:08:52] Oh, that was Cotonou, Benin. Yeah, the country's capital. And then they took us off to Porto-Novo for training and we actually did our training in a very nice space. It's a Presbyterian seminary with running water and electricity, which most of us didn't have in our posts. I just happened to have both, but most people did not.

SZTUK: [00:09:16] Yeah, but you were one of the lucky ones.

NOTT: [00:09:18] Yes, I was one of the lucky ones. So that a really nice situation.

SZTUK: [00:09:23] How long was your training?

NOTT: [00:09:25] My training was three months, if I remember correctly. And they taught me my it I give my worldwide schools presentation to my students every single year and they're really mystified by the fact that I learned French in three months. And in there I also learned how to fix a bike, which confuses them that I needed to learn how to fix the bike. And it confuses them that I needed to learn to take care of my own health. They think these things are trivial and that they already know how to do these things and they don't understand why I needed training in those things. But they're also amazed that I learned French in three months. But, you

know, I said, well, if you're stuck in the middle of a country where you can't speak English, you're going to learn the other language pretty darn quickly.

SZTUK: [00:10:16] So your French training in your country was very intensive.

NOTT: [00:10:19] Yes. Yeah, yeah. I also learned how to teach there. I had a, my teacher trainer was out there. I still remember his first name. I don't remember his last name. And Albert gave me a compass that I still have to this day. It's a beautiful rotating compass. It's rusty now, but I'm not throwing it away.

SZTUK: Drawing compass?

NOTT: [00:10:45] Drawing compass. Yeah. So and I was in a very small stage stages, the training group, and there were only about twelve of us. I think by the end there were only eleven. Maybe at the very end there were only nine. I don't remember we our numbers dwindled because some people couldn't handle it. Somebody had issues with alcohol. So, you know.

SZTUK: [00:11:08] Yeah, that's not unusual. Was all the training in-country? You didn't have anything in the in the US before you went, no orientation or training or anything?

NOTT: [00:11:19] I seem to remember about maybe it I don't remember it at all, but I seem to remember something where we had something in the United States for a day, three days some. In short, like that, but I have no memory of what that was. So we also had an interesting flight. We flew, I think, from somewhere in Pennsylvania to New York City and then to Cote d'Ivoire. And we got stuck in the airport in Cote d'Ivoire, which is the capital there, Abidjan.

SZTUK: [00:11:56] You're asking the wrong guy.

NOTT: [00:11:57] I can't remember. And we were supposed to be met by people who worked in the airport and they were supposed to put us up in a hotel. Well, somebody fell down on the job and we ended up sleeping on the floor and playing cards all night. And it was definitely a story for the books. So, yeah, that's OK. We all lived. And I had never traveled. Never, ever, ever. My first time out of the country. I'd been on a plane, but I'd never been out of the country. So I had no I really had no expectations. So that worked out well.

SZTUK: [00:12:36] Everything must have been very new and different to you.

NOTT: [00:12:39] Yeah, everything was new and different. Even palm trees were unique to me. So I'd seen palm trees in Florida. But the fact that they were going to be a part of my daily life astonished me.

SZTUK: [00:12:49] So did your training include village day or homestay or any kind of cultural orientation like that?

NOTT: [00:12:57] Yes, I had a stay in a village with a family, and that was the first time in my life that I realized that, I don't know, I think I'm going to say black women had hair sewed on to their hair. I didn't realize that was a thing. So they have wigs that you can sew on to if your hair is scraggly, like there's hardly any left because it's been stressed or something has happened to your hair to cause hair loss. They can sew a wig to your head, but not on to your skin, onto your hair. And I watched a little girl sew her mother's hair onto her head. And you would think that that outdoor, the lack of outdoor, the lack of plumbing or the lack of running water would have amazed me. But that right there astonished me. I was expecting wells and latrines. I was not expecting to see somebody get their hair sewn on.

SZTUK: [00:14:06] Yeah, especially in a village.

NOTT: [00:14:08] Yeah. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:14:09] You remember the name of the family you stayed with?

NOTT: [00:14:11] I don't at all. No, I did not stay in touch with them.

SZTUK: [00:14:16] How was that, uh, that experience for you, you know, being so you were probably the only volunteer that stayed with that family. So you were on your own and you must have been by that time, been pretty proficient in French.

NOTT: [00:14:33] Yeah. I can remember going through that and thinking, hmm, I better start taking this French thing a little bit more seriously. That was my biggest take away because I don't know the, a lot of things didn't bother me. I slept on a straw mattress that didn't, I mean, it was exotic and I took pictures, but it didn't bother me at all.

SZTUK: [00:15:00] So it sounds like you were pretty adaptable to the physical surroundings.

NOTT: [00:15:03] Yes. It also helps that I can sleep anywhere.

SZTUK: [00:15:08] So any memorable experiences that happened during training that you can think of, any time in training?

NOTT: [00:15:17] Well, let me think. I have so many pictures from training, I had my birthday, which is the same birthday my friend Mark and I are only two days apart, so we had the same birthday essentially. So we got to celebrate our birthday together. We often went out to nightclubs, which were not what we were expecting the first time we went, but once we went, we decided, boy, they should have these in the States, just you just go to a little boubet, I don't know the name of this in English. And you buy drinks, whether they're sodas or beers or whatever, and then you get out the boombox. That's all it was, was a boombox and play music. And everybody danced. And it was a big old party and a.

SZTUK: [00:16:21] Like a pop up nightclub.

NOTT: [00:16:22] Yes, yeah. Yeah. I mean, you'd expect something fancier.

SZTUK: Was it outdoors?

NOTT: Yeah, it was outdoors under a little gazebo, things like payotes. I don't know what they're I don't know what these things are called in English, so.

SZTUK: [00:16:36] But it was open sided thing with a roof on it.

NOTT: [00:16:38] Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:16:41] So that sounds like fun.

NOTT: [00:16:44] Yeah. So um other than that I roomed with Seka and Seka was very giggly and her English was extremely good and she wanted me to stop speaking English, but it took me until that home stay to stop speaking English. It was really hard for me to stop speaking English.

SZTUK: [00:17:12] Was Seka another volunteer or was she one of the locals?

NOTT: [00:17:15] I'm sorry. She was she was one of the French speaking French trainers.

SZTUK: [00:17:19] So you remember the trainers?

NOTT: [00:17:21] Yeah, I think almost everybody did, because there was our our training group was so small that almost roomed with a trainer. I don't know if that's typical or not, but sure made learning French easier.

SZTUK: [00:17:38] So after training, where did you get sent?

NOTT: [00:17:41] I got sent to the city Ouidah, Benin, and it's only about, I don't know. I haven't looked at a map and I mean, I've looked at a map and a long time, but I haven't measured in a long time. It's either thirty miles or

30 kilometers from Cotonou. And they put me very close because I thought they thought I was very naive, which at the time I was. And they were afraid that I might need to go into the city frequently. So they wanted to make that convenient for me. I think they put people out in the bush who are in the sticks who are more worldly than I was. I got that impression anyway. Um, but I got into Ouidah and almost immediately I made a best friend. Her name is Jameelah and I adopted a family. They were right across the street from me and I started dating their son. His name was Suzlon Gedo. And, uh, I got a dog named Dragon and another dog eventually named Kente. And I taught a couple miles from my home and I would ride my bike to school every day, teach for a little while and come back home on my little bike and never thought it was strange. But looking back, I had a pretty fancy bike and, I had a Nishiki, even by American standards at that time that was considered a nice bike and I never had it stolen because I, I was adopted so quickly by these families that they really kept an eye out for me.

SZTUK: [00:19:28] Did you have your own house, though? You didn't live with the family?

NOTT: [00:19:31] No, I have my own house. Yeah.

SZTUK: They were neighbors.

NOTT: Yes. Yes. All of them were neighbors.

SZTUK: [00:19:36] What was the size of this? Was it a town or village?

NOTT: [00:19:39] It was a city and it was about thirty thousand.

SZTUK: [00:19:41] And you didn't live on the school compound? You lived in town?

NOTT: [00:19:47] Yes, I lived in town. I think I only had rode my bike a mile. I don't know, everything was in kilometers and I don't convert. Well I don't, I

don't understand the whole conversion thing just either thinking kilometers or thinking miles. And you don't need to waste your time.

SZTUK: [00:20:05] What can you expect of them? So you it sounds like you made friends very fast there. So you settled in. You didn't have any period of kind of where you felt like an alien there?

NOTT: [00:20:27] I think there was about a month where I was kind of scared and alone. But Jameelah took her me under her wing so quickly.

SZTUK: [00:20:38] How did you meet her?

NOTT: [00:20:40] She worked for my landlord. He claimed that she was his niece. And I don't know. If that is true or not, because everybody claims a lot of people for family. Yeah, but she worked at the hotel where I would call my parents and I would call my parents from the hotel about once a month. And that's where she took care of me and really got to know me and introduced me to some of the fun things in town. So like the local movie theater where we would go see Bollywood and karate movies, and I still have a soft spot in my heart for Bollywood and karate movies. And she's the one who introduced oh, and I also hired a maid really quickly because Jameelah talked me into hiring a maid. And I had this wonderful maid who also helped me figure out which end was up like, if I needed peanut butter, she would say, Oh, you can just take the peanuts to the miller and the miller would ground you some peanuts. And if I needed a tailor, the maid and Jameelah would help me find a tailor. And the carpenter, I think my boyfriend Gedo helped me find. But all of these people that I was close to help me find the resources that I needed to make things like peanut butter and cornmeal and flour happen.

SZTUK: [00:22:08] So that's great. So quickly.

NOTT: [00:22:13] Yeah. And then I did a third year because I fell in love with it so much. And then I tried to do fourth year and my director pulled me aside

and told me, talk to me and said, I think you're becoming a little too Beninese and it's time for you to go home.

SZTUK: [00:22:34] But might stay forever.

NOTT: [00:22:35] Yeah, I was on the verge of staying forever. Yeah, he was right. So but I'll do it again once I retire.

SZTUK: [00:22:44] Now, it may sound unusual for a Peace Corps volunteer to have a maid. Was it common in Benin?

NOTT: [00:22:54] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:22:56] Have someone help with household chores?

NOTT: [00:23:00] Yes.

SZTUK: [00:23:00] I think it was maybe expected of Europeans or white people to have.

NOTT: [00:23:07] I think it was expected of everybody to have a maid. Very few people did not have a maid. All of my neighbors had maids but most of the maids were people where they bought the child from a family so that the child was taken out of a situation where they would have starved to death and put into a situation where at least they would be fed and go to school. But my maid was a woman about my age who had a child, I believe, out of wedlock, and I only paid her twenty dollars a month. But oh my gosh, what you can do with twenty dollars is amazing in that country. Or at least then.

SZTUK: [00:23:48] So it was helping her out as well.

NOTT: [00:23:50] Yeah, it was helping her out. Most, most Peace Corps volunteers had a guardian and I didn't agree with that. I liked having a dog because people were very afraid of my dog. Because Dragon was so friendly.

SZTUK: [00:24:10] Were there safety concerns or was there a lot of burglary and stuff like that would go that we had to have some kind of protection?

NOTT: [00:24:19] Um, I suppose if I hadn't had any protection at all, there may have been a burglary, but. I didn't. I am. The only people, the only volunteers that I knew of that ever had a burglary, did not have a dog or a guardian. The volunteers who had a dog or a guardian or a maid never had issues with burglaries. I think somebody with a guardian had a, I don't guard, a guard. It's called a guard in English. I think a couple of volunteers with guards or at least one with a guard had some sort of theft, but I don't know.

SZTUK: [00:25:08] So that's interesting. Most volunteers had their own personal security, right, and part at least one.

NOTT: [00:25:15] Yeah, well, I think I've heard of that before. Well, I also had that family across the street and I was dating their son, so I hardly ever even locked my place because they wanted water from my tap because all they had was a well. So I had people running out of my house all the time and I still live by that philosophy. My neighbors have keys. You never know when people are going to be coming and going. So I keep all the bad people of the world guessing. And I also learn from Jameelah to hide the hide the valuables in really weird places that nobody would ever think of looking so.

SZTUK: [00:26:01] Like, for example?

NOTT: [00:26:03] Like my Social Security card is not where anybody would expect to find it, or my any nice jewelry is where nobody would expect to find it. So. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:26:13] Great, great. So tell me about your house, was it a bit like it was wasn't as a standalone house or an apartment, kind of a Western style building?

NOTT: [00:26:26] It was a standalone cinderblock house with kind of a they call them shotgun houses where the front door and the back door are just go boom, boom, right through to each other. And that main room was between those two doors. And then there were three bedrooms, one of those bedrooms I converted to a kitchen, although it didn't have water, it was a pretty functional kitchen.

SZTUK: [00:26:55] So when was that the typical house for the area?

NOTT: [00:27:00] Yes, it would be pretty typical.

SZTUK: [00:27:02] Yeah, yeah. Were there other volunteers in your town?

NOTT: [00:27:07] There was for one year the rest of the time. Then the first year I had a volunteer in my town from the United States. The second year I had a um, an archeologist in my town in that same, in that same, I don't know, house. And then the third year there was a woman from Houston who lived there who was studying voodoo. But those are the only three Americans, the only three Americans that ever lived in that town. And I did not have much contact with them. The first year I had some contact with that volunteer, um, the second year, hardly any with archeologist. And by the third year, I barely paid attention to her.

SZTUK: [00:28:03] So you adapted to the local community very well, yeah.

NOTT: [00:28:06] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:28:08] And were there other foreigners in town, other Europeans or anything? Was it basically just you and a couple other Americans?

NOTT: [00:28:16] There was there were, there were Germans, there were Swiss, there were Italians. But I, I think I spent time with them once. One of those groups of people once um mostly because my life was about teaching,

teaching math, playing with my friends, and playing with my friends some more.

SZTUK: [00:28:42] So tell me about your typical day at your work day at school and what the school was like in the and how the students were might be.

NOTT: [00:28:57] So my schedule varied from day to day. Everything was in, if I remember correctly, shortly slightly less than two hour blocks. So approximately eight to ten, ten to twelve. And there was a two hour siesta or siest. And then we'd start up again from two to four and four to six. But you would not teach all four blocks. Some I only taught one block. Some days I taught three blocks. And you always went home from that twelve to two block. Also between the classes, between the eight to ten and the ten twelve, there was some sort of break. I don't remember much about that break except the kids would eat a lot of porridge and things like that that they would buy off the women's heads. Yeah, but I would get to school shortly before 8:00. We would sing the anthem, the national anthem, and maybe we said the pledge, but I don't remember the pledge. I only remember the anthem. And then we start school and I had the best assistant principal. He was so wonderful, he did not believe in beating the children, which a lot of the assistant principals did, and instead he believed in making the kids work. So at the end of the school day, if a kid had a punishment, they would have to sweep the school yard, gather the mangoes, clean, whatever needed cleaning. It was really nice. I really respected him for treating the kids with respect.

SZTUK: [00:30:33] So the administration and the other staff at the school were pretty good, right?

NOTT: [00:30:39] Yeah, I really think so. They did insult me a lot about my lack of understanding, or two of them in particular thought it was disgusting that I was allowed to teach at their school because I didn't speak French very well in their eyes. But, you know, whatever that's their problem.

SZTUK: [00:30:53] And classes were in French?

NOTT: [00:30:55] Classes were in French. Yes. And my students, when I would walk in, they were slam on the desk, stand up, greet me and then sit down. But students are students wherever you are, and they're always up to mischief. I don't care what anybody says, no matter where you go, they're up to mischief. Sometimes it's louder mischief. Sometimes it's quieter mischief, but it's always mischief. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:31:18] So any memorable examples or stories?

NOTT: [00:31:23] No, I can't think of any you know, so sorry I couldn't even tell you what happened last year as far as mischief, but they're always up to something.

SZTUK: [00:31:34] Yeah but no, no big challenges. Or was there any time when you when you felt like going home or you just did you get you ever get just get down or decide that maybe you'd made a mistake or anything or was it all pretty smooth?

NOTT: [00:31:53] Well, it wasn't all smooth, but I never wanted to go home. I think there were times when I would really struggle and I'd ride my bike to Come, which I don't remember how. Again, I don't remember thirty miles or 30 kilometers. And I'd hang out with my friend Mark or I'd ride 30 miles or 30 kilometers, I can't remember, to spend time with Rochelle and Margie. I think her name was Margie. I think I'm saying the wrong names.

SZTUK: [00:32:21] Other volunteers?

NOTT: [00:32:22] Other volunteers. And kind of decompress a little bit, especially that first year. That was really important. But generally, I don't ever remember wanting to go home. I probably did. I just don't remember it.

SZTUK: [00:32:37] Yeah. So and you stayed at that same school for your entire time?

NOTT: [00:32:41] Yes, I did. Yep. Yep. Still teaching math. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:32:47] Did you get to travel at all on your school breaks or time off? Did you get to see more of the country?

NOTT: [00:32:52] I did. I got to see a really beautiful part of the country where there was a really beautiful springs. And I got to see some museums in the country and I got to go to the game park where my camera died and I didn't know it. And I kept taking pictures and I didn't find out until I got back to the States. But while we were at the game park, I was traveling with a vet and his wife and there was a mama lion and her cubs and the dumb vet got between them and his wife was panicking. And we're in an open jeep. And somehow he didn't get, he didn't make the mom angry and came back fine. But what a ding dong.

SZTUK: [00:33:47] He was outside the vehicle?

NOTT: [00:33:48] Yes. Yes. What was he thinking? Oh, my gosh. So anyway, it was kind of an exciting trip because I'd never seen hippos in real life. And I mean, I'd seen hippos at the zoo. But that's I mean, it's just so much different there. You realize how powerful they are when they're not in a zoo, I'm sure. And two summers in a row, the last two summers I was there. So after my third year and before my third year, I went to Ghana. And I think Ghana is heaven on earth, um, just a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful country. And before going there, I had to go through Togo. So I've been to Togo and a lot of people went a lot more places than I did. But I just I was very interested. I enjoyed my community so much that I enjoyed deep learning rather than broad learning. So but Ghana was really cool. We my friend Danielle and I hopped on our bikes, rode all the way from Benin to Ghana. And then our butts hurt so much.

SZTUK: [00:35:11] How long did that take?

NOTT: [00:35:12] Several days. Yes, several days.

SZTUK: [00:35:14] And you camped out on the way or you stay in hotels or?

NOTT: [00:35:16] No, it's even more interesting. Strangers would let us into their homes and feed us. Just see these crazy white people. And finally, when we got to Ghana, our butts hurt so much that we ended up hitchhiking on the back of a dump truck and the dump truck was filled with rice in big bags and wow, is that comfortable. That is so comfortable. We slept and everything. Then we got off at the big hub for kente cloth there and kind of midway up Ghana. I can't remember the name of the village or the city. And we shop for kente cloth for a little while and got on a train to Accra where we stayed for a few days and then went to a slave trade port and stayed at Bourgeois Beach, which is a random little resort town with nothing in it, which was perfect for what we wanted. We just wanted to hang out and sleep and.

SZTUK: [00:36:19] Just go to the beach.

NOTT: [00:36:20] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:36:22] Now there's this bike trip. So you traveled through Togo to get to Ghana?

NOTT: [00:36:27] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:36:28] Boy, that must have been quite an experience.

NOTT: [00:36:30] Yeah, it was. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:36:32] And you say you stayed with families on the way?

NOTT: Yeah.

SZTUK: You meet some interesting people there, but there must be a good story in there somewhere.

NOTT: [00:36:40] Not really, no. The best part of the story is that hitchhiking adventure. We just stayed with whoever would take us in.

SZTUK: [00:36:49] And did they, did they just did they see you riding by and call you over as they come and have something to eat or something? Or did you go up and knock on the door and say can we stay here?

NOTT: [00:37:00] Both things happened. And at different times, both things happen. We also had kind of a tradition in Benin, I think they still have it, of converging on Grand Popo, which is a beach resort really close to the border of Togo. And I would always end up in a tent with Bill Lummell, who I think still works for Peace Corps. But he was in Peace Corps about the same time I was. He's here for this thing [conference] this week. I haven't seen him yet, but I can't wait to. So. Yeah, yeah. The sand fleas were terrible. I remember that. I don't like the beach because simply the sand fleas at that beach were just, blah. And I didn't like going to the beach because of the sand fleas. They come out at night and just bite you to death. So. But I don't know. My boyfriend was a, what is it called, the person who kind of orchestrates the whole construction thing. What is the name of that?

SZTUK: [00:38:24] Supervisor? Construction superintendent?

NOTT: [00:38:25] No. Contractor? Yeah. And he owns several Mack trucks, and he was so proud of that he would get out there with the boys and fill the trucks with sand and gravel and stone and do that all by hand. Which we definitely don't do in the United States. So it was pretty impressive.

SZTUK: [00:38:55] I, um, you talked about being very adaptable physically, but, um, it was your first time overseas and into a very different culture. So there must have been some challenges for you. What were some of the maybe the oddest things that, uh, that you ran into or hardest things to adapt to?

NOTT: [00:39:26] Hmm, one of the hardest things to adapt to was living so alone. My water, my tap, was only outside of my house, it was in my little walled concession, little compound, but it was not inside my home and the water was always cold. There was never warm water. That was hard to get used to. I don't know what else was hard to get. Uh, one of the easiest things to get used to was the fact that my bed was six feet by seven feet.

SZTUK: [00:40:07] It was made for a family.

NOTT: [00:40:09] Yeah.

NOTT: [00:40:11] And I had a really hard time figuring out how to make a dresser out of everything. I remember that just being really confused about what do I do with all my clothes, I don't understand. I don't remember. I remember my adjustments coming back, being confused about why everything. Why rice cost so much in this country, why beans cost so much in this country, why Americans eat so much meat. And the food there is really, really, really good. Really good. So that was not an adjustment at all.

SZTUK: [00:40:50] A lot of fresh fruits, vegetables and?

NOTT: [00:40:53] A lot of spicy food. Yeah, and I love goat. I've never had goat before. Very good meat.

SZTUK: [00:41:04] Yeah. I think one of the things that, uh, people who haven't been in the Peace Corps think about is that you must have had to eat weird stuff to do. What was the strangest thing that you had to eat?

NOTT: 00:41:15] Oh, I did eat some bush rat and it wasn't very interesting. And I decided once was enough because it just wasn't exciting.

SZTUK: [00:41:26] So but the normal diet of the folks there wasn't too unusual.

NOTT: [00:41:30] No, no, no. It was my understanding that some kids eat termites, but I never saw that or experience that, so.

SZTUK: [00:41:40] Ok, so, getting back to your job, then. Do you think you feel like you've made some real meaningful contributions with the kids?

NOTT: [00:41:54] Well, yeah. I mean, without me, they wouldn't have had a math teacher, really. And that's why I was hired. That's why Peace Corps volunteers are were hired in the position of math teachers and science teachers, because all the math teachers and science teachers are the people who are proficient in math and science. They can get jobs as engineers in other countries. So nobody wants to teach for pennies when they can go to another country and make oodles of money. So. And I didn't mind.

SZTUK: [00:42:37] So much as you were winding up your service or getting ready to go home and you said you wanted to stay for a fourth here. So I must have been a little bit hard to leave.

NOTT: [00:42:49] It was really hard to leave. But lucky for me, my landlord got mad at me for letting my boyfriend spend so much time in my house and kicked me out and sent me to the other side of town where I had to find a new apartment or a new home. And I lived there. And somebody poisons my dog Kente. And so it kind of helped that those bad things happened right there at the end. And then Dragon and I got on the plane and went home.

SZTUK: [00:43:33] Oh, you brought them home with you? He was a local dog.

NOTT: [00:43:36] He was a local dog, yeah. And then my parents got to babysit him for a couple of months while I looked for a job.

SZTUK: [00:43:49] And after coming back, did you keep in touch with your friends and your adoptive family back there?

NOTT: [00:43:57] For a little while, for a couple of years and then it just all faded away. So kind of sad but true.

SZTUK: [00:44:06] Well nowadays with everybody, everybody's online. You haven't rekindled the connection?

NOTT: [00:44:13] I have tried to. And I have found one, a member of their family who is very young, who's on Facebook, but the rest of them I can't find. So I think, well, I'm 52. So I think, you know, mama and daddy, they're about 20 years older than me and they may not be around anymore.

SZTUK: [00:44:44] It's very old for.

NOTT: [00:44:46] Yeah. And I think my boyfriend has passed away and most of his older siblings have probably passed away.

SZTUK: [00:44:52] So did you ever go back?

NOTT: [00:44:55] I did not ever go back, nope. Nope. Never got to the point where I could do that. Plus, I've got this philosophy. You have to get paid to travel. The only traveling I've done since has been as a teacher. And when you travel as a teacher with a certain number of students, you get paid. You don't get paid to do it, but you don't have to pay for your travel.

SZTUK: [00:45:22] Right. Would you ever consider Peace Corps again?

NOTT: [00:45:25] I will do it right after I retire.

SZTUK: [00:45:28] Yeah, you will?

NOTT: [00:45:30] Yeah, well I hope so. If they'll let me.

SZTUK: [00:45:32] And you'd go back to Africa or would you maybe try an island this time?

NOTT: [00:45:36] I would go anywhere. I would prefer not an island but I wouldn't say no if that was the only offer on the table.

SZTUK: [00:45:46] And have you stayed involved with any Peace Corps groups or like country groups or anything or fellow volunteers since the time you got out?

NOTT: [00:45:58] I tried for a long time to be involved in Friends of Benin, and I was a terrible member. And I was, I actually was an officer at one time. I was terrible officer. And now that I'm in Austin, I'm trying to get involved in Heart of Texas Peace Corps. But I am members of both. And when I was in Madison, I tried to be involved. But boy, is that ever an active group. Wow. Because they put together the calendar and that's quite a time commitment. So I've only lived in Austin and the Madison area since I got back.

SZTUK: [00:46:44] How do you think your Peace Corps service influenced your after your post Peace Corps life, your career, or maybe your values or how you just treat your life in general?

NOTT: [00:47:02] One thing that really well, there was one experience that I didn't think to talk about. So on the way, sometimes when I would ride my bike to the beach because I lived a mile from the beach. Kids would throw rocks at me and call me names because I was white. And that was my first experience with racism where I was the victim. And I don't think it was earth shattering, but it certainly wasn't pleasant. It wasn't like I didn't know that racism existed before that. And at the time, I also had another American friend that I completely forgot to mention. Her name was Laura Lemon, and she had a son named Felipe Lemon. And she experienced a lot of racism because he was mulatto and.

SZTUK: Mixed race.

NOTT: Yeah. And that was kind of awful.

SZTUK: [00:48:15] Was he born there in Benin?

NOTT: [00:48:17] Yeah, his father is Beninese. But anyway, after I came back for a year or two, I was actually very cautious around white people. I had learned not to trust white people. And I think probably some of my behaviors the first couple of years were a little odd because of that. And now I see the world through a different lens, and I don't there are a lot of American things that I have trouble understanding. Like the incredible materialism, like people wanting big, huge houses and I have trouble understanding why people have any kind of issue providing scaffolding to the poor through institutional bodies that are there to help the poor. I've always had trouble with that, but I know it confuses me even more because I see how wealthy Americans are and I think Americans don't realize how wealthy Americans are.

SZTUK: [00:49:47] So, well, living in a place where you had to go outside to get your water, something a lot of people can't comprehend.

NOTT: [00:49:56] Yeah. Or the market, you could only go shopping once a week in the open air market. So you're like, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:50:06] Why was that? They would only come and bring their crops in once a week?

NOTT: [00:50:10] Yep. And Americans, we go to the supermarket all the time. I don't really mind going in the supermarket all the time, don't get me wrong. But it's not something we should take for granted.

SZTUK: [00:50:27] Well, are there any other any other thoughts or experiences you want to share? It's fun to back up when funny things come to mind.

NOTT: [00:50:39] I can't think of anything. I probably think of something at 3:00 in the morning, but yeah.

SZTUK: [00:50:46] So you teach high school now?

NOTT: [00:50:49] Yes.

SZTUK: [00:50:50] Have you ever had an occasion to talk to a student about Peace Corps? Has anybody ever mentioned it to you that it was something they were thinking of?

NOTT: Yes.

SZTUK: And how, what do you tell them?

NOTT: [00:51:05] I have kids at least once a year ask me about it. And I talk about my experience or I ask them about what they want out of it. And they're usually almost anybody who considers the Peace Corps is pretty open to almost anything. That doesn't mean that they're going to make it through the application process. I swear that application process is as difficult as it is because they're trying to find out if you're flexible enough to handle it. Yeah, but I talked to them about how valuable it is. And I just had a girl ask me about a month ago, actually, and I said, oh, it's so much fun. You'll just love it. You're a perfect candidate. I mean, what a, I don't know what more because they usually ask me on the heels of my worldwide schools presentation and I the kids like that. I have this huge scrapbook full of printed out pictures. I've talked to them about turning it into a slideshow and they're like, no, no, pass around the pictures. It's so much fun. Well, it's really hard because I'm talking about the pictures as I pass it to person number one. And by the time it gets to person number 30, I'm already on to like the tenth picture.

NOTT: [00:52:26] So but they love it and they are very entertained by the pictures and what's going on in it. And I'm trying to get better about writing down what's going on in the pictures, like the ladies with the stuff on their head and trying to describe that better and carrying things on their head. Yeah, trying to be more descriptive about what's going on. And then I talk up, there's a Nigerian food truck in my neighborhood and I talk up that Nigerian food truck because they serve the food that I'm accustomed to,

so. When I try to talk to the kids and go in there and try the food because the food is actually really good and then I serve the kids the food.

SZTUK: [00:53:10] Oh, you do?

NOTT: Yeah.

SZTUK: Do you cook that type of food at home?

NOTT: [00:53:16] Yeah, I do. Still sometimes, yeah. Only about once or twice a year because it makes it a lot. I only know how to make it for like a family of ten.

SZTUK: [00:53:25] Is it hard to find ingredients?

NOTT: [00:53:27] No, not at all. No, it's just tomato paste, hot pepper, onions, garlic, ginger, peanut butter, water, rice. Can't get any easier. You can find that anywhere in the world probably.

SZTUK: [00:53:46] Ok. Anything else you want to say?

NOTT: Un-unh.

SZTUK: All right. Well, thanks very much. This concludes the interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]