

**Paul Jurmo Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Paul Jurmo  
**Interviewer:** Evelyn Ganzglass  
**Date of Interview:** October 5, 2018  
**Location of Interview:** Washington, D.C.  
**Length:** 38 pages

**Biographical Note**

Paul Jurmo served as a Peace Corps volunteer in The Gambia from 1976 to 1979 on a literacy project. He later joined Peace Corps staff as the country representative in Tonga from 2012 to 2017.

**Access**

Open.

**Usage Restrictions**

According to the deed of gift signed December 12, 2018, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. This interview is in the public domain.

**Copyright**

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

**Technical Note**

This transcript was created by Sonix software from the MP3 audio recording of the interview. The resulting text file was lightly edited and reformatted according to a standard template.

**Suggested Citation**

Paul Jurmo, recorded interview by Evelyn Ganzglass, October 5, 2018, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

## DISCLAIMER

This transcript was generated automatically by Sonix software from the audio recording. The accuracy of the transcript cannot be guaranteed. Only the original audio recording constitutes the official record of this interview and should be used along with the transcript. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy or would like to recommend corrections, they are encouraged to contact the library reference staff.

Oral History Interview

with

Paul Jurmo

October 5, 2018  
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:01] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. Today is October 5, 2018, and I am interviewing Paul Jurmo, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in The Gambia from 1976 to 1979. He was also country rep and director of programing and training for Peace Corps Tonga from 2012 to 2017. And I forgot to say that I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. So with that little introduction, let me ask you, Paul, why did you join the Peace Corps?

JURMO: [00:00:43] Well, it's a very good question. I was just jotting some notes and I'm sure like anybody, you know, multiple reasons. You know, I grew up in the Kennedy era. I actually saw John F. Kennedy campaigning for president in 1960. And in Detroit, where I grew up, my dad took me to when Kennedy was going down the Woodward Avenue at Six Mile Road or McNichols Road. And we saw Kennedy's motorcade, very small motorcade, driving by on its way to the Michigan fairgrounds nearby to make some kind of speech in front of probably

organized labor. But so I was part of the Kennedy generation, influenced by his vision, etc.

JURMO: [00:01:35] I went to the University of Michigan and my junior, my freshman year at the University of Michigan, I was in a, uh, I lived in the Michigan Union, which is the building on which where John F. Kennedy made his famous declaration that one of the first things he was going to do, and he ended up actually doing, which was to, as president, was to start this thing called the Peace Corps. And I used to walk past, up and down those steps where he stood every day. I mean, this is eight years later. Eight or nine years later. But you know that stuck in my brain, I think.

JURMO: [00:02:12] I had a very good education, especially in high school, went to a fantastic boys'. It was a Jesuit high school, not Georgetown Prep, but University of Detroit High School, where community service, etc., was instilled in us not just by speech, but by doing. We would do community service projects. And I was there during the civil rights era, got a great exposure to what the low income communities of Detroit were like through community service. In those high school years, I had some great education in, well, basically international history, etc., world history. Had a great, I think sophomore year course in, I forget exactly the name of the course, but it was all around world cultures I guess.

JURMO: [00:03:21] And I was, in my university years, took a junior year abroad in Germany and traveled all around Europe and, you know, got out and got the sense of what it's like to live abroad and the wonderful things you can learn and the fun you can have and adventure you can have in other countries.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:44] Mm hmm.

JURMO: [00:03:44] And of course, it was the Vietnam era where I was very interested in the history of Southeast Asia and Vietnam, etc. And when I was at University of Michigan in Ann Arbor my senior year, I was in a, I spent about a semester or so in a kind of like a boarding house. I had a room. And down the hall from me was a graduate student who had

been a PCV in Malaysia. And he talked to me about his experience and further, you know, planted the seed, like man, this is maybe something I want to do. So when I was, uh.

JURMO: [00:04:28] I moved away from Michigan, lived in Boston for a few years and took a, got a master's degree at Boston University in education. It was called social education, which talked about the kind of the interface of social issues and education. I mean, that was a mix of courses, kind of an eclectic mix, but it gave me some grounding in how to do research. One of the courses where I investigated the issue of school bussing in Boston at that time, which was a very hot topic then in the early seventies. And then it came time to say, think, what am I going to do after this master's degree program? And I decided to go apply for a Peace Corps.

JURMO: [00:05:21] And I showed up at the Peace Corps recruiting office in, I think it's called the McCormick Building in Boston, gracious old office building, which I think is still there. I came in on a Friday afternoon, turned out like 3:00 in the afternoon. The last, um, I think I had about an hour to go or 2 hours to go before they closed the office. And that was the last day they were advertising and recruiting for a position as a functional literacy advisor in The Gambia. And I wanted to do something in the area of education. I'd hoped to go to Southeast Asia, but I ended up applying for this particular job. I didn't particularly know even what functional literacy meant, and I did have only very minimal training in ESL, a type of education.

JURMO: [00:06:09] But I applied and I got the job and I suspect I was maybe the only person who ever applied for it. And I did it just under the deadline. They said, Oh, good, I'm glad. You know, they basically said, it's a good thing you applied today because we're going to close out this position. And, you know, within three or four months, I was on the plane to The Gambia. So it was this kind of mix of education and luck and other kind of life experiences.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:41] So you are the only person I've ever heard who actually applied for a specific ad.

JURMO: [00:06:47] Yes. At that time, well, because I'm an old timer I guess, because they don't do that nowadays I guess, but maybe with some exceptions. But at that time, there was a big, you know, a big book full of profiles or project descriptions or whatever you call it, position descriptions. And you could kind of leaf through it. And I think maybe they could point you to particular areas of interest like education jobs, or maybe, I'm not sure if they had it organized by area of the world. But somehow I zeroed in on this particular position and it sounded interesting and it kind of overlapped with some of my prior training and etc.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:30] So what did your family and friends think about you applying?

JURMO: [00:07:34] Well, I mean, by then I had moved away from my home of Michigan. They knew I was pretty independent. You know, I had gone the route of growing the long hair and becoming, you know, sort of an activist in the hubbub of the antiwar and civil rights activities in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Back then, you know, they kind of knew I was somewhat marching to a different drum than what I was kind of, they'd probably hoped the direction I go in, but so I don't think.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:06] So it fit.

JURMO: [00:08:07] Yeah, I don't think it totally surprised them. I think my dear mother was, you know, understandably like probably every parent, concerned about my safety and health. But they, I think, basically they gave me my blessing, their blessing. And I always had their support, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:29] So you got accepted, I guess, quickly.

JURMO: [00:08:33] Relatively.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:33] Other people wait a long time.

JURMO: [00:08:34] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:35] Where was your training?

JURMO: [00:08:38] We had whatever it was, three or four day training in Atlanta, I believe, or whatever they call that. Orientation.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:47] And then?

JURMO: [00:08:49] And then we were on a plane. And I was in a group of about 15 volunteers, unlike I think the trend currently in Peace Corps at that time. You know, it was a very mixed group, but we all worked under the Department of Community Development in The Gambia and had different jobs. I mean, several women volunteers were doing like day care center, quote, jobs, which and, you know, one of my buddies was, already was a civil engineer and I'm still very good friend with him. He was a civil engineer who was a hydrologist who was doing water resources projects like building little culverts and digging wells and that sort of thing. Three or four others were construction volunteers.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:42] So it was a mix.

JURMO: [00:09:43] It was a mix. And that was fine. I mean, I do understand Peace Corps is gone in this two directions where basically it's a more focused kind of strategy, but that's what our mix was.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:01] How old were you when you went in?

JURMO: [00:10:03] I was the oldest of my cohort, and that was, I think I was 25 because I had.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:08] And the rest of them were straight out of college?

JURMO: [00:10:10] Pretty, almost, pretty much. And with a couple of exceptions. And I think the age difference, for me at that time, was really significant. For one, I had had more work experience and I also had a master's degree already and I'd been living on my own, you

know, and I was. It was just who I am. I mean, for whatever number of reasons, I was very focused and kind of on a professional task. And there were several others that fit that mold, but a lot of the others were just like babes out of undergrad school. And not to say they didn't do well, but. And I also, that year, that was like the tail kind of getting toward the tail end of the Vietnam War era. And I think the difference between my experience during a very, like I entered as an undergrad in 1969 and that was still the civil rights era and the Vietnam era. It was very intense. And of course, I was in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which was a very.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:13] Hotbed.

JURMO: [00:11:13] Hotbed. And so I was exposed to a lot of that stuff. And most of the people in my group didn't have that kind of experience. And, you know, as a result, we kind of had different perspectives. I mean, it's not that we didn't get along, but I think I took, I had both a professional, some kind of professional skills and a kind of a mindset and a consciousness around kind of the political ramifications of Peace Corps work and what we were trying to do in The Gambia. And that did me well. I mean, I think I basically felt like I was taking this more seriously than the other ones. Most of the others, there were others that, like my hydrologist friend, he also had a master's and he was very professional about his work. I mean, we all had fun, but we said we were there to do a job.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:08] Yeah. So you got to, I should know. What is the capital of The Gambia?

JURMO: [00:12:14] Well.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:15] Or what was the capital of The Gambia?

JURMO: [00:12:16] You're forgiven for not knowing, but it's Banjul.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:20] Banjul.

JURMO: [00:12:21] And we, yeah, we flew in. You know, it was a very memorable, I still remember this very distinctly. You know, we flew, I think, through either LaGuardia or JFK via from Atlanta, I believe. And then, you know, it was an eight hour flight roughly. We first landed in Dakar. It was on September 1st, 1976. We landed. And as you come into Dakar and, you know, it's like an overnight flight, you come in and it's very dramatic because you come in and the sun is just rising, more or less, when the, just barely dawn. And what you first see actually is a lighthouse, which is on the very westernmost tip of Africa, flashing, and you're looking out the window and you look down. And it's just very dramatic, like Africa, you know, like we made it. We're going to make it.

JURMO: [00:13:13] And we, you know, we transferred to the Dakar airport and ended up sleepy eyed and groggy in what was then the earlier version of the what is now an international airport. But at that time, it's called Yundum International Airport now, but at that time it was little tiny Yundum airport, which was literally like a little tiny building. And the landing strip was made of, this is their national airport, is made of leftover landing strip, metal landing strip pieces left over from World War II. Because World War II, in World War II, I think the British had a presence and they used The Gambia, I think, as like a launching pad for their North African campaigns. And so basically they're like these metal interlocking grids that would be pieced together and laid on, you know, on the ground. And that would form, that was their airport.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:17] That was the landing strip.

JURMO: [00:14:17] That was the landing strip.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:18] And this was Dakar?

JURMO: [00:14:19] And by the time. No, no, this is Banjul.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:22] Oh, Banjul.

JURMO: [00:14:22] Dakar was more developed. But Banjul is, at that time The Gambia only had 100,000 people, the whole country. And I guess I

was told recently that now it's like over a million. I haven't checked but, you know, it's. And I actually I'm concerned.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:39] Is it just birth rate or is this immigration as well?

JURMO: [00:14:43] I think it's probably birth rate. I think they have a lot of emigration from the country, you know, like many African countries. But even then with that, you know, and whether there are any refugees from nearby countries, you know, that could be part of it. I'm not sure.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:59] So you flew to Dakar, you then went?

JURMO: [00:15:01] Transferred.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:01] Transferred and you flew to Banjul?

JURMO: [00:15:04] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:04] To this tiny little airport.

JURMO: [00:15:05] Yeah, it was very cool. You know, it's like, you know, this is a guy from the United States, you know, I had never been in a place like this. And the same with all my mates, you know? So basically we were picked up by the staff, the Gambian staff, and put in a bus and driven through the, it was in September, so it would have been the middle of the rainy season. That is, you are kind of driven through the, down the roads with this tall elephant grass because it was a rainy season, you know, the grass grows like crazy and it's like six feet tall or whatever it seems like. So there's a lush green savannah kind of environment. And then we were taken to initially a couple of days in the capital city in a hotel.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:53] How big was Banjul at that point, how many people?

JURMO: [00:15:56] I would guess maybe 20,000 or maybe 30,000. That's my guess. And, you know, this little sleepy, dusty, post-colonial, English

influenced country. Dusty streets. And we spent a couple of days in the Apollo Hotel, kind of getting.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:21] In Banjul?

JURMO: [00:16:22] In Banjul, getting oriented. And then we were brought out to our training site, which is about 50 miles up the Gambian River. But in this, I remember arriving in the, of course, we were dead tired. We weren't used to this. You know, any jet lag, you're going to get tired plus all the excitement of, etc. And we would be, we were introduced to our Gambian trainers and they. One of the funny things was taking my first foray out onto the streets of Banjul. And it was in the middle of the, in Ramadan, which is a fasting month. And I mean, kind of like nobody, I don't know if anybody explained it to us or even if they did, it didn't sink in very much. Because I'm walking down the street with this Gambian, you know, trainer, very nice. It was just, but you know, it's hot and sunny and so foreign and all the sounds of an African street and everybody, you know, looking very different.

JURMO: [00:17:25] Everything's so different and being jetlagged and kind of hungry, probably. I didn't eat probably well. And all these people were spitting on the street. And I go, like, this is the weirdest country I've ever seen. People are spitting all over the place, like, what's up with that? And I later learned, I mean it took me quite a while to learn. I mean, it wasn't immediately I learned that during Ramadan, a very strict Muslim doesn't even swallow his or her saliva. So. I mean, that's like gung ho, you know, fasting. And that's why they were spitting. It wasn't like they were just a strange culture that's always spitting. But anyway, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:08] So you then went to a training site. Where was that?

JURMO: [00:18:12] Yeah, it was on a, in a kind of a vacation tourist camp run by a little German guy named Willie up the Gambian River. Gambia is a long, narrow country, about 300 miles long and about ten miles wide on average, that follows the course of the Gambian River. It's like a snake, you know, in the middle of, surrounded by Senegal on three

sides. And then one end of it empties into, you know, the river. The mouth of the river empties into the Atlantic Ocean. And so about 50 miles up that river was a place called Tendaba, which basically I think means big port or big wharf or something like that in Mandinka. And so it was a little, you know, kind of very simple, rustic place with little cabins.

JURMO: [00:19:07] And so I was housed with, I think, two other trainees. Mike Jusinski, the same hydrologist, who is still a good friend. And Bill Hollis, I believe. I think there were three of us rooming in this little house, and then likewise the rest of us were spread among these other houses. And so we had our training there on the river, language training. My training, because I was the only person doing literacy and nobody in the country was really doing literacy, I basically was given next to no technical training. There was no particular training. I had to kind of. Basically they said, look, go talk. At some point in the training, they said, if you want to get technical training, go talk to Mr. So-and-so and Mr. So-and-so and kind of pick their brains. Like what do you think you're going to be doing in this project?

JURMO: [00:20:02] And I was handed a couple of reports from UNESCO, which are still kind of classic books, that talked about the Experimental World Literacy Program that UNESCO had been running in the seventies and all over the world. And it was a functional literacy kind of project. And these documents explained the concept behind functional literacy, which is just practical functional literacy that farmers or business people or whatever needed for their particular occupations. And that was the strategy UNESCO was promoting. And so I kind of read these books and I read the profiles of various countries that had done this and used this approach, etc., and that was my technical training. And I said, you know, I wasn't all upset about it. I mean, I didn't know any better that theoretically I should have had much more technical training. And the other volunteers or trainees in my group got similar kind of training. You know, there wasn't a lot of formal technical training.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:12] What was the training? Mostly language training?

JURMO: [00:21:14] Yeah, it's mostly language and culture.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:16] What language did you learn?

JURMO: [00:21:17] We all learned Mandinka. There's roughly at that time five languages spoken in The Gambia. Mandinka was the largest. And because most of us would be working, we were going to all be assigned to Mandinka areas, you know, speaking areas. And that was fine. And, you know, the training was pretty good. I mean, if I in retrospect, I became, you know, at least minimally fluent in Mandinka. I mean, I stayed for a third year, and I was never highly, perfectly fluent. There were a few in our group that were much better than me and.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:51] But you were able to communicate?

JURMO: [00:21:52] Yeah. And I had a great time. And there is, and also the nature of my work, which I'll describe, basically allowed me and it almost required me to use English because I was doing a lot of work with English speaking officials and teachers, etc. So, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:15] Just to end on the training, what was the cultural training like?

JURMO: [00:22:20] It was, you know, talking about different cultural practices and religious practices and so forth. It was a Muslim, you know, 99% Muslim country. And what that was all about and what that looked like in The Gambia. And I subsequently, while I was there, I did a series of audio recordings. And one of the themes I did was Gambian religious practices. And I was, I've been digitizing these cassettes recently to hand over to the archive at American University. And I'm astounded in what I put in there, and I'm really proud of myself, but it goes back to my training and I'm not even sure why I made that particular one about Gambian religious practices. Like, what was the audience? I'm sure I had some audience in mind and but anyway, it was really great.

JURMO: [00:22:20] And I think, I'm happy to say I and our group, I think, you know, took that training to heart, you know, to be respectful of the culture. And I'm not saying we were saints or perfect or whatever, but, you know, we got it. You know, you can't, you know, we tried to adhere to their norms of behavior or whatever the right word is and be respectful of their religion. We never got, you know, unfortunately, you know, subsequently, there's been obviously conflict between parts of the Islamic world and the Western world, etc. I never saw any of that there. There was never kind of religious, um, fundamentalism or whatever the right term is, whatever. And I never saw that. Nobody pressured me to become Muslim. Nobody, you know, said anything negative. It was a very tolerant, positive, wonderful thing.

JURMO: [00:24:16] And as I, you know, I've often said, I felt like Islam in that time and that place, you know, in many ways is a very positive force. And it gave people a purpose and, you know, encouraged appropriate, you know, mature adult behavior and care for your fellow person, you know, community members and family members.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:42] All the same things that Christianity and Judaism.

JURMO: [00:24:46] Christianity and Judaism and every other religion says, you know, and so I got it. You know, and I had a, you know, Catholic upbringing. I mean, it all was consistent with what I was taught and not just in my religious education, but in my family. You know, it was just consistent with my, you know, I've subsequently done research about my extended family and its history and how they stuck together through the Depression. And they were all immigrants, all that stuff, you know. And like, it all made sense to me.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:18] So you were in training, I guess, for three months or something like that?

JURMO: [00:25:23] It wasn't that long. I think it was only six weeks.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:25] Oh. So short term training. And then where were you assigned?

JURMO: [00:25:29] Yeah, I was assigned. I and a couple of other volunteers were assigned to a village that was just close, just down the road from a kind of regional government headquarters called Mansa Konko, which means the king's hill in Mandinka. And we were in the next village over called Pakalinding, and that became my home. Well, for much of the subsequent three years, although I ended up dividing a lot of my time between Pakalinding and then the capital city, which I'll describe why that happened. But the first year in particular, the three, there were, it was me and the two other volunteers, one of which is this guy Mike, who is a hydrologist, water resources guy, and then a young woman named Chris who herself went on and I think she got a PhD in anthropology and worked at the Smithsonian. And my friend Mike got a PhD at MIT in hydrology and I got a doctorate in education.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:35] So something was right in.

JURMO: [00:26:36] Yeah, there was in fact something in the water I guess. We ended up all taking this our profession seriously and, uh. But anyway, we were initially all, we were housed there because we were supposed to be working with the officers in this, at the government office up the road. Although it turned out that it was a mixed bag, my job kind of went in a little bit different direction. But so we, you know, we were all, we ended up for various reasons, all initially in the first year, living in the same compound. We got an old, we were given a brand-new house, which although I looked at a picture of it yesterday and it looked old already, even though it was like a mud block house, very rough. We after the end of our training and our swearing in, we were put on a truck.

JURMO: [00:27:34] All the volunteers are put on a truck in the capital city with our, the furniture that we had bought in the capital city and the other household goods that we're going to use in our new homes, and driven up the Gambia, the road that ran along the southern shore of the Gambia River. And, you know, we'd go, like every seven or eight miles, one of the volunteers. The truck would stop and one of the volunteers would get off with his furniture. We'd wave at him and say, we'll see

you next whenever we see you again, Bill, you know, or Jim or whatever. And we made it. And our truck, our village is the last in the line. And I remember getting, pulling up around sundown just as the sun's going down.

JURMO: [00:28:18] There's our house. We'd already seen the house under construction because we did our live-in or whatever they call it during the training in that village. So we were already introduced to where are we going to live. And we basically walked up to the house and the local landlord or somebody opened the front door. And the house was not 100% done. It was about, the construction, it was like 90% done. But there was still cement work and painting and other kinds of finishing touches that had not been completed. And so they opened the door. And there lying right inside the door welcoming us was a coiled snake. And the snakes in The Gambia, many of them are poisonous.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:15] Poisonous, oh.

JURMO: [00:29:15] And of course, the immediate reaction of the local guys was to grab a shovel and kill the snake, you know? But I thought, oh, what a welcoming. Welcome to your new home. And of course, there's no electricity, no running water. And that's how we lived. And subsequently. So that was part of the adventure. You know, some of us would have, might have said, oh, in fact, you know, more recently I'd gone back to Peace Corps staff, which I can tell about later. But you know, what we did, as in my recent Peace Corps experience, was we were required to have all these houses all up to date, da da da, safety, da da da, you know? None.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:54] None of that.

JURMO: [00:29:55] None of that, you know, and I mean, I've subsequently heard there are many volunteers historically that lived in even much cruder, rougher conditions, you know, like up in the boondocks, 50 miles from the latest, the nearest telephone, etc. Ours wasn't that, so much that.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:12] You had a door, right?

JURMO: [00:30:13] We had a door.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:14] You had a bed?

JURMO: [00:30:15] No. Well, we did because we'd bought it and brought it. So anyway, basically, my friend Mike and I, um, the other guy that was in the house, and Chris to some degree, but mostly Mike and me. Because he was an Eagle Scout and I was a Boy Scout and we were all, you know, he was an engineer, you know, a civil engineer. I mean, so we had it in our, and I had done some, you know, I'd grown up doing, you know, maintenance of houses that my mom owned, etc. I mean, so I, you know, I knew how to pound a nail, I'll put it that way. Maybe not always straight, but I knew how to pound a nail. And so we took the, we probably spent three or four, if not six months, finishing off that house and, you know, putting, building screens, going down to the market, buying scrap lumber. You know, finding screening material, getting nails, you know, making stuff, using very crude tools. Building like a wash area where you could take showers, you know, building a shed, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:20] Did Chris benefit from this, too?

JURMO: [00:31:22] She benefited, yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:24] OK. I'm looking out for the woman. Did she share the house with you?

JURMO: [00:31:28] She did. But it was, it was kind of divided up into four two-room units that were, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:37] Oh, I see.

JURMO: [00:31:37] Spread along a long building. And what we did is we knocked, we cut holes like doorways between these units, which

originally would have been private, you know, two-room apartments, so to speak.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:52] Oh, I see.

JURMO: [00:31:53] But we kind of link them by digging, you know, putting doorways between them and, you know, there's privacy, etc. But then they had one common, one of those units was like a common area. And anyway, yeah, so we did all that. And the thing is, you know, it gave us something to do and it had the benefit that every small, you know, you've got a group of small boys, as the phrase goes there, like boys that were probably between five and eight or nine years old that came over to our house almost every day.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:32] To help?

JURMO: [00:32:32] Yeah. Quote, to help, or at least to observe and to laugh and teach us Mandinka. And it was funny because many of our volunteers, and one of our fellow volunteers made the point that about language learning. He said, yeah, within the first year I was able to speak Mandinka like a five year old boy, you know? And it's like a joke, but it's not far-fetched because they were, they had infinite patience just to sit there. And if we said, well, what's that? How do you say that? You know, what's that? A lizard. But how do you say tree? How do you, you know, and how do I?

GANZGLASS: [00:33:04] They would tell you.

JURMO: [00:33:05] They would tell us, you know, and they would just laugh and they'd laugh at the silly things we did. And Mike had brought an accordion of all things. He grew up playing the accordion and he brought it with him as a volunteer. I brought a guitar, but they. He brought this exotic thing that nobody, none of these little kids, had ever seen. And I actually have a picture of Mike playing the accordion. And it's a picture, a great picture of him playing the accordion. But I sent it to him and his wife the other day and she said, oh Mike, you look so handsome, you know, like blond curly hair, and you know. And I said,

yeah, what you don't see in the picture is all the small boys standing, sitting around, amazed by the sounds that Mike was playing. And Mike made fun, you know, he was a fun guy. He is a fun guy. He likes to joke and he would make it fun for the kids and put on a show and so stuff like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:59] So they were your language instructor?

JURMO: [00:34:00] They were our informal, you know, language informants. I mean, there's, I don't know if you ever came across. There's a Peace Corps Senegal thing called, it was a book called An Approach to Language Learning for Volunteers called the Language Informant Technique. And I think the author was Gary Engelberg, if I am not mistaken. He and some other former volunteers in Senegal started a training. They ended up working as trainers for Peace Corps Senegal, I believe. And among the things they produced was this book. And it's basically, you know, how do you tap into local people to become your mentor, language mentors, and de facto, in a way, that's what these kids were. And so anyway, we, you know, got to know the community. And I gradually, you know, during that initial six months.

JURMO: [00:34:59] And then but I also was frustrated, well, for two, probably two reasons. One is I had dysentery a good part of my first year. The sanitation by modern standards is atrocious. You know, flies everywhere, open latrines, open defecation. I mean, you know, so I got Giardia lamblia, which took forever to diagnose and, you know, to treat. And I was really debilitated by dysentery, which is really a serious thing. And I was, you know, at some point, they almost, I was almost going to be sent home. I was, I had lost so much weight, you know. But anyway, I stuck with it. And the other frustration is there really wasn't a job and nobody knew what to do with me. This Department of Community Development had with Peace Corps, you know, probably a year previously written my job description and whatever they call it, the job request or whatever they call it. And but my guess is whoever wrote that had either.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:00] Long gone.

JURMO: [00:36:00] Gone off to some other place or had forgotten about it. I mean, they're not going to sit around for a year waiting for someone to show up, you know, with bated breath. And it's like, you know, like if they send us one of these things, we'll take them, you know? And my other fellow volunteers, similarly, they felt.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:17] They didn't have jobs either?

JURMO: [00:36:18] They didn't really have much support. I mean, on paper, yeah, they have a job. But, you know, like anything, if you're, you know, to make a real job for someone, you've got to have all sorts of support and, you know, all sorts of administrative and other supports. But anyway, we all made, did our best. And I think some of us probably were more successful, part of it due to luck. And in my case, I was quite frustrated because I was kind of like saying, well, you know, OK, what do you want me to do? Where am I supposed to work? You know, who am I going to work with? Do I have a counterpart? You know, and even then, Peace Corps had the counterpart idea. You know, we were supposed to be building local capacity and so, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:04] Did Peace Corps help with this or not at all?

JURMO: [00:37:06] A little bit, very marginally. I mean, we had very little involvement of our central office staff. And in the time I was there in three years, I think there were four different directors, country directors. And, you know, it was just, uh, nothing terrible happened. But, you know, for various reasons, people were. You know, I worked with about four different directors. And so by the time, you know, anyway, there wasn't a lot of support from the office. And in some ways I wanted more support. And in some ways I quickly I think I gradually liked it or not. I figured I'm out here, I've got to figure it out now. And so.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:50] Well, before we move on to that, is there anything you want to say about the home stay when you first got there?

JURMO: [00:37:58] Yeah. I mean, there were a couple of my, these other two volunteers. I think all three of us went in the same home stay I think. I know Chris, the woman, Christine, she and I were in that village for the home stay and maybe Mike, I don't remember for sure. But yeah, I mean for me personally. Poor Chris. She came down with malaria. I mean, she didn't know what it was, but they subsequently figured out she had malaria.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:30] Did the family help you when you then came back to town?

JURMO: [00:38:33] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:33] You knew them?

JURMO: [00:38:34] Oh, yeah. And I'll tell you about them. And that's one of the greatest things I've ever had in my life. One of the greatest experience, sets of experiences with that family. But yeah, I was, I spent the first, you know, I did my home stay, which is only like a couple of days.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:49] Oh, only? Some places it's much longer.

JURMO: [00:38:51] Yeah. I think it was only like two or three days.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:53] Oh.

JURMO: [00:38:54] And you know, I, unfortunately, I think I probably had dysentery then, so I was, I just generally, I was pretty tired and didn't feel well most of the time. So I think a lot of my experience in that period was just through that gauze of just being sick. But, you know, it was a very intense exposure to all sorts of things, like living surrounded by a bunch of curious kids and people, and they're all like staring at me and nobody was ever hostile or anything. But it was, you know, very little privacy, having to eat food, which I didn't honestly initially I didn't like Gambian food. It took me about a year before I started to liking it. And even then there were some things I never really liked. And being hot and mosquitoes and.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:45] Yeah.

JURMO: [00:39:45] You know, it's just, and no privacy and not knowing it, you know, it's not easy. It's these things are like really rough and you've got to really be kind of tough and strong and, you know, I don't claim that I was like Superman. You know, I was a human being, you know, a young 24, 25 year old guy. So anyway, plus being sick so. And poor Chris got, she had malaria and so she was miserable. I mean, she was, I think, whatever, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:19] Had a fever.

JURMO: [00:40:21] Whatever. I mean, multiple symptoms, I'll put it that way. So it was not the most pleasant home stay.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:29] OK.

JURMO: [00:40:30] And but and, you know, I don't think, you know, Peace Corps staff did much to prepare the host families. But, you know, like, of course, they were, my family that I ended up developing a strong relationship with for not just my three years as a PCV, but I subsequently went back to The Gambia a couple of years later for another two years under an AID project, USAID, and all those five years was very tight with that family, which I could tell you more about. But anyway, that was my home stay type of experience.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:07] Yeah. So why don't you take time out and talk about this family before we get to figuring out what your job is?

JURMO: [00:41:13] Well, um, you know, it's been nice thinking about this and also preparing my some of those audiotapes and photos for the archive at the American University. I've been doing that the past couple of weeks. I thought that would be something I could all finish in one day. And they turned out about two weeks of time, you know. And part of it was I went through, I discovered one of the wonderful aspects of doing this is that I rediscovered or discovered at least roughly eight audiotapes that I made that have sounds of the village and life there,

etc., etc. And, you know, between that and looking at the some of the photos, which I think are really great photos that, you know, it just brings back this flood of memories.

JURMO: [00:42:07] But basically, I lived with a family called, their family name is Sese. He was in the village of Pakalinding, the same place I did, you know, I lived for those years. It's in the sort of like halfway up the Gambia River, maybe one third of the way up the Gambia River. It's 100 miles up the Gambia River. It's a combination of a traditional village and then one that has become more of a district hub where civil servants who lived, who worked up the road at that government headquarters came from all over the country to live there. So it was a bit more of a cosmopolitan, and in some ways a little bit rougher, community. Rougher in the sense that it was like a transit hub. And a lot of, you know, it wasn't the pure, more pure, traditional, isolated village, but that was fine.

JURMO: [00:43:02] And Sese family were part key leaders and key family in the traditional community. They lived right across the little dusty, um, you could barely call it a road, across the street? Across the street from them. Another family was the Kinte family, and the Kinte family was related to Kunta Kinte of Roots fame. And if you look carefully at the Alex Haley's book, Roots, our village of Pakalinding was mentioned in the first or second chapter. I forget exactly where it is in the book, but it's in the early phase of the book where which describes the life of Kunta Kinte in The Gambia before he was captured and taken off as a slave to the United States.

JURMO: [00:43:51] So I lived with the Sese family. This it was headed, well, the patriarch of the family was Fakemo Sese, which was an elderly man who was a religious leader in the community. Like, I'm not sure if he was technically an imam or what the term would be, but he was a very respected, revered religious leader. He was probably 80 years old or so, judging from my memory and the photos of him. His son was my landlord. His name was Landing Sese, L-A-N-D-I-N-G, and I think that basically in Mandinka means the son of God or something like that, if I'm not mistaken. And he was my landlord, he was my mentor, he

spoke English, you know, kind of a pidgin English, but a decent English. He's a wonderful man.

JURMO: [00:44:55] He had three wives, multiple children from the oldest being probably at that time 18 and the youngest being like an infant. By the time I left, his youngest wife had a child in the year I left. In fact, they named the child Paul. I think that was a hint to like, OK, now you're going to basically take care of this kid the rest of your life. And I'm like, hey man, I'm like, you know, I got my own life to live. But still, they said, they gave me a little house that had been built for another volunteer that had lived with them about ten years before. His name was Jim. Jim. And everybody initially would ask me, do you know Jim? You know, like, no, I don't know Jim. He was a guy. He's an American. We've got 360 million people and I don't know all of them yet, you know. But it was funny, you know, as a typical thing.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:48] So this was, the little house was during the home stay or?

JURMO: [00:45:51] Well, initially I didn't, the house was being used as a storage shed when I was in my home stay. But by the time I ended up eventually moving into that house, it was only about a year after. That first year I lived with Mike and Chris.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:05] Oh, it was only the first year.

JURMO: [00:46:07] Yeah. And then by about the second year for various reasons, I decided to move into the village and Chris then, you know, Chris and Mike both went on to different places. And it was a good thing because it, I'm glad. I mean, the idea of volunteers living together, I think honestly, part of the reason I wanted to live with the other volunteers, I personally, because I was sick, I just felt like I can't handle all this stress. I feel crappy. And Mike was really a sweet guy. He cooked for me. He was my nursemaid for that much of that first year. And we had fun, a lot of fun together, and I'm very appreciative of all the great support he gave me. He's a wonderful man. And so, and he still is.

JURMO: [00:46:50] And so anyway, but when I finally really moved full time in that village, you know, it's Landing Sese, my landlord, had three wives, multiple children. Within that compound, he had two brothers living and each of them had their own wives and children. It was around a central courtyard, very, I think probably a very common kind of set up. Multiple houses, small, well, houses. The women would live in their own unit. The children would, the older children would live in their own little areas, etc. It's a traditional agricultural village. Rice. Rice fields down on the river. They grew peanuts as the main crop and a few other things like I think sorghum or millet or something, I forget. Anyway. And I grew up with the sounds and the life of that.

JURMO: [00:47:50] The village was a, um, there was a primary school kind of like just behind my house. And I later learned only from listening carefully to these tapes that I made, you know, just listening in the past couple of weeks, I was listening carefully to some of the tapes. And one of the tapes I went to the primary school and the kid, you know, the teacher welcomed me and the kids saying, row, row, row your boat. Then they sang one song in Mandinka, and then they sang another song in Wolof. And then the kids introduced themselves and they explain where they were from. And it turned out many of them were not from Pakalinding, but from nearby villages, because not every school had a every village had a primary school, so kids would come and board in Pakalinding. So I've never quite sure how they, they must have had relatives or somebody would take these kids in.

JURMO: [00:48:43] And when I was living there, I never realized that many of the kids in the village weren't from the village. They were just boarders, you know. So anyway, it was a fantastic experience and I learned a lot and I made great friends in the. You know, it didn't take long for me to, one light bulb that went on in my head was like, oh, all Africans are not the same. These are all individuals who are just have their own personalities and their own lives. And I just learned that by osmosis, just through experience, I didn't like take a course in that, but it's just like, oh, Tita, this is this wonderful woman. And Funay, this is the oldest of the three wives and got like five kids and works her butt off all day long and carries babies around on her back and cooks and goes in

the rice field and, you know, da da da da da da. And this woman acts this way and that guy this way. And this kid has this personality.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:45] Just like anywhere else.

JURMO: [00:49:46] Just like anywhere else. And that's one of the Peace Corps goals is like intercultural understanding. And I get it. Check, you know, check that one off.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:57] So let's go back to your non-job. So what did you figure out your job was? Or what did you do?

JURMO: [00:50:04] Well, yeah. Well, then this is where luck came in, you know, fortune, good fortune and perseverance, you know? And I, one of the metaphors, I guess, or, you know, or concepts that I had is like in my first six months, somehow one thing I used to say to people was I felt like I've just spent like X number of months locked in a dark room, blindfolded, just, you know, like trying to figure out how to get out. You know, like feel my way around and try to find my way out of this room. And because I had no, almost no one to guide me, you know, and not a lot of prior, relevant prior experience in a foreign culture with, and I was sick. You know, it's like multiple challenges.

JURMO: [00:50:58] But I, the good news is that along the way it became known to other people in the country that I was available to help work on literacy, adult literacy. And it turned out there were a number of other people that had a common interest in that. These included, um, there's a couple of key people. One was a Gambian professional who ran the National Cultural Archives. It's like their national cultural museum. And he was a very astute, creative, strong man named Bakari Sidibe, Gambian. And he had been trained at, uh, I forget the name of it. It's like this school of inter, I don't know if it's School of African and Asian Studies or something like that in England. People who know this field would know the name of the place. I forget the name of it exactly. But he had some kind of course there where he was trained in linguistics and cultural anthropology or something like that. And he had that kind

of background and he was like a very proud, Mandinka proud leader, probably went through independence and etc., etc.

JURMO: [00:52:26] And there was a British man also there named Cyril Eyre, E-Y-R-E, who was assigned to work with the Gambian Agricultural Extensions Unit, which was basically like the farmer education unit. He helped establish that as a tool for educating farmers about agricultural practices, etc. and Extension Aids Unit, EAU. And he, those two gentlemen both had an interest in doing something around functional literacy. And so then they, I basically started meeting with them, and at the recommendation of this Department of Co-op, of Community Development, which I had been assigned to, and they basically. I think they were just relieved to get rid of me because I was, I kept knocking on their door like, what am I supposed to do, you know, you dragged me all? I didn't say it this way, but basically you dragged me all the way over here.

JURMO: [00:53:28] And jeez, you know, I'm, my time is valuable, you know, like I've only got two years, you know? And so anyway, basically it was agreed that I would be seconded to this National Cultural Archives unit, and that became my office. So that's where I started spending more time in the capital city. And I shared an apartment in the capital with three or four other volunteers who would use it as a home base when they had to come to the city to do work. And there were two or three others that were like me. They were doing working in rural communities, but they also wanted to work with the.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:12] In the capital.

JURMO: [00:54:13] You know, the people and the headquarters in the city. So, um. So anyway, we four, we. Basically Mr. Sidibe, Mr. Eyre, I and two or three other people that were also sort of interested in something like functional literacy for rural communities, formed what was called the National Literacy Advisory Committee, which ended up running. We got some funding through the United Nations Development Program. And of course, my time was covered by Peace Corps, and I became the main full-time staff person, sort of a coordinator for, like a jack of all

trades really, for a national, well, it became eventually over my three years became a national functional literacy pilot program that started with a small number of villages, including my home village at Pakalinding, the first, uh, and I'll explain what we did at the village level, and then grew up to somewhere between 18 and 21 villages.

JURMO: [00:55:29] I can't remember the exact number by the time I left three years later. And so what we did, we started a literacy program from scratch, which had multiple aspects to it. One was determining what language you were talking about, and it was actually done in Mandinka for all sorts of linguistic and cultural reasons, and um, the widest spoken language. There had been a lot of work done by the Cultural Archives in developing an orthography for the written version, using the Roman script to write the Mandinka language. They had already been doing, you know, transcribing oral histories and other kind of things in Mandinka. So they had a, you know, expertise in how to write the Mandinka language in a consistent way. And so and so Mr. Sidibe and his team there, they started working with us, uh, me.

JURMO: [00:56:32] And there was another American guy that was there as a Baha'i missionary. His name was Richard Harmson, was very gentle, very kind young man who was, I think, from Iowa. He was trained as an artist, a graphic artist, and he and his young wife and I think they had one or two children where there as Baha'i missionaries. And my first exposure to Baha'is, and I later in my later life as a Peace Corps staff person, also worked with Baha'is in Tonga, just coincidentally. But Richard became was the illustrator and under the direction of Mr. Sidibe, they basically they wrote a primer on, which I think I have a copy of in the materials I'm giving to American University. And it was like The Reading Book, Book One.

JURMO: [00:57:29] And it basically used like a phonics, you know, a phonetic approach to teaching basic words and, you know, basic syllables. Ka, ta, la, sa, na, you know. And Mr. Sidibe did a study of like, what are the most common sounds in the oral language? I mean, it was done relatively scientifically. And so people would learn these syllable sounds and slowly start making simple words and there'd be line

drawings that were very nicely done by Richard, the artist, of, you know, a snake. A snake in Mandinka is sa, you know, S-A, I mean. And tala I think is a pen. No, kala is a pen. Anyway. You know, there would be an illustration of these simple words familiar to people and gradually. And so they would use this book as their reading material in the classes. And then we.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:32] These are farmers basically?

JURMO: [00:58:34] Yeah, they were farming community members, mostly farmers, and it was a mix of people who were actually in the classes. There were mostly more men than women, but there were some women, um, probably a lot of younger kids even would come into classes. We said this is for adults, but we weren't going to like keep kids from coming in. And because there are a lot of kids who never went to school. They didn't have school fees or for whatever life circumstances, they didn't go very far or ever attend primary school. It wasn't, you know, on paper it was universal education. But the reality is that not every kid went to school, but they did want to learn to read. So, um. So those were the early materials. And gradually they got more, we developed more and more reading materials. So because, you know, a key thing was, a big question in every literacy effort, including in the U.S., is you've got to have relevant reading materials for people to practice with, right?

JURMO: [00:59:32] So, um, and so we did that and we developed other side projects. We called them income generating projects as a way for these classes to do projects together and generate income. And that was another aspect that we developed in after a couple of years, we were doing more of those things. We trained young, what we call VFs, village facilitators. These were all young men from selected villages who agreed to become the teachers in these literacy classes. And we trained them, and most of them had at least like six years of schooling and some of them all the way through high school. It ranged in there. And these were often just the most wonderful young men. And, you know, it's like the models that we use in the U.S. of the literacy volunteers. And it's basically that model and we try to train them as

well as we could in the methodology that went with this, these books and materials.

JURMO: [01:00:34] And they ran the classes. We equipped them with lanterns, etc., because most of the classes were run at night, because people were busy during the day. We helped them get, you know, build, get materials to build furniture and create blackboards for the classes, and we'd equip them with chalk. And, you know, there was a lot of logistics in this. So it was like from soup to nuts creating a program. And I was very involved. I mean, I did a lot of the work. I did have counterparts that worked with me, some of whom were just fantastic young men who were really more like. They were, they were assigned to me from either the Department of Community Development, which was my original department, or I think from the Agriculture Department. I forget exactly where all they were originally, who they paid their salaries, but some of them were just fantastic.

JURMO: [01:01:38] They got it really quickly and it was a great pleasure to work with these young guys. They were all men at that time, and for various cultural reasons, it was like the men, it was promoted more for a men's thing. You know, nowadays we might have done more, had more special stuff for women, but, you know, that's the way it was then. So anyway, it was fantastic. And I played a role.

JURMO: [01:02:04] I was, I worked in the capital, but I also would spend time in the rural areas supervising, you know, as a visiting classes, spending nights in the host villages where the classes were, riding around. At that time, Peace Corps volunteers in The Gambia were given motorcycles. I could absolutely not have done my job without a motorcycle. I fully understand the dangers. I've ridden a lot of motorcycles in my life, so I know the dangers of motorcycles and I get it, why Peace Corps doesn't do it. Anyway. But for what it's worth, plus, I was an experienced motorcycle rider before I joined Peace Corps. So I you know, I understood how you have to be careful. You know, I wasn't like a nut driving a motorcycle at high speeds.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:48] So did you do this for three years, for the third year as well?

JURMO: [01:02:52] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:52] You then continued?

JURMO: [01:02:52] Yeah. Yeah. I mean by the time the end of my second year was coming I, by then everything was clicking, you know, like the project was rolling. I mean, I'd gotten beyond that first year of frustration and just started off.

GANZGLASS: [01:03:05] Took almost a whole year?

JURMO: [01:03:07] Oh yeah, it did. I mean, it took me six months before I even started doing any real work outside, you know, nailing, making things for my house, I mean. And, but I mean, the advantage of that initial six months also gave me time to get to know the community and learn Mandinka, etc., etc. But, you know, it wasn't like totally wasted time. But in any case, that was *c'est la vie*, that's the way it was and um.

GANZGLASS: [01:03:36] That sounds great.

JURMO: [01:03:36] And we ended up and I was like the secretary of this literacy committee. I wrote all the minutes of the meetings and wrote reports, etc., and some of, many of which, all of which really, or a good bulk of which are in this collection I'm giving to American University. I'm. I was very meticulous. I have all these notebooks from all these meetings and things I went to and I've been thumbing through a few of them just this past week or so. And I think, man, that was a lot of.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:08] It was a lot of work.

JURMO: [01:04:10] A lot of work and this gets to some of the impacts of the work on me professionally. But so that's what we did. And so after and by the end of the second year, I said, man, I don't want to give it up now. It's just getting going. This is getting to be fun, you know, and a great adventure. And I felt so much achievement and I felt like if I left, the thing would kind of fall apart because I, unfortunately, which too

often happens in Peace Corps and in international development type of things, too much was dependent on people like me.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:42] Yeah. So did it continue after the third year?

JURMO: [01:04:45] Well, I will say, yeah. I mean, yes, in parentheses, and I'll explain what I mean by that. So basically the third year we continued and we, and by then they were starting to talk about, oh, this functional literacy thing is a real thing, right? It can actually be done here. So we were doing a demonstration and we had demonstrated that you can do all this stuff of creating a program. You can do all the things I just described, develop a curriculum, train teachers, handle logistics, get the funding, da da. That it can be done. So the government then was saying, oh, we're going to, and this is at the recommendation of a UNESCO team that came in and evaluated our project in roughly the third year. And they recommended, yeah, this should now be, um, formalized.

JURMO: [01:05:37] Not in this kind of informal National Literacy Advisory Committee, which had no official capacity. It was just a group of representatives of about ten different agencies that would meet periodically and in various ways support this project. Although there were really only three or four people that really did very much to make it run. But that's, you know, that's understandable. And so they said that UNESCO agreed that with our feeling like somebody should take this up and make it more formalized and with the real staff and so forth. And so out of this project became a new government department, who was like the Non-formal Education Department or something like that, which was within the ministry of, I think it was within the Ministry of Education, and that all was just getting put into place about the time I left at three years.

JURMO: [01:06:32] And quite honestly, I was a bit trepidatious. I don't know if that's the word. Or worried that this new department wasn't going to fly because of who they were staffing it with. And it was being staffed with a bunch of people that really had no knowledge of our project. And maybe my impression was, had different perspectives on literacy and

how to teach it and how to run things, etc. And honestly, I have had, well, so that was created. I mean, I will say in a way it was one of the achievements. Where that went from there, I am not sure. I honestly to this day don't know quite what ever happened to it. I suspect that it was maybe not particularly successful, but I don't know for a fact.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:25] Mm hmm. But that was an impact in any case.

JURMO: [01:07:28] It was an impact. And there were other volunteers, by the way, that came after me that were assigned to work in that, in this area, and they would probably know more what actually happened. But so that's what I did.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:45] Talk a little bit about the impact, all of that on your career?

JURMO: [01:07:49] Well, I, yeah, I was jotting down yesterday in anticipation of this interview. Like to me there were multiple impacts on me personally and on me professionally and on other things. And can I talk about all those things?

GANZGLASS: [01:08:04] Sure, sure.

JURMO: [01:08:05] You know, on a personal level, as I think I've already described, it was fantastically, uh, had a lot of impact on me personally. I was a young guy, you know, starting out in life and on a personal level, you know, I developed all those great traits. Perseverance, resilience, creativity, all the good stuff that, you know, these are life skills that we all need in our, not just in our professional lives, but in our personal lives, our family lives, etc. I'm going to kind of refer to my notes here to kind of keep this little focus. You know, basically Peace Corps, my Peace Corps experience opened the door for me, and less directly for others, to many kind of positive opportunities.

JURMO: [01:09:01] On a personal level, I made many friends, both Americans and others from other cultures, certainly from Gambia. I have great memories that I carry with me now. I mean, you can see that I'm still, it

doesn't take much to provoke me to talk about all these great people. I have friendships that I'm still, at least with some of my American PCV friends, because we all live in the States and stay in touch. You know, I still am in touch with some of these folks. I have great fondness for my, the people I worked with and lived with in The Gambia. I mentioned some of these people. I could go on and on about these individuals, how great they were in so many ways and how kind they were to me and how much fun we had. And the personal relationships, as strong as I've ever had anywhere in my life. And they're profound, you know, profound. And I carry these memories around all the time.

JURMO: [01:09:58] I have these flashbacks to my life in that village, the people there and the wonderful, you know, how wonderful those people were and how kind and fun they were. And, um, you know, professionally, tremendous impact. It started out, it introduced me to my profession of adult literacy education, although I've done other literacy related things in primary school level, which I'll talk about as well. But most of my 40 some year career has been in adult literacy. Most in the U.S., but some in Africa. And then I have also done work for Peace Corps Tonga more recently in a literacy project. So I developed interest and expertise in the area of literacy education. It led me to apply for and graduate from a doctoral program in international education at the University of Massachusetts.

JURMO: [01:11:05] Because right after my Peace Corps experience, I enrolled at UMass and went on to study adult literacy and related non-formal education subjects which I've used in my career. I wrote a very complex, extensive doctoral dissertation on participatory literacy education in the United States, but that was triggered by what I learned in The Gambia, my interest in those areas. Um. I played many roles in my career, and many of those are similar roles to ones I started learning in The Gambia. I mean, everything from program planner to evaluator to teacher trainer to curriculum developer to logistics, you know, operations, financial management, project proposal writing, all that stuff. I did that as a young volunteer.

JURMO: [01:12:10] And actually have many of those, again, I don't know if I have, I don't think I have a hoarding instinct. I like to call it the researcher in me. I saved all my notes and proposals, etc., in a box which I basically didn't look at for 30 years until now, or 30 plus years. And those are being handed over to American University. And this led to me doing many different projects. And by odd coincidence, I'm sitting here across from Evelyn Ganzglass, who is a respected professional in basically my field that I interacted with in my early career in the United States.

GANZGLASS: [01:12:55] You never know.

JURMO: [01:12:55] Yeah, it's a funny thing that we're sitting across the table now and have had similar experience, many similar experiences. Um. Other aspects of my, the impact on me personally was, you know, solidifying my interest and confidence and motivation around sort of intercultural communications and that kind of work. You know, I went into an international education program at UMass, and not only that, I met my wife, who was a Colombian immigrant at UMass. And we ended up getting married and going back to The Gambia about two years after I had left my Peace Corps experience, because I spent about two years on campus at UMass. We got married. And I went back to UMass or to The Gambia with her. She by then was a trained registered nurse.

JURMO: [01:13:55] I went back to work for the Cooperative League of the USA, CLUSA, which now has a different name. I forget, it's like the National Cooperation Cooperatives Association or something like that. It's still an entity, an NGO based in Washington area, and they brought me to The Gambia a second time to work on a farmer numeracy slash literacy project. We focused on teaching farmers how to do the calculations needed to sell their produce and other things in that member education program for co-op members. And so I spent another year and a half to two years there in The Gambia again, interacting with many of the same people I had worked with as a PCV, although they were separate projects.

JURMO: [01:14:44] My wife, my dear wife Olga, to whom I'm still married, was volunteering there in The Gambia in a village health clinic run by an Irish priest. So we had that wonderful experience together. We have two children, each of whom have studied things like linguistics and intercultural communications and have gone onto careers and graduate studies in those kind of related areas. They, I think, benefited from growing up in a dual cultural family because we were very, we've had very close relations with my wife's Colombian immigrant family. And they, the Colombian immigrant grandparents helped to raise our children and the whole extended family. So and I think our kids heard.

GANZGLASS: [01:15:41] Telling stories.

JURMO: [01:15:41] Would hear me talking about Peace Corps, you know, and all the decorations on the walls and stuff. And, you know, they got it, that this stuff was legit and interesting. And we traveled a lot with them as part of their upbringing, vacations to other countries and so forth. So we would, it was in the air in our family. And again, that experience helped me develop all those generic transferable life skills of creativity and resilience and respect for other cultures and resourcefulness, etc. And I, by the way, I've just written an article on those themes for the Worldview magazine.

GANZGLASS: [01:16:30] Oh.

JURMO: [01:16:30] I'm not sure if it's going to get published. I'm waiting to hear whether it is. But there's an issue of the Worldview magazine coming out soon that's around the theme of education. And I actually wrote not so much about my experience in The Gambia, but my experience working more recently for Peace Corps Tonga, which I'll tell you about in a minute.

GANZGLASS: [01:16:51] Yeah.

JURMO: [01:16:52] But the project there in The Gambia had impacts on The Gambia in the sense that it, as I mentioned earlier, led to the creation of a national non-formal education unit or department. We did run

literacy classes in 20 some villages. We hope that people learned, we know people learned stuff. Now, whether they were able to use it and sustain it is always a question. We trained all sorts of young people as village facilitators. That was a positive thing. We did other projects, we helped build community centers, etc. And I got very proud, to go back to the impacts on me. I mean, I learned how to speak in public. I was a nervous wreck before I went to Peace Corps ever speaking in front of a group. And, you know, I remember almost literally the day and the moment that that went away. And I was asked to speak on the Gambian, Radio Gambia, the national radio, that somebody interviewed me and I started, but I was about a year into the project. And by then, again, kind of the light bulb had gone on in my head like, hey, I really.

GANZGLASS: [01:18:12] You can do this.

JURMO: [01:18:12] I can do this because I was talking about something I was passionate about and informed about, and I was suddenly like a national expert. I was like this 26 year old guy on the national radio speaking about this project. And you can see, I'm still talking about it, you know. I mean, there's been a gap in, I haven't been talking for 30 years about it. But, you know, it enabled me to speak confidently. I got all sorts of writing skills as reflected in the documents I'm leaving behind. I also got a kind of a critical thinking about the, um, an understanding of kind of the political and cultural challenges of running these kind of projects. It's not like, you know, there's some tough questions to ask about, you know, the, where countries want to go with themselves and what support it's going to be given, who's going to benefit, etc., etc.

JURMO: [01:19:07] And I've brought those with me to my work in the U.S. and I still ask these questions every day, even right this very minute, about the direction of a country and what roles education can play in it. And, you know, empathy and understanding of other cultures and an interest and willingness and, you know, joy, I guess, and motivation to work in other cultural, multicultural settings. And I mean, I could keep going, but.

GANZGLASS: [01:19:36] Well, apply that to Tonga. Let's spend a few minutes on Tonga.

JURMO: [01:19:40] All right, fast forward 35 or 40 years to 2012. And at that point, or maybe in 2011, my wife and I had become empty nesters. Our two young adult children had moved out. They'd then finished their college educations, one of them here at GWU in international affairs undergrad. And so we are, you know, we had said we had been planning at some point to go back to international development kind of stuff possibly. And we sold, basically sold our house, our four bedroom house in the suburbs of New Jersey, got rid of all that stuff that was, a lot of the stuff, most of the stuff that was in that four bedroom house.

JURMO: [01:20:38] And I applied for and got a job as director of programming and training. And it was like a dual job. For the first three years there, it was country representative, which I'll explain what that is, in Peace Corps Tonga. You know, another side of the world, a different environment, and a different, somewhat different project. Because the Peace Corps volunteers there, I was supposed to help really launch a new project for what eventually became roughly 30 volunteers spread across this archipelago of islands that's called the Kingdom of Tonga in the South Pacific. We were launching an English literacy project, and basically we were trying to help the Ministry of Education in Tonga to modernize how English literacy was taught and supported in the country. And we had multiple objectives, etc. And I won't go into all the details.

JURMO: [01:21:37] You can read about it. I wrote an article for UNESCO about it after I left Peace Corps Tonga. I ended up staying there for five years. The country representative role was just as a footnote. Peace Corps at that time was, I think, as a cost saving measure. So they'd brought together three different countries under one country director. So I was, and he was based in Fiji, so I kind of was his representative and kind of like an assistant country director in Tonga in his place. So I had a kind of a dual role with a lot of responsibility. And we ended up, I think, doing a great project as I worked to support our wonderful Peace Corps volunteers. You know, I reflected frequently on my time in The

Gambia. Sometimes I'd say, ah, you guys got it so easy. You all got cell phones and running water and electricity and etc., etc., and a real job in. And what are you complaining so much about, you know? And much better medical care than I had.

JURMO: [01:22:47] But I tried not to say that out loud. My wife would hear me say that probably every evening over the dinner table, but we both got it, you know. It was a different time and place. But the good news is the volunteers have done a great job there. The project continues. So that was another. That and then all the other professional projects I had between my PCV experience and my Peace Corps staff experience, 30 some years, were impacted by my, directly or indirectly, by my Peace Corps experience.

GANZGLASS: [01:23:23] That's great. Anything else you want to add?

JURMO: [01:23:28] Um.

GANZGLASS: [01:23:28] I think you've covered all of the bases.

JURMO: [01:23:29] Yeah, I've probably gone, I've probably gone longer than your thing but.

GANZGLASS: [01:23:34] That's fine.

JURMO: [01:23:34] Your time thing. You know, I think, um, I'm just grateful. You know, I'm grateful for the people who put that Peace Corps together, for all the great support I got from the many people I worked with. My fellow volunteers, my host family, the coworkers I had, the villagers in the, you know, in The Gambia, the staff, the Peace Corps staff, the medical officer there who took care of me, you know, in my sick times, and the support I got from my family at home, you know, long distance. And I'm proud of, you know, I think I was a great success. I think I had a great success.

GANZGLASS: [01:24:23] It sounds like it.

JURMO: [01:24:25] And I'm, you know, I maintain an interest in Peace Corps. And I went back and spent another five years at Peace Corps Tonga more recently, which was also fantastic. I could talk another couple of hours about that, but I won't. But that, you know, I wouldn't have done that if I hadn't had such a great experience. And so I'm grateful for that. And I think it's, you know, there's always things that could be improved in any agency. But on balance, my three cheers to Peace Corps and my really heartfelt thanks and appreciation for doing what it does. And it's a great, it's a great use of taxpayers' money, I'll put it that way.

GANZGLASS: [01:25:16] That's a good way to end the interview. Thank you, Paul.

JURMO: [01:25:20] Thank you, Evelyn.

[END OF INTERVIEW]