

Christian EreK Porter Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
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Biographical Note

Christian EreK Porter served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi from 2011 to 2013 as a management consultant in the environment sector.

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Oral History Interview

with

Christian EreK Porter

August 26, 2019
Cary, North Carolina

By Ivan C. Browning

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

BROWNING: [00:00:00] Today is August 26th, 2019. This is Ivan Browning. I'm interviewing Christian EreK Porter, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi from 2011 to 2013 in a management consulting project. Christian, why did you join the Peace Corps?

PORTER: [00:00:24] Well, initially my thought was that I wanted to do something that was a little bit abnormal, that was a little bit different than what, uh, a lot of my friends and family were doing. Uh, so I knew I wanted to travel. So I looked into different things, uh, different projects, teaching English or, or working at universities abroad. And then I had some friends who had signed up and, and some who had gone and some who had not gone to the Peace Corps because, uh, you know, the process was quite, quite a while back then, uh, between initial interview and going. And during that time, they were talking to me about it and how interested they were in going. And it kind of got me interested. And I did a little more research. And then I thought it, you

know, it fit what I wanted to do. So I, uh, went through the interview process myself. And, uh, 18 short months later, I was, I was taking off.

BROWNING: [00:01:21] So were you still in school when you started looking at the Peace Corps and started the interview process?

PORTER: [00:01:27] No, I was about a year out of, uh, university. Um, I had gone, I had gone through University of Texas at San Antonio, graduated, and then I moved back to D.C., where I grew up, and I was working. And, um, it wasn't something, I wasn't doing anything that I necessarily wanted to do. Uh, and I knew that I wanted to, like I said, travel and do something international. So, um, I looked into the Peace Corps.

BROWNING: [00:01:57] When you talk about doing something international, was that interest as a result of something you had encountered when you were younger, growing up?

PORTER: [00:02:06] Uh, in a way. I had always wanted to travel and I wasn't able to. Uh, it was very difficult for me to get a passport. So I had never gotten a passport before Peace Corps. It actually, it took Peace Corps calling the State Department, who ended up calling INS to even get me a passport in the first place. So, uh, part of that was, um, part of the reason why I never really traveled out of the country was that. And, um, obviously, at that time, I couldn't afford to go anywhere. Um, so the Peace Corps was also, they gave me the ability to, to, you know, it wasn't. A lot of the other programs that are similar to Peace Corps, they ask for X amount of money and I didn't have any money. Um, so it was one of those opportunities that it was kind of for everyone, you know, even people who didn't have X amount of money to, to pay for, for a trip could, could go do. So that was a big factor in me being able to go.

BROWNING: [00:03:06] Uh, so from the time you had your first, or you put in your application and had your first interview, it was about 18 months before you were, had been accepted?

PORTER: [00:03:18] Mm hmm.

BROWNING: [00:03:19] And, you know, they sent you an invitation to serve. Um, now, did you have a particular country or project in mind when you applied?

PORTER: [00:03:30] No, I didn't. Um, so when I applied, well, I was pretty sure I was going to do business development because I had gotten my degree in business. I had been working in small business development throughout college and after college as well. Um, when I applied, my initial interview, um, they had put me in for education, which I thought was interesting. Uh, they told me that maybe a day after my interview, and then a few hours after that, I got a call back from the recruiter who said that he had reviewed my resume again, and this time he said, oh, actually, we are looking for business development people. So they changed me to business development.

PORTER: [00:04:07] Uh, he told me I was probably going to go to the Ukraine, but I was, I was, uh, scheduled to go to Eastern Europe. Um, and then months later when I got my invitation, it was to Malawi. So I called them and I asked them, uh, you know, like, I think I got mixed up here. And they, they said, uh, no, they were sending me for a particular project because Malawi doesn't have a business development group, uh, but there was a particular project they wanted me to do in Malawi.

BROWNING: [00:04:39] I see. Um, and what was your first thought? And because apparently you had your mind set toward Eastern Europe. And what was your thinking when you heard Africa?

PORTER: [00:04:51] Well, I heard Malawi. So my first thought was, where is Malawi? Um, I knew Malawi was a country in sub-Saharan Africa, but I didn't know anything about it. I didn't know where necessarily it was or, or what the culture was like, obviously. Um, so I looked it up, did just normal Wikipedia, Google, YouTube kind of things, looked it up. I was pretty excited because I was not looking forward to, uh, cold weather. I don't do well in cold weather. And that was something that made me nervous about the Ukraine, uh, where Malawi's quite the opposite. It

was pretty much hot everywhere, uh, which I do well in. So from a climate perspective, I was, I was interested. Also, I was interested that, um, I knew that there wasn't going to be too many other business development people with me, so I thought that would make it a little more interesting because it'd be just a little different.

BROWNING: [00:05:46] I see. Um, what did your friends and family think of your decision to go to Malawi for two years?

PORTER: [00:05:55] Honestly?

BROWNING: [00:05:56] Yes.

PORTER: [00:05:57] Uh, I did not get too much support. Uh, people weren't really. Most people tried to talk me out of it. Um, it was, it was mostly I got, I got comments like, that's what rich people go do, you know? And when you come from a less affluent background, you're not expected to do stuff like that.

BROWNING: [00:06:22] I see. That's interesting that, you know, your, um, folks around you thought that Peace Corps was kind of a, um, a thing that the, the wealthier classes did.

PORTER: [00:06:34] Right. And I was expected to go get a job, 9 to 5, make money, kind of, you know, which all makes sense. I'm not saying it wasn't, you know, bad advice, but it was not exactly what I wanted to do.

BROWNING: [00:06:48] Did you, uh, in getting yourself ready to go to Malawi, what kind of, what kind of process did you, did you do, besides the research?

PORTER: [00:06:59] I actually, and this is where I feel like I do kind of differ from a lot of people. I wanted it to be a very, um. I want to be, I didn't want to go in with any notions or, or, uh, perceptions. So I did very little bit of research on the Peace Corps and very little bit of research on Malawi. I went in as blank as I could because I wanted to get everything as an

experience, rather than judging it based off of what I had read. So I actually, and to this day, I still feel like for me that was the best way of approaching it, because everything was very new and interesting. And when I spoke with other people in my group, they were saying, oh well, I read this book, so I was expecting this, and or I watched these videos, so I was expecting that where for me, everything was greenfield. Everything was like clean slate. And I got to just enjoy things moment by moment rather than comparing it to, you know what, my expectations of what Malawi was going to be like were.

BROWNING: [00:08:09] Makes sense to me.

PORTER: [00:08:10] Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:08:11] And instead of going in with a lot of preconceived notions, you just went in with an open.

PORTER: [00:08:16] Right.

BROWNING: [00:08:17] Attitude and mind. Um. How long was it between the time you got your invitation and, and when you made up your mind that you were going to accept?

PORTER: [00:08:29] The moment I applied, I was going to go.

BROWNING: [00:08:32] If you got accepted.

PORTER: [00:08:33] If I got accepted. That's, that's the way I tend to work, is I'll make a decision to do something and then I will follow through on that. Uh, so I knew I was going to go when I got my invitation. Like I said, I was a little, I thought there was a mistake at first, but once I got that all cleared out, which was, you know, the next day or so, um, I knew I was going to accept and go.

BROWNING: [00:08:55] Great. So now you're, um, staging, I guess, and meeting up with, were there others in the group that were going to go over to training with you, or were you on your own?

PORTER: [00:09:11] Yeah, we all met up in Philadelphia for, I want to say, three days, uh, just to get, uh, paperwork done. I think we had to get a couple of vaccines. Um, I don't quite remember everything you had to do. I think there was, I think it was mostly used as an orientation. So people were talking about, you know, particular rules for, any organization you join usually has an orientation day or two. So it was no different than that. Uh, so I actually flew up from DC to Philadelphia with someone else. I saw a woman get on the plane with like, a huge bag and, you know, all that. And I asked her, because the plane was like half empty, I asked her if she was going to the Peace Corps, and she said yes. So we sat next to each other and we talked the whole way up, and we ended up being in the same group and went to Malawi together.

BROWNING: [00:10:06] Great, indeed. Um, so after your three days of orientation in Philadelphia, you, you took wing and, uh, what was your, um, you know, what was your travel itinerary? I'm assuming there was not a direct flight.

PORTER: [00:10:23] No. Well, no, we took a, we took a night bus to New York and we flew out of, I want to say JFK, but it could have been LaGuardia. Um, and we flew to South Africa. So that's a decent flight, um.

BROWNING: [00:10:35] How many hours?

PORTER: [00:10:35] A twelve hour flight. Uh, so we were, our group was maybe half the plane because it was, we, I flew with the environment group, which I was a part of, and the health group. So the two groups went through all of their training. Maybe not the same specific trainings, but we went through the training process together. Um, so there was, I want to say 50 or so of us. So all on the same plane. So we had that whole area of the plane. So we all just chatted and everything like that, uh, you know, got to know each other on the flight over there.

PORTER: [00:11:12] Um, so we went, we went to Joburg [Johannesburg] and then Joburg to Lilongwe, which is the capital of Malawi. Um, and then we took busses from Lilongwe to Dedza College, which is about an hour south of Lilongwe by private car, um, where we were for, for most of our training. Uh, my bus broke down about halfway through. I think they got a flat tire, I want to say. Um, so we actually got a chance to, like, walk around in some village by the side of the road, uh, which was really exciting because usually they kind of keep you at the college and keep you away from, you know, from anything for a couple of weeks to let you adjust. But we were two hours off the plane and we were sitting in some village, like not necessarily talking to anyone, but being, you know, in a, in a different culture, completely just right, right off the get go.

BROWNING: [00:12:06] What, uh, what were your impressions when you first got off the plane and started, you know, being transported through a city in Africa?

PORTER: [00:12:15] It's very hot. And I had lived in San Antonio, um, which is not by any means a cool city. Uh, but I didn't expect it to be quite that hot. Um, and just, uh, you know, you get off of runway, right? And you're walking, you're walking across, like, maybe 200 meters of some runway into this shabby concrete building that is like the international airport of Malawi. And you're thinking like, oh, okay. Like, I've never seen an airport like this, you know? And you're just, I feel like you're, I was always kind of surprised because, like, I understood that Malawi being the poorest, least developed nation in the world is not going to have like running water and electricity in homes.

PORTER: [00:13:05] But to not have things like that in airports was surprising, you know, like. And of course, the Lilongwe airport has electricity and running water. But to have it be so bare and have it be so, uh, opposite of what you'd think of an airport in America with, like, bustling and clean and efficient. And it was the opposite of all that was just very, uh, very interesting to me.

BROWNING: [00:13:28] Welcome to Africa.

PORTER: [00:13:29] Yes, yes.

BROWNING: [00:13:30] Welcome to Malawi. Uh, did you have a Peace Corps representative meeting the group at the airport?

PORTER: [00:13:36] It was actually really nice. We had a couple of staff members who got there, but we also, Malawi also did, um, and I don't know if they do it still, but they did at the time when I was there, was they would have volunteers who are currently serving, uh, whoever just happened to be in Lilongwe that day, I think. They would come to the airport and they would cheer for you when you got off the plane. So when we got off the plane, there was this bunch of people cheering for us, which was really nice.

BROWNING: [00:14:01] That was good. That was good. So describe where you were trained, the physical site.

PORTER: [00:14:10] So we trained in the mountains in Dedza College, which are actually decently cold compared to Malawi. So it's one of those things where um, my first year there, they weren't cold. My second year there, they were very, very cold. And obviously it was because I had gotten so used to everything being hot. Um, but yeah, we trained in the mountains in Dedza College, which was, was interesting. So our first week was in the college, so we really didn't, we really weren't around Malawians who didn't work for Peace Corps. And then the second week we go to, uh, our training villages. So we had four training villages grouped into two groups that could walk to each other.

PORTER: [00:14:51] Mine was the most remote, least developed of the four villages, which I think is probably good to learn that way, because other people had like electricity and water and stuff like that. And then if you go to site and you don't have those things, you don't know necessarily how to deal without them, right? Um, so mine wasn't like that and it was, it was an interesting situation. My family spoke zero English, couldn't say hello. Um, I spoke zero Chichewa. Um, so everything was just like hand motions and. And by the way, that

doesn't always translate. Um, and just trying your best to kind of figure everything out, um, just with, like, you know, pointing at things and everything like that.

BROWNING: [00:15:41] So in your, in your training village, were you staying with a family or?

PORTER: [00:15:47] I was.

BROWNING: [00:15:47] Okay.

PORTER: [00:15:48] Yeah. So I stayed with a family. It was a mother, a father, two daughters who were maybe 14 and 12-ish, and a young boy maybe 3 or 4. Um, again, they, they were very, very funny, I'll say, for, for the Chewa people. Uh, that's the tribe that lives in that area. Uh, they were, they are very, very funny people. Everything's a joke. And even if you don't, if, even if you can't say a punchline, you can still be humorous. And they were just all, like the kids were funny. The parents were funny.

PORTER: [00:16:25] I never learned their names. I stayed with them for like eight weeks, and every time they said their name, it was something different. You know, it was an English name because they were trying to be nice to me, but it was always like a biblical English name. So one day the daughter's name is Mary, but the next day it's, you know, you know, a different. I don't know my, I don't know the Bible, but it was just a different, like biblical name because they were just trying to give me a nickname to call them. But the result was I never knew their names. And I know it really wasn't that important, right? Because you call the father "father," you call the mother "mother," you call the girls "sister" and you call the boy "brother." So it wasn't that big of a deal not to know their names. But I always thought that was funny. That I live with a family for eight weeks and never learned their names.

BROWNING: [00:17:10] That is interesting. But, um, they would provide you with a different name each day, and they weren't particularly committed to the?

PORTER: [00:17:18] Right. And then the next day they just chose a different one that I could call them if I wanted to.

BROWNING: [00:17:23] I see. Well, they obviously had some biblical exposure, I guess.

PORTER: [00:17:27] Right. And they were having fun with me. Like I said, they're a joking, fun culture. So they were also just, that was part of the humor of the situation.

BROWNING: [00:17:39] Okay. And then you, did you have to walk back to the college for the actual?

PORTER: [00:17:44] So, so the, the training villages were, I would say like 10 or 15k from the college. So they would pick us up in busses and bring us back to the college if need be. I think we went back to the, if I'm remembering correctly, I think like every Wednesday we went back to the college. Um, but for the most part we stayed in our training villages.

BROWNING: [00:18:04] So what kind of training were you getting in the training village?

PORTER: [00:18:07] So we would have two types of training. One was language and one was, uh, technical trainings. So I can honestly say I didn't get much out of either. Um, so, so only 4 percent of Malawi speaks a language called Chitonga, which was where I was going with a few of my cohort. So, uh, they actually didn't have a teacher who, well, they had one teacher who spoke Chitonga and taught Chitonga, and that's who the health volunteers got. And the environment volunteers got somebody who had once lived with the Tonga people but didn't actually speak the language. So we would sit down at the beginning of every class and we would look at the pieces of paper we had printed from somebody who created it, probably the other teacher. And we as a group, including the teacher, we'd try to figure out what any of this meant. So we really didn't learn any Chitonga.

PORTER: [00:19:06] Um, and then when I went to the environment classes, they were very well taught and I learned a lot, but I wasn't doing environment. So all the other volunteers, except one other volunteer who was in the other health, uh, the other, um, environment village were doing, um, environment, but we were doing business development. So the, so they would teach us about like, uh, poly cropping and uh, how to make, um, compost. All things I don't do and not going to do. So it was interesting from the perspective of learning something I didn't know, but it didn't apply to me. I knew it didn't apply to me. The teachers told me it didn't apply to me, so I mostly just sat in the back and listened in. But I didn't want to take up any valuable like learning experience from any of the other students.

BROWNING: [00:19:58] I see. So, um, yeah. What would your estimate be of your, uh, fluency in Chitonga after training?

PORTER: [00:20:11] Like, so. Oh, I'm going to get really into it. So we. One. So the Director of Language and Training, or whatever the position was, eventually came and sat down, and he actually got into a yelling argument with our teacher because he realized that nothing was being taught in this class. And it wasn't the teacher's fault. He didn't know the language. He was trying his best, and he told us that he told them he didn't know the language. So, you know, like I said, there's not a lot of people who speak this language. So they were kind of in a rock and a hard place, and I understand that. Um, but they ended up getting rid of him. Um, and I think they just put him in a language he did speak, and they brought us in somebody else for like, the last two weeks of training who actually did speak the language. So by the time I left, I could maybe greet people. And that was about it.

BROWNING: [00:21:09] I see. I see. Now is the national language of, um, Malawi Chichewa?

PORTER: [00:21:16] Chichewa, yes.

BROWNING: [00:21:17] Because that happens to be the.

PORTER: [00:21:19] It's like 60 percent of the people in Malawi are Chewa.

BROWNING: [00:21:22] The tribe.

PORTER: [00:21:23] Right. The tribe Chewa. Uh, and then the rest are, uh, then the rest are just kind of broken up. I think maybe 20 percent Tumbuka. And then it gets into like five, 10 percent for the rest of the tribes.

BROWNING: [00:21:35] Right. Right. When you weren't in class at the university, when you were in your training village, specifically with the family, you know, what was it? What was it like around the dinner table?

PORTER: [00:21:55] So there's no dinner table. Um, and I think one of the first meals was the most interesting. So you sit in a mud circled house with, you know, grass roof, and they build a fire in the middle. And the whole family's sitting there. And the fire, because Malawi has very little forest left anymore, uh, so firewood is very expensive and very hard to come by. And so you're burning literally maybe one little stick at a time to cook. And, um, I remember sitting there and it was pitch black in this little room. It was smoky. I could barely breathe. My eyes were watering and, like, I heard laughter. I heard talking from the darkness, but I couldn't see anything. It was so dark.

PORTER: [00:22:51] And that was like my first, that was I think when it really hit me I was in Malawi. Because before you're at the college, you're around Americans, or you're around Malawians who speak perfect English. It wasn't until I was sitting in this little room with a different language going back and forth, and I couldn't see anything but like a little flickering flame from underneath a pot. And I was like, I'm in Malawi now. This. This is it.

PORTER: [00:23:18] So once the food was prepared, we would move into the house, the main house, not where I stayed, but the main house. And, um, you would eat on the floor so everyone would just sit and eat and you didn't necessarily have your own plate. There were, you know, everything was just like plates of food. And they, they eat a substance called *nsima*, which is, um, or I guess the Chichewa call it, uh, *nsima*,

which is a, like a cornmeal, but much more finely ground and bleached until it's flour, boiled with water, until it comes to the consistency of, of, some people say mashed potatoes. I say wet notebook paper. Uh, but it tastes fine. But that's just the consistency of it.

PORTER: [00:24:06] And, uh, you, you take it in your hand and you roll it until it's like a dense ball and you dip it into, um. *Ndiwo* is the word. It's, it means something that's not the *nsima*. So. So it might be, um, beans or they, they make, uh, tomatoes and onion. Um, they like, make a, I don't want to say salsa, but it's just like.

BROWNING: [00:24:39] Sauce?

PORTER: [00:24:39] Sauce. Yes. Um, or you might have some greens. So the greens are always boiled, so, so it'd be boiled, um, mustard greens or boiled, um, uh, pumpkin leaves or something along those lines. Well, when you're cooking, you're only cooking one thing at a time. So the *nsima* must be hot. So the *nsima* is the last thing you cook. So the first thing you cook is usually the greens. So when you're eating, the *nsima* is boiling hot in your hand. But the greens are always like ice cold by the time you're eating. So one thing I learned was, if you grab the *nsima* and it's too hot, you can always stick your hands in the greens to cool, cool your fingers down.

PORTER: [00:25:19] Um, so, but again, it's, my family didn't have any electricity or anything, so it's. We might have like turned on like one little flashlight or like maybe there's a candle in the corner burning. But you really can't see anything, so you kind of feel around for a bowl, and then you kind of just like, you try to figure out what's in the bowl, and that's kind of how you eat.

BROWNING: [00:25:47] Well, it sounds like a very informal dining.

PORTER: [00:25:52] Yes. And it's a, it's a very family orientated culture. So. So the thought of eating your plate while someone else eats their plate is very strange.

BROWNING: [00:26:07] So it was family style dining in the best sense of the word.

PORTER: [00:26:11] Right there on the floor.

BROWNING: [00:26:13] So, uh, do you have a favorite memory of training?

PORTER: [00:26:19] Um, well, we had a day off once, uh, that we didn't have too many days off, but we did have a one day off, and I just walked around. And I went for like a very long walk, uh, maybe a 15 kilometer walk. And I, and I, and I didn't do this on purpose, but I ended up walking to a neighboring village that was even more remote than my village, and the people came running out of their houses because they had never seen a non-Malawian before. So people were like touching my skin, touching my hair. Uh, you know, like old ladies were coming out of their houses just to look at me. And that was the first time I'd ever gotten that. And I thought that was like. I guess I never thought of that being a possibility. I mean, they didn't think I was, you know, they knew about white people, but they never actually physically seen one. And they probably knew that there was a group of white people 10k away, but they never really seen one. So it was very interesting. Babies crying, you know, it was, it was a very funny, very interesting situation.

PORTER: [00:27:27] The nicest people, but obviously I couldn't speak to them. So I was never being taught Chichewa. That was a very difficult thing about my training was, I was being taught kind of Chitonga, but I was never being taught Chichewa. So I was never able to really grow in my training village like the other people who, other Peace Corps volunteers who were learning Chichewa, who were learning to have conversations with their family and, you know, stuff like that. I was never, I never had that opportunity. So, um, you know, it was fine because I was able just to kind of communicate a little. But, um, I never was able to actually like have even a rudimentary conversation.

BROWNING: [00:28:09] So. Yeah. You would say that, you know, the, the language component of your training was kind of weak?

PORTER: [00:28:17] Yeah. But it was also the situation where they were teaching me the language of where I was going, not where I was staying, which makes a lot of sense. It was just while I was staying there, it was unfortunate. I did, I was able to join the soccer team for the village of my training village, um, which was fun. I got to, got to play soccer with the guys and it was just, it was a good time.

BROWNING: [00:28:39] Do, in the, in the training village, they were speaking Chichewa?

PORTER: [00:28:46] Yes.

BROWNING: [00:28:46] Because they were.

PORTER: [00:28:47] They were Chewa.

BROWNING: [00:28:48] They were Chewa.

PORTER: [00:28:49] Yes.

BROWNING: [00:28:49] Okay.

PORTER: [00:28:50] So the whole country for the most part, I mean, when you get out into the bush, the people only speak the language of their area. But for the most part the country all speaks Chichewa, but they'll also speak their language if they're Tumbuka or if they're, you know, Lomwe, or Tonga like my tribe. But this village, because they already spoke Chichewa, didn't speak any other language.

BROWNING: [00:29:12] I see. Um, okay. And um, so what was the length of the training period again?

PORTER: [00:29:19] About two months.

BROWNING: [00:29:20] Okay. And, uh, what happened after training?

PORTER: [00:29:25] So at the end of our training, we had a few days that we went to a site visit. So I went up to my village. I lived basically in the suburbs of a, of a provincial capital. So like a state capital.

BROWNING: [00:29:40] What city? So what city was that?

PORTER: [00:29:42] It was called Nkhata Bay. Uh, and if you ever want to Google it, it's absolutely beautiful. Um, it's, I always laugh about, it's kind of the Vegas of Malawi, but it's, um, it's on the lake, Lake Malawi. Um, and it's like a beach resort town, but it's also where 80 percent of the production of honey is in Malawi.

BROWNING: [00:30:07] Okay. So you, you finished up training and you did a couple days orientation.

PORTER: [00:30:14] Yep.

BROWNING: [00:30:14] Did, did anybody bail from the training at the end before taking their assignment?

PORTER: [00:30:19] I don't know if anyone bailed at the end. We had, we had someone not show up in Philadelphia. And we had someone who, her very first day in, uh, when we were all going to our, our training village, which is like five days into country. She left that day. She, she couldn't, she didn't want to deal with it. Um, and she had her, she had good reasons. Um, you know, it's not every, not every place is for everyone and everything like that. So she left. Uh, but I don't. I think after that, we, everyone swore in. We actually didn't have too many people leave. It was strange when someone eats heat out of our group. I think we only had maybe 4 or 5 the whole time out of like 50. That's really not too bad.

BROWNING: [00:31:03] No, I'd say that's a pretty high percentage of people that hang in there.

PORTER: [00:31:07] Mm hmm.

BROWNING: [00:31:08] That's good. Um, so tell me about, um, your reaction to, uh, Nkhata Bay.

PORTER: [00:31:17] So I get to Nkhata Bay and the volunteer who was before me was still there, and he would remain there for, I want to say my first like 3 or 4 months he stayed. And then he stayed in country, but he was down in the south after that. Um, and Nkhata Bay is one of those places that I think you either love it or you hate it. It had, it had all the best resorts, it had all the best bars and nightlife and fun things to do. But, but I always, like, equate it to Vegas. Like, Vegas isn't fun to people who live in Vegas. Um, you know, so for me, my first few months, people would always call me and say, hey, I'm in, I'm in Nkhata Bay. Come on in, you know, let's go to the beach or let's go get a drink or let's go do this or let's go do that.

PORTER: [00:32:06] And I realized after maybe 4 or 5 of these things, I said, this is going to happen every day. Because it's always, you know, there was 100 and something, 125 volunteers in Malawi. At any given time, one of them's going to be on vacation, and they're probably going to be in Nkhata Bay, right? So I'm not going to, I'm not going to be on vacation all those days. So I had to really, I had to actually reel it back and go, well, no, I want to stay at home. I want to stay in my village, which is about 5k outside of the city, and I want to like do my thing and not always be being pulled in by Nkhata Bay.

PORTER: [00:32:44] And I realized that, um, that's not always true of volunteers who live around Nkhata Bay. And I realized that maybe a year in, I had some people in my village talk to me, and they said I was very strange. When I asked them why, they said that because you always stay here. You don't go and stay in Nkhata Bay. And you know, because they, when, when they see white people, the white people are almost always in Nkhata Bay, where I was happier out in my village, at my home in the village.

BROWNING: [00:33:12] And why do you think that was?

PORTER: [00:33:16] Um, I just enjoyed my friends and my neighbors, and, and I'll get into it a little bit when I get into my actual work. But I wasn't home very often, so when I was home, I wanted to be, that was my time for myself. Uh, and I didn't want to have to share that time, I think. Um, so, so it was very cathartic for me to go home and relax.

BROWNING: [00:33:44] That makes sense. So tell me about your, uh, work assignment and how you approach that. Were you, did you get introduced by a Peace Corps staffer or, or some, uh, a Malawian that took you to your assignment?

PORTER: [00:34:04] There was, there was no debate of what I was doing in Peace Corps. A lot of people get to, come to their village, and they have to kind of like figure out what they're going to do. A lot don't, but a lot do. Um, I went, I knew from one of the first days I was in country that I was going to Nkhata Bay, I was working for the co-op. Um, so when I got there, the, I was the third volunteer. So two volunteers before me had worked at the co-op, and the second volunteer introduced me to the, the people at the co-op and who I'd be working with and all that. And I sat down with them and had meetings with them about what they did, how they did it. Um.

BROWNING: [00:34:47] So tell us a bit more about the co-op.

PORTER: [00:34:50] So the Nkhata Bay Honey Cooperative was, uh, started about ten years before I got to country, so the early 2000s. It was started because, um, and this is not just a Malawi thing. It's, it happens in a lot of developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is that there's very few buyers of goods. So, uh, if you're talking about cotton, uh, honey, uh, coffee beans, tobacco, whatever the situation, there's very few buyers. So. So that creates an industry structure where the buyers have all the power. High buying power, they call it in business. Um, so what was happening was, I think there was maybe 2 to 3 buyers in the early 2000s of honey. And they would just get together before the crop was due and they would say, hey, what are we going to buy honey for? And they would find the absolute lowest rate that people would still sell it to them for, uh, but where they could

maximize their profits. Which is exactly what you'd expect in a situation like that.

PORTER: [00:36:00] So the co-op got together was a group of farmers, literally hundreds, who got together one day and just said, this is really unfair. But, but when you live in a society that doesn't necessarily have laws, um, like that, like commerce laws, uh, you, you have to fight things with economics. So their decision was that they were going to choose a couple of the members who were more savvy, let's say, uh, and they would say, okay, we'll pay you from our profits, but you sell the honey for us. So a couple of members said, okay, yeah, well I'll do that and I'll do that. Like three of them said they'll do that. And they, uh, started taking the honey and putting it in little jars, little plastic jars, and selling it wherever they could.

PORTER: [00:36:51] So then after maybe 4 or 5 years, they asked the Peace Corps if they could help. And Peace Corps said, hey, this is actually a really interesting proposition. So they sent, uh, the first volunteer. He did a very good job, um, structuralizing the supply, which means he taught, uh, better, more efficient honey gathering techniques. He taught them how to grow trees that the honey bees would produce more with, uh, stuff like that. Uh, and I can get into a lot more of what he did. But suffice it to say, he did a lot on the supply side.

PORTER: [00:37:31] Then the next volunteer who came in was very good at sales. He was a good salesman, so he did more on the demand side, um, talking to grocers and talking to, um, you know, uh, gas stations who could sell the honey. Right? So it went from a couple of guys who were, who would get on a bus with 2 or 3 packets of 24 jars of honey and would walk around with the honey in their arms, trying to sell it, to little tuck shops and things like that. To now they're producing more honey, and they may be putting 10 or 15 packets of 24 jars on a bus, and they're going directly to a gas station and selling a whole package to the gas station.

PORTER: [00:38:18] Then I came in. My job was to kind of put them over the top. I knew I was going to be the terminal volunteer. I was the last one

there. So my job was to get, okay, now we're going to get into like higher level, uh, business thought processes. Um, so, so what we started doing is we started selling to groceries at this point. So now I'm no longer selling one packet, I'm selling ten, I'm selling 15 packets, um, or cases or whatever you want to call them. And, uh, we, you know, like, when I, my very first meeting, I sat down with the director of the co-op, and he said, we sell the highest quality of honey in Malawi, and we are the cheapest. And I said, well, one of those two things is going to change. I'm not sure yet because it's the first meeting, but we're not going to be selling the highest quality honey in Malawi for the cheapest price anymore.

PORTER: [00:39:09] Um, so when I got there, they had no honey left. They had sold out all their reserves from the year before. And you can only gather honey once a year. There's like a one month window, I think it's October, that you buy all the honey you're going to sell for the year. And they had sold out by like June, let's say. So they had a few months, uh, before they were going to buy or sell honey anymore. So, uh, I took that time as market research. So I spent my days traveling the country, um, going to grocery stores and standing in the grocery store near honey. And whenever somebody passed me, I would ask them, do you mind? I'm not from here. Which was very evident. Uh, and I'd say, which is the best honey? And the people would tell me which is the best honey. And I did that for months.

PORTER: [00:40:01] I asked hundreds and hundreds of people what the best honey was, which is the honey I should buy, which is the honey you buy? Why do you buy that honey? Very informally, I wasn't taking notes or anything like that. And then the grocers would throw me out after a while. But I just gathered enough understanding to realize that there was no middle or low market. Honey was bought by only the richest people in Malawi, and they bought only the most expensive honey. It was irrelevant which honey on the shelf was the most expensive. That was the one they were going to buy. They didn't care. So branding meant little to nothing. And there was only like four different types of honey sold in Malawi, um, in grocery stores. There's lots of different ones that are sold in tuck shops and other things. But in

grocery stores, because in order to sell in a grocery store, you have to go through the Malawian like health organization, and that costs money. And there was only like four companies, including ours, that had this certificate. So besides, the ones that sold stuff when they shouldn't have, there was really only like four.

PORTER: [00:41:06] And um, like I said, people would always just, when I saw people buy honey, they would look for the most expensive one and buy that one, because their perception of what the best honey was based solely on the price. So October rolls around. Uh, we buy a bunch of honey, I don't know, a couple tons. Um, we bottle a bunch of it. And now when I started going to grocery stores to sell it now, I kept getting told no. And the reason was that they had tried to sell and had sold in grocery stores in the previous years but inconsistently. So they would show up in June and sell five cases, and then they wouldn't come back until like September. So the grocer said, listen, you sell good honey. It makes it makes a nice contribution margin for me. But what it doesn't do is it's not consistent. So it's too annoying for me to deal with you.

PORTER: [00:42:05] So I told them, I said, well, I was, that was the old guild. The new guild here, we're consistent. We run everything more like a business than before. You know, we don't, we're not going to do things like sell out of our honey, right? So I found out when we knew how much we had, I literally divided it by 11, right? Because there was 11 more months before I could buy more. And I said, we don't sell more than this. Because the thought process that they had before was like get rid of everything as much as you can sell.

BROWNING: [00:42:32] As fast as possible.

PORTER: [00:42:32] As fast as possible. So we went to this big grocery and this grocer said, okay, I'll take all your honey, but I want a 10 percent discount. And the director of the co-op said, oh, okay. And I said, well, no, not okay. Why? Why do you get a 10 percent discount? He said, because I want one. I said, you don't, you don't get one. Like, why am I giving you a 10 percent discount that I don't give to anyone else? And we got in this argument where he said, well, then I won't buy it. I said,

well, then I'll sell it to everyone else. Like I don't need to sell it to you. Because the thought process of before was just always be selling. Where mine was, I was saying, hey, I've got 23 cases to sell. I can sell you six, or I can sell someone else six.

PORTER: [00:43:11] So for the other grocers, though, the ones I wanted to sell to. So I, so I made the decision that I wanted to sell in the high end groceries. We weren't in the high end groceries. So I showed up and they said no. They said you were, you're inconsistent. So I said okay. And I showed up the next month and they said, no, you're inconsistent. So I showed up the next month and they said, no, you're inconsistent. And I did that for six or so months before they couldn't say you're inconsistent anymore, if you keep showing up and asking them on the same day every month if they'll buy your honey. All right, I'll buy 1 or 2. Okay, the next month. All right, I'll buy 4 or 5. Next month. I'll buy 6, I'll buy 7, I'll buy 8.

PORTER: [00:43:46] About a year into it, I would pull up in the parking lot, and the director of one of the nicest groceries would run out to the truck and say, I'll take 20 cases. And I would tell him, I can give you eight, you know, because, because I have to be consistent to my other grocers. So that first year was all about building consistency. And by the end of that first year, we were no longer in gas stations. We were no longer in small tuck shops or small grocers. We were only in the best grocers in the country. But I had yet to be able to convince the co-op to raise the price.

BROWNING: [00:44:24] Okay, so when you talk about being in a tuck shop, is that like a local grocery market?

PORTER: [00:44:30] Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:44:30] Just carries a few, like a little convenience store?

PORTER: [00:44:33] Yeah, exactly. Maybe made out of some corrugated steel and some nailed up wood, but it wasn't like a full fledged grocery.

BROWNING: [00:44:41] So when you, uh, traveled around, what kind of mileage are you talking about? And did you have, uh, did the co-op own a truck?

PORTER: [00:44:50] The co-op did own a truck. So maybe half the time I traveled, I traveled with the co-op, and half the time I didn't. So it depended on what the situation was. If we were delivering or picking up supplies, we would have the truck and we would try to make the same route for both of those things. Because gas, gas in Malawi was not only very expensive, but very, very, very hard to come by for some economic reasons that I don't know if you want me to get into. Um, but, but gasoline in Malawi was running every month at a shortage. So finding gasoline, I once spent three days in the honey truck waiting for gasoline just to get home, because that happened sometimes. Um, so sometimes if I was just like, let's say, collecting money or negotiating price on something, I would, uh, just take public transport or hitchhike my way around.

BROWNING: [00:45:47] I see. And, uh. What does the countryside look like when you're traveling around in Malawi?

PORTER: [00:45:58] So it's. So if you're down by the lake shore and we say down not as a north south thing, but as an up or down thing, because Malawi's either mountains or lake for the most part, there are definitely, there are different things than that. But, but, but especially where I lived, um, it's just mountains or lake. So you're either up or you're down. Um, so down by the lake shores is beautiful, this beautiful lake, uh, and, you know, sand and that's the area. But there are some areas in Malawi that are more rocky. Uh, there are some that are more mountainous, not, you know, Nepal mountains, but, you know, decent size mountains. Um, not too much, not too much forest. Not too much woods. Uh, that was all cut down unfortunately, uh, deforestation in Malawi is a huge issue. Um, but, but it's a, it's a pretty country for the most part.

BROWNING: [00:46:54] Now, before you got there, there were other people doing the the marketing of the, of the honey.

PORTER: [00:47:01] Mm hmm.

BROWNING: [00:47:01] And so how did they react to this Peace Corps volunteer white guy from America coming in and taking over everything? Was it, did you get positive feelings? And you know, they got a lot of buy in from the folks? Or how did that work out?

PORTER: [00:47:18] From the actual co-op?

BROWNING: [00:47:19] Yeah.

PORTER: [00:47:19] Oh yeah. I mean, they were, I was the third volunteer, so I wasn't exactly breaking any kind of norms. Uh, no. They were very excited about me being there, especially because I put a little more effort into the co-op than the other volunteers did the co-op as a project that they were working on, but they had other things they were doing. I did not. I viewed the co-op as my job. I worked, I worked more than 40 hours a week at the co-op. I would go home and because I didn't have a computer, I would light a candle and I would run business scenarios out by hand on notebooks until I figured out what the optimal amount or price or, or cost I could, I could sustain to accomplish a certain goal or whether it was worth it or not.

PORTER: [00:48:08] So I was teaching things like cost benefit analysis and, you know, um, NPV [net present value] and, and, and the co-op was like really into it with me. So, so I would say like, hey, can we talk about, you know, maybe that we would get a deal. So when I got there they would, someone from South Africa would come and say, hey, I'll buy a ton of your honey off you for like this much. They would never have done the math to say. They would do the math and know that was profitable, but they never did the math to know if the opportunity cost was higher. So they would sell it for what a normal person would think would be profit, but a business person would consider a loss.

PORTER: [00:48:54] So I had to show them this through, through numbers, right? Or we'd run all these numbers out and I'd go, well, yeah, you made 1,800 kwacha, but you lost, but you could have made 2,300 kwacha.

So you lost 500 kwacha. And that's a very hard thing for someone to understand, that they took a loss when they're holding the money in their hand, but they're very, you know, like the co-op. So the co-op wasn't a bunch of people. It was one guy who was the director, one guy who was the driver but he was really like the COO. He was like the, he knew everything. He knew the whole thing in and out. And there was a secretary who would almost never be there. So. So the co-op was really these two guys. And a couple of guards who were very, very helpful in anything you could ever need from a person.

BROWNING: [00:49:47] What age were the guys that you were, the two guys?

PORTER: [00:49:50] Much older than I am. They were probably in their 40s.

BROWNING: [00:49:53] Okay.

PORTER: [00:49:54] Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:49:54] And they, were they honey farmers?

PORTER: [00:49:57] Mm hmm. Yeah. They were everything. They were, so everyone in Malawi is a farmer. Everyone. The president's a farmer. Everyone's a farmer. Um, but yeah, they were both honey farmers. They were originals. Um, there was three but one fell off. And there was these two who were just like the original people who have been doing this for like ten years. But they also did other things, uh, the director also had a workshop, like a carpentry workshop. And, and I mean, they did other little things. So part of me was also just teaching them. There was so much opportunity to do stuff in Malawi. So part of me was to try to teach them just to see opportunity, because that's very important for a business person is not necessarily just to do your job, you know, well, but to see potential, opportunity, and other things.

BROWNING: [00:50:44] So you looked at your position as not just doing, but training them for the day when you were going to say goodbye and walk away, right?

PORTER: [00:50:58] Any good consultant understands that their job is finite, and that they should not be there every day for the rest of their lives. So I understood, I had, I had a reverse engineered timeline of what I wanted to convey before I left, locked down by month. So every month I was trying to hit that mark to convey something. And you know what? That didn't always work out because I didn't know everything walking in. I knew nothing walking in. So a lot of times I would say, oh, we should do it this way. And they're like, no, that doesn't work because of this. And I'd be like, oh, I had no idea that was a situation. That happened all the time because we're more used to the way we do business, not the way they do business, which makes sense.

PORTER: [00:51:44] Um, also, everything changed in our second year. Um, there was a very rich company who was number one in distribution, and I knew they were number one in distribution, um, because of, funny story. I, so I. So I used to watch people at the honey, in grocery stores at the honey area. And people would walk over the honey, they'd unscrew the cap, they'd stick their finger in it, they'd eat a little, they'd screw the cap back on and put it back on the shelf. And I said to myself, that's gross. That's, that's, that's something that I wish I didn't know. So I went, there was one jar making company in the country that made locking lid jars, but their jars were something like ten times more expensive than the jars we were using.

PORTER: [00:52:36] So I was trying to get us to move towards not only raising the price of the honey, but also going towards these locking jars. Um, and what ended up happening was I was able to convince the co-op to, to go to the locking jars. So we, so we bought these locking jars. Well, when the health and safety inspectors came, they saw these locking jars and went, what are these? We explained to them like, hey, look, this locks. And if someone opens it everyone knows it's open and they don't buy that one because they know it's no longer, you know, pure honey. It's got someone's finger on it. And they were like, they were just like, blown away. They thought this was like the best thing in the world. So like three months later that became the law.

PORTER: [00:53:28] Um, that, or not the law. But, you know, like, they wouldn't give out, uh, a pass to any honey co-op, any honey company or distribution company that didn't have locking jars. So this woman who I would deal with at this one jar company that made this was very happy that all of a sudden she was selling tens of thousands of these jars all around the country. So she and I had become decently close in the time that we had spent together. And Malawi is not like America. People don't think to not tell you something if you ask them. So every month I would ask her how many jars my competition was buying from her. Knowing that they all used the same jar, I was able to chart what the distribution was of all five, at the time it was five companies, uh, through the whole country. So it was very interesting to see the numbers of what everyone was doing.

PORTER: [00:54:21] Um, so that, that big company that I was talking about, um, that they were, they, they had most of the market share. Uh, we were, we had maybe 5 to 7 percent when I got there and they were like 50 percent. And everyone else was like in the tens, you know. Um, they, uh, they got an influx of money from the European Union. Uh, and I don't necessarily know why the European Union gave them a bunch of money, but they did, and they, uh, went. So the way honey was always purchased was that the farmers would put it into some kind of jar or big, um, bucket, and they would ride their bicycle to either our co-op or that company or one of the other ones, and sell their honey to us. So we would just stay there and people would come throughout the day, ten, 15, 20 people a day, and we'd buy their honey if it was a high enough quality. So we would test it and everything.

PORTER: [00:55:26] Um, what this company did with their influx of money is they, they bought like trucks, or they already had trucks because they had money, but they were able to buy, you know, put the investment into it. And they went out into the villages and bought the honey. Um, and the thing was, they had to buy it for higher because we were buying it for higher now. So we were raising the price. It was no longer a buyer's market. It was becoming more of a seller's market because we as a nonprofit were able to offer more. So if somebody comes and says, hey, I'll give you X and you say, Nkhata Bay is giving X, 1.2X, like you

have to raise your price, otherwise no one's going to sell to you. So they raised their price to the farmers, which is good for the farmers, which is our ultimate goal. But they went out and bought all the honey.

PORTER: [00:56:18] Um, and their intention, as far as I can understand, it was to put everyone else out of business and then the next year they can buy it for a fraction of the price. Which is not an unusual ploy. It happens, uh, in business. And so we were, we did not buy as much honey as we wanted to. We were lucky that we caught it early enough, like people told us. And we took our truck out to some of our major sellers, and luckily, our major sellers had waited for us or, um, or were good to either, you know, had more or something along those lines. So we had enough to get by. But it was, it was a low amount compared to what we normally have. So I want to say we bought maybe 70 percent of the year before's yield when we were expecting to buy maybe 115 percent. So it's a dramatic cut, which was very hurtful, but I was able to convince the co-op to raise the prices now because we didn't have as much.

PORTER: [00:57:19] So we raised our prices. And what we did is we, we had our locking jars and people knew we were the first with the locking jars. So people liked that. We, we had made a nicer label, which, so our cost of goods sold, which is your cost of each item that you're selling, um, went up, but we were able to exponentially raise our price. So our profit margins went, I'm saying through the roof, like hundreds of percent up. Um, and we were selling out because now we were the most expensive honey in Malawi. And it took us a year to get there, which is fine. It takes time to do a complete change like that. But we started selling at rates no other company could sell at. And, um, we were, yeah, we were really rolling.

PORTER: [00:58:10] I mean, we were telling every customer no, because our customers are saying, I'll take 20 cases. And I was like, I can give you, I can give you six. And we would negotiate to like 12. Because I just, like people wanted more than I literally had to give them. Uh, and we just, yeah, we, that was, it was like that basically until I left.

BROWNING: [00:58:32] Okay. Well, uh, you did a lot in terms of changing the business practices of the co-op. Let's dial it back a little bit to when you first got to the co-op. Did anybody take you out to the hives?

PORTER: [00:58:49] No, actually, this is one of the funnier things I think. I never went and saw a hive. I never went and gathered honey. I never went and did anything like that. I was, and the co-op would say, oh, we're going to go do this. I'm still running some numbers. Because my job wasn't necessarily to do that. And, and looking back on it, that would have been a fun afternoon. And I probably should have put the notebook down for, you know, a little bit and gone out and done that. But at the time I was, I was so concerned with getting all of our sales data correct, because our sales data was kind of a mess. And making sure that I had like a good view of my customer, a good view of the industry, of the market, that I was not. I didn't feel like I had the time to go, just go spend the day looking at, at the hives. And they were far away too, so it wouldn't have been, it's not just like down the street.

PORTER: [00:59:47] Uh, so no, I never really got into the actual honey part. It, it was a commodity. It could have been anything else.

BROWNING: [00:59:59] Was anybody besides your co-op, um, directors evaluating your work?

PORTER: [01:00:09] I don't think they necessarily knew how to evaluate my work. I don't know if there is a specific metric that would have worked. But our sales went up, our profitability went up. We went from the fifth largest distributor in the country to we were almost the first when I left. Uh, the buying price for the farmer skyrocketed. We changed the price of honey through the whole country. People, we didn't buy in the south, people in the south were selling their honey for twice as much because of the impact we were having in the north. Um, so the ramifications of our actions were felt. But me personally being assessed, I think would have been very difficult.

PORTER: [01:00:50] But I always had very good relationships with the office and the office staff. They knew I was working hard and that's really all they

cared about. Uh, so they gave me a really like they gave me a long leash. Um, so, like, you're not supposed to. I traveled maybe 25 days a month, so I was at my site less than a week a month, easily. There were months I was never at site. And that's not a normal thing for Peace Corps, usually. But like I said, my co-op was like, well, what did you do this month? I was collecting money. I had to go negotiate something with the labels. I had to go get jars. I had to talk to this, this, this owner because they, they didn't like the quality of their last shipment, you know what I mean? So I was always doing something enough that, that they were okay with me just kind of being somewhere in the country. And they just didn't really, they didn't have a. And I kept them apprized of what I was doing and where I was. And I think that was enough.

BROWNING: [01:01:50] Uh huh. So, um, when you were out, um, were you staying in local, small hotels or?

PORTER: [01:02:01] Yes, you could call them that. You could call them brothels. You could call them anything that was the cheapest. The point was to always be as cheap as possible, because every dollar you're spending is a dollar less that we could give back to the farmers. So we were staying three to a room or, or staying in the worst places. And that was my first year was more like that. My second year I realized I could stay on the floor of other volunteers' houses for cheaper, and it was more, it was like a nicer situation. So I spent my second year mostly staying with other volunteers. So they are, I'm very appreciative to them because they were able to save the co-op a lot of money. Um, so anyone who helped me out knew that they were also helping out, uh, our cooperative. And that was, you know, I got some really great, uh, you know, like, people were really great to me along the way.

BROWNING: [01:03:03] Did you ever, uh, give them partial compensation of a jar of honey?

PORTER: [01:03:08] No. Nobody got, nobody got honey for free. My, my now wife got honey that she thought was free until she realized I was buying it. But no. So whenever we would go through a roadblock or

police, they'd always ask us for free honey. And that's just, that is just an absolute disaster. Because if you give one away, you're giving it all away. So the rule was to never, ever give honey away. The, the only time I gave honey away is if a kid had burned themselves in a fire or something like that. They put honey on the wound. And then, even then usually I would buy it and give it to them.

BROWNING: [01:03:47] I see, I see. Well, did you have any free time or were you working 24/7?

PORTER: [01:03:54] So when I was, when I was on the road, I was working. Now, now that doesn't necessarily mean I was like, you know, I could have been like sitting in a car or something like that, but I was working. So those like five days a month that I was home, I was home. And that's what I was saying, like, did I want to go into Nkhata Bay and hang out? Like, no. I wanted to lay, I wanted to read, I wanted to sleep, I wanted to cook my own food. I want, you know what I mean? I wanted to listen to the radio. I just wanted to be in my house by myself.

PORTER: [01:04:24] And one of the very first things, my very first days I was in my village, my chief called like a meeting. It wasn't for me, but, you know, there was a meeting and I was there, and he introduced me to the village, and he said a bunch of things I didn't understand. And later someone else told me he said, this is this is our new Peace Corps volunteer. He's here to work with the co-op. The co-op helps each and every person in our village. Don't annoy him. Don't, don't like ask him for anything. Don't do anything. Just leave him alone and we'll all benefit. And I'll say I was pretty much left alone.

PORTER: [01:05:04] I had my friends who, when I was back, would, they knew I was back before I even got there. Like, my friends would be sitting on my porch when I got home because someone had told someone who had seen me at the, you know, at the bus stop, and some kid had run down the hill and told someone else. And, um, so they were always. So I had my friends who'd come and visit me when I was home. Um, but for the most part, that was my time to just be, to decompress. And I'd maybe go into the co-op for an hour or two to, like, uh, do accounts

receivable or something, something simple that needed to be done. But for the most part, that was my, and even the co-op was like, okay, let's give him a couple days off, because maybe I was on the road for like three straight weeks.

BROWNING: [01:05:46] I see.

PORTER: [01:05:46] Stuff like that.

BROWNING: [01:05:47] Did you, um, so you did not have a personal computer?

PORTER: [01:05:52] No.

BROWNING: [01:05:52] Did you have a cell phone?

PORTER: [01:05:54] Uh, I did, I had one of those, like, Nokia cell phones, like, um, the Nokia brick phones.

BROWNING: [01:06:01] Oh, okay.

PORTER: [01:06:02] It didn't always work, but it was good because sometimes I had to call, like, a supplier and say and find out, like, hey, I'm, I'm in one city, you're in the other city, but I'm not going to go all the way to you if you don't have what I need. So I'd call them. They'd say, yeah, yeah, we have it, come on over. I'd go there and they didn't have it, you know. Or maybe they did, and you never really knew. But at least I could get some things done by phone. But for most part, you had to really be places to get anything done.

BROWNING: [01:06:29] At the office, um, was everything calculated in, um, all your work product was on paper?

PORTER: [01:06:36] Yes. Big ledger books. Everything was on paper. So the co-op had a computer that was like 12 years old and really didn't work. It had, I think, like almost like Office 93 on it or something like that, that I was able, or Office 95 I think, that I was able to use a couple

spreadsheets when the computer was working, but it didn't work very often. So it wasn't some, it wasn't a big part of our business.

BROWNING: [01:07:02] So did you ever go to the capital for Peace Corps, uh, training class, reunions, or social time or anything?

PORTER: [01:07:13] Um. Oh, I mean, I was always in the capital. Capital's, capital bought maybe 50 percent of my honey. So I was in the capital quite a bit. Um, there were special events, I think the 50th anniversary I went for that, um, or I was probably just in town for that. And there were other little things that, you know, there were little social events I went to, but for the most part, a lot of the social events. So for the most part, when I would hang out with other Peace Corps volunteers, it was the other people who were serving in my, um, with my tribe. So the other Tonga volunteers. So we would get together maybe once every couple of months, or maybe they got together a lot when I wasn't around. But I think they would kind of plan, like, hey, Christian's gonna be in town this weekend. Maybe we, maybe we all meet up and we spend like a day together. And we would.

PORTER: [01:08:12] So maybe once a month or once every two months or so, we would get together and do that. So if I was going to socialize with other Peace Corps volunteers besides maybe my site mate coming over, um, it was more the Tonga volunteers and less like. And because I saw a lot of the other volunteers by staying at their houses or like a group of them would be in Blantyre, uh, which is the financial capital in the south. And they'd all be having fun and, and I'd run into them because I'm there working, right? So maybe we get lunch or something. I'd just say hello. But, so I saw volunteers constantly. But for like a particular social event, those didn't happen too often, I don't think.

BROWNING: [01:08:53] I see. So was that how you encountered your future wife?

PORTER: [01:08:58] Yes. She was also part of the Tonga tribe. She was about 100 kilometers away from me. So I would. So sometimes on my way out, I would go down, I'd see her and then I'd go out. Sometimes on my

way back, I'd come, you know, back into town. I'd see her on the way back, stuff like that. Or she'd, she'd sometimes come into Nkhata Bay, but she really didn't leave her village very much, so. So that didn't happen too often.

BROWNING: [01:09:23] So you felt from the get-go, or maybe you didn't feel from the get-go, that the services you are performing for the co-op were going to be assumed by a host country national more or less.

PORTER: [01:09:41] No, they absolutely were. All of them were.

BROWNING: [01:09:42] All of them were.

PORTER: [01:09:43] Yeah. Yeah, it was. There, the guys at the co-op were very capable, very intelligent, very good at their jobs. They just didn't know the higher level business things. And why would they? You know what I mean? And so, so what they brought to the table was like a lot of good knowledge and experience. What I brought to the table was more on the education point of view. So I also have to thank, a lot of hard work went in those two years. Not all that hard work came from me, so I have to thank a lot of the people back home. I would run into some problem that I couldn't figure out, and I would, when I was in the capital, I'd write an email to a buddy of mine I went to school with. And by the time I could get email again, he had written this like long thing citing sources of like how, how some other company had dealt with what we were dealing with. And it was usually from like 1910 America, you know, like this is how Carnegie handled it.

BROWNING: [01:10:48] I see.

PORTER: [01:10:48] You know, and I would read it and then I'd come up with some strategy for this business problem based off of that. So I've got to say, there were a lot of people in the, in America, in Malawi, um, that would help me through a lot of this. And then I'd bring it back to the co-op and say, hey, this is, you know, this is a strategy. What do you guys think? We would tweak it together because they had this specific

industry knowledge, specific company knowledge. And then we would, we would go forward with with some kind of plan.

BROWNING: [01:11:20] You obviously spent a lot of time and effort and made a huge impact in the operations of the co-op while you were there, but did you ever come in contact with anybody else's project, any other volunteer's projects?

PORTER: [01:11:36] And yeah, so all environment and even health volunteers are encouraged to do what they call income generating activities or IGAs. Uh, so what that basically usually entails is a small startup. Uh, it's usually women based groups that will save some money and then they'll start a little, maybe a soap making company or, or they'll make textiles or something along those lines. Um, so as a secondary kind of project, I would go to the villages usually when I was traveling through. Uh, you know, I'd spend the evening going to a village of somebody and I would look through their books. I would just have discussions with the people about what they're doing, and then I'd just give little, like, helpful feedback.

PORTER: [01:12:23] Uh, one of the ones that I always think about is, is this group of women were, uh, making soap. And they had never taken time to actually calculate what it cost them. So we went through this large exercise, writing in the sand, sitting, you know, sitting in the dirt, writing in the sand. And we found out that they were losing money on every bar of soap they were selling. Um, but you'd never know that because you're talking about buying this for this much and buying that for that much, and then you, you know, put it all together and you sell it for market rate. But they couldn't, they couldn't escape the economies of scale of a larger company who can make this all for, for half the cost that they were making it for. And you would never have known that unless you did it. So it wasn't, it wasn't bad that they did it, but it was bad that they would have kept doing it.

PORTER: [01:13:16] So we had made the decision for that one just to fold that company and, uh, you know, try something different, selling clothes or something along those lines. So I probably did that for maybe seven-

ish, uh, IGAs. Where I'd go and I'd just, you know, do a review, and then maybe six months later I'd review again. I also, um, the embassy. So. So there was a economics officer, but there was no, like, business development people at the embassy, so they wanted. So the embassy came and asked my country director if I could do a training. So they had a training called AWEF, which is African Women's Entrepreneurship Program, and they wanted to do this big training. So they brought in maybe 25 women from all around the country into the capital. And I held this training.

PORTER: [01:14:06] So I prepared all these different activities and documents and training materials. And the first day I said, okay, let's all introduce ourselves and tell me what you do. And these women were so impressive. I mean, doctors, lawyers, captains of their industry. I just turned around to my folders and just threw it all away and just said, you know what we're going to do? We're going to learn from each other. And we spent the few days just like discussing different business problems that they had and how they were going to, you know, and then someone else would have a great idea. And at the end, everyone had just peer learned their way through this session so well. It was a huge success. It was a really great thing that the embassy held, um, you know, so I did a couple things like that as well.

BROWNING: [01:14:55] Sounds good. Um, just on a personal, you know, health related issues. Um, any, you know, particular likes or dislikes with the local food?

PORTER: [01:15:09] So the local food is basically like four things. So everyone every meal eats *nsima*. Um, sometimes you'll eat rice instead of *nsima*. But for the most part you're eating *nsima*. And there's different types of *nsima*, but you're really always eating *nsima*. And there's, uh, potato, uh, I guess French fries, um, but a little bit different than French fries. And chicken and, but that's rare. Most people don't eat meat. Um, but you'll eat eggs every now and again. Um, and then a little bit of greens and that tomato and onion mix. So, so you basically eat, I would eat maybe 4 or 5 times a day. And I would eat basically the same meal 4

or 5 times a day, every day. Um, and, you know, you just kind of get used to it.

BROWNING: [01:15:57] And do you, did you supplement with any fruit or anything like that?

PORTER: [01:16:02] Sometimes you could get fruit. Um, I had an orange tree that was growing oranges in my front yard, and I was so excited about these oranges. And I had to go out of town. And when I came back in town, I was like thinking about making orange juice, like the whole like 200 kilometers home. And when I got home, there was not one orange in my tree. But I was really lucky because my neighbors were selling oranges that day, so I was still able to get my orange juice. I just cost me a little bit money I wasn't expecting.

BROWNING: [01:16:35] Well, that's good. Any, uh, health or injury issues while you were there?

PORTER: [01:16:41] I got into a car accident maybe six months in. Um, I was standing in the back of a truck with about 25 of my closest friends and, uh, like a, nah, like something ran in front of the road. I don't even know. And the truck went to a slamming stop. All 25 people leaned into the roll bar, and the roll bar broke and crushed my thumb in between the truck cab and the roll bar. Uh, and I didn't even notice until after because I was so happy I didn't fly out of the truck, uh, that my thumb had been crushed, and I, like, ripped up all the ligaments and everything like that.

BROWNING: [01:17:21] So where did you, uh, get medical treatment for that?

PORTER: [01:17:24] I really didn't. They tried their best, but they didn't have the facilities. At a certain point, they wanted to send me to South Africa, but I was just a little too busy, so I didn't go. Um, but it wasn't. It wasn't, you know, it wasn't anything too bad, like a fracture is going to heal. There's not really much they can do about that. They gave me a cortisone shot for the, um, I guess the ligaments. I'm not a health

person, but, uh, you know, so it never really got better. But it's not the end of the world.

BROWNING: [01:17:57] You talked some about coming back from being out in the field and your, you know, friends would get word of your impending arrival and be, be waiting for you. What, you know, describe a little bit about this group of Malawian friends.

PORTER: [01:18:16] So I really had two friends that I was the closest with. One was the COO of the co-op or the driver. Um, and he was just such a good guy, such a, like he, he cared.

BROWNING: [01:18:29] What was his name?

PORTER: [01:18:30] His name was George, George Kamanga, and he just cared so much about his family and the co-op. And there's a lot of apathy in Malawi. There's a lot of apathy in, in impoverished places. But he didn't have any. He was always like kind of pushing and trying. And he had turned his life around. He had spent the first, you know, half of his life in the bar and, you know, drunk. And he wasn't good to his family, and he understood that. And he had turned his life around, and he was so good to his family. And I remember once, he had sent, he was sending his daughters to his expensive private school. And, you know, he was just scraping by to send them to this great school. And I asked him about it. I said, you know, it must be hard that you're spending so much of your money to make sure your daughters get a great education. And he said, he said, and these are very important words. He said, Christian and education. It is worthless.

PORTER: [01:19:30] So we had a good conversation about the difference between priceless and worthless. Um, but he just, he really, he was a really, really good guy. And I spent a lot of time with him on the road. And then when I was home, I spent a lot of time with, um, his name's Robert Banda, and he. He, just one day he was walking his bike, and I was walking to the, to the, to the road. And we were just talking. And he said he worked for a research center that was doing agricultural research. I think they were being funded by the Gates Foundation.

And, um, it was very interesting. I didn't understand any of it. It was well over my head, you know, it was talking about like pH balances and nitrogen fixers of soil, you know, things I really like, like I said, just way over my head. Um, but, but it was very interesting.

PORTER: [01:20:26] So I told him I was like, hey, you know, one day you should let me come with you while you do your information gathering, because that's what he was doing, information gathering on these different ten by ten plots and, you know, comparing all the numbers after. He said, oh, okay, yeah, that sounds like a plan, you know. And I went on and did whatever I was going to go do that day. And I came home and at like 5:00 the next morning, I hear someone yelling for me outside of my house. And keep in mind, I'm the only person in Malawi that doesn't get up at like 4:30 in the morning. And, uh, he was like, let's go. You said you wanted to go do this, right? So at like 5:00 in the morning, I like, you know, put on some shoes and get on my bike and we ride what I would say is roughly 10,000 kilometers up Mount Everest and down the other side. I mean, it was, by 7:00 a.m. I felt, I was just, like, exhausted from the day.

PORTER: [01:21:26] Um, but, but he was such a funny guy, and he's such a nice guy that we just really, like, got along. And then after that, I was like, hey, where do you live? And he ended up living like five houses away from me, you know? So, and I was new to the area, so I didn't know. Um, and we ended up becoming pretty good friends. And we still talk today.

BROWNING: [01:21:50] So when you look back at your tour of service, um, you know, just briefly, what do you think your main accomplishments were?

PORTER: [01:22:03] Uh, well, if I don't say finding my wife, I'll get in trouble. So let's start with that one. Um, but I would say, uh, getting the co-op through that very difficult, uh, second year. At one point, we were talking about how to liquidate. Because it was, we were at the point where we didn't know if we were going to make it to the next month. I was pulling out money, out of my account that I got paid by Peace Corps, which was not very much, to pay the, pay the employees.

BROWNING: [01:22:34] Mm hmm.

PORTER: [01:22:35] Um, you know, just until we could get, get the next sale. Um, it was, there was some really, really, really hard times. And I don't know necessarily if I helped bring us through them or anything, but I know going through that with them was one of the more important things I feel like I've ever done professionally.

BROWNING: [01:22:55] Any lessons learned? Or what were the most important lessons learned out of your service?

PORTER: [01:23:02] I would say me personally, um, it was very humbling. I think when I went in, I thought, well, if, if just this. And I thought you could solve all the problems if you could just do this one thing. And I realized that these issues are so deep and so multifaceted. I mean, Malawi's not the poorest country in the world because of just one thing. It's the poorest country in the world because of many, many things. And there's no, I've got to say, like being the president of Malawi has got to be one of the hardest jobs in the world, if not the hardest, because there's just, there's just nothing you can. There's no silver bullet, there's no like thing you can do. And I think I walked in very naive thinking, not maybe that I, I don't think I walked in thinking I would solve all problems, but that all problems could be solved if just. And I walked out going like, man, I'm just impressed people get by, you know, day to day because it's just such a very difficult situation they have there.

BROWNING: [01:24:12] How did your Peace Corps experience influence your plans for the future, as you were in your second year and thinking about what's next?

PORTER: [01:24:24] Um. I'm not sure. I think I was so focused on making sure what we had accomplished was sustainable, um, that I didn't think about. You know, I didn't think about America in, like, uh, what am I going to do kind of way? I just thought, I thought about it as like a I know I need to get there. I know I need to, I know eventually I need to

go home. But I was really concerned with just making sure everything kind of went, um, but I was.

PORTER: [01:24:58] I was also wanted to make sure that I didn't lose my international connections, not connections of like knowing people, but like that feeling and that structure of thinking internationally. And I think that was one of the things that when I got home and people would say things like, well, nobody doesn't have a car. And I'd be like, well, I think you're thinking of Americans and you're still wrong, you know what I mean? But, but I started thinking that way where, like, I, when people would make statements where I'd be like, well, you know, people in other countries don't do that, you know, or that's a very Western or that's a very American thing to do. So I started thinking that way more, and I knew I wanted to continue working in a situation where I wasn't just thinking inside the confines of the United States.

BROWNING: [01:25:52] So in light of the three goals of Peace Corps, I think it's, it's obvious that you provided technical assistance to a project where that assistance had been requested.

PORTER: [01:26:05] Yeah.

BROWNING: [01:26:06] To a great degree. But in looking at the second and third goals of Peace Corps, promoting better understanding of Americans and promoting better understanding of other people by Americans, how do you, do you feel like your work reflected on those goals?

PORTER: [01:26:26] So. So you're right. I was definitely first goal centric. Um. And some volunteers are second goal centric. And that's, that's absolutely a way you can go. And that's, that's a great thing. I just, I just happened to have, um, a situation where first goal made more sense for me to focus on. Uh, I'll say I talked to a lot of people while I hitchhiked, basically wherever I went, which is not abnormal. Everyone in the country does that. Um. I would always, you know, the first question. Where are you from? I'm from America. Oh, so you're from England? No, I'm from America. Um, you know, because everyone's English when you're in a, you know, a commonwealth, right? And, you

know, just, just having conversations with people about America and about, um, you know, like, Obama was a big subject at the time and, and, you know, just having conversations.

PORTER: [01:27:24] And I remember I was in a truck once with a couple of guys and they were like, you know, we hated America. And now that we're talking to you, we love America. And I was like, okay, well, that's kind of a silly statement, but, you know, thank you I guess. You know? But they had never, they had only seen media of America. And you know, how the evil empire of America, but they never actually met an American who was just like a normal person.

PORTER: [01:27:49] I was sitting in a bus with the guy I replaced once, and this was during that week where I spent up there during training and everyone was talking. And then one person asked us like, uh, are white people people? And we were like, well, what do you mean? Because we just thought they had the words wrong. And they're like, are you like people? And you know, we're like, yeah, we're people. And they're like, oh yeah. And they started asking us more in-depth questions like, do you drink water? And we're like, yeah, we drink water. They're like, we drink water too. And I was like, yeah, that's, that's awesome. We're all, you know. But like if you've never met, you know, anyone who's not literally Malawian before, like that's not a crazy question.

BROWNING: [01:28:29] No.

PORTER: [01:28:29] You know.

BROWNING: [01:28:30] Not at all. Um, well, you mentioned that you were still in touch with one of your, um, friends, uh, from Malawi.

PORTER: [01:28:40] Yeah, Robert.

BROWNING: [01:28:41] Uh, any other involvement with the, with the country or with other people from the country since you returned?

PORTER: [01:28:50] Um. So. We. So I'll talk to other volunteers who served in Malawi, because you just have so much in common with them, more than you have with just other volunteers who serve in Sub-Saharan or other volunteers in general. Although, you know, it's a, it's a Venn diagram there, so there's a lot you have. But there's not too many Malawians around that I know. Um, so every now and again I'll run into a Malawian and it's kind of cool.

PORTER: [01:29:20] Um, I went into, I was sitting in a plane once and the two people next to me were speaking Chichewa. Okay, so because I traveled so much, by the end of my service, I was actually pretty decent at Chichewa. Um, so I heard two people speaking in Chichewa next to me. So I just started talking to them. And of course I can't, like, have a full conversation in Chichewa. I can, I can, I can order food, but on a plane, that's not really going to do much for you. Um, but, you know, so it's, it's pretty fun to, like, be able to talk about Malawi because even Malawians understand that, that there's, that they're a very small country and there's not that many of them. And you know what I mean? They have that understanding. So when you run into a Malawian, they're like blown away by it, that you've been to their country.

BROWNING: [01:30:10] Since you've completed your service and returned to America, I know you've been involved with returned Peace Corps volunteer associations. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

PORTER: [01:30:21] Yeah. Uh, when we, when my wife and I came back to America, we, uh, moved to Houston, Texas, where we got involved with the Gulf Coast, um, Peace Corps group. I don't remember the exact name, but the Houston area Peace Corps group. And really basically our entire friend group were ex-Peace Corps, uh, or RPCVs. And, uh, we, we went to events and we just really enjoyed, uh, our time speaking with other volunteers. I think it was important for us, especially because when we just got back, it was, it was easy to kind of have conversations with people who were like-minded.

PORTER: [01:30:57] Um, and then about four years after that, we moved here to the Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina area and got involved with the, with the North Carolina Peace Corps, uh, group. And, um, you know, same thing. Like it's, it's really good to, to be able, not necessarily to tell stories, but just to be in a situation where you're, you're talking to people who have who have similar experiences to you. I feel like, uh, people think that all Peace Corps volunteers are very similar. And that's not necessarily true. There are, there are different, there's a lot of diversity in Peace Corps volunteers. Um, and I don't just mean racially, I mean, like in many different aspects. Um, so, so being around other people who have something so similar in common, I think is, is nice. It's a nice, um, it's a nice group to have.

BROWNING: [01:31:54] Okay. So overall, um, if you had to sum up and say, you know, what effect your Peace Corps service has had on your life since Peace Corps? How would you react to that?

PORTER: [01:32:12] It's a difficult question. I think. I think when I think about Peace Corps, it's, it's very binary. It's very like on or off. I'll go a long time without thinking about my service. Maybe I'll think about Malawi, but I won't necessarily think about Peace Corps or my service or anything like that. And then something will remind me, and then something else will remind me, and something else will remind me. And I'll be on a situation where I'm thinking about it all the time for a couple of days. Um, because it's just such a, it's such a effective part of my life, you know, it. And I think, I think that I think more broadly now, uh, like I was saying earlier, like I think in global terms, I don't necessarily think. I know for a fact before I left I thought like America. And when I said things like "people," I was talking about Americans. And now I don't do that anymore. And not that it annoys me when other people do it, but I notice it when other people do it.

BROWNING: [01:33:15] Okay, Christian. Well, thanks for your service and for taking time to do this interview.

PORTER: [01:33:20] Yeah. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]