

Steven Smith Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Steven Smith served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from 2008 to 2010 in an environmental program.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Steven Smith

October 9, 2019
San Diego, California

By Julius Sztuk

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

SZTUK: [00:00:01] Today is October 9th, 2019. My name is Jay Sztuk, RPCV Fiji 1974 through 1976. Today I'm interviewing Steven Smith, who is also a volunteer in Fiji from May 2008 through July 2010 and worked in environmental projects there. Steve, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed today.

SMITH: [00:00:27] Yeah, my pleasure.

SZTUK: [00:00:29] Let's start out with you telling us about your background, where you grew up, and where you heard about Peace Corps and why you decided to join.

SMITH: [00:00:39] Well, I grew up in Crescent City, which is a tiny little town on the far north coast of California, and eventually moved about 80 miles south to Eureka, where I went to college at Humboldt State University. And Humboldt State I think has quite a few Peace Corps volunteers. So I just

kind of heard about it. And then one of my dad's good friends, he did Peace Corps in, um, somewhere in South America, I forget what country, but he talked about it all the time. So it was interesting and I knew about it, but I didn't sign up while I was in college. I actually graduated college and I worked for the parks in Humboldt County, then I got a job, a permanent job, with the parks down in San Luis Obispo for the county there. But it was a bit of a boring parks job. I was doing grounds maintenance.

SMITH: [00:01:33] And at the time I took some bad advice, but maybe it was serendipitous, because I didn't become a park ranger and I just stayed on the grounds maintenance crew. But I eventually got so bored that I was like, I need to do something different with my life. And my roommate at the time had also done Peace Corps in South America. And so he was encouraging me to join the Peace Corps. And I was kind of at this point where I was either going to quit and doing around the world tour or join the Peace Corps. And so I applied for Peace Corps and I kind of had this thought that, you know, I like surfing. I was like, maybe they'll send me somewhere where I can surf and do service, and if not, maybe I won't do it. So I went through the whole process and by the end of it they said, you can go to Fiji. And I was like, well, that can fit a lot of goals and you get to go somewhere tropical and can probably surf and it sounds like a cool adventure. So there I went.

SZTUK: [00:02:28] And did you know anything about Fiji before that?

SMITH: [00:02:31] Only through surfing. I mean, it's got Cloudbreak. And so I was like, wow, that seems interesting. Not very, it's not like I think the traditional route of I want to save the world. It was more of a selfish route that got me there. But in the long run, I think that that selfishness paid off immensely better than the wanting to save the world attitude.

SZTUK: [00:02:54] So that was the first invitation you got was to go to Fiji and you took it?

SMITH: [00:02:59] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:02:59] How long did that process take?

SMITH: [00:03:02] A long time. I think it was like nine or ten months. It took a while. But you know, you're writing a lot, doing a lot, getting your medical exams, waiting to hear back. I mean, my life was comfortable, so I wasn't stressing about it. I had a good job and San Luis Obispo is a nice place to live.

SZTUK: [00:03:20] Yeah.

SMITH: [00:03:22] So off I went and forever life changed.

SZTUK: [00:03:27] So you did all your training in country?

SMITH: [00:03:30] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:03:30] Was there any kind of orientation in the States before you went?

SMITH: [00:03:33] We met in LA for a couple of days and did a little bit of orientation. I kind of don't remember much about it, but when we got to country then we all met up. And I don't remember the names of all the towns anymore. I think we spent about a week doing a little bit of orientation and then we split up into groups and went to a nearby village where groups of five or six of us were placed in villages, all I think within the same *tikina*, and did training roles. It was training relevant to what where our future assignment would be. So I was in environmental, so I was doing environmental kind of training and language every day and living with the family and learning the language and culture that way.

SZTUK: [00:04:14] So you did the training in villages from very early on.

SMITH: [00:04:21] Yeah, which I think is a wise thing to do because they teamed you up with a family and then that family was supposed to treat you like the family, which is easy to do in Fiji because they treat everybody like family and everybody's related. But yeah, I lived there with a family and I was Ratu Siti to start with. Later when I moved to the Nadroga area, I became Lavo Siti, or Siti Vini.

SZTUK: [00:04:49] Yeah, different dialect in Nadroga. When you had the orientation in LA, were there any Fijians that came to that?

SMITH: [00:05:01] I don't think so. I can't remember though.

SZTUK: [00:05:04] So do you recall your early impressions or your first impression? Like when the plane lands in Fiji, it's usually early in the morning. Do you recall how you felt when you're flying in there and what your first impression was like?

SMITH: [00:05:21] I remember writing, I journal daily. I remember writing in it on the plane, kind of just like in anticipation and then showing up. And I had done, because of surfing, I had traveled to tropical areas already. So when I landed there, it was that same kind of warm, humid heat and that smell that you'll get. It was kind of burning trash that you get in a lot of countries. And I was like, oh, this feels familiar and exciting. And I just got excited. And then I don't remember what we all did, but we all got on busses and drove from Nadi over to Suva. And I just remember looking at everything and taking it all in and being surrounded by a bunch of people that I didn't know but I felt connected to, all of the other Peace Corps volunteers.

SZTUK: [00:06:11] How big was your group?

SMITH: [00:06:13] 33 or 34.

SZTUK: [00:06:15] Pretty good sized group.

SMITH: [00:06:17] Mm hmm. And I think most people made it all the way through. There's only a handful of people that had to leave for medical reasons. A couple of dropped out, but not many.

SZTUK: [00:06:28] And was the entire group environmental or were some of them doing other things?

SMITH: [00:06:34] Now there's environmental. And there was, I think there was health. Some of them were doing some health. And what did else they do?

People worked in some of the ministries doing things too. There's people doing economic development. Sorry, I can't remember. And then it was a mix, too. I mean, most people went to either villages or ministries and then a handful went to the Indian villages, or not villages, but the Indian kind of communities and helped out there. And that would, that's usually more urban. So. Yeah. It was varied.

SZTUK: [00:07:15] Yeah. So by having the training in a Fijian village, that's kind of immersion from the get go.

SMITH: [00:07:25] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:07:25] Um, tell me about the village. Describe it to me and the house you lived in. And the family.

SMITH: [00:07:32] The family? Man, I feel bad, like I've forgotten people's names. But the house was, it was a two-story house. And below was where they did all their cooking, cleaning. And then the house was upstairs. The village was somewhere, I think, north of Suva. It was kind of swampy nearby. So we got. There was mosquitoes, which I wasn't used to, the amount of mosquitoes there. But after two years, you're kind of used to mosquitoes. I don't think you ever like them, but you kind of get used to them. Um, and when people complain about mosquitoes here in San Diego, I just go, meh, not really.

SZTUK: [00:08:12] Right.

SMITH: [00:08:14] But yeah, there was some bush around, but not. It was different than where I ended up because it was more swampy.

SZTUK: [00:08:21] So it wasn't a remote village. It was pretty close into Suva.

SMITH: [00:08:25] No, it wasn't that close to Suva. I'd have to look up, look at a map, I can picture where it is on a map, but it's north of Suva, kind of swampy, not too far from the ocean, but not. I think you'd want to take like a mini bus to get to it. And it wasn't really like the ocean reef, it was more like a bay, a muddy bay and mangroves. And, you know, there was a villa

or a town center that we'd go shopping at once a week. And I just remember my fondest memories are walking around in the bush with a cane knife and starting to learn about what you could eat and what to harvest. Because later on, when I was in my village on Sundays when I couldn't take church anymore, I would just go bush. I'd grab my spear and my cane knife and I'd just go out and I'd collect ferns and coconuts and spear some fish, catch an eel, and come home, and I'd have all the food I needed.

SMITH: [00:09:22] So those were the things I enjoyed. And so those are my fondest memories. Also just sitting around and laughing because Fijians laugh so much. So we'd always be cooking food and they'd be teaching me how to scrape a coconut. How to crack a coconut. Words, all the words that go with it. How to cook. And I remember they introduced me to rotis. I was like, I want to learn how to make rotis. So they're teaching me how to make the little rotis.

SZTUK: [00:09:45] Right.

SMITH: [00:09:46] On the fire, and I'm burning my thumbs trying to do it.

SZTUK: [00:09:48] And these are Fijian women teaching you how to do it?

SMITH: [00:09:50] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:09:50] It's an Indian flatbread. But everybody eats it in Fiji now.

SMITH: [00:09:56] Yeah, you know, it's like a burrito. So I was like, this is close to a burrito, but it's just got curry in it.

SZTUK: [00:10:03] So how long did you stay with the family during training?

SMITH: [00:10:06] I think that was about three months.

SZTUK: [00:10:09] That long?

SMITH: [00:10:09] I believe so.

SZTUK: [00:10:10] And a lot of language? Was it pretty intensive language training?

SMITH: [00:10:14] Mm hmm. We had to, uh, really every group had their own language trainer and they helped us with culture too. So there was the village and the family who lived us. And then there was an individual Fijian who worked with, worked for Peace Corps, who taught us. We did all sorts of lessons on language and culture and everything else. He passed away after I left. He was young too. And you know, that happened a lot. People would pass away. They just get something that's not a big deal to us. And then they'd do something like change villages and something that wasn't the correct procedure. And then they'd end up passing away.

SZTUK: [00:10:53] Yeah. People die young.

SMITH: [00:10:57] Yeah, but he was. Then they'd take us out for the night life too. And we went to some really rough bars.

SZTUK: [00:11:06] Is this in the area where you were staying?

SMITH: [00:11:09] Yeah, I can't even remember the name of it, but I do remember they like kind of made a ring around us to protect us because it was such a rough bar. And I remember one night somebody even threw a big, like their big beer bottles across the room and it smashed on the wall. And we're just going, where are we? This is a bit scary. Because like I guess this is how you learn.

SZTUK: [00:11:30] Yeah. So any, well other than the bars, any memorable experiences during training with your cohorts or your family that you stayed with?

SMITH: [00:11:47] Yeah. I mean, so I made friends. All the people that I was in the village with, I stayed in pretty close contact with. I think it was the five or six of us. That was important. One in particular named Natalie. There was, my two best friends actually weren't in the same village with me, we

became friends later. But in that one, Natalie was my best friend. And it was just kind of.

SZTUK: [00:12:12] Another volunteer?

SMITH: [00:12:13] Mm hmm. She ended up going up to a northern island, so we lost. It was hard to stay in contact when you're on a different island, but the bonds that you make with those people are really important. And I think they're lasting, because we're still friends. Even though we lost contact, we're still friends, and I still consider her a great friend. And then the people of the village, just all the way that they treat you like family was something special. I feel like, well, I know from going back to Fiji you can walk into any village and you're just like you never left in a way. I feel like you could sit down and there's always food. And if you bring something, you're always accepted, you know, always bring some kava. But whatever everybody has is always shared. And all the stuff that we taught, you know, they taught us about, it was relevant, but it was more just those trying to learn words, trying to learn the social norms.

SMITH: [00:13:09] I remember one time doing something really stupid. We're sitting around eating and we're laughing and laughing and laughing. And they were calling me Ratu Siti and like making me think I was a chief. And I like, there's a cane knife and I grabbed it and went like this, and just like made some silly cultural chief gesture that had nothing to do with what they did. And they're like, oh tombu, you know, don't do that. You never hold a knife at the table. And it was one of those things. Oh yeah, I got carried away. And just, like, being too silly with it.

SZTUK: [00:13:40] Just goofing off.

SMITH: [00:13:41] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:13:42] I'm sure they understand.

SMITH: [00:13:44] But then they were told to be understanding and teach us that stuff. And that was what it was all about. You learn your place, you know, you learn. They were always telling you, you know, how to walk, how to

talk, never to walk above somebody's head, never to touch their head. All these different little cultural things that the family was teaching you that you'd never get if you just went there. Because they wouldn't tell you and they wouldn't be told to tell you, so you wouldn't know. It's really important, when I look back. Without that, had they just sent me to the village, I'd be lost as anybody, you know. I'd eventually find my way. But it's not the same as walking into a village and knowing to bring kava. Knowing where to sit. Knowing how the ceremonies work. Knowing at least a foundation of the language. You just couldn't do it without, I think, those three months of training.

SZTUK: [00:14:34] So you felt like the training was pretty good?

SMITH: [00:14:37] Yeah. I mean, the, like I said, towards what we did, you know, what our job would be in the village. Every village is so different that they're just kind of giving you ideas of what you could do. The village is going to tell you what to do, but the training they gave you towards language and how to culturally interact was invaluable. So and there's a lot of other volunteers in Fiji from different countries that don't get anything like that.

SZTUK: [00:15:04] Well, VSO, VSA.

SMITH: [00:15:05] Yeah, there's like a, yeah. But they're doing nothing like Peace Corps. They're not, they're not as ingrained into the culture.

SZTUK: [00:15:14] Ah, right. And there's some of the NGOs that bring people in. So it sounds like you were comfortable and you adjusted pretty quickly. You were comfortable with the environment and the lifestyle.

SMITH: [00:15:29] Yeah. I mean, there's always going to be the difference. I think Fiji is, it's almost like by nature communistic or it used to be anyway. And the fact that everybody kind of owned everything and personal space wasn't really understood, it was. And I always had a hard time with that because I'm OK being by myself and reading a book by myself or closing the door for a little while. But, you know, you get more and more comfortable with that. You just get comfortable with if I'm reading the book

and you want to sit in my house and pick your toenails, so be it. You know, I'll just keep reading my book. We don't need to talk.

SZTUK: [00:16:09] Yeah. So then you went out to your, you swore in after training, and you went out to your worksite. What was the name of the village?

SMITH: [00:16:17] Biausevu.

SZTUK: [00:16:17] How do you spell it?

SMITH: [00:16:19] B-I-A-U-S-E-V-U.

SZTUK: [00:16:27] And that's somewhere you said around the Coral Coast?

SMITH: [00:16:31] Yeah, it's. It's in Nadroga. Um, I mean, it's kind of dead in the middle of Coral Coast. It's, uh, if you know where the Warwick Hotel is, it's kind of inland from there, about two kilometers.

SZTUK: [00:16:46] OK.

SZTUK: [00:16:47] It's just up in the hills. There's a big waterfall called Savu Na Mate Laya. And tourists always go up there and go visit the waterfall. And it's actually one of the main projects that I worked on was because of that waterfall.

SZTUK: [00:16:58] Oh, really? What is that?

SMITH: [00:16:59] It's true. So there the village had somehow had a grant set up with the Ministry of Forestry to build a native tree nursery and update the trail leading up to it. And so the village could then reforest the forest with native trees because a lot of Fiji's hardwoods have been cut down.

SZTUK: [00:17:19] Mm hmm.

SMITH: [00:17:19] And so there's still some native trees and other trees that we'd go around and collect seeds from. And we built a nursery and the Ministry of Forestry came and we built the nursery, taught a lot of the youth how

the whole thing worked. How to make the soil, how to prepare the seeds, how to plant them. And then when tours would come to go to the waterfall, they could pay their ten bucks to see the waterfall, but then they could also buy a tree, plant it somewhere on the trail up there. Because there's a whole lot of non-natives and with the idea of reforesting it. And it was also an idea that they'd offset their carbon footprint. And then there's also money in that grant to update the trail, because horses went up there and people went up there on foot. And uh. It was.

SZTUK: [00:18:03] Trail must have been pretty bad.

SMITH: [00:18:03] Yeah, it was a really cool project and I'd say it was semi-successful, but it was so heavily dependent on a United Nations development program grant and some of the reporting that I don't feel like it was successful in the fact that no. United Nations wanted report sent back to them via email. And I was really the only conduit to do that. Without me, like that wasn't happening by the village, and the Ministry of Forestry couldn't obviously babysit them. And I tried to train people on them, but it just. It wasn't like some of the grassroots programs that I worked on that I think were a lot more successful because they didn't involve all these elements and money. It just needs to be simple. Yeah, it was too, it was too in-depth. It was good for a while I was there. And then I think it kind of faded away, like the nursery I think. I don't know this, but I think when I went back, I went back a couple of years afterwards, it didn't look like it was in operation. So. And some of the trail have washed away too. They built these crazy bridges. I remember I was like, that bridge is going to wash away. Super cool bridge, but there's no way it's going to last.

SZTUK: [00:19:09] Who would build them, the villagers, or was it part of a grant?

SMITH: [00:19:14] The Ministry of Forestry. Like there was a bunch of money. We brought all this material in and we built these really cool bridges that went up over this creek. But I had been there through a cyclone and I saw how high the water got, and I was like, this is impossible. You can't just concrete these pieces of wood in here in the middle of a creek and think they're going to stay. But they wanted to do it. And I think it gave them.

The village was really stuck on it for a while, but that part didn't last. But we did build a lot of benches and picnic tables up near the waterfall that lasted, and I think they really enhanced the area. And we did these crazy project of, they had been logging up above in the headwaters. Like you could walk up past this waterfall into some amazing just jungle headwaters, but they're logging way up there and it was silting in the rivers.

SMITH: [00:20:00] So the village thought that they would remove all these big boulders. I mean, boulders as big as this table and as high as that, like just the boys would get sticks and we'd all push on these things and start pushing them out. And over the days, we moved all these boulders out of there and made the pool bigger and deeper and it washed out a little bit. Then I think a big flood came through and just silted in because there's so much deforestation happening up above in the headwaters. So it just made a big shallow pool. Because you used to be able to jump into the waterfall, but now it's only a handful of feet deep.

SZTUK: [00:20:35] Oh, that's too bad. So these projects that you worked on, were they, um, dreamed. Were they initiated by an NGO or a government agency or did you just come up with a lot of these things yourself with the community?

SMITH: [00:20:58] Well, that one was. That one had been initiated before I got there and I got given a big folder of paperwork on it and I reinitiated it. I think that they were about to lose all their funding because there's people who wanted to use the money to do things that it wasn't intended for and they weren't doing the reporting. And when I became that, like I said, the key element that kept it all in line, it happened.

SMITH: [00:21:25] Some of the other projects I worked on. There was another one which we call the vuzi farm, it was a traditional dalo farm. And that was, there was a. This has also come to the village before I was there, but when I was there I happened to be at right place, right time. A guy with his doctorate from New Zealand, it's doctor, what's his name? I feel bad for getting all these names now, but it's been like over ten years. Um, anyways, he had a doctorate in cultural anthropology, I believe, and he

wanted to recreate the traditional dalo farms where they would build these big kind of like, almost like a moat, like a muddy plain. And they'd have water draining down. They'd divert a water source and they'd drain it into one moat, then drop into another moat. You can see them in Hawaii. They're common there.

SMITH: [00:22:19] But it was because in Fiji there's this dalo beetle that was eating all their dalo. So the Fijians, in order to combat the dalo beetle, dump pesticide on it. But if you grow dalo in these bodies of water, the beetle can't get to the crown of the dalo. It can only eat the leaves. And so you get this really nice tasting, moist dalo and you don't have to use pesticides. And so he had got a bunch of money. I forgot who he got the grant from.

SZTUK: [00:22:44] Was he a New Zealander or an American?

SMITH: [00:22:47] He was a New Zealander. He had money through, I think, a university. Sorry, if I had more time, I would have pulled out some of these documents that I still have somewhere. Anyways, so yeah, we work with. There's two, there was two main families and they were fighting over how this is going to work. So I said, why don't we just have both families do their own vuzi farm and then everybody's happy. And so we built two vuzi farms and we fenced off these giant areas to keep the pigs out. And it was, I made it into a youth project, so that everybody could get on board with the youth learning how to do something new, building these things, learning how to do a new style of farming, and then they could sell it and make the profits for their own youth group.

SZTUK: [00:23:30] So they had lost the knowledge of how to do these dalo patches?

SMITH: [00:23:35] Well, there was a few of the elders that we talked to that remembered their dads, like the old guys, some of the random old guys in their seventies, remembered their dads did it. But the thing was it, I guess when you read about it, they did it all the time pre 1800s. And then there was, I forgot what happened. There was a bit of a plague in Fiji and a lot of people died off. I forgot what came through, but it killed off a decent

amount of the population, so they stopped doing it because it's so labor intensive to make everybody come out and build these kind of. They line them with giant rocks, kind of like.

SZTUK: [00:24:11] Like a pit.

SMITH: [00:24:12] Yeah, and then there would be mud in the middle. And so they stopped doing it and modern farming technology came and fertilizers and pesticides. So it became, you know, why do that if you don't have to? Fijians are really good at not working hard. Why work hard if you don't have to?

SZTUK: [00:24:29] They're good at working hard when they want to.

SMITH: [00:24:30] Yeah, I think they just know that right balance. But then I like I said earlier, there was a cyclone came through and it tore up all the fencing and knocked down trees and wiped out all the forests. And the project kind of fell apart after the first year because we couldn't redo all the fencing. There's no money to do it. And then the pigs got in there and ate the dalo. But the first year they harvested it all, they went around and sold their dalo, and it was a really cool project. And it was cool to teach them how to do it I think. And I learned so much too, just going around in the bush and clearing things with 15 guys and a bunch of cane knives and putting in fencing for I feel like miles.

SZTUK: [00:25:16] Yeah.

SMITH: [00:25:18] It was something that I have never done since.

SZTUK: [00:25:20] In a jungle?

SMITH: [00:25:21] Yeah, in a jungle.

SZTUK: [00:25:21] It's not an easy thing to do.

SMITH: [00:25:25] Um, and there was another. The other main project that I worked on was, it was just a recycled rubbish program, and it was started

by a volunteer in a different village in the same *tikina*. And what was it called? But it was, it involved no money, no nothing. So it was just she had seen that the villages were dirty. You know, people would throw their, as plastic trash came in, they'd throw it out the back of their house like they threw all the non-plastic trash, not that many years before. So they started this program where they'd go around. They had an environmental group, I forget the Fijian name they had for it, but these designated groups for each village would go around and they'd check every house and they had a scorecard. And they'd check to make sure that you had your trash in one pile and your recycling one pile. And we're able to get recycling from Nadi to come and pick up these big ton bags of recycling.

SZTUK: [00:26:21] No kidding.

SMITH: [00:26:21] Off the side of the road. And you had to have nice flowers and medicinal flowers and all the drains around your house had to be dug out and cleared so that the water would drain away and you wouldn't have mosquitoes. And they would go through and they'd rate everybody's house. And then at the monthly village meeting, they would read out the scores to the houses and basically shame you into.

SZTUK: [00:26:44] Embarrass everybody.

SMITH: [00:26:44] Yeah, into getting your house nicer. And it worked, and it worked even after, you know, she started it, I kept it up, and they just kept on doing it on their own. It just became something that they did. It was like part of what the village did and it just seemed so logical, you know, like there was no money. Everybody had a benefit to it. The village got better. The only problem was there's still no trash collection system there. So all that plastic trash goes into a pit and gets lit on fire every once in a while. It's just awful when they light all that plastic trash on fire. But that one was, that was a cool project, because I don't know but I feel like they're probably still doing it. As toward the other ones, not so much.

SZTUK: [00:27:34] How big was this village?

SMITH: [00:27:36] Well, so we did it in five villages. It was the whole *tikina*. So we'd go around every week to a different village. So it was basically like we just would go around every five weeks and go to a different one. And it was always kind of an event. We'd meet up with people, go around and check every house, and then as always, once you're all done, you sit around and have kava and tally it all up. And then somebody brings out a bunch of food and you feel like you've accomplished something and you're full and kava'ed up.

SZTUK: [00:28:07] So your job wasn't limited to just the village where you lived. It was that whole district there.

SMITH: [00:28:12] It was the whole one. I, at first when I got there, I thought that I'd be more in the whole one, in the whole *tikina*. But all four of the villages were on the coast and you can just walk down the beach to them. But my village was about two kilometers inland, and I could walk down. You know, I could walk down the bush to there or I could walk down the road. But it's just, it kind of wears on you. So I kept that one to the five because it was just once a week to go to different villages. But the other projects I mostly just stuck all in my village. It was just a lot of walking.

SZTUK: [00:28:44] So the village that you lived in, how big was that? How many families there?

SMITH: [00:28:50] Oh, I can't remember. I think they said when the village is full, there was like 330 people live there, but it never felt like that. I felt like there's maybe 120 to 150 at any given time or less. And how many houses? Not that many. You can walk around the village pretty quick.

SZTUK: [00:29:09] Yeah. And what was your house like?

SMITH: [00:29:11] My house was actually kind of big for a house because it was, they were building a kindergarten and they didn't have any place to put me, so they put me in the kindergarten. At first I started out in somebody else's house because it wasn't finished, and then it took them, I don't know, three months or so to finish up the house that I stayed in. So I had

like a little kitchen area, actually, kind of a big kitchen area, and then a really big room because it was supposed to be a kindergarten.

SZTUK: [00:29:38] Yeah.

SMITH: [00:29:38] It was, that waterfall I talked about had a creek that ran down. It ran right by my, right behind my house. And just tin walls, tin, no concrete walls, tin roof, doors, windows.

SZTUK: [00:29:52] And you stayed there the whole time?

SMITH: [00:29:54] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:29:54] So no kindergarten?

SMITH: [00:29:55] No. No.

SZTUK: [00:29:57] They stayed in another building?

SMITH: [00:29:59] They, yeah, they just held it in the, what is the main village hall called? I think the common?

SZTUK: [00:30:06] Oh, uh.

SMITH: [00:30:08] The bosami quaro? I think we had different ones, like bosami ware. So. And I didn't get involved with the, there was a school nearby and there was a kindergarten, but I didn't get involved in everything. And people, when you're in the Peace Corps, people will ask you to get involved in a lot. And since, one thing I guess I forgot to say. In all of my projects, I made them all about the youth, because when I did show up in my village, people kind of didn't know what to do with me or think of me. And I had one guy who kind of guided me and he said, you should get the youth involved because it'll unite the two families who kind of have their differences. One family has the chief and the other family is related to them, but doesn't get necessarily everything that the chief's family does. So if you involve the youth, you involve everybody.

SMITH: [00:30:59] So I made them all about youth projects. And I remember, I'd go to the village meeting and I'd say, I'm going to have a youth meeting. And then I'd go sit at the community hall and wait for people to show up. And maybe one or two people show up and nothing was really happening. And then I did that enough times. I was persistent enough. It was kind of frustrating. You're like, oh, why don't people want to come do stuff with me? I thought that was the point. One time the elders, I think they saw me sitting there maybe after the fifth or sixth time. They told all of the youth that they had to come. And then after that, it just kind of blossomed. They saw that I was there to actually do something, not just hang out. And that was actually the key to everything else I did.

SMITH: [00:31:43] And from there, too, I even invited one of my other good friends named Sarah, who worked primarily with the Indian communities, but she was doing health work. And so she came to the village and she did a health talk about sex and STDs, because a lot of youth would come to me with questions. And they'd have questions that, man, that sounds unhealthy. We need to have a talk. So I brought her there and she did a talk for the youth and it was a packed house and they had lots of questions that, you know, they had nobody probably in the village that they would ask. And even if they did, they wouldn't have a good answer. So, you know, you become a jack of all trades. You're doing a lot. People want you to get them cars or fix their roof or whatever. You know, you get all these questions, you're like, well, I can't help you with that. But yeah, everybody thinks you have the answer to everything.

SZTUK: [00:32:38] Right. So what did you do in the evenings and after work when it's time to relax?

SMITH: [00:32:48] Well.

SZTUK: [00:32:49] What was life like there in the village?

SMITH: [00:32:52] It varied. I mean, fortunately for me, I was near a backpacker resort called the Beach House, and I could go there in the afternoons when I was done with stuff if the tide was right and I could surf. And it was during the time a coup happened. So nobody was really traveling to the

country. So I was surfing alone, which is kind of a dream, to be able to surf by yourself in Fiji, although it's kind of, you've got to paddle pretty far out. So it's a little bit scary. But I had that, which I think kept me sane sometimes. And then in the village, when it was a night that I wasn't hanging out with people, I usually would just at an appropriate time would close the doors and the windows just to kind of have my own private time. And I've read a ton. I wish I had the time to read like I read there.

SMITH: [00:33:41] And I sometimes put headphones in and I did a thing called strancing, which was like stretching and dancing, because in the village you're not really supposed to move around and gyrate so much. So I would just have my own time of just wiggling. It's like feeling and listening to different kinds of music. I wrote. I wrote so much, you know, I just was writing about everything because it was so foreign and different. I always thought that being in the village you had these extreme highs and lows almost simultaneously. This is like the sweet and sour or combined to where you could feel incredibly isolated all at the same time, while being surrounded by a ton of people and just being all of your stimuluses were on full alert because everything was so new and trying to wrap your head around that. Like simultaneous high and low.

SZTUK: [00:34:39] That's interesting. You must have done a lot of kava drinking there in the village.

SMITH: [00:34:45] I did. I got. I got bored of kava after a while. Sometimes I'd have to run away and hide. But that's what they do. And if you want to get to know them and you want to be a part of the community, you have to do that. If you just sit in your house and hide, you won't be a part of Fijian culture. You won't learn the language. You won't know who's who and what's going on. So you've got to drink kava.

SZTUK: [00:35:10] Now, did you stay in this location for your entire two years?

SMITH: [00:35:16] Mm hmm. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:35:19] And some of these projects you're talking about, obviously they don't happen overnight. So you might spend months working on some of these things.

SMITH: [00:35:32] I feel like, well, all the projects were happening simultaneously. There wasn't a beginning or an end to one. And I felt like some of them, like, would ramp up and there'd be a big push to everything. And then it would. I feel like this is maybe just Fijian culture. Something else would happen, like a funeral or a wedding, and everything would just stop abruptly. It didn't matter. Just all stopped. And for the next week or two is all about the wedding or the funeral. And then I'd have to slowly build the momentum back up and it will go, go, go, go, go until something else happened, a wedding, a funeral. Or Christmas. Christmas was a big thing. And Christmas, everything shuts down for a pleasurable amount of time. If we had a Christmas break as long as Fiji at Christmas break, it'd be nice.

SMITH: [00:36:22] But it was. You have to. You had to keep pushing and keep the motivation. And I think because you're alone and there's not a lot of other stimulus, it's really good to be able to keep that motivation going, because you've got to focus your energy somewhere. So the projects become, it'd become, you know, it's 24/7 on that project. And what you're doing there is also your life. It's everything. You know, you wake up and you're on. You're on the clock. You go to sleep. People knock on your door in the middle of the night and you can't say, go away, because you're there. You're supposed to be there in service.

SZTUK: [00:37:06] So when somebody knocks on your door in the middle of the night, what are they looking for?

SMITH: [00:37:11] They usually want something. Or the one time they wanted to sell me fish, because they catch fish in the middle of the night.

SZTUK: [00:37:17] Oh, right, they go out.

SMITH: [00:37:18] They go out fishing and they want to sell their fish. But if you don't buy your fish right when they catch it, all the fish is gone by the time you're ready to wake up. You learn that quick. Somebody knocks on the

door at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning and scares you. Siti! What? What's wrong? Siti, you want some fish? You're like, what? No, I don't want fish. It's 3:00 in the morning. I'll come back at 8:00. And I come back at 8:00. Fish is all gone, Siti.

SZTUK: [00:37:48] I bet you learned that fast.

SMITH: [00:37:49] Yeah. You gotta get it when it's ready.

SZTUK: [00:37:53] So it was the Peace Corps experience a lot different than you envisioned it when you signed up?

SMITH: [00:38:00] It was a bit, it was because everybody that I talked to previously went to South America somewhere.

SZTUK: [00:38:05] Oh, right.

SMITH: [00:38:06] Where I think culture is more similar to a Western culture and Fiji is not very similar to Western culture at all. So I think that it gave me, well, I just didn't know what to expect. I had no idea really what Fijian culture would be about. I had never really even thought about Fijian culture. But what it did do is it gave me, I feel like as much as I learned about Fijian culture and I could go back to Fiji and sit down at any village and be comfortable to where a lot of people couldn't and know what's going on when a lot of people wouldn't. I also was able to look at my own culture in this really bird's eye view and go, oh, why did I ever think this? Why was this normal to me? Because what is so normal to them, it's weird to me. They think the same thing about me, you know. So it was a really good cultural sharing experience of being able to learn, in retrospect.

SZTUK: [00:39:10] And you just stayed for the two years. Did you think about extending?

SMITH: [00:39:16] I did. In hindsight, I wish I would have. But by the end of the two years, I was also feeling. I think a lot of people feel this way. They feel kind of a little bit stir crazy or you miss your family, you miss your friends, or you want to do something different. But at the same time, it was the

best time of my life. And I think, you know, by the end of the second year, I was pretty fluent in the language. I was really comfortable. My jobs were going good. Had I carried on, I think I would have just done better. So I kind of regret not trying to do a third year. But I mean, I was younger. I was younger then.

SZTUK: [00:40:03] Well, it's not too late.

SMITH: [00:40:05] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:40:05] There's still. So what do you think some of your main accomplishments were there? You know, the Peace Corps, one of the goals is to transfer knowledge and expertise to your local counterparts. Do you think you had any effect there?

SMITH: [00:40:27] I think the one, the recycling rubbish program, I think was. I think they. I think they always kind of understood that it wasn't good, but it's kind of like if you just. Like I'm a park ranger right now and if I don't want people to use an illegal trail, if I just put brush on it, they'll move the brush. If I put brush on it and I put a sign, this is going to cause erosion and ruin the park and yadda yadda yadda, people seem to respect it. If you just, you know, after those I guess it was four years because there's a volunteer before me. They all got it and they saw the benefit of it and they just carried on. You know, it was trash is trash. And this new trash, especially for them because it was a new style of trash, has a lasting impact. And they'd asked me questions, you know, they'd ask me the questions that were hard to answer. If this plastic is so bad, why do you make it? Well, I wish I could answer that better.

SZTUK: [00:41:28] A good question, yeah. You weren't the first volunteer in that community, were you?

SMITH: [00:41:35] No. Second in the community, but first in my village.

SZTUK: [00:41:38] First in your village. So the people there probably didn't know what to expect of you. Do you think you, uh, that they had a better understanding of Americans after you were there for a couple of years?

SMITH: [00:41:52] I think they did because I was open and shared with them. And I became friends with, you know. There's, some of it was superficial talk with some people and other people you become close with and you start to share a lot. And so they'd have a lot of questions. I mean, everybody had questions about me, what it was like in America. Sometimes I almost felt offended by the questions and I remember like probably reacting impolitely, almost defensive in a way.

SZTUK: [00:42:23] Yeah.

SMITH: [00:42:23] But it was just curiosity. And it's curiosity based off of what they see on TV. And you're trying to say, well, I don't actually live in a mansion and drive a fancy car. And I'd find it offensive that people kept thinking I was really rich. In comparison, I am I am wealthy, but I'm not as wealthy as they thought. And I was trying to always say, hey, we're even though economically we're very different in a lot of ways, we're all the same and we're just all trying to do the best we can. And there's industrious people and lazy people. And, you know, it's just, everything's the same. And in some ways, I'm really envious of you because you don't have to do some of the things that I have to do. You can just go to the bush and feed yourself and there's always a roof over your head and you're never going to have to buy it or land, you know? So we're always sharing those kind of ideas.

SMITH: [00:43:17] And relationships with other people. I was really curious about their relationships and in comparison to ours, because for me it was about finding a girlfriend and for most of the villagers it was about marrying families together, you know? So I got to talk a lot about that.

SZTUK: [00:43:39] Oh really?

SMITH: [00:43:39] And the elders would talk about how all the young people were more like me and how they had these love marriages, which were brand new, and that these love marriages are no good. You know, there's one old guy who said he'd never even kissed his wife and that's like mind boggling to me.

SZTUK: [00:43:55] So even in the Fijian culture they were arranging marriages before?

SMITH: [00:44:01] Mm hmm. It's like, you never kiss your wife? You know, it just wasn't, there was no need for it. And as to where us, we went, you know, they see us wanting to fall in love and find this life partner. For them it was like it was just so much more practical. So I mean, I guess I still am looking at it from my own perspective, but they had asked me so many questions about love marriages. The older ones. The younger, I think the younger generation got it differently.

SZTUK: [00:44:35] Sure. Sure. Now so when you left Peace Corps then, what did you do after that?

SMITH: [00:44:48] I traveled. I went to Sri Lanka for about a month and Bali about a month. And then I ended up living in New Zealand for about a year and Australia for about a year and kind of did some traveling in between till I made my way back to the States and kind of went home up to Humboldt County, worked for a while, and made my way back or ended up getting a job here.

SZTUK: [00:45:19] And you kept in touch with folks back in Fiji and some of your Peace Corps friends from the time?

SMITH: [00:45:29] I still got two of my good friends, Sarah and Amy. Amy lives up in Washington. Sarah just moved over to the East Coast. And then Corina, who was, I was friends with and she lived in a village kind of near mine, but she was there a year before me, so I only knew her for a year while I was there. She, we worked not together, but in similar departments so I'd see her often. And I had another friend, Christian, who was the year after me and he is a park ranger at Joshua Tree and we hang out kind of often. I go out there a lot and he comes here.

SZTUK: [00:46:04] So you guys have this shared, kind of shared experience.

SMITH: [00:46:07] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:46:07] And I think you mentioned earlier that that kind of brings you together. You have something in common.

SMITH: [00:46:15] Yeah. I mean, Fiji was such a monumental moment in my life. I feel like there's probably, there's probably more times in a week that I mentioned something about Fiji than anything else I ever did. And so when you have somebody else that kind of understands it or knows a word or gets the humor behind it, it's really, it's really important and special.

SZTUK: [00:46:40] Yeah.

SMITH: [00:46:41] I feel like when I hear about old guys talking about their service in the military and like, that's where their defining moments. Peace Corps is really similar in the way that Peace Corps volunteers talk about it. You just kind of go, oh, you did that? You did that. Good job. You know, even if it wasn't the same country. The same country's even better, probably like Marines like Marines more than they like guys in the Army.

SZTUK: [00:47:06] How about your Fijian friends? You keep in touch with them?

SMITH: [00:47:10] Not so much. I was a little bit because Facebook came around, but then I got off Facebook and I haven't had that much touch. For a few years afterwards, I'd handwrite letters to a lot of them.

SZTUK: [00:47:21] Yeah.

SMITH: [00:47:23] And then I just kind of, they never wrote back and I guess it faded away. But for a while I always wanted to write letters to people. And I think about them and like I have conversations in my head in Fijian with some of them to try and keep up with the words because there's nobody else to talk to in Fijian. But it's, sadly the language is fading. Every once in a while, like a couple of weeks ago, I was with my friend that is out in Joshua Tree and he was, he said a word and I was like, I don't remember that word. I was like, I don't even know if I ever learned that word, but I definitely don't remember. He's like, surely you learned that word. But it's,

it's a cool, it's cool to know language, even though it's not a very useful language. It's cool to know such a unique language.

SZTUK: [00:48:09] Right. It's not like any other.

SMITH: [00:48:09] And then I learned a dialect that's even more unique to the language, when I would go around Fiji and I could speak my dialect, it was really impressive to everybody.

SZTUK: [00:48:17] Yeah, I bet. Especially the people in Nadroga.

SMITH: [00:48:21] Yeah, yeah. You just say a couple Nadroga words. They'd just be like, oh!

SZTUK: [00:48:26] Yeah. So have you had the occasion to maybe talk to people since then that, since you've been back, that are thinking about going to the Peace Corps?

SMITH: [00:48:41] Yeah, I did a talk actually. I did a big talk for at Mesa College. There's a teacher that she does a lot of work with. So I'm a park ranger and she sends her students to work in the canyons with us. And she knew that I was in the Peace Corps, and she asked me if I would do a talk for an array of students. And so I went and talked about my experiences. And I was supposed to do it one other time, but they canceled it and she said she's got another event coming up that I'm going to go talk at. And just tell students, you know, it's kind of like they do these little groups and they can ask me whatever questions they want. And then there's a broad question and answer period, and it's probably 50 or 60 kids in there.

SMITH: [00:49:23] And then any time anybody asks me about the Peace Corps, I tell them they should do it. If they're thinking about it, they should at least start the application because it's going to take ten months anyway. And if they really want to do it, just buy the ticket, take the ride. I mean, it's two years. It goes by so fast. You don't have much to lose.

SZTUK: [00:49:44] Yeah. In retrospect, it doesn't seem like a long time, does it?

SMITH: [00:49:47] It sounds like a long time before you do it. And when you're done, it's just like, that's over? So I highly encourage people to do it because I know wherever you go it's just going to be something unique that can't be replicated by any travels that you'll ever do. It's just not the same. It's, you become a part of another culture and country, and you have a purpose. As to where when you travel, it's so much more selfish. So. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:50:26] So as far as Peace Corps' effect on your life and your attitudes and so forth, you think you'd be the same person if you hadn't had this experience?

SMITH: [00:50:39] No, I don't. I think, I think I'd still be. I feel like I've lived a really cool life and I feel like I always probably would have. But I don't know if it would be. I don't know if I would take as many chances as I do because I did that. Because when I got out of it, I was like, wow, I did that? I can do anything, you know? Like once you get through that like everything else seems possible. And so I think, I don't know if I would have lived in other countries and experienced, you know, it wasn't the same as Peace Corps, but living and working in New Zealand and living and working in Australia and finding my way and meeting friends, I think it was all directly because of that experience. I was like, oh well, moving countries, that doesn't seem like that big of a deal. I can do that.

SZTUK: [00:51:27] I can adjust.

SMITH: [00:51:27] Yeah. And I'd still do it again if a great opportunity came up. Because I feel like when you're in another country, you wake up and every day feels like an adventure, because you don't know what's going to happen and you don't know what to expect. It's just, I like it when there's diversity and change in life. So without Peace Corps, I mean, who knows? Who really knows what would have happened? Because I know that if I didn't do Peace Corps, I was going to take off anyway for a year. But I'm glad that I did Peace Corps instead, because it just had so much more meaning.

SZTUK: [00:52:09] You've had these experiences that you wouldn't have had otherwise.

SMITH: [00:52:12] Yeah. I mean, yeah, I'd go and learn how to. For me, it was really, really cool to learn how to go bush and learn about all the foods that you could collect and eat, how to collect them and eat them. I mean, I even. They don't kill pigs like we kill pigs. They drown them. And I've drowned pigs with my bare hands. It's not something that you can replicate very easily. So it's just these moments that you're like, you've done this and you feel like, oh, if I did that, I can do this. And I've taken it even into my career at work. We can do everything. There's not like, I don't want to complain about stuff. I want to figure out solutions to things and implement it and do it.

SZTUK: [00:52:58] Great. Great. So any, um, it sounds like we're kind of wrapping it up. Any last thoughts or anything you'd like to share, your final reflections?

SMITH: [00:53:09] Well, if anybody is listening to this and they're listening it to join, one of my favorite sayings, which I said earlier was, buy the ticket, take the ride. Because once you buy the ticket, you're kind of committed and then you'll end up somewhere and you don't know where. And enjoying that, really embracing that not knowing is an amazing feeling because once you come out on the other side, your life will just seem that much sweeter.

SZTUK: [00:53:39] Great. All right. Well, thanks a lot for your time. It's a good interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]