

Maria del Carmen Moreno Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Maria del Carmen Moreno served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mauritania and Mali from 1989 to 1992 in an agriculture program.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Maria del Carmen Moreno

May 1, 2016
Madison, Wisconsin

By Phyllis Noble

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

NOBLE: [00:00:02] Here we go.

MORENO: [00:00:02] Okay.

NOBLE: [00:00:03] This is Phyllis Noble. I am interviewing Maria del Carmen Moreno, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mauritania from 1989 to 1991 when she was evacuated, went on to finish 1991 in Peace Corps service in Mali, and then returned to Mauritania as Peace Corps staff, as a trainer of new volunteers. Yeah, so we'll talk about that.

MORENO: [00:00:37] Sure.

NOBLE: [00:00:38] Maria. Um. Oh, did I say today is, today is May 1st. It's May Day, 2016.

MORENO: [00:00:45] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:00:46] And we are in Madison, Wisconsin. So Maria, let's, let's talk about who you were before you joined the Peace Corps. Where were you born?

MORENO: [00:00:56] I was born in the Dominican Republic, an island in the Caribbean, but grew up in New York City as part of the Dominican diaspora that started moving to the States after 1965.

NOBLE: [00:01:07] Yeah. And, um, how old were you when your family moved?

MORENO: [00:01:12] I was six.

NOBLE: [00:01:13] To New York. You were six. So you have pretty strong memories of being a child in Dominican Republic.

MORENO: [00:01:20] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:01:20] And when you moved to New York, it was you and both of your parents?

MORENO: [00:01:24] Both of my parents. And, um, there were four of us. Four siblings, four children.

NOBLE: [00:01:28] Where were you among the four?

MORENO: [00:01:30] I was in the middle. So kind of middle daughter.

NOBLE: [00:01:33] Uh huh.

MORENO: [00:01:33] Um, middle. I have an older sister and an older brother. And then I have my younger sister, and then my parents had two more children.

NOBLE: [00:01:41] After that.

MORENO: [00:01:41] After that.

NOBLE: [00:01:42] Wow. Born in New York?

MORENO: [00:01:43] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:01:44] So six of you altogether. Wow, wow. And what did your parents do?

MORENO: [00:01:49] So my mom initially worked in a factory, and then, uh, uh, stayed at home when we lost our baby, our, our, um, uh, kind of in-home, um, caretaker. And then and my dad worked, um, kind of it was, um, he worked for a man that had a lot of properties, and he managed his properties, and then eventually he purchased those properties when this man decided to return to Nicaragua.

NOBLE: [00:02:17] Oh, okay. So your father purchased the properties that he'd been taking care of.

MORENO: [00:02:22] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:02:22] Wow. And where were the?

MORENO: [00:02:25] These were an apartment building in Manhattan, the Bronx.

NOBLE: [00:02:28] Huh. Wow. That must have been a good move I'm thinking for your father.

MORENO: [00:02:33] Oh, yes.

NOBLE: [00:02:34] Economically, for the family. Six kids plus two parents. That's eight people.

MORENO: [00:02:40] Eight people.

NOBLE: [00:02:42] I'm trying to imagine traveling together as a family. Did you ever go anywhere?

MORENO: [00:02:46] No. We never traveled. No.

NOBLE: [00:02:48] You couldn't. Yeah.

MORENO: [00:02:48] Yeah. We didn't go anywhere.

NOBLE: [00:02:50] Right. And where in New York did you live?

MORENO: [00:02:52] So we initially lived in Manhattan, which is where the Dominican, uh, community was. And then we moved to the Bronx by Fordham University.

NOBLE: [00:03:00] Yeah. Yeah, I can imagine that. And so, um, when you arrived in New York, I'm thinking you probably spoke only Spanish.

MORENO: [00:03:10] Only Spanish. Right.

NOBLE: [00:03:11] And now you speak English without an accent. So you did a remarkable job of being bilingual.

MORENO: [00:03:19] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:03:20] Where did you go to school?

MORENO: [00:03:22] Um. You mean undergrad or?

NOBLE: [00:03:24] No, no, I mean, as a child.

MORENO: [00:03:26] So first, initially it was in, um, Manhattan. It was an elementary school, and then we moved to the Bronx and I went to high, I went to a Catholic school.

NOBLE: [00:03:34] A Catholic school. So elementary school was public school.

MORENO: [00:03:37] Yeah. And middle school was, uh, public school. And then high school was a Catholic school, a Catholic school in the Bronx.

NOBLE: [00:03:42] In the Bronx. What was the name of the school?

MORENO: [00:03:44] Saint Thomas Aquinas.

NOBLE: [00:03:46] Saint Thomas Aquinas. Okay. And, um, I went to a Catholic school too. That's why I'm smiling. Um, so at Saint Thomas Aquinas in high school, uh, you already spoke Spanish. Were you required to take another foreign language?

MORENO: [00:04:04] Well, all the school, all the schooling was in English.

NOBLE: [00:04:06] Oh, yeah. Sure.

MORENO: [00:04:07] Yeah. No, I mean, in high school, no, they counted my Spanish as a foreign language.

NOBLE: [00:04:14] So you didn't have to.

MORENO: [00:04:15] I didn't have to take another language or take Spanish.

NOBLE: [00:04:18] Spanish, right. You had that.

MORENO: [00:04:20] I already had it. Yeah. It's kind of interesting, but it was an all girls school. I don't know if that's what you went?

NOBLE: [00:04:24] I did go to an all girls Catholic school.

MORENO: [00:04:26] I loved it.

NOBLE: [00:04:27] Yeah. Oh, good. Yeah. You had to wear uniforms?

MORENO: [00:04:29] Yes, I loved it. I loved everything about it.

NOBLE: [00:04:31] Oh, wow.

MORENO: [00:04:31] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:04:32] Quite the opposite of my experience. And so how did you learn? You must have learned to read and write in Spanish in school?

MORENO: [00:04:40] Because I was in school in the Dominican Republic prior to coming to the States.

NOBLE: [00:04:44] Okay. All right.

MORENO: [00:04:45] So even though I was so young, yeah, I was already in school.

NOBLE: [00:04:49] Okay. So you were already literate in Spanish.

MORENO: [00:04:51] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:04:51] And then when you came here, you had to switch to English.

MORENO: [00:04:54] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:04:54] What was that like?

MORENO: [00:04:56] Um, well, that was very hard, but, you know, I learned it. I don't know how, but.

NOBLE: [00:04:59] I'm thinking that at age six, to be thrust into.

MORENO: [00:05:02] You know, I lived in a Spanish community, so everything was in Spanish. The only thing that was in English was school.

NOBLE: [00:05:08] Was school.

MORENO: [00:05:08] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:05:09] But school must have seemed, um, ultra difficult for that first year until, I mean, kids pick up languages quickly, but the beginning must be.

MORENO: [00:05:17] Yes. Yeah, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:05:19] So you're at Saint Thomas of Aquinas. Um, what did you, what did you do as a kid when you were, uh. I'm not, I'm not talking about academics, but, um, extracurricular activities.

MORENO: [00:05:31] Yeah. You know, I played tennis. Uh, um, so I spent a lot of time traveling to and from a place to play tennis, so. So sometimes that was a two hour train ride to Queens.

NOBLE: [00:05:43] Wow.

MORENO: [00:05:44] Manhattan.

NOBLE: [00:05:45] Wow.

MORENO: [00:05:45] Yeah. So that's what I did.

NOBLE: [00:05:47] So that tennis then brought you into other corners of New York. You must know New York very well then.

MORENO: [00:05:53] Well, I did before.

NOBLE: [00:05:54] Yeah, yeah, of course.

MORENO: [00:05:55] That was wonderful.

NOBLE: [00:05:56] Yeah, yeah. Uh, so you played tennis. Um, did you hang out with, uh, both Hispanic kids, girls and?

MORENO: [00:06:07] Uh, you know, not really. I mean, we weren't really allowed to hang out, so my, my dad was very strict. So you went to school, you either went to a job, or you went to sports, and you came home.

NOBLE: [00:06:17] You came home?

MORENO: [00:06:18] Yeah. And so and we had a very large extended family. So we really didn't need anybody else.

NOBLE: [00:06:23] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [00:06:24] We were, we were quite a large group.

NOBLE: [00:06:26] It sounds wonderful. It sounds very warm.

MORENO: [00:06:29] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:06:30] What, what about, um, summer jobs after you were 16? Did you?

MORENO: [00:06:36] Uh, no, I played tennis. I played tennis through, yeah, until I went to college. My summers were filled with tennis.

NOBLE: [00:06:42] You must have been very good.

MORENO: [00:06:43] Well, I loved it.

NOBLE: [00:06:44] Do you still play?

MORENO: [00:06:45] A little bit. Yeah, not as much.

NOBLE: [00:06:48] Yeah, yeah. Excellent. So then you graduate from high school and then you went to college?

MORENO: [00:06:54] I went to American university in Washington, D.C.

NOBLE: [00:06:56] American University, the very place we were just talking about that has the Peace Corps Community Archive, in Washington, D.C.

MORENO: [00:07:03] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:07:03] So this was your first time living outside of New York?

MORENO: [00:07:07] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:07:07] In D.C., did you live in a dorm?

MORENO: [00:07:08] I lived in the dorms.

NOBLE: [00:07:09] Yeah, yeah. And what did you study at?

MORENO: [00:07:13] You know, I, I did political science and Russian studies.

NOBLE: [00:07:17] Russian studies. Did you study Russian?

MORENO: [00:07:20] I did, I did, there.

NOBLE: [00:07:21] And you hadn't done that in high school?

MORENO: [00:07:23] No.

NOBLE: [00:07:24] So you plunged into that brand new in college.

MORENO: [00:07:26] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:07:27] Wow. I'm thinking how difficult that is.

MORENO: [00:07:30] It was, the alphabet. Yeah. Well, I mean, I did learn to speak the language so.

NOBLE: [00:07:35] Radically different from Spanish. It's not like French or Italian or something.

MORENO: [00:07:39] Yeah. Correct.

NOBLE: [00:07:40] Wow. Well, you took on. What, what drew you, what attracted to?

MORENO: [00:07:44] Well, I was, uh, you know, I was, I was a, um, an avid reader and, um, my, at the time when I was filling out my, which I think, uh,

when I was filling out my application for courses, I must have been reading. I used to go through like phases, like I would read all these French authors, or I would read all these Latin American authors. And I was reading maybe the Russian authors at the time. So I was heavily into Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky and some of these other Russian authors. So maybe that's why. And, you know, and I saw that they had Russian language and Russian studies, so I just decided to take it.

NOBLE: [00:08:18] Right.

MORENO: [00:08:18] And then made a minor out of it.

NOBLE: [00:08:21] Wonderful. And your major was, did you say political science?

MORENO: [00:08:23] Political science.

NOBLE: [00:08:24] Okay. And again at AU, did you have to work part time?

MORENO: [00:08:30] I did, I did.

NOBLE: [00:08:31] So what did you do there?

MORENO: [00:08:32] I worked at a church on, on the campus. So it was a, you know, ecumenical, um, office. And I worked there the whole time I was at AU.

NOBLE: [00:08:41] Summertime too?

MORENO: [00:08:42] No, no, just during the year and then during the summer, I'm trying to think, um. Well, I, uh, freshman, um, I think I went, oh, yeah, I went back to New York and I worked. So I had one, in one of my semesters, I did an internship on Capitol Hill, and then it also took me to New York City because I worked for the congressman. So I worked in New York City. And another one, I worked for the mayor's office. So I would go back to the city, to New York, to work.

NOBLE: [00:09:11] And work there in the summers.

MORENO: [00:09:12] Summers, mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:09:13] Yeah. Which Congressman?

MORENO: [00:09:15] You know, I. Roberto Garcia. The name. Yeah, I don't remember. I mean, yeah, he eventually went to jail for some racketeering problem. I found it odd, I never saw him in the office the whole time I was there.

NOBLE: [00:09:27] So that's an interesting part of your education too.

MORENO: [00:09:30] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:09:31] And then, uh, eventually you went to the Peace Corps. Did you go to the Peace Corps immediately after?

MORENO: [00:09:37] Well, I did apply to the Peace Corps. And actually, the reason I decided in the Peace Corps was because at American University, a lot of people, a lot of my friends, um. So I was in the political science department, but a lot of my friends were in the international relations department.

NOBLE: [00:09:51] Oh, yeah.

MORENO: [00:09:51] And a lot of them went on to the Peace Corps. So that's where.

NOBLE: [00:09:56] Okay. So, you knew people who were.

MORENO: [00:09:57] I knew people who had been in the Peace Corps or were going to Peace Corps. And then the whole Kennedy, you know, give back to your country, service. I mean, American University put a lot of emphasis on service. So, so I knew that that's what I was going to do after. And I did apply to Peace Corps, and I was accepted to go to, I believe it was Costa Rica, but it was to teach English and I didn't want to do that.

NOBLE: [00:10:20] Okay.

MORENO: [00:10:20] So I declined.

NOBLE: [00:10:20] And when was that? When was that?

MORENO: [00:10:22] That was May of 1985.

NOBLE: [00:10:24] 1985.

MORENO: [00:10:25] '85.

NOBLE: [00:10:26] '85. And you were still a student at AU?

MORENO: [00:10:29] I graduated in May of '85.

NOBLE: [00:10:31] Okay. So right then when you graduated, you applied.

MORENO: [00:10:35] I had a, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:10:36] Or you had applied and you were invited to Costa Rica. And you turned that down.

MORENO: [00:10:41] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:10:42] Did they say anything to you about how, oh, if you turn down what we offer you, you might not ever get another invitation?

MORENO: [00:10:49] No, no.

NOBLE: [00:10:49] Okay. So what did you tell them? How did you?

MORENO: [00:10:54] No, I just said I choose to decline my offer.

NOBLE: [00:10:57] You didn't tell them why?

MORENO: [00:10:58] No.

NOBLE: [00:10:58] Yeah, that.

MORENO: [00:10:59] Yeah. I didn't.

NOBLE: [00:11:01] You didn't want it. You wanted something else not teaching English.

MORENO: [00:11:03] Yes, I didn't think.

NOBLE: [00:11:04] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [00:11:04] Yeah, the teaching English just didn't, didn't seem to work.

NOBLE: [00:11:08] Had they, in the application project, had they asked you for your preferences? Had they asked if there was any place you would not go to?

MORENO: [00:11:16] No, no, that was pre, pre-choice. I mean, it wasn't. I mean, I had Spanish so you know they automatically put me in a Spanish speaking country.

NOBLE: [00:11:27] Oh. Yeah.

MORENO: [00:11:27] So yeah. I don't remember very much of that process. I know that the, my second time around I was very deliberate as to where I wanted to go.

NOBLE: [00:11:35] Where you wanted to go and what you wanted to do.

MORENO: [00:11:37] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:11:38] So, um. So you decline the invitation to, to go to Costa Rica. And then what happened? Did you have to apply all over again?

MORENO: [00:11:52] Yeah, so, I mean a year's passed between that. So then I stayed, I worked in the Dominican Republic that following year.

NOBLE: [00:11:59] Doing?

MORENO: [00:11:59] Um, I worked at a hotel.

NOBLE: [00:12:01] Uh huh.

MORENO: [00:12:02] Uh, and then I went to graduate school at Boston University.

NOBLE: [00:12:04] Oh, you did?

MORENO: [00:12:05] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:12:05] And so you're now in Boston, at Boston University studying?

MORENO: [00:12:10] International relations. Um, and then, my, uh, I did a two year program because I worked full time at the, at that time. And during the summer, I did an internship in the UN, in the Dominican Republic. And then I realized that I wanted to go work overseas. So when I graduated from BU the following May, I was trying to get overseas. And in one conversation with one potential employer, he was, you know, he showed me the stack of job applicants and, you know, talked to me about some of their qualifications. He says, you must have a plan B.

NOBLE: [00:12:45] Ah.

MORENO: [00:12:46] And he goes, what's your plan B? And I said, well, I guess it's Peace Corps. He goes, well, you should, you know, put plan B into gear just in case.

NOBLE: [00:12:54] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:12:55] Because a lot of the organizations would want me to stay in country, in, work in the United States in their home office for one to two years before they would send me overseas.

NOBLE: [00:13:04] Okay. And you weren't sure you wanted to do that.

MORENO: [00:13:06] No, I didn't want to do that. So I wanted to go overseas right away.

NOBLE: [00:13:09] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:13:09] So I went home and I applied for the Peace Corps that day.

NOBLE: [00:13:11] Okay.

MORENO: [00:13:12] Second time.

NOBLE: [00:13:12] Second time. Same, same application form, having to fill the whole thing out?

MORENO: [00:13:17] But this time I selected the continent and the language.

NOBLE: [00:13:21] Okay. So you said you wanted Africa.

MORENO: [00:13:22] I said I wanted Africa, or I wanted Nepal, whichever was first.

NOBLE: [00:13:26] Oh, okay.

MORENO: [00:13:27] And that I wanted French or, you know, another language. So I wanted to learn another language.

NOBLE: [00:13:31] Okay.

MORENO: [00:13:31] And then I wanted to go and experience another place.

NOBLE: [00:13:34] Something radically different from what you were already comfortable in.

MORENO: [00:13:38] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:13:39] Wow. What a character you have, so strong that you just really want to learn as much as you possibly can.

MORENO: [00:13:47] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:13:48] So this is now 1987, maybe?

MORENO: [00:13:50] '88.

NOBLE: [00:13:50] '88. And how long did it take before you got an invitation?

MORENO: [00:13:54] So I didn't, uh, so this is, this is May. Um, this is June, June '88. So I applied and then I, uh, I was selected to go into training in March of '89.

NOBLE: [00:14:09] Oh, that's a long time. So you had to fill all that.

MORENO: [00:14:12] Mm hmm. Well, I was working in D.C. at that point, at that time.

NOBLE: [00:14:15] In D.C.

MORENO: [00:14:16] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:14:16] Okay. And what were you doing in D.C.?

MORENO: [00:14:17] I was working at PAHO, Pan American Health Organization, just doing odd jobs.

NOBLE: [00:14:22] Yeah, yeah. Using Spanish?

MORENO: [00:14:24] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:14:25] Uh huh. Okay. Yeah. And, and now you have a master's degree in?

MORENO: [00:14:29] International relations.

NOBLE: [00:14:30] International relations. You're just so qualified to do so many things. I would think people would just zap you up. So. So you're, um, working in D.C. with a connection with, uh, Panama?

MORENO: [00:14:47] PAHO, which is the Pan American.

NOBLE: [00:14:48] Oh, Pan American, not Panama, but Pan American Health Organization. Okay. And then in, did you say March of '89?

MORENO: [00:14:56] In March of '89.

NOBLE: [00:14:57] You began training?

MORENO: [00:14:59] Began training in Frogmore, which is, uh, where you did the agricultural. You did like six, 6 or 8 weeks of agricultural training.

NOBLE: [00:15:06] What's Frogmore?

MORENO: [00:15:07] Frogmore is in, um, I don't know if it's South Carolina or North Carolina. It's close to Hilton Head, not very far from Hilton Head.

NOBLE: [00:15:15] Island sort of?

MORENO: [00:15:17] Um, well, Frogmore, it's on the mainland. Hilton Head is on an island.

NOBLE: [00:15:20] Okay, so near and coastal.

MORENO: [00:15:22] Yeah, yeah. And this is where Peace Corps would go and do their ag training.

NOBLE: [00:15:26] Okay. Yeah. All right. So you were going to be an?

MORENO: [00:15:29] Agricultural volunteer at this point.

NOBLE: [00:15:31] Agricultural. But you didn't know exactly specifically. Did you know that it would be Mauritania?

MORENO: [00:15:36] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:15:37] You knew it would be Mauritania.

MORENO: [00:15:38] So everybody who went to, there were, uh, like 3 or 4 countries. And everybody who was doing ag, ag volunteer in Mauritania was in that training. Well, I think actually every, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:15:49] Yeah. Okay. But also people going to different countries?

MORENO: [00:15:52] Yeah. Tunisia. Um, yeah. There were a number of other countries.

NOBLE: [00:15:56] All were francophone?

MORENO: [00:15:57] Not really, no.

NOBLE: [00:15:58] No. Okay. So you're not talking about culture or language at Frogmore?

MORENO: [00:16:01] No, yes, strictly technical.

NOBLE: [00:16:04] Agriculture and, uh, learning the skills you'd need in agriculture. Something brand new.

MORENO: [00:16:10] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:16:11] For you.

MORENO: [00:16:11] Yes. Yeah. It worked well.

NOBLE: [00:16:13] Great. How long were you in Frogmore?

MORENO: [00:16:14] You know, I think it was either 6 or 8 weeks. I can't remember.

NOBLE: [00:16:18] How many volunteers?

MORENO: [00:16:20] Well, there were a lot. I mean, because it was not just the Mauritania. So, um. I don't know. There were a lot of us. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:16:34] And what did you?

MORENO: [00:16:35] So we did gardening. Yeah, just farming techniques and.

NOBLE: [00:16:39] Organic farming? Or were they talking about fertilizers?

MORENO: [00:16:42] No, they don't. Yeah, because I remember they did use fertilizer, because I remember I killed one of my plants because I put too much. Yeah. So, so it was not organic.

NOBLE: [00:16:53] Uh huh.

MORENO: [00:16:54] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:16:55] But they're telling you how to do gardening, planting?

MORENO: [00:16:58] Yeah. Um. Just that whole process and.

NOBLE: [00:17:01] Uh, I'm thinking about how that might differ from country to country is the soil and the temperature, the climate and the soil differ in different places.

MORENO: [00:17:11] Yeah. You know, but they didn't talk about the fact that where I was in Mauritania was very, it was the desert. So that wasn't, it wasn't brought up. I mean, we were farming in good. And yeah, it was, it was good. It was very different from where I was.

NOBLE: [00:17:24] Yeah. Yeah. So, but so, so you did that training and then you went to Mauritania?

MORENO: [00:17:28] And then we did more training. There was language and culture and some technical.

NOBLE: [00:17:33] So, um, before we leave Frogmore, uh, where were you living? Were you in, uh?

MORENO: [00:17:39] We lived in a, in a house, a dorm.

NOBLE: [00:17:44] Uh huh.

MORENO: [00:17:44] Yeah. Everybody lived together.

NOBLE: [00:17:46] Okay. So, like, maybe it was sometimes used as a school.

MORENO: [00:17:50] Yeah. Mm hmm. I can't remember. I do remember us was doing a weekend family in the community.

NOBLE: [00:17:56] Oh.

MORENO: [00:17:57] Uh huh.

NOBLE: [00:17:59] And that was for how long did you say?

MORENO: [00:18:01] It was 6 to 8 weeks.

NOBLE: [00:18:03] 6 to 8 weeks. Okay. And then you all get on a plane somewhere?

MORENO: [00:18:08] In New York, out of New York to Mauritania via Paris.

NOBLE: [00:18:11] Okay. So at this point, somewhere you have to say goodbye to your mom. You have this big family, and you're all very close. Did you then go home to your family?

MORENO: [00:18:21] Yes. In the Dominican, in the Dominican Republic. At that point, my parents were living in the Dominican Republic.

NOBLE: [00:18:26] Okay, so you went back to the Dominican Republic?

MORENO: [00:18:29] Yes.

MORENO: [00:18:29] To see your parents, hug them with. Were they worried about you? You're going off to Africa.

MORENO: [00:18:36] I think my mom. My dad was like, good luck.

NOBLE: [00:18:39] Okay. All right. He knew you to be the strong person that you are. Moms are, the job description of your mom is to worry. And your siblings? Um, what were they saying?

MORENO: [00:18:52] You know, I mean, I have, my two sisters are world travelers, so that was fine. And then my brothers were like, oh, why are you going there? You know, they, nobody really knew anything about Mauritania.

NOBLE: [00:19:03] Of course not. I would have had to look it up on a map.

MORENO: [00:19:07] So did I.

NOBLE: [00:19:09] So, so, um, and so you're, you get together with other volunteers in New York to fly over. How old were you then?

MORENO: [00:19:19] So I, um, so let's see. This is '91. 23.

NOBLE: [00:19:24] You're 23, you've already got a master's degree under your belt, and you're in New York.

MORENO: [00:19:30] Or maybe 24, maybe 24.

NOBLE: [00:19:32] Yeah. And it's 1989. Um, what month are we in now?

MORENO: [00:19:40] Uh, we are June.

NOBLE: [00:19:42] June, June of '89. And you all get on a plane. Was it a special chartered plane going only to Mauritania?

MORENO: [00:19:49] No. It was, we went to Paris. So it was like a United or American.

NOBLE: [00:19:54] Did Peace Corps staff go with you on the plane?

MORENO: [00:19:57] There was a Peace Corps staff person.

NOBLE: [00:19:59] Somebody accompanying you. Okay.

MORENO: [00:20:01] You know, maybe not. No, now that I mention it, now that I think about it. No, they were meeting us in Mauritania.

NOBLE: [00:20:08] Oh, so you have to transfer planes in Paris without a Peace Corps staff sort of shepherding you from place to place?

MORENO: [00:20:16] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:20:16] How many people were there?

MORENO: [00:20:18] There were about 24 of us.

NOBLE: [00:20:22] At the age of 23 or 24, were you older than most of them?

MORENO: [00:20:26] Yeah. Most of them were 21, 22.

NOBLE: [00:20:28] Okay. So fresh out of college?

MORENO: [00:20:29] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:20:30] And they're all, you're all supposed to take care of yourselves in a, in an airport where maybe people don't speak French.

MORENO: [00:20:37] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:20:37] And find your way to an international.

MORENO: [00:20:41] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:20:42] Uh, flight that's going, what now? From Paris.

MORENO: [00:20:45] From Paris to Mauritania.

NOBLE: [00:20:47] What's the name of the capital city?

MORENO: [00:20:49] Nouakchott.

NOBLE: [00:20:50] Nouakchott. And did the, is there an airport there?

MORENO: [00:20:55] Yes. Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:20:56] Was it a direct flight from Paris?

MORENO: [00:20:58] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:21:00] And um. So you get in, it's June and we're in West Africa. Mauritania. I'm trying to think, Mauritania is north of Senegal?

MORENO: [00:21:11] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:21:12] Yeah. It's just where the continent begins to swing.

MORENO: [00:21:16] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:21:17] Um, Senegal is the westernmost point, and now we're beginning to swing around on, on that part of West Africa. Nouakchott. You get off the plane. Do you remember getting off the plane? Was it walking down?

MORENO: [00:21:33] Yes. On the outside.

NOBLE: [00:21:35] The outside. So right away you're hit with a.

MORENO: [00:21:38] A sandstorm.

NOBLE: [00:21:39] Oh. Oh, I thought you were going to say heat. A sandstorm?

MORENO: [00:21:44] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:21:45] Wow.

MORENO: [00:21:45] It was horrible.

NOBLE: [00:21:46] Oh my goodness.

MORENO: [00:21:47] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:21:48] So immediately.

MORENO: [00:21:49] Immediately there was a sandstorm. And, uh, and so everybody's covered, you know, because apart from the fact that most, most people were covered because the Muslim country, because of the sandstorm, you know, even the women had their faces covered.

NOBLE: [00:22:03] Yeah. Women and men.

MORENO: [00:22:04] And men.

NOBLE: [00:22:04] Would have their faces covered. Yeah.

MORENO: [00:22:06] So that was. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:22:07] But you didn't have, your faces weren't covered.

MORENO: [00:22:09] No, we didn't, we. Yeah. That was a mistake.

NOBLE: [00:22:11] Whoa. Maybe somebody in New York could have mentioned that to you.

MORENO: [00:22:16] But, um. Yeah, but that was a, you know, that was like the first shock that the fact that everybody was covered, you couldn't see

people's faces. So, you know, and certainly for me, coming from New York City, where, you know, it's so important to see who you're seeing.

NOBLE: [00:22:30] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [00:22:31] And only the thieves would cover themselves. So that was the initial. That was the first, I remember feeling that image of the bandits with their.

NOBLE: [00:22:38] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:22:38] I do remember feeling shocked.

NOBLE: [00:22:40] Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And, and then you're in the airport. You have to go through, uh, immigration and.

MORENO: [00:22:49] Yeah, by that point we did have, um, Peace Corps volunteers who were there and Peace Corps staff.

NOBLE: [00:22:54] Yes. Yeah. But sometimes that's not the most efficient of things. And you have to get all your luggage and make sure everybody's got their stuff. Um, and among your group, um. What did you say, there were 20, 20?

MORENO: [00:23:10] About 26 of us.

NOBLE: [00:23:11] 26 of you. Um, was it a mixture of men and women?

MORENO: [00:23:16] Men and women, yes.

NOBLE: [00:23:17] Um, and, um, any married couples?

MORENO: [00:23:20] There were, there were, uh, two. Two that I remember.

NOBLE: [00:23:27] So then what happened? You get off. You're dead tired.

MORENO: [00:23:31] Yeah. Get off the bus. Get off the plane

NOBLE: [00:23:33] You didn't sleep?

MORENO: [00:23:33] Yeah. No, we did not.

NOBLE: [00:23:35] So you're exhausted.

MORENO: [00:23:36] And, uh. And we arrive in.

NOBLE: [00:23:38] You arrive at?

MORENO: [00:23:40] In Nouakchott. It's during the day. So we arrived in the morning because it was an old flight. Um, an all night flight. Uh, well, the first thing was you notice, you know, the boys were sent to one side. The girls were sent to another.

NOBLE: [00:23:54] Oh.

MORENO: [00:23:54] Yeah. Um, and then.

NOBLE: [00:23:57] Of a hotel lobby?

MORENO: [00:23:58] No, no, this is the airport.

NOBLE: [00:24:00] Oh. Even in the airport, they separated the men from the women?

MORENO: [00:24:03] Mm hmm. Um, yeah. And then just, uh.

NOBLE: [00:24:08] Even married couples had to split up?

MORENO: [00:24:09] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:24:10] Huh.

MORENO: [00:24:11] And then, and then there was an emphasis on, on it being a dry country. So make sure that you didn't have any alcohol.

NOBLE: [00:24:17] Oh.

MORENO: [00:24:18] Um, yeah. And then the Peace Corps people picked us up on the other side. We got on a bus and then we went to the Peace Corps house.

NOBLE: [00:24:25] Ah. What's that like?

MORENO: [00:24:28] That, you know, it was just one big block of cement. I mean, it was nothing. All the houses were either brown or maroon, surrounded by dunes.

NOBLE: [00:24:39] Wow. Even in the capital city?

MORENO: [00:24:42] Yes. Yeah. And maybe there was one tree inside the compound. So all the houses were, had high walls built on the outside, you know, so you had to go through a door and then there was a guard.

NOBLE: [00:24:52] Okay. And the high wall was a concrete block wall?

MORENO: [00:24:54] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:24:55] Painted brown.

MORENO: [00:24:56] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:24:57] So you went into such a gate in a wall and you found yourself in a compound with maybe a tree in it.

MORENO: [00:25:04] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:25:04] Okay. And then, so it's still late morning, lunchtime maybe.

MORENO: [00:25:13] Yeah. And then that was, um, you know, sitting on the floor eating. They started, you know, talking about you eat with your hand,

with your right hand, not your left hand. You have to wash your hands before you eat.

NOBLE: [00:25:22] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:25:23] Um, and the way you have to sit in terms for women sitting properly and making sure you don't put your feet out or your knees. So it's, you know, very kind of covered up. And, you know, right away that whole cross-cultural started just because of the importance of having your legs covered.

NOBLE: [00:25:39] From the very beginning.

MORENO: [00:25:41] Yeah, you know, overall, I think Peace Corps does a good job.

NOBLE: [00:25:44] Okay. All right. What were you eating?

MORENO: [00:25:47] So it was rice and maybe fish with, um. Um, well, either fish with that peanut sauce or chicken and couscous, but everything was in one bowl.

NOBLE: [00:26:04] And you all reached?

MORENO: [00:26:05] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:26:05] Into it. How do you pick up couscous or rice with your fingers?

MORENO: [00:26:11] Well, you pick up, um, you grab with your hand and then you make a ball. So you have to squeeze, squeeze, squeeze.

NOBLE: [00:26:17] Oh, so, you're squeezing the couscous or the rice to make a ball?

MORENO: [00:26:20] To make a ball. And then you put it in your mouth.

NOBLE: [00:26:21] And you somehow, what, do you make a depression with your thumb to pick up some meat?

MORENO: [00:26:26] No, that's all the same pickup.

NOBLE: [00:26:28] Oh, wow. Okay, so your hand gets kind of full of rice and.

MORENO: [00:26:35] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:26:36] In the process of this. Can you lick your fingers?

MORENO: [00:26:38] No.

NOBLE: [00:26:39] No?

MORENO: [00:26:41] Because you have, no, because you have to put your hand back in the bowl.

NOBLE: [00:26:43] Back in. That's right, that's right. Of course, it wouldn't be hygienic.

MORENO: [00:26:47] No.

NOBLE: [00:26:49] Oh, boy. I'm thinking of all the bad habits I'd have to break if it were me. So you're all sitting around in circles? One great big circle or small group?

MORENO: [00:27:00] Well, small groups. So it's, you know, 6 or 7.

NOBLE: [00:27:02] Because you have to reach to, reach that communal bowl. So you can't have too many of you. Yeah. Okay. And so that was your introduction.

MORENO: [00:27:12] That was. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:27:14] Then what happened. You probably were allowed to rest for the rest of the day.

MORENO: [00:27:18] Yeah. And then we started classes, language classes and cross cultural section with the Peace Corps volunteers of the different regions came to speak to us. We did a, um, during our training, we did, um, family visits. So we went and would live with a family for one week. So we did French and depending on where you were going, you did, like I did Arabic because that was the, I was going to the north. So people who were going south were doing other languages.

NOBLE: [00:27:47] Maybe Wolof?

MORENO: [00:27:48] Wolof, yeah. Pulaar.

NOBLE: [00:27:50] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [00:27:52] Um, yeah.

NOBLE: [00:27:53] So you were learning both French and Arabic?

MORENO: [00:27:55] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:27:56] Wow. Wow, what a challenge.

MORENO: [00:27:58] It was very challenging.

NOBLE: [00:28:00] Two at once. So let's, let's talk about the language stuff. There's, um, so much that I want to know about your training, but since we're on language, how did you do that? Were you, were you in small groups?

MORENO: [00:28:14] Yes, very small group. Maybe 2 or 3.

NOBLE: [00:28:17] Oh. Oh, excellent. Excellent. Um, for. And then you had a few hours of French and then a few hours of Arabic?

MORENO: [00:28:26] Mm hmm. And then cross-cultural.

NOBLE: [00:28:28] And were you, how were you learning it? Was it, um, I'm still on the language thing. Um, was it all conversational or were you given any written?

MORENO: [00:28:38] No, it was all conversation.

NOBLE: [00:28:40] So you couldn't see what it looked like in writing?

MORENO: [00:28:43] Um, yeah, you could write it, but that wasn't, the focus was really on, you know, just learning. It was about living the language.

NOBLE: [00:28:49] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:28:50] And, you know, what do you need to know? How do you ask? How do you, when you arrive, how do you introduce yourself? How do you ask where the bathroom is?

NOBLE: [00:28:56] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [00:28:57] That sort of thing.

NOBLE: [00:28:58] So in both French and Arabic.

MORENO: [00:28:59] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:29:00] Um, I, I'm thinking about how I learn languages. Um, visually I need to sort of in my mind's eye, I need to see how you spell it, and then I can move on. But this, that wasn't an option. You just had to remember the sound.

MORENO: [00:29:17] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:29:17] And reproduce that sound for various situations.

MORENO: [00:29:21] Yes. I mean, they did have some booklets, but, you know, the problem with the Arabic was that it was the Peace Corps wrote it, would

write it phonetically. Um, so it's, I mean, you know, it couldn't. I mean, you would eventually have to study Arabic, classical Arabic.

NOBLE: [00:29:36] Yes. To get the writing.

MORENO: [00:29:37] To get the writing alphabet, yeah. Um, so that's why the focus was on learning to speak, using it.

NOBLE: [00:29:43] Right, right. And who were your language teachers?

MORENO: [00:29:46] These were Mauritians.

NOBLE: [00:29:47] Mauritians. Okay. And they were fluent in both French and Arabic?

MORENO: [00:29:52] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:29:52] And probably something else too.

MORENO: [00:29:53] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:29:55] So at least three languages.

MORENO: [00:29:56] Yes. If not more.

NOBLE: [00:29:58] Puts us to shame.

MORENO: [00:29:59] It does. It does.

NOBLE: [00:30:01] So.

MORENO: [00:30:02] So I should tell you that during my service, I don't know if it was during the service or right before we arrived. There were problems between Mauritania and Senegal.

NOBLE: [00:30:12] Ah.

MORENO: [00:30:13] So some of those, uh, trainers that were working with us, with us had been to the capital, not because of the Peace Corps, Peace Corps training, but they came in because of the problems.

NOBLE: [00:30:25] Oh, yes.

MORENO: [00:30:26] And during that time, and the only reason I say this is so at least it's, uh, documented. Documented because the Mauritanian government put all these Mauritians who were claimed to be Senegalese in the stadium, and then Peace Corps volunteers were brought in to translate because they knew the local languages of these people.

NOBLE: [00:30:46] Oh.

MORENO: [00:30:46] Yeah. So it was a very ugly experience.

NOBLE: [00:30:50] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [00:30:51] So these were some of our trainers.

NOBLE: [00:30:52] But this was a little bit later?

MORENO: [00:30:53] These were right before, right before we arrived. So we were not sure if we were going to go to Mauritania.

NOBLE: [00:30:58] Oh, because that happened. That tension was already going on when you entered the country.

MORENO: [00:31:03] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:31:04] So and in Frogmore, you're, you're actually living in the Peace Corps house when you're not with a family in Frogmore.

MORENO: [00:31:13] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:31:13] I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I don't mean Frogmore. I mean in Nouakchott.

MORENO: [00:31:17] Yes. No, we're living in a, um. During the training, we were living in a hotel.

NOBLE: [00:31:22] Okay.

MORENO: [00:31:23] Like, it's like the training center, but it looked like a Chinese hotel or something. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:31:28] So you were living, your classes, your language classes.

MORENO: [00:31:32] We're all in this training.

NOBLE: [00:31:33] All your cultural, uh, cultural orientation, and everything was all in the same building where you were sleeping?

MORENO: [00:31:39] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:31:39] Yeah. Um.

MORENO: [00:31:40] And which was right next to the stadium.

NOBLE: [00:31:44] Next to the stadium, which you had just been talking about, where people had been held?

MORENO: [00:31:49] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:31:49] Sort of like imprisoned?

MORENO: [00:31:51] Yes. Before they were deported to Senegal.

NOBLE: [00:31:54] Oh, I see, I see. So by the time you were there, this wasn't had passed.

MORENO: [00:31:58] Yes. No.

NOBLE: [00:31:58] The, the stadium was no longer containing these Senegalese Mauritanians. Okay. Ah. So training consisted heavily of language, very heavy on language learning and cultural things. Can you remember what some of the cultural stuff was? You know, some of it you already talked about. Some of the basics.

MORENO: [00:32:21] Yeah. In terms of being covered up, in terms of dress, in terms of, you know, you would go into a meeting and people, men would not, if you were a woman, would not, um, give you the hand.

NOBLE: [00:32:32] Oh, so you didn't shake hands.

MORENO: [00:32:34] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:32:34] If you were a woman.

MORENO: [00:32:35] Yes, sometimes. Well, you could extend the hand, but they wouldn't.

NOBLE: [00:32:38] They wouldn't take it.

MORENO: [00:32:38] They wouldn't take it. Um, and then just, you know, history of Mauritania, the different ethnic groups and. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:32:45] Yeah. And did that seem good?

MORENO: [00:32:49] Yeah, that was great.

NOBLE: [00:32:49] Like a good orientation?

MORENO: [00:32:51] That was very good.

NOBLE: [00:32:52] All right.

MORENO: [00:32:53] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:32:54] How long were you there?

MORENO: [00:32:56] I, I think that was the whole. We did, we were, um, sworn in in September, so three months.

NOBLE: [00:33:03] Oh, good. That's a good, good chunk of time.

MORENO: [00:33:05] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:33:06] And during that training time, did you mention that you were sometimes living with a family?

MORENO: [00:33:10] Yes. So we would do, um. Oh, I can't remember. There was a word where they would go out and you live with a family for a week. So a village. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:33:18] Okay.

MORENO: [00:33:19] So a village, in a village setting.

NOBLE: [00:33:20] Yeah. And you didn't have responsibilities other than to just kind of be there and participate in whatever, whatever it was going on with the family.

MORENO: [00:33:27] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:33:28] What was your experience like? Where did you, what village, do you remember what village you went to?

MORENO: [00:33:31] You know, I don't remember the village, but, uh, you know, I just remember the discomfort.

NOBLE: [00:33:40] Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MORENO: [00:33:41] Uh, and I did get sick. Um, um, you know, just sleeping outside and practicing outside.

NOBLE: [00:33:49] Sleeping outside?

MORENO: [00:33:50] Yes. I mean, you slept outside.

NOBLE: [00:33:51] Wow. Under a mosquito net or?

MORENO: [00:33:54] No, no, it was dry. It was the desert.

NOBLE: [00:33:57] Okay. That's right.

MORENO: [00:33:58] Yeah. So it's, uh. And then just eating with the family, um, you know, the hospitality that, you know, they would not have, for a meal they would not have meat, but they would roast, um, a goat because you were a guest.

NOBLE: [00:34:15] Oh, yeah. So they were knocking themselves out for you?

MORENO: [00:34:18] Yeah. So that was, yeah, it was, it was good. And then, you know, it gave us an opportunity to practice the language.

NOBLE: [00:34:25] And this was towards the end of your three months or so of training that you had, you already had some language?

MORENO: [00:34:30] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:34:31] And was your family predominantly speaking Arabic or?

MORENO: [00:34:34] Arabic, yeah. Because I was going north. Yeah. Well, once you left the capital it was Arabic.

NOBLE: [00:34:39] Okay. So French is not spoken throughout the country unless you're highly educated.

MORENO: [00:34:44] And, you know, you were part of the ministry or. Uh.

NOBLE: [00:34:47] Yeah. So you were functioning in Arabic?

MORENO: [00:34:51] I must have.

NOBLE: [00:34:53] Yeah, clearly.

MORENO: [00:34:55] I don't remember much, but I must have been.

NOBLE: [00:34:58] Thinking about the, the scary part here is not having any control over the food that you're eating and how it was prepared. So you did get sick.

MORENO: [00:35:06] I did get sick.

NOBLE: [00:35:07] You couldn't do your own cooking. You couldn't make sure the water was boiled. It was.

MORENO: [00:35:10] No.

NOBLE: [00:35:11] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:35:11] So I mean, you know, the, the advice was always you don't drink. Um, you try not to drink, but, you know, one of the, one of their hospitalities is once you arrive, they come and bring you a bowl of milk.

NOBLE: [00:35:24] Oh, yeah.

MORENO: [00:35:25] Yeah. So you don't know.

NOBLE: [00:35:26] There you go.

MORENO: [00:35:27] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:35:28] I suppose if you drank tea, you'd be pretty sure the water was boiled.

MORENO: [00:35:31] That was fine.

NOBLE: [00:35:32] But, uh, milk. Yeah. Um, that's probably what did you in.

MORENO: [00:35:37] I know. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:35:38] Ah. And then you come back to Nouakchott, the capital, for some sort of, uh.

MORENO: [00:35:46] Ceremony, and we were. Yeah. And then from there, we packed up and went, and went with the APCD, which is the person for the ag. And he went and he took us each to our villages and.

NOBLE: [00:35:58] APCD means Assistant Peace Corps Director?

MORENO: [00:36:02] Yeah, something like that.

NOBLE: [00:36:04] But he was the guy who was in charge of the agricultural?

MORENO: [00:36:07] Yes. And he was actually Mauritanian. So that was really good. And he spoke Arabic.

NOBLE: [00:36:11] Okay.

MORENO: [00:36:12] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:36:12] All right. So he had a vehicle.

MORENO: [00:36:15] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:36:15] And you piled into that.

MORENO: [00:36:16] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:36:17] And you say we. So it wasn't you by yourself.

MORENO: [00:36:19] Well, I mean it was everybody that was going to this region.

NOBLE: [00:36:21] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:36:21] So he took us.

NOBLE: [00:36:22] How many of you?

MORENO: [00:36:23] Um, there were about six of us. So that we were going to different villages. You had, um, English people who were going to be teaching English.

NOBLE: [00:36:31] Oh.

MORENO: [00:36:32] Then you had some that were doing agriculture.

NOBLE: [00:36:34] Yeah. Okay. So during training, you were mixing not just, not exclusively with agricultural volunteers, but with English teachers as well. But you all had to go through the same language training.

MORENO: [00:36:50] Correct. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:36:50] So. Yes. Okay. Um, and then you're taken to your site.

MORENO: [00:36:57] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:36:58] Were you alone at that point?

MORENO: [00:37:00] Yes, at my site. But then, um, so my first site was called Mekanet and M-E-K, Mekanet.

NOBLE: [00:37:09] We can talk about.

MORENO: [00:37:09] So that site, um, we couldn't find it the first time.

NOBLE: [00:37:13] Even the, even the Peace Corps assistant director couldn't?

MORENO: [00:37:16] And the problem was, first of all, we didn't speak Arabic, so we were trying to find it. We didn't speak Arabic.

NOBLE: [00:37:22] Or read the signs.

MORENO: [00:37:24] Well, there were no signs. It was in the desert. And we would stop and ask people and we must have been pronouncing it wrong. So we didn't get it until we had our APCD arrived and he knew. And then the person, then they directed us to go through the dunes, zigzag our way through until we came to this flat area. And there was Mekanet in the middle of nowhere.

NOBLE: [00:37:46] Wow. Surrounded by dunes. Really, truly a sand desert?

MORENO: [00:37:50] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:37:51] Wow. Mekanet.

MORENO: [00:37:54] Mekanet. Which translated to a place that does not exist.

NOBLE: [00:37:58] Really?

MORENO: [00:37:59] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:37:59] That's how you, nowhere.

MORENO: [00:38:01] That's probably why we couldn't find it.

NOBLE: [00:38:06] Oh that's nowhere.

MORENO: [00:38:08] Anyways.

NOBLE: [00:38:10] Oh my goodness, how isolated can you get?

MORENO: [00:38:13] Well, it wasn't that far. It was less than ten miles. But it's still.

NOBLE: [00:38:17] From the capital city?

MORENO: [00:38:19] No, from the, from this regional capital.

NOBLE: [00:38:20] Okay. What's the regional capital?

MORENO: [00:38:23] Ayoun el Atrous. Ayoun, A-I-O-U-N [sic], el Atrous.

NOBLE: [00:38:30] Okay. We'll worry about the spelling later. Ayoun el Atrous is the regional capital?

MORENO: [00:38:34] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:38:35] How far is Ayoun el Atrous from?

MORENO: [00:38:38] Probably 20 hours from Nouakchott.

NOBLE: [00:38:40] From, 20 hours?

MORENO: [00:38:41] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:38:41] Over land?

MORENO: [00:38:42] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:38:43] 20 hours.

MORENO: [00:38:44] That could be wrong. I could be wrong. But it seemed far.

NOBLE: [00:38:47] Yeah. So. Oh, my goodness, that's a long way away.

MORENO: [00:38:54] I'm trying to think, maybe 13 hours, maybe 13.

NOBLE: [00:38:57] Even 13 is a long way if you need.

MORENO: [00:38:59] Yeah, it's very far.

NOBLE: [00:39:00] It's a long way to go. And then from Ayoun el Atrous how far to Mekanet? Oh, you said about ten miles.

MORENO: [00:39:06] Yes. So it was less than an hour to car drive because you had, you're going through the desert. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:39:11] And thinking about taking less than an hour to go ten miles is shocking.

MORENO: [00:39:16] That's right.

NOBLE: [00:39:17] From our perspective here in the United States. Okay. So you get to Mekanet. And, um, has there ever been a Peace Corps volunteer there?

MORENO: [00:39:25] No. That was the first time.

NOBLE: [00:39:26] You were the first volunteer.

MORENO: [00:39:28] In this, um. And so what was happening is that a lot of these, these were Moor, which is white, the white Moors, and they had Black Moors as either slaves or did all the work, physical work for this village. And in terms of, it wasn't really a village. I mean, it was a place that had a few one room cement houses and then next to it is a tent. So the Moors would really use the tent as their living quarters and use the one room house, cement house, as a storage area.

NOBLE: [00:39:59] Oh, okay.

MORENO: [00:40:01] So then they would, I lived with the chief of that village and he rented the one room house to me.

NOBLE: [00:40:07] Okay, so you lived in a one room house that maybe was designed to be a storage shed?

MORENO: [00:40:12] Yeah. I mean, it was just the one room. Yeah, it was just a one room. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:40:15] Window?

MORENO: [00:40:16] It was two, two lower windows on the bottom. You know, windows couldn't be on the top because of the sandstorm. So they were on the bottom.

NOBLE: [00:40:23] Oh. So you can't really see out, but you get a little bit of light coming in.

MORENO: [00:40:27] Yes.

MORENO: [00:40:27] Yeah. But you didn't spend any time in that room. Only if there was a sandstorm.

NOBLE: [00:40:31] You just slept in there.

MORENO: [00:40:32] No.

NOBLE: [00:40:33] You didn't even sleep there?

MORENO: [00:40:34] You slept outside. Only if there was a sandstorm.

NOBLE: [00:40:38] Oh my goodness. So it was a place you could go and get away from the sand if you had to. And that was its reason for being there. So what was inside? You have a chair?

MORENO: [00:40:46] So I had my, a Peace Corps trunk. No. My Peace Corps trunk. My Peace Corps mat, my pillow. You know, just posters and postcards. My writing material.

NOBLE: [00:40:56] Okay.

MORENO: [00:40:57] Um, yeah. I mean.

NOBLE: [00:40:58] If you wanted to write, you didn't have a table and chair.

MORENO: [00:41:01] No, I didn't.

NOBLE: [00:41:04] Okay.

MORENO: [00:41:05] You just said on, on the, on the mat.

NOBLE: [00:41:08] Right. Or I suppose you could sit on your trunk.

MORENO: [00:41:11] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:41:13] Whew. Boy.

MORENO: [00:41:15] You know, Arab, Arab countries, you don't sit on. You don't, I mean, I don't know if you've ever seen where they have a bunch of pillows in a room. So it was like that.

NOBLE: [00:41:24] Okay.

MORENO: [00:41:24] Um, in a sense that you sat on, you know, the, the trunk was used as a table, and I used my mattress, my sleeping mattress as a chair.

NOBLE: [00:41:34] Okay. Um. Um. I'm still trying to digest this. This is really shocking, um, bare bones situation.

MORENO: [00:41:46] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:41:47] Electricity?

MORENO: [00:41:47] None.

NOBLE: [00:41:48] None in all of Mekanet?

MORENO: [00:41:50] No, no. So Mekanet was really just, um, you know, this, this valley surrounded by sand dunes. There was a water well, and so a lot of animals would go there to drink, and it was probably not a village always. Uh, but because of the desertification and the lack of movement of people, they just, you know, it was really a place to store things and to come to. There was a palmery not very far.

NOBLE: [00:42:19] A palmery?

MORENO: [00:42:19] A palmery where you go and get dates.

NOBLE: [00:42:21] Oh.

MORENO: [00:42:22] Um, so maybe they would come and set their, um, tents, uh, up, um, during the, the date season. And you know.

NOBLE: [00:42:32] That well with water seems to be for a reason why.

MORENO: [00:42:37] Mekanet.

NOBLE: [00:42:38] Something surface to be gathering. Um, telephone?

MORENO: [00:42:42] No electricity, no running water. No.

NOBLE: [00:42:44] And you didn't, you didn't have your, you were not issued a phone by Peace Corps because it wouldn't be used?

MORENO: [00:42:51] Well, there were no phones then.

NOBLE: [00:42:53] Okay. This is 1989.

MORENO: [00:42:57] Right.

NOBLE: [00:43:00] Um, so no phone, no electricity, no running water?

MORENO: [00:43:05] No.

NOBLE: [00:43:07] Um, if you wanted to drink water, did you have a way to boil it?

MORENO: [00:43:13] No, I just, I filtered it.

NOBLE: [00:43:15] You filtered.

MORENO: [00:43:15] And then I put, um, drops of, uh.

NOBLE: [00:43:20] Chlorine? To kill whatever bacteria might be in it after you filter it?

MORENO: [00:43:25] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:43:26] Yeah. Okay. And so you sleep outside, so you haul your mat out of your little tiny house, which isn't really a house, and you sleep on it outside. And the reason you do that is because that's what everybody else does?

MORENO: [00:43:44] Yes. And it's also very hot.

NOBLE: [00:43:45] Oh, okay. It would be hotter inside that concrete tiny storage area than outside at night?

MORENO: [00:43:52] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:43:53] Did it get very cold at night?

MORENO: [00:43:54] It did like, you know, December, January, you know, the. I don't know if it was very cold, but it was relatively cold. For there.

NOBLE: [00:44:04] Yeah. Um, how close are, so you're on a compound sort of or in a big tent with?

MORENO: [00:44:13] A family.

NOBLE: [00:44:14] A family. And this, was this considered your host family?

MORENO: [00:44:17] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:44:18] Okay. So you had a host father and a host mother. Let's talk about those people. Because when you came home from wherever you went to do your work, you'd come home to these people.

MORENO: [00:44:28] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:44:30] Who were they?

MORENO: [00:44:32] So he was the chief of the village.

NOBLE: [00:44:34] Uh huh. What was his name?

MORENO: [00:44:36] He could have been Mohammed.

NOBLE: [00:44:37] What did you call him?

MORENO: [00:44:38] I don't remember.

NOBLE: [00:44:40] All right.

MORENO: [00:44:41] And, uh. And her name was, oh my God, Aisha, I think it was.

NOBLE: [00:44:45] Okay.

MORENO: [00:44:46] Um, and the only thing I remember about, she was very big, physically big and.

NOBLE: [00:44:54] Both tall and wide.

MORENO: [00:44:56] Big, wide. Yes. And that was considered beautiful.

NOBLE: [00:44:59] Okay. All right.

MORENO: [00:45:00] For the, yeah, and it was considered a sign of wealth.

NOBLE: [00:45:03] Yes.

MORENO: [00:45:05] Um, but she was one of the people that kept saying, you know, we do not work.

NOBLE: [00:45:10] We do not work?

MORENO: [00:45:12] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:45:12] We meaning women or?

MORENO: [00:45:13] Yes, women. So because I was always trying to encourage them to go to the garden.

NOBLE: [00:45:18] Oh yeah. And this was outside her cultural concept of what women do.

MORENO: [00:45:24] Yeah. She said women, they, we do not work. Look at our hands. And all henna.

NOBLE: [00:45:29] Oh, of course. They would decorate their hands with henna. Oh, well, that puts you in kind of a predicament, isn't it?

MORENO: [00:45:36] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:45:36] That you're there to work. And yet the cultural norms of your family are that women don't work.

MORENO: [00:45:41] That's right.

NOBLE: [00:45:42] Ah, well, we'll get back to that later. Did she work in the kitchen? Did she, did she have a kitchen? Or who cooked?

MORENO: [00:45:49] The, the, um, African slaves from the village across that would bring the food in.

NOBLE: [00:45:54] Okay, so you're talking again. You talked about white Moors and.

MORENO: [00:45:57] And then the Black Moors would bring the couscous.

NOBLE: [00:45:59] Okay. So your mother, your host mother, Aisha, was a white Moor.

MORENO: [00:46:03] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:46:04] White, meaning her skin, her complexion was white.

MORENO: [00:46:07] Yes. Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:46:07] Uh huh. Okay. And so the people who did the work were the Black.

MORENO: [00:46:12] Black skin.

NOBLE: [00:46:14] Yes. And were they actually slaves? Were they owned by the family?

MORENO: [00:46:18] Well, um. You know, there were other families where the Black family lived with them.

NOBLE: [00:46:27] Uh huh.

MORENO: [00:46:28] Um, with my family, this, uh, this woman would bring the dinner every night, and her husband did all the physical labor for the family.

NOBLE: [00:46:36] Oh. Okay.

MORENO: [00:46:38] Um, you know, there was slavery in Mauritania until the '80s.

NOBLE: [00:46:43] Uh huh.

MORENO: [00:46:43] Um, but, you know, there was, uh, it was outlawed in 1980.

NOBLE: [00:46:48] Okay. Which doesn't mean it didn't happen.

MORENO: [00:46:52] Correct. So I think there was definitely a relationship. Uh, it was not a reciprocal relationship.

NOBLE: [00:46:58] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:46:59] I mean, these people, you know, when I decided to visit the Haratin across the dunes, I was told to be careful that, you know, they, they didn't have, they were not very hygienic. Um.

NOBLE: [00:47:10] This is what you were told?

MORENO: [00:47:12] Yes. Yeah. By the White Moors.

NOBLE: [00:47:14] Yeah. So they warned you to be careful when you went over there.

MORENO: [00:47:21] So they didn't speak of ownership, but it was a very, um, uh. I mean, other Blacks, other ethnic groups would speak of the Haratin as slaves of the white Moors.

NOBLE: [00:47:35] Yeah. And were they paid, did they get something in exchange?

MORENO: [00:47:38] Well, they got paid in, uh, in food. Not money.

NOBLE: [00:47:43] Ah, okay. So they had to grow the food. They had to do the labor of farming?

MORENO: [00:47:49] They did the farming of the, um, uh, the, what was turned into couscous. The wheat.

NOBLE: [00:47:54] Oh, yeah.

MORENO: [00:47:55] Um, but they, you know, they, the, the family would bring in produce from the, from Ayoun el Atrous and then they would parcel out a portion to give to this family.

NOBLE: [00:48:06] I see, I see. That's what they got in exchange for their labor. And then they had, but they had to provide the couscous.

MORENO: [00:48:13] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:48:14] And also cook those vegetables and things.

MORENO: [00:48:17] There were no vegetables.

NOBLE: [00:48:18] Oh, there were no vegetables?

MORENO: [00:48:19] Strictly couscous or meat, and milk. That's it.

NOBLE: [00:48:23] No carrots even?

MORENO: [00:48:24] No.

NOBLE: [00:48:24] Wow. No greens?

MORENO: [00:48:26] No greens. That was my job, to introduce vegetables to this community.

NOBLE: [00:48:34] Oh, okay. We'll get to that in a minute. I just want to, I just want to get straight on your living situation here. What, what it meant for you living there. Uh, so the meat that you were eating would be?

MORENO: [00:48:47] A goat, they would kill a goat.

NOBLE: [00:48:48] Uh huh.

MORENO: [00:48:50] Or a cow or a camel. You know, something special. It would not be all the time that they had meat.

NOBLE: [00:48:57] Oh, yeah. So sometimes it's just.

MORENO: [00:48:59] Just couscous and milk.

NOBLE: [00:49:00] That's it. Couscous and milk.

MORENO: [00:49:02] Correct.

NOBLE: [00:49:04] Could you boil the milk? I mean, how could you keep yourself from getting sick when you were out there? Yeah. You're shaking your head.

MORENO: [00:49:15] There's nothing. There was nothing to do. That was it.

NOBLE: [00:49:18] Right. That was it. Yeah. You had no access to a little propane burner.

MORENO: [00:49:23] A store.

NOBLE: [00:49:23] Nothing. Wow.

MORENO: [00:49:23] Well, also, you know, like if, if I did, where would I, where would I have done that? You know, like, then you would have done it. If I did it in my house and I would have people coming in, you know. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:49:33] It would, it would, it.

MORENO: [00:49:34] I didn't have a private space.

NOBLE: [00:49:36] Right. It would have been culturally inappropriate.

MORENO: [00:49:38] Awkward. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:49:39] Yeah. Wow. So there you are. And they've never had a Peace Corps volunteer before. And so you're quite the oddity.

MORENO: [00:49:49] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:49:50] Um, they don't get it.

MORENO: [00:49:52] No, they did not.

NOBLE: [00:49:54] They had, maybe they had not asked for a Peace Corps volunteer?

MORENO: [00:49:57] No, they did.

NOBLE: [00:49:59] They had?

MORENO: [00:49:59] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:49:59] Why? The family, the family or the?

MORENO: [00:50:02] No, the, the village, so I think.

NOBLE: [00:50:05] So how big is the, how many families?

MORENO: [00:50:07] I mean we're talking maybe 100 people. Yeah. I mean it was very small. Um, and not everybody was always there. That was the other thing. You know, it was hard to tell how many people it had, because you had elder and little ones. I mean, there weren't those middle aged sort of working population. People would leave.

NOBLE: [00:50:31] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:50:31] Or they would. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:50:32] And the grandparents would take care of the children when, say, if people in their 30s and 40s would go out to do something and, and the grandparents would take care of the kids?

MORENO: [00:50:42] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:50:43] Schools, were there schools?

MORENO: [00:50:44] There was one school.

NOBLE: [00:50:45] There was?

MORENO: [00:50:46] A one room school, but it was all in Arabic.

NOBLE: [00:50:48] Yes.

MORENO: [00:50:49] Yeah, it was religious school. It wasn't necessarily a school. A madrassa.

NOBLE: [00:50:55] A madrassa. Yeah. Okay. So let's talk about this. So your first day, the Assistant Peace Corps, the AP.

MORENO: [00:51:05] APCD.

NOBLE: [00:51:05] APCD brings you here, introduces you to your family, shows you what your accommodations will be.

MORENO: [00:51:15] Well, so you want me to tell? Let me tell you the little story, how it really went.

NOBLE: [00:51:18] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:51:18] It was pretty traumatic. So we, uh, because of, um, so the way they did it in Mauritania was that a Peace Corps volunteer would stay with you overnight the first night to help with the language, the translation, and kind of adjustment.

NOBLE: [00:51:31] A Peace Corps volunteer who had been in the country for some time?

MORENO: [00:51:34] Correct. And spoke that language. So it worked with that group.

NOBLE: [00:51:36] Okay. All right.

MORENO: [00:51:37] Um, so as a woman, but I got a man to stay with me.

NOBLE: [00:51:41] Oh. That'd be awkward.

MORENO: [00:51:42] Uh, because there were I don't think there were female that worked in the North.

NOBLE: [00:51:46] Oh, you were the first female up there?

MORENO: [00:51:49] I'm not sure why. Yeah, I'm not sure. We, yeah, why would they? I don't understand why they sent a man. But anyway.

NOBLE: [00:51:55] A white guy.

MORENO: [00:51:56] A white guy. Yes. Who was, who spoke Arabic.

NOBLE: [00:51:59] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:51:59] So he stayed with me that night and he had dinner with us, and it was wonderful. And then so I was already nervous because I knew he had to leave the next morning, the minute the Peace Corps driver would come in.

NOBLE: [00:52:09] Oh, off you go.

MORENO: [00:52:11] Off he'd go. So, you know, we get up in the morning and we're having our tea because it's what you do in the morning. You have tea.

NOBLE: [00:52:18] Uh huh.

MORENO: [00:52:19] Um. And sometimes eventually they'll bake bread, but not all the time. Um, so you could, you could hear the sound of the, of the, of the car long before you could see the car.

NOBLE: [00:52:30] Yes.

MORENO: [00:52:30] Because of the dunes.

NOBLE: [00:52:31] That's right, I remember those. Yes.

MORENO: [00:52:33] Yeah. And then so I'm sitting down with him and we're talking and, and I can hear the car.

NOBLE: [00:52:38] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:52:39] So at that point, you know, I, I get very, I got very nervous and, uh, and then the car is coming and all the kids are following the car. And then the driver gets out and he has a bunch of bread on his arm, and he hands it to me. He says, here, here's the bread for you. Good luck. And then the Peace Corps volunteer turns to me. He takes his mattress, puts it in the car. He says, you're a woman, I cannot give you my hand, but good luck.

NOBLE: [00:53:09] What you really want is a hug at that point.

MORENO: [00:53:11] Yes, yes. And then he goes and gets in the truck.

NOBLE: [00:53:14] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:53:14] Uh, and the truck starts going away. And, uh, and at that point, I just started bawling.

NOBLE: [00:53:21] I was just going to say, I would cry.

MORENO: [00:53:23] So I was crying. And then my family came over. And then one of the young boys who spoke a little bit of French, uh, they came over and said, *habibti*, don't cry. We're your family now.

NOBLE: [00:53:35] Aww.

MORENO: [00:53:35] I know, that was very sweet.

NOBLE: [00:53:36] That's very nice.

MORENO: [00:53:37] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:53:37] What did they call you, *habib*?

MORENO: [00:53:39] *Habibti*, which is dear. It's an endearing term.

NOBLE: [00:53:42] *Habibti?*

MORENO: [00:53:43] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:53:46] How lovely. How lovely.

MORENO: [00:53:48] So that, I.

NOBLE: [00:53:48] It was one of the children?

MORENO: [00:53:49] Yes, uh, no. The mother of the family.

NOBLE: [00:53:52] Okay.

MORENO: [00:53:53] But the boy translated to me.

NOBLE: [00:53:54] Oh. I see, I see.

MORENO: [00:53:55] Yeah. So yeah, that was, yeah, that was very touching. But that was very, uh, never to be forgotten.

NOBLE: [00:54:02] No kidding. No kidding. You are so isolated.

MORENO: [00:54:06] Yes. And it was far.

NOBLE: [00:54:08] Yeah. Talk about the, the first few days, the first week. Uh, what did you do?

MORENO: [00:54:17] Yeah, well, you know, I try to talk. I drank a lot of tea. Um, I was locked in the. So there was only one latrine in the whole village, and I was going to have a latrine built for me because my family didn't have one.

NOBLE: [00:54:32] Oh, yeah.

MORENO: [00:54:32] But there was one latrine, and I'm not sure who it belonged to. But, you know, I had to walk a little bit ways, a ways to do that. And, um. And the kids locked me in the latrine.

NOBLE: [00:54:44] No.

MORENO: [00:54:44] Yes. That first week.

NOBLE: [00:54:45] They thought that was funny.

MORENO: [00:54:46] They thought that was hilarious. So, of course, you know, somebody opens the latrine and lets me out, and I go back home.

NOBLE: [00:54:52] And were you hollering? I mean, what?

MORENO: [00:54:54] I don't know. I don't think so. I don't know, I don't know, I just kept knocking, you know. Yeah. It was horrible. And, uh, but the kids got a real beating for doing that. So that was nice. So but, but the kids had it in for me. There was one boy who just, you know, um, and he was one of the instigators of the locking of the door. So at another point, he also threw like dung, like cow manure, at me.

NOBLE: [00:55:16] Oh my!

MORENO: [00:55:16] So once again, he also got a beating for that. And after that he stayed away. But, um, you know, that first week was a lot of adjustment. You know, I walked a lot and tried to understand, you know, they didn't really have a garden, a very big garden. And, um.

NOBLE: [00:55:33] And what they had was growing wheat to make couscous?

MORENO: [00:55:35] Uh, no, that one was, uh, the wheat was done in where the Haratin lived. It wasn't done there.

NOBLE: [00:55:41] Okay. What was this family trying to grow?

MORENO: [00:55:45] You know, there was just a, a community garden, but, you know, the goats would get in there, and it's just horrible.

NOBLE: [00:55:50] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:55:51] Um, and then I, you know, just trying to make friends with some of the young people. It is very hard.

NOBLE: [00:55:57] So you're walking around.

MORENO: [00:55:59] Walking around, drinking a lot of tea.

NOBLE: [00:56:00] Okay. And you didn't really have a function yet.

MORENO: [00:56:02] That's right.

NOBLE: [00:56:05] So people were looking at you, saying, huh?

MORENO: [00:56:06] Yeah. I know. What are you doing here? Why does your family not like you and they've sent you so far away?

NOBLE: [00:56:14] Oh! Is that their perception of it?

MORENO: [00:56:17] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:56:17] Yeah. How could anyone let their daughter go?

MORENO: [00:56:19] I know. Why aren't you married?

NOBLE: [00:56:21] Oh, yeah. Okay. Yeah, because by then you're 24.

MORENO: [00:56:25] 24, 25. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:56:26] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [00:56:26] So. Yeah. But it was, um, so it took a lot of adjustment and then, you know, I did some gardening there, but they didn't get it. You

know, I would bring in an onion and they would throw it to the goats because they said it's not red like a tomato. So red, a tomato turns green and then turns red. Um. So, and.

NOBLE: [00:56:45] But tomatoes are not indigenous to Africa. They came from here.

MORENO: [00:56:48] But you know, we were introducing things. We're introducing green peppers and onions and.

NOBLE: [00:56:52] Yeah.

MORENO: [00:56:53] Um, so that was hard. At one point there was a caravan that came in, um, and that had one of the Peace Corps volunteers from the capital, from the regional capital, Ayoun el Atrous, so that was kind of nice.

NOBLE: [00:57:04] Arriving in a caravan?

MORENO: [00:57:05] In a caravan of camels, yeah. Uh, so that was kind of, you know, I remember having just this good feeling like, oh, I'm not as isolated as it seems.

NOBLE: [00:57:16] Yeah, yeah. How, was there a postal service or something like?

MORENO: [00:57:20] In Ayoun, in Ayoun.

NOBLE: [00:57:22] So if you wanted to, really the only way to communicate with your parents at this point is by letter.

MORENO: [00:57:29] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:57:30] So you would write a letter. Did you have paper and envelopes?

MORENO: [00:57:35] I did, but you know, the letters. We would write the letters and send them to New York via somebody that was leaving from the community.

NOBLE: [00:57:42] Okay, you, got it, you wouldn't send it to the Dominican Republic.

MORENO: [00:57:46] No.

NOBLE: [00:57:46] You would send it to New York. And then somebody in New York would send it on.

MORENO: [00:57:49] Would get it to them. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:57:49] Take a long time before your parents would get it.

MORENO: [00:57:52] Yes.

NOBLE: [00:57:52] How long from, um, Mekanet? Because it has to go from there to.

MORENO: [00:57:58] Well, there was no post office in Mekanet.

NOBLE: [00:57:59] No. So you would have to, you could only post it when you went.

MORENO: [00:58:03] In Ayoun.

NOBLE: [00:58:03] In Ayoun. And then from Ayoun to New York, how long would it take?

MORENO: [00:58:07] You know, probably three weeks. 3 or 4 weeks.

NOBLE: [00:58:10] Just to get to New York, 3 or 4 weeks. And then from New York to Dominican Republic, another week?

MORENO: [00:58:14] Yeah. Another 3 or 4 weeks.

NOBLE: [00:58:16] 3 or 4 even?

MORENO: [00:58:17] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:58:18] Oh, man.

MORENO: [00:58:19] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:58:19] And so, so there's really no way to have a dialog via letters.

MORENO: [00:58:24] No. So but when I would go into, into Nouakchott in the capital. So we went, you know, probably every three months. I would call my parents.

NOBLE: [00:58:34] Call them.

MORENO: [00:58:35] Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:58:35] That must have been very reassuring to them. From the Peace Corps office?

MORENO: [00:58:38] No, from the hotel.

NOBLE: [00:58:39] From the hotel. You had to pay for that?

MORENO: [00:58:41] Yes. Mm hmm. Yeah.

NOBLE: [00:58:44] Okay. Um, did you get sick up there? I know you got sick in training.

MORENO: [00:58:50] I did not, I did not get sick after that.

NOBLE: [00:58:52] You didn't?

MORENO: [00:58:52] No, I was very careful.

NOBLE: [00:58:54] Yeah. Yeah. Good for you. So you settle in, you spend some time getting to know people, walking around, getting your bearings about where you are in relation to other things. How often do you get into Ayoun?

MORENO: [00:59:10] You know, probably once a month, over the weekend.

NOBLE: [00:59:13] Well, that's pretty sparse. So for a whole month at a time, you're not speaking English to anybody?

MORENO: [00:59:20] No.

NOBLE: [00:59:20] You're totally immersed.

MORENO: [00:59:22] Out there.

NOBLE: [00:59:22] Totally immersed. Um, how did you take care of your mental health?

MORENO: [00:59:28] So I wrote a lot of letters, and I read a lot of books.

NOBLE: [00:59:31] Okay. You had books with you. Did Peace Corps give you books?

MORENO: [00:59:34] No.

NOBLE: [00:59:34] Did you get a book locker?

MORENO: [00:59:35] You know, we, I bought books with me and then the Peace Corps library had books. And then when we would go into Ayoun.

NOBLE: [00:59:40] You'd switch.

MORENO: [00:59:41] We would switch.

NOBLE: [00:59:42] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay.

MORENO: [00:59:44] Um, yeah. So that was.

NOBLE: [00:59:45] Did you have a lantern or something?

MORENO: [00:59:48] Yes. I had lanterns and a lot of candles.

NOBLE: [00:59:50] Okay. Yeah. So you're reading by candlelight.

MORENO: [00:59:53] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [00:59:55] Um, and your host, did anybody else in your host family sit around reading in the evening?

MORENO: [01:00:00] No.

NOBLE: [01:00:01] They might have thought that was kind of weird.

MORENO: [01:00:02] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:00:02] But um, you had more education than they did. You were, you read.

MORENO: [01:00:08] Well, they, you know, they would, they would, um, yeah. They, you know, that wasn't done there, right?

NOBLE: [01:00:13] Right. So eventually you set into your routine of how you're going to live there, and then eventually you're an agriculture volunteer.

MORENO: [01:00:25] And I realized it wasn't going to work there.

NOBLE: [01:00:27] Okay.

MORENO: [01:00:27] So then I asked the Peace Corps about getting a transfer.

NOBLE: [01:00:32] Oh.

MORENO: [01:00:32] To transfer. Oh, so I went from my village. I went to Ayoun, I transferred to Ayoun.

NOBLE: [01:00:38] So you realized it wasn't going to work, because any attempts to start a garden were, animals would come in and tear it down, and it just.

MORENO: [01:00:46] And they were not, they weren't, you know, they were not at a stage to work on having a garden.

NOBLE: [01:00:53] Right. And I mean.

MORENO: [01:00:54] They were nomadic.

NOBLE: [01:00:55] Culturally, they didn't perceive your role as maybe a white Moor. I mean, if you were going to be living with a white Moor family, that your role was not to get your hands in the dirt.

MORENO: [01:01:07] Correct. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:01:09] So that was a pretty impossible situation. So how long did you stay there?

MORENO: [01:01:13] So I was probably there until, um. Uh, March. So from September to March.

NOBLE: [01:01:23] That's a long time.

MORENO: [01:01:24] Yeah, a very long time. I mean, it took the whole process to get me moved took a long time.

NOBLE: [01:01:29] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [01:01:30] A long time. But then I did, and I moved to Ayoun. And there I worked with different groups. You know, I would just go out and seek women's groups, or I did math with a group of Malian women and, um.

NOBLE: [01:01:43] With Malian women?

MORENO: [01:01:44] Well, they were not, you know, they were not Moors. Okay. So I didn't work with Moors after getting out of Mekanet, because most of the women who were doing marketing, working in the market tended to be, um, Afro, Africans, Black Africans.

NOBLE: [01:02:00] So Moors, um, are like the Berbers of North Africa.

MORENO: [01:02:06] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:02:07] Yeah, yeah. Okay, so now you're in Ayoun and you worked with people of.

MORENO: [01:02:13] Different groups.

NOBLE: [01:02:13] Of a different race altogether.

MORENO: [01:02:14] Yeah.

MORENO: [01:02:15] So there I used French.

NOBLE: [01:02:17] Ah, yes.

MORENO: [01:02:18] Because they spoke French.

NOBLE: [01:02:19] Yes.

MORENO: [01:02:20] And then I lived with a Bambara family.

NOBLE: [01:02:22] Ah. And Bambara is one of the African groups in Mauritania?

MORENO: [01:02:28] And they were originally, they speak Bambara. So I think Malians, there's a group from Mali that speaks that are Bambara.

NOBLE: [01:02:34] Bambara. But with them you spoke French?

MORENO: [01:02:37] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:02:37] Because Peace Corps training had not included Bambara?

MORENO: [01:02:40] No.

NOBLE: [01:02:40] There's no way you can learn it out when you're trying to function in a job. So did, did you sort of give up on agricultural work at that time?

MORENO: [01:02:49] No. You know, I, um, I worked with another Peace Corps volunteer who was a health volunteer, Phoebe Jones, and she and I worked in school, and I would do the agriculture, planting, gardening, and she would work on the health component.

NOBLE: [01:03:03] Ah.

MORENO: [01:03:04] So her and I partnered.

NOBLE: [01:03:06] Very nice.

MORENO: [01:03:06] I worked in school. Yeah. Now that I think about it.

NOBLE: [01:03:08] Totally different work situation, radically different from just ten miles away.

MORENO: [01:03:14] Correct. And that was really nice.

NOBLE: [01:03:15] Ten miles was a world apart.

MORENO: [01:03:17] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:03:18] Where did you live in Ayoun?

MORENO: [01:03:19] So I lived with a family in Ayoun.

NOBLE: [01:03:21] A family. Okay.

MORENO: [01:03:22] So I lived inside a compound.

NOBLE: [01:03:24] Okay. What was that like?

MORENO: [01:03:25] You know, that was wonderful. I loved it. Yeah. So a house with kids. Um, one, the oldest, young, the oldest daughter, when I moved in, was just getting ready to come to the States. Her husband was working on a PhD. So she left. And then the younger, her sister, who was 16, Aminatou. And, um, so we, you know. Yeah, it was great. It was wonderful, I loved it. I loved being part of a family.

NOBLE: [01:03:54] Oh, good.

MORENO: [01:03:55] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:03:56] And, um, I'm writing down Aminatou here. Um, and in that family, the, the host mother did the cooking?

MORENO: [01:04:06] Yes. And, and the young lady, Aminatou, she was also a lot responsible more for, she would go to school, but then responsible for doing things in the house.

NOBLE: [01:04:16] In the house. And did you get some vegetables into your diet there?

MORENO: [01:04:19] Yeah. They, they ate a little bit more green.

NOBLE: [01:04:23] Yeah. But it was still basically meat and couscous or rice?

MORENO: [01:04:26] Um, and fish.

NOBLE: [01:04:27] And fish.

MORENO: [01:04:28] Fish. Yeah. Because this is the Black Africans. So they did the couscous with the peanut sauce. The Moor diet was basically couscous, you know, roasted meat and, um, couscous with milk or.

NOBLE: [01:04:40] Yeah. Mm hmm.

MORENO: [01:04:42] Whereas the Black Africans had rice, fish, fish with vegetables.

NOBLE: [01:04:47] Where would the fish come from? How close to the coast are you here?

MORENO: [01:04:50] We were not close to the coast. I think it probably came from, oh, people bring it in. That's right. There was a truck that would come in.

NOBLE: [01:04:57] From the coast?

MORENO: [01:04:57] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:04:57] Okay.

MORENO: [01:04:58] And would, uh, with a freezer, sell fish.

NOBLE: [01:05:01] Okay. So you're still in desert?

MORENO: [01:05:04] Yes. But there are, uh, Ayoun has, uh, you know, was a, was a, um, colonial town, so it had a grid.

NOBLE: [01:05:14] Ah.

MORENO: [01:05:15] So you had mud houses, but mud compounds, but yeah. It had a, you know, there were streets.

NOBLE: [01:05:20] Yes. And so you have a compound where the walls are made of mud.

MORENO: [01:05:25] Correct. Baked adobe sort of things.

NOBLE: [01:05:29] And was your house like that too?

MORENO: [01:05:31] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:05:32] And what did you say, and rocks?

MORENO: [01:05:33] And rocks. Because this, Ayoun is very rocky.

NOBLE: [01:05:36] Ah. Did you have a room yourself?

MORENO: [01:05:39] I did, I have a one room. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:05:41] So now you slept inside or inside?

MORENO: [01:05:43] Inside.

NOBLE: [01:05:44] Okay. This is really quite different from that experience.

MORENO: [01:05:47] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:05:48] How difficult and how rich that experience had been up in Mekanet that now you can sort of, uh, relax from that and get some work done. Wow. Kids in that family? You talked about Aminatou.

MORENO: [01:06:03] Yes. Yeah. Young kids.

NOBLE: [01:06:05] Uh huh.

MORENO: [01:06:06] Um, and then Aminatu was a young lady, so maybe 15, 16. Her older sister who was leaving, Aisha, she was, I think it must have been 18 or 19. So that was, you know, that. I mean, there was an eye opener because I noticed that people would socialize in the evening, like the young people would get together. Yeah. So it was very different, you know.

NOBLE: [01:06:30] Yeah. And to drink, you would be drinking tea?

MORENO: [01:06:34] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:06:34] Yeah. And again no alcohol?

MORENO: [01:06:36] No alcohol. It was a dry country.

NOBLE: [01:06:37] Yeah.

MORENO: [01:06:38] I mean there was alcohol, but I don't know where.

NOBLE: [01:06:41] You were probably encouraged, if you found out, not to join in.

MORENO: [01:06:45] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:06:46] It was probably all men.

MORENO: [01:06:48] Yes. That's right.

NOBLE: [01:06:50] So, um, do you have electricity now, in Ayoun?

MORENO: [01:06:55] No, no.

NOBLE: [01:06:56] Running water?

MORENO: [01:06:58] No, no.

NOBLE: [01:06:59] And there's a latrine that's not too far away.

MORENO: [01:07:01] Yes. That's on the compound. Inside the compound.

NOBLE: [01:07:05] Okay. So let's talk about the work. You mentioned, let's talk a little bit more. You started talking about how, um, you partnered with, with Phoebe, Phoebe Jones, and you were doing the agricultural.

MORENO: [01:07:18] Yeah. So that was interesting. And we would go to school and she would do the health.

NOBLE: [01:07:22] Yes.

MORENO: [01:07:23] Um, of eating vegetables and washing your hands. And then I would work with the students to work on the planting of the garden.

NOBLE: [01:07:30] Oh, boy. How fun, school garden.

MORENO: [01:07:31] I know, so that worked out. Yeah, that worked out well.

NOBLE: [01:07:34] Yeah, yeah. And was it one school or did you travel around to various schools?

MORENO: [01:07:38] You know, we traveled to schools, but I don't remember how many. I do remember just traveling.

NOBLE: [01:07:43] Mm hmm.

MORENO: [01:07:43] Yeah. And then I worked with women, uh, these market women, teaching them how to write the numbers.

NOBLE: [01:07:50] Oh good. How to write them in Arabic?

MORENO: [01:07:52] No, no. Numbers.

NOBLE: [01:07:54] No, these are, these are not Arabic speakers. In our alphabet.

MORENO: [01:07:58] Yes. Because they knew the number. They knew how to do math, but they didn't know how to write it.

NOBLE: [01:08:02] Aha. Wow. To have to do all that math in their head is another skill.

MORENO: [01:08:07] Yeah. And then I also, um, when I was there, I worked with, uh, like a women's cooperative planting trees. So, you know, different things. It was good.

NOBLE: [01:08:17] Yeah.

MORENO: [01:08:17] It worked out well.

NOBLE: [01:08:18] Yeah.

MORENO: [01:08:19] Better situation than my first one.

NOBLE: [01:08:20] Clearly, clearly. And so you stayed there for how long?

MORENO: [01:08:24] Well, I stayed there until the Gulf War. And then that's when we were pulled out.

NOBLE: [01:08:28] And the Gulf War. Now the Gulf is way far away from Mauritania.

MORENO: [01:08:34] Yes. But Mauritania received the family of Saddam Hussein. So we were pulled out.

NOBLE: [01:08:40] Oh, Saddam. Saddam Hussein.

MORENO: [01:08:42] Sent his family.

NOBLE: [01:08:43] Sent his family to Mauritania, at which point that meant that Peace Corps had to leave?

MORENO: [01:08:47] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:08:47] Really?

MORENO: [01:08:48] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [01:08:48] Wow.

MORENO: [01:08:50] Peace Corps pulled out of the Arab countries.

NOBLE: [01:08:52] Did they think it was unsafe or just a political?

MORENO: [01:08:55] Unsafe. Um, I think they thought it was unsafe. I mean, they went to a skeleton crew even in the embassy.

NOBLE: [01:09:02] Okay. So when was it that you were pulled out?

MORENO: [01:09:05] That was January. I think January 20th, maybe something like that, of 1990.

NOBLE: [01:09:14] It must have been '91.

MORENO: [01:09:15] Yes. Right.

NOBLE: [01:09:17] And then you went to Peace Corps Mali.

MORENO: [01:09:19] So we all went to Peace Corps Mali.

NOBLE: [01:09:20] All of you from Mauritania.

MORENO: [01:09:21] The plane took us, took, it was a charter plane. And they picked up all the volunteers who were called in during that Christmas. So traditionally, Christmas we would have a conference in Nouakchott. So we all came in for the conference.

NOBLE: [01:09:35] For the conference.

MORENO: [01:09:36] But from there we got on a.

NOBLE: [01:09:38] Now, wait. Did you know that was going to happen?

MORENO: [01:09:40] No.

NOBLE: [01:09:40] So you left stuff behind in Ayoun?

MORENO: [01:09:42] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:09:43] Things that you maybe, your trunk.

MORENO: [01:09:45] Everything.

NOBLE: [01:09:45] Your books.

MORENO: [01:09:46] Everything.

NOBLE: [01:09:48] Oh man. How hard. And, and you had to leave it all behind.

MORENO: [01:09:55] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:09:55] And get on a plane. You left clothes behind.

MORENO: [01:09:58] Everything. Yeah. You just had whatever you had.

NOBLE: [01:10:01] Whatever you had with you to go to a conference that was going to be a pretty short conference. Woof. You get on a plane and you go to?

MORENO: [01:10:11] Mali. And we were there.

NOBLE: [01:10:13] Bamako?

MORENO: [01:10:14] Bamako. And then we were there for, um, a few days. And then Peace Corps gave you the option of terminating your service or continuing.

NOBLE: [01:10:22] Okay.

MORENO: [01:10:23] So that's.

NOBLE: [01:10:23] So you didn't have that option in Mauritania at all.

MORENO: [01:10:27] No.

NOBLE: [01:10:27] They wanted, they didn't even want you to think or talk about anything until you got out of that. They wanted to get you out of there.

MORENO: [01:10:32] Yes. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:10:32] Okay. So you're in Bamako. And what, what was the ratio of people who chose to go home or people who chose to extend, uh, in Mali?

MORENO: [01:10:42] Oh, the people who extended were very small, I think, in Mali. Um, so I, I remained a Peace Corps volunteer.

NOBLE: [01:10:49] Yeah.

MORENO: [01:10:49] And two other people decided to stay and work for an NGO.

NOBLE: [01:10:54] Oh.

MORENO: [01:10:54] One woman went to Chad. Um, so I would say Mauritania had probably less than 50 volunteers. Uh, five people maybe stayed as volunteers.

NOBLE: [01:11:06] Okay. And the rest just.

MORENO: [01:11:07] Most people left. Yeah. Most people left or, uh, those who didn't, who weren't volunteers stayed and worked in Africa, were working in Africa.

NOBLE: [01:11:15] For some NGOs. Um, did Peace Corps or anybody compensate you for all that you had to leave behind in Mauritania?

MORENO: [01:11:25] No.

NOBLE: [01:11:25] If you're going to stay in Mali and work, you're going to have to go shopping. You need clothes. You need books.

MORENO: [01:11:30] Yeah. They didn't. Nothing.

NOBLE: [01:11:33] Nothing.

MORENO: [01:11:34] Yeah, that was weird.

NOBLE: [01:11:36] That seems very harsh. So, okay. But you decided to stay?

MORENO: [01:11:41] Yes. And then I went up to Peace Corps Gao.

NOBLE: [01:11:44] Why? Why?

MORENO: [01:11:45] You know, I wasn't ready to come back home.

NOBLE: [01:11:47] Okay. Yeah.

MORENO: [01:11:48] It was weird.

NOBLE: [01:11:49] You wanted, you had thought you'd have more time in Africa and you wanted that whole experience.

MORENO: [01:11:53] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:11:53] Yeah, sure.

MORENO: [01:11:54] So I extended and I was posted in Peace Corps Gao in Mali.

NOBLE: [01:11:58] Okay.

MORENO: [01:11:59] Which is, and that was a 30 hour bus ride from Bamako. That was a nightmare.

NOBLE: [01:12:05] Oh my gosh.

MORENO: [01:12:06] God. Um.

NOBLE: [01:12:07] Did you go with somebody?

MORENO: [01:12:08] I did. Luckily, I did go with someone. Another woman, another volunteer. She was one of the volunteers who extended from Mauritania.

NOBLE: [01:12:15] From Mauritania. Okay. So you knew her?

MORENO: [01:12:16] Yes. And, uh.

NOBLE: [01:12:17] But it wasn't Phoebe Jones.

MORENO: [01:12:19] No. Phoebe decided to leave.

NOBLE: [01:12:21] Okay.

MORENO: [01:12:21] And, um, so I went with this woman. Um, unfortunately, she didn't cover her head. So we were on this bus, and we were. At one point, like, eight Tuareg heavily armed men got on our bus. So that was the beginning of knowing that we were going somewhere that was very far away.

NOBLE: [01:12:44] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [01:12:45] Um, so that was kind of an uncomfortable. Um.

NOBLE: [01:12:49] But when you mentioned that you didn't cover her head.

MORENO: [01:12:52] Well, she didn't cover, yeah. So she.

NOBLE: [01:12:53] Against the sand, you mean?

MORENO: [01:12:54] No, just covered.

NOBLE: [01:12:56] Like culturally?

MORENO: [01:12:56] We were moving north, it was more and more Arab looking.

NOBLE: [01:12:59] Yes.

MORENO: [01:13:00] And some of it were not Arab. They could have been Tuareg. Just, they were just covered.

NOBLE: [01:13:05] Right.

MORENO: [01:13:05] So, you know, you would.

NOBLE: [01:13:06] And the women too?

MORENO: [01:13:07] Yes. So in a situation like that, you just make sure you cover yourself too. You don't want to stand out.

NOBLE: [01:13:11] That's right. So. That's right.

MORENO: [01:13:12] So we stood out on that bus.

NOBLE: [01:13:14] Did you have a scarf on your head?

MORENO: [01:13:15] I did have a scarf but she didn't.

NOBLE: [01:13:16] Did you cover your face?

MORENO: [01:13:17] I didn't cover my face, but. And I could pass actually as a Moor if I didn't speak. Um, I don't remember if she was a blond, but she, we stood out.

NOBLE: [01:13:29] Okay. Yeah.

MORENO: [01:13:30] So we got a lot of stares, which was uncomfortable.

NOBLE: [01:13:32] Yeah. Um, I would think that after her time in Mauritania, she would have.

MORENO: [01:13:37] Yeah, but she was a teacher, so she was in the capital.

NOBLE: [01:13:40] Okay, that's, that is different.

MORENO: [01:13:42] Yeah. And, um, so we got to our site and there was nobody waiting for us. So after this 30 hour bus ride, we arrive and there's no one waiting. The Peace Corps volunteer, we were told there was a Peace Corps volunteer up there. She doesn't know who we are. So, um, we actually were sent to the Vision, World Vision house, and the person

there told us that they had just had a bunch of visitors and they just needed a little bit of rest. So they didn't have room for us. So we had to wait and find this Peace Corps volunteer.

NOBLE: [01:14:22] And you've been, you've been on the road for 30 hours.

MORENO: [01:14:25] Oh, it was a nightmare. And, um, you know, we are, we had to. The driver then said, well, the Peace Corps volunteer is not there. Why don't you come to my house, rest, take a shower, have something to eat, and then we'll go look for her again in the afternoon. So that's what we did.

NOBLE: [01:14:40] That's kind of risky, but it turned out okay.

MORENO: [01:14:42] Yes. Yeah, that worked out well, so. Thank God.

NOBLE: [01:14:45] What's Gao like? Gao is in the northern part?

MORENO: [01:14:48] Yes. It was, it was very desolate. Much more desolate. It wasn't as pretty as Ayoun. Ayoun had, um, you know, very dark rocks. A lot of the houses were made of rocks or adobe, whereas, in Gao the roads were wider, but the, and the houses were cement, but they weren't painted. And they just had a drab feeling about it.

NOBLE: [01:15:12] I was going to, on that 30 hour bus ride, what were the roads like? Is it a paved road?

MORENO: [01:15:17] Yes. There were paved roads the whole way.

NOBLE: [01:15:19] Potholes or?

MORENO: [01:15:21] Uh, yeah. But you know, there was a road.

NOBLE: [01:15:24] There's a road. Okay.

MORENO: [01:15:25] And at one point we had to cross the river or like over, over a river probably.

NOBLE: [01:15:30] Yeah.

MORENO: [01:15:31] But it was a long, long ride. That's all I remember.

NOBLE: [01:15:36] My geography, my knowledge of the geography isn't very good in Mali. But I'm wondering where the Niger River starts somewhere?

MORENO: [01:15:43] Yeah. So that must have been the.

NOBLE: [01:15:44] That might have been the Niger at its very beginnings.

MORENO: [01:15:47] Yeah. Um, and what, you know, what made it seem so long was just that we were traversing very desolate areas.

NOBLE: [01:15:56] Yeah, yeah. And you had been through a somewhat of a trauma. I don't know, maybe that's too strong a word, but you'd been plucked out of.

MORENO: [01:16:05] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:16:05] I, uh, you, you're very shaky. You know, you're in a very shaky situation where you're going to a totally unknown place. What was it? What were you, what were you expecting to do in Gao?

MORENO: [01:16:18] You know, I was supposed to work with this Peace Corps volunteer, ag extension.

NOBLE: [01:16:23] Okay.

MORENO: [01:16:23] So what I actually ended up doing was working with the people in Gao with the World Vision people.

NOBLE: [01:16:28] Okay. So you never did find that Peace Corps volunteer?

MORENO: [01:16:30] I did find her. And she showed up that afternoon.

NOBLE: [01:16:32] Okay.

MORENO: [01:16:33] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:16:33] All right. Um, you know, I lived with her. Well, I lived with her the whole time I was there, but I think I had intentions of moving and finding a family because I didn't like the fact that she left. She lived in a house by herself.

NOBLE: [01:16:48] Oh, okay. And you wanted, you liked.

MORENO: [01:16:50] You know, I liked the warmth and the security of having a family. Um, so I worked with World, I eventually worked with World Vision. We patched up the, uh, relation after that first day.

NOBLE: [01:17:01] Yeah, when they sent you off, we don't have room for you. No room in the inn.

MORENO: [01:17:04] I know. And, um, so I worked with them and that, that turned out well. But then, you know, eventually we had to call Peace Corps because there were fighting in Gao of the Tuareg, the Tuareg rebellion. And they were they were killing people ten kilometers outside of Gao.

NOBLE: [01:17:21] This is way before ISIS came in and took advantage of that Tuareg unhappiness.

MORENO: [01:17:25] Yes. Um, so at that point, uh, and then you know that, at that time there were these consultants visiting, uh, which was good, because then we used them to get down, to get to Bamako, um, because we told Peace Corps there, you might want to talk to the embassy.

NOBLE: [01:17:43] Yeah.

MORENO: [01:17:43] There are problems up here that.

NOBLE: [01:17:45] Right. Yeah. So you, you it was your decision to leave Gao and go down to Bamako?

MORENO: [01:17:48] No. It was, we called Peace Corps. And then they said, well, can you get out?

NOBLE: [01:17:52] Okay, so you did have, World Vision would have had a phone.

MORENO: [01:17:55] Uh, no. No, we had to go to the post office. They didn't have a phone.

NOBLE: [01:17:58] Oh my goodness.

MORENO: [01:17:59] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:17:59] Wow. Wow. So you had, but there was a phone in the post office. You were able to call Peace Corps and describe what was happening.

MORENO: [01:18:06] Happening in the, um, across the street from the house where this volunteer lived was the main house of the Tuareg, which was surrounded. Yeah. No, it was a very, uh, shaky situation.

NOBLE: [01:18:16] No kidding. No kidding.

MORENO: [01:18:17] So at that point, they told us just get out.

NOBLE: [01:18:20] Yeah. Did you feel unsafe? Was it scary?

MORENO: [01:18:24] Uh, it was scary because you could hear a lot of shots.

NOBLE: [01:18:26] Oh, wow. Oh yeah. So how did you get out?

MORENO: [01:18:30] With the Peace Corps, with the two consultants who were visiting.

NOBLE: [01:18:33] Okay, okay. And they drove you back?

MORENO: [01:18:35] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:18:35] In a Jeep or something.

MORENO: [01:18:37] On a Jeep. Yeah. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:18:40] Oh.

MORENO: [01:18:40] I know. So pulled out twice.

NOBLE: [01:18:43] Yeah, yeah. How long had you been up in Gao?

MORENO: [01:18:47] Probably 3 or 4 months.

NOBLE: [01:18:48] Okay.

MORENO: [01:18:49] It couldn't have been that long.

NOBLE: [01:18:50] Yeah. Did you feel that you accomplished something in that short amount of time? Well, you were teaching. You were working.

MORENO: [01:18:56] Yeah, I was working. You know, I was working with another person, a counterpart. So that was good. Yeah. There was a there were a lot of good things about that situation, you know, working with World Vision, they had villages that they were working in, working with a counterpart. That was all good. And she spoke French.

NOBLE: [01:19:12] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [01:19:13] And the local language. So.

NOBLE: [01:19:14] But now your French is getting better.

MORENO: [01:19:16] That was much better.

NOBLE: [01:19:17] Yeah, yeah. So now you're back in Bamako.

MORENO: [01:19:20] In Bamako.

NOBLE: [01:19:21] And it's.

MORENO: [01:19:21] And Peace Corps just told me take your time, whatever you want to do.

NOBLE: [01:19:24] Oh, okay. So what did you do?

MORENO: [01:19:27] So I decided to leave eventually.

NOBLE: [01:19:29] Okay. Yeah.

MORENO: [01:19:30] But then Peace Corps Mauritania reopened.

NOBLE: [01:19:33] Aha. Because things calmed down.

MORENO: [01:19:36] In Mauritania.

NOBLE: [01:19:37] Was Saddam Hussein's family still there?

MORENO: [01:19:38] Left. They had left.

NOBLE: [01:19:39] Oh, they left so it was okay for Peace Corps to come back.

MORENO: [01:19:40] Yes. So Peace Corps went back. And then at that point, instead of. So I took about two months and not sure what I wanted to do. Then Peace Corps decided to.

NOBLE: [01:19:50] Where are you during those two months, in Bamako?

MORENO: [01:19:52] In Bamako.

NOBLE: [01:19:53] Okay.

MORENO: [01:19:53] And um, at that point.

NOBLE: [01:19:55] And Peace Corps is still giving you your living allowance?

MORENO: [01:19:57] Yes, yes. And they, and then at that, at one point I went and I stayed with the doctors, the doctor's house. Um. Yeah, no, they were very nice.

NOBLE: [01:20:07] Good.

MORENO: [01:20:08] Peace Corps was very, very supportive.

NOBLE: [01:20:09] Good, good.

MORENO: [01:20:10] I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I wasn't ready and, you know, it was very. It was not a good, I was not in a good place because you know psychologically I think I was a bit traumatized by that.

NOBLE: [01:20:21] Well, sure. Sure. You being pulled out twice wherever you were trying to figure out what to do.

MORENO: [01:20:29] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:20:30] And then before being pulled out of Ayoun.

MORENO: [01:20:34] Peace Corps Mauritania.

NOBLE: [01:20:35] That first placement wasn't working out either. So that's really three separate places where you had to leave. And then, and then you, you're offered an opportunity to work as Peace Corps staff back in Mauritania.

MORENO: [01:20:51] Well, no, in Mali. So they trained, they brought the volunteers to Mali first and we did training there, cross-culture, language. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:21:00] Okay.

MORENO: [01:21:00] And then we went back to Mauritania.

NOBLE: [01:21:02] So people, these were brand new Peace Corps volunteers coming in from New York or someplace, flying in, flying into Bamako, into Mali to begin their Peace Corps training.

MORENO: [01:21:11] Peace Corps training.

NOBLE: [01:21:12] Had they already done something like you did in, um, in the Frogmore?

MORENO: [01:21:18] Right. No, no.

NOBLE: [01:21:19] They were fresh out of college.

MORENO: [01:21:21] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:21:22] Or someplace. And, and you were. And so there were people doing language training and cultural orientation?

MORENO: [01:21:28] Language and cross-cultural, yeah. All this stuff.

NOBLE: [01:21:31] And what was your role?

MORENO: [01:21:32] So I was a cross-cultural trainer there.

NOBLE: [01:21:35] All right. Well, you had lots of experience of.

MORENO: [01:21:38] And that was good. I mean, I think it allowed me to sort of, um, you know, come full circle. So after, after doing training, I was ready to leave Mauritania.

NOBLE: [01:21:48] Yes. And did you accompany these volunteers into Mauritania?

MORENO: [01:21:53] Yeah, and then I did another training. So two sets of training and then.

NOBLE: [01:21:56] Okay, two trainings in Mali or?

MORENO: [01:21:58] No, in Mauritania. So once we did the first training in Mali. Then we went back to Mauritania and then it was fine. And then they figured out they could start doing their training there.

NOBLE: [01:22:06] Okay. So yet another group came in from New York and you did their training in Mauritania.

MORENO: [01:22:11] Yeah. Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [01:22:12] A couple of those.

MORENO: [01:22:13] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:22:15] And then you decided it was time to go home.

MORENO: [01:22:18] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:22:18] So at this point you had not yet gone back home.

MORENO: [01:22:22] No.

NOBLE: [01:22:22] You'd spent this whole time between Mauritania and Mali.

MORENO: [01:22:26] Mm hmm.

NOBLE: [01:22:26] Had you ever had a chance to do some traveling or some?

MORENO: [01:22:30] I did.

NOBLE: [01:22:30] When you were in Bamako at least, did you?

MORENO: [01:22:31] Yeah, I did, I went to, um. Ivory Coast.

NOBLE: [01:22:35] Oh yeah. For a little vacation.

MORENO: [01:22:37] A little vacation with some of the volunteers.

NOBLE: [01:22:40] Yeah. Yeah.

MORENO: [01:22:40] And that was good, just realized.

NOBLE: [01:22:42] Abidjan?

MORENO: [01:22:42] Abidjan. Just realizing that, you know, other places were much better than where I came from.

NOBLE: [01:22:47] Yeah. You were in really a hardship.

MORENO: [01:22:49] Yeah. I mean, it was, you know, it wasn't typical, typical Peace Corps experience, I think. Um, so that was nice just to see, and the fact that, you know, people ate much better.

NOBLE: [01:22:59] Yeah.

MORENO: [01:23:00] Had electricity and water.

NOBLE: [01:23:02] Yeah. Peace Corps. And you were able to speak French in Ivory Coast too.

MORENO: [01:23:07] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:23:07] So that was.

MORENO: [01:23:08] Yeah. That was very good.

NOBLE: [01:23:10] Yeah.

MORENO: [01:23:10] No, it was, it was good. Overall, you know, I had a very good experience. I mean, and I think for me, so I think the fact that I stuck around and allowed it to run its course and then I was ready to come home.

NOBLE: [01:23:23] Yeah. That's good. You made very good decisions all the way around. And I don't know how many people going through what you went through would be able to say, it was a very good experience. There was very hard experience. And you're looking, you're, you're looking at the positive side of it and talking about the good that you got out of it. And it was a ultimately a good experience for you. You're a very special person. Then you come home. Home to where? To New York or?

MORENO: [01:23:52] I came, I came to New York, and then I went to the Dominican Republic and visited my parents. And then I decided to go to France for that summer so I could practice, so I could perfect my French.

NOBLE: [01:24:01] French. Yeah.

MORENO: [01:24:02] Yeah. So I lived with a French family.

NOBLE: [01:24:04] Wow.

MORENO: [01:24:04] And I took classes at the Sorbonne. And then in August decided I was going to come to Madison. So I came back to the States. I went to Yale, to New Haven. And to think, I thought maybe Yale would be the school where I would come and do my PhD, and I didn't like it. And then I came to Madison and I stayed, and I've been here ever since.

NOBLE: [01:24:24] So you came here to the University of Wisconsin. You got a PhD here. In what?

MORENO: [01:24:30] Cultural anthropology.

NOBLE: [01:24:31] Cultural anthropology?

MORENO: [01:24:33] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:24:34] Well, you had such a wonderful grounding in, in living in deeply inside other cultures that you brought with you to your academic studies. How wonderful. And, and, um, do you think you would have

gone on for a PhD in cultural anthropology had you not had that Peace Corps experience?

MORENO: [01:24:55] Um, yes, because in my graduate work, the reason. So at Boston University, my one professor said, um, when I was finishing my master's and I wanted to do anthropology, she said it would be good for you to go out and get experience and then come back to do your PhD.

NOBLE: [01:25:10] And that's exactly it.

MORENO: [01:25:11] It took me five years, but I did it.

NOBLE: [01:25:13] You did it.

MORENO: [01:25:14] You know, five years kind of roundabout way from starting from that, yeah, to the coming to.

NOBLE: [01:25:20] It was all.

MORENO: [01:25:21] Yes.

NOBLE: [01:25:21] All, you could look at that as one big educational experience.

MORENO: [01:25:27] And it was good. You know like I mean, yeah. You know, sometimes you have to, you know, even though you come, you go full circle, it's, it's part of the, that learning.

NOBLE: [01:25:37] Yeah. So you finished your PhD then, in what, 1992?

MORENO: [01:25:42] No, 2004.

NOBLE: [01:25:44] 2004.

MORENO: [01:25:45] I finished, yeah.

NOBLE: [01:25:46] You finished. Yeah. And what have you done since then?

MORENO: [01:25:50] So you know, I've.

NOBLE: [01:25:51] That was 12 years ago.

MORENO: [01:25:52] Yeah. No, that's a long time. Uh, you know, I've worked in numerous capacities in Madison at, uh, I was a knowledge management coordinator at the World Council of Credit Union, where it was really my anthropology that got me that job. I, uh, I've been very interested in engaging young people in science. So I've done a lot of science outreach through Edgewood. And then the last four years I've been working at the Earth Partnership, uh, at the Arboretum, UW Arboretum, on ecological restoration, which is training teachers and community members to do restoration and the reasons why. And my position is really multicultural. So I bring my anthropological to the work. So I work with Native American communities, I work with Latino communities. And now I'm taking UW students overseas to do restoration in other countries.

NOBLE: [01:26:44] Oh, wonderful.

MORENO: [01:26:45] So, you know. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:26:48] And in somewhere in all this time you've married. You have.

MORENO: [01:26:51] Married, children. Yeah. So I have my twins, who are going to be 17 in four days. Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:26:57] And you married a guy who himself was.

MORENO: [01:26:59] A Peace Corps volunteer.

NOBLE: [01:27:00] But you didn't meet him in the Peace Corps?

MORENO: [01:27:02] No, but we met through mutual Peace Corps people. So I met him through my, at a party of my, um, Peace Corps trainers, Julia and Emmett, Julian Paulsen and Emmett Millen. And Emmett studied with

Charles, my husband, at UW doing his master's. So they're very good friends.

NOBLE: [01:27:19] Oh, that's, it all comes together, doesn't it?

MORENO: [01:27:22] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:27:23] Anything else you'd want to say? Would you recommend it to a young woman today?

MORENO: [01:27:28] Yes, I would. I think, you know, you have to go in, you know, clearly with, uh, open eyes and open mind and, uh, and be very aware that, you know, it's not the same world as when I went in. You know, I was very lucky to go to a dry country, so I didn't have to deal with a lot of issues that I think countries where alcohol.

NOBLE: [01:27:48] Oh, there's that.

MORENO: [01:27:50] Is prevalent. Yeah. So I was very grateful for that.

NOBLE: [01:27:52] I'm thinking dry in two ways. Okay.

MORENO: [01:27:55] And then, um, living with a family I think was critical for me. So I would highly recommend that.

NOBLE: [01:28:02] Yeah, yeah.

MORENO: [01:28:03] Um, yeah. No, I, you know, for me, I would say that my defining, the moment in my life that has defined me was my Peace Corps service.

NOBLE: [01:28:11] Oh, wonderful. Thank you, Maria.

MORENO: [01:28:14] Thank you. [tape break]

NOBLE: [01:28:18] Hello. Um, we're going to get back to this discussion with Maria because she's written a piece that she just read for me. And I think

we should include this in the interview. It's, it's very lovely. So here's Maria reading now to you something that she's written. Who did you write it for?

MORENO: [01:28:36] You know, I wrote this when I was for the 50th anniversary. The UW did a celebration.

NOBLE: [01:28:40] 50th anniversary of Peace Corps.

MORENO: [01:28:42] Yeah.

NOBLE: [01:28:43] And that would have been 2011?

MORENO: [01:28:45] Correct.

NOBLE: [01:28:45] Yeah, yeah. Okay, so let's hear it.

MORENO: [01:28:47] All right. So I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mauritania, 1989 to 1991, and in Mali, 1991. My experience in Mauritania has had the most lasting impression on me. Originally born in the Dominican Republic and raised in New York City, here I was, a young Spanish speaking girl out of college, sent to work among Moor nomads in the Sahara Desert. The Sahara, with its desert colors of different shades of brown and its size equal only to the ocean in its vastness and complexity. On my trip to my village of Mekanet, the vastness of the ocean dawned on me and I realized I was like a speck of sand. This realization instilled in me a fear of the desert, and a respect for those who managed to carve a life for themselves and their community. As of that moment, my initial plans and wishes to travel across the desert by camel became a nightmare. As of that moment, I was simply happy to travel by car the 12 hours on the road of hope to my village of Mekanet.

MORENO: [01:29:48] However, as desert tales go, finding Mekanet was not so simple. Driving to my assigned village were mountains of dunes everywhere and our rudimentary Arabic as no villager we encountered on the sandy landscape spoke French, we could not make our way across the dunes. But eventually we did manage to find a guy who

helped the driver steer the car through the dunes to behold the golden sight. A village, if you could call it that. With a few one room stone structures and a scattering of fixed tents. The name of my village was Mekanet, which translated in English as "the village that did not exist." But the translation was the least of my challenges.

MORENO: [01:30:28] I came to live in a village whose daily life revealed itself in similar fashion as might have occurred in the 15th century. Slow, hot, devoid of the western colors of my Caribbean imagination, with a diet consisting of boiled rice, couscous with milk, and on special occasion with the arrival of a guest or a stranger, the roasting of meat. The initial boredom arising with the sun and going to bed with the sunset was difficult. The irony, the irony was that I was an agricultural volunteer in a village that had slaves or slave-like relations with individuals of darker skin who lived across the dunes. The Haratins, as the workers were identified, did all the physical work in my village. And every night you saw them traversing the dunes to bring us our evening meal of couscous.

MORENO: [01:31:16] To deal with the boredom, I put my all into my work. My emphasis on gardening resulted in the harvest of a green pepper here and there, or an onion, but otherwise bore little fruit. During those initial months in the village, I wonder what was worse, the lack of work interest on the part of the women, or the fact that the garden was located close to the only well in the village whose daily presence of goats, camels, cows, and children and women pulling water made working a difficult task. But I trudged on, writing two letters a day, reading endless books and practicing my rudimentary Arabic over my ninth glass of tea.

MORENO: [01:31:56] While my experience in Mauritania was cut short by the first Gulf War, the lessons learned are still with me. I still think of those nights staring at the stars while my Muslim family finished their prayers, of our family gathering around the bowl of couscous for our evening meal, of the long stretch of evening drinking our three cups of tea. My Peace Corps experience reinforced for me the importance of family, the importance of focusing on the here and now, particularly the person in front of you, and that your lasting legacy is measured by the number of

times we extend a helping hand to a neighbor or stranger, regardless of religion, color of skin, or national identity. *Shukran mas allah*. Which means thank you and God be with you in Arabic.

NOBLE: [01:32:39] Thank you.

MORENO: [01:32:39] Oh, you're welcome. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]