

Betty Ansin Smallwood Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Betty Ansin Smallwood served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from October 1969 to December 1971 as an elementary school teacher.

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Betty Ansin Smallwood

November 6, 2018
Arlington, Virginia

By Julius Sztuk

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

SZTUK: [00:00:00] Are we ready?

SMALLWOOD: [00:00:00] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:00:04] Today is November 6th, 2018. This is Jay Sztuk and I'm interviewing Betty Smallwood, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from October 1969 through December of 1971. Betty worked as an elementary school teacher. Betty, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed today.

SMALLWOOD: [00:00:25] You're welcome. And when they, when you do the record, I'd like you to put my maiden name in too. So it's Betty Ansin Smallwood.

SZTUK: [00:00:33] Betty Ansin Smallwood. OK. Thanks, Betty. So let's start by having you tell us about how you originally heard about Peace Corps and why you decided to become a volunteer.

SMALLWOOD: [00:00:44] Well, that's a nice story. 1959, John F. Kennedy, who lived in my town, was running for president. I went to hear him in Boston with my mom, and he was talking about this thing called, he was figuring it out. But he calling it the Corps de Paix, or the Peace Corps. And he had this idea. He said, when I become president, I'm going to start this for young people to go overseas and serve and to help other people. And I remember standing there with my mother and saying, I'm going to do that. I was 12 years old. She said, but Betty, how can you know this? You're 12 years old. I said, I'm going to do this and I'm going to do it with a husband. She said I didn't have a boyfriend. I had never gone out on a date with anyone. But I was pretty clear.

SZTUK: [00:01:40] You had a plan.

SMALLWOOD: [00:01:41] I had a plan. I had a plan. So that's how I first heard about it. And then I was thrilled when he got elected and he started the Peace Corps. And unfortunately, he died before he could see much of it. But he did start it.

SZTUK: [00:01:56] Right.

SMALLWOOD: [00:01:56] So that's, it was part of my plan from the time I was an adolescent.

SZTUK: [00:02:03] OK. So and then 1969 rolled around.

SMALLWOOD: [00:02:08] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:02:09] How did you? Tell me about your application process and the acceptance. And did you plan to go to Fiji? Was that part of this whole, this grand plan, or did that just happen?

SMALLWOOD: [00:02:21] No, that just sort of happened. Come, now, I was a senior in college by then and was trying to decide what to do. I had this boyfriend at this point. I thought he might be a likely candidate for going to Fiji with me. So we both applied to the Peace Corps separately. They were difficult times, not dissimilar from our current times. Benign in contrast, really, because Nixon was not Trump, is not Trump. But he was a force of evil anyway. But this was in the, we were, it was the Vietnam War. It was Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy had just died. We had worked in, I think it was McCarthy or McGovern in 1968 up in Wisconsin. And we were very hopeful.

SMALLWOOD: [00:03:23] And then we were very despondent during the convention in Chicago, and we weren't there, but I just didn't want to stay around. It was a time when I just wanted to get out. We had tried to do what we could and Nixon had beat Humphrey, and Humphrey was. Anyway, we were ready to leave. And we had some offers. It was during the war and my boyfriend at the time, who I later married, we were clear he didn't want to serve in the war and we were worshipping with the Quakers by then. And so they were willing to put us on the Quaker Underground Railroad up to Canada and get us set up as teachers up there. And we had offers to teach in Alaska, although I didn't have a teaching degree. So we had, but I had this thing, I wanted to join the Peace Corps.

SMALLWOOD: [00:04:17] So in February we applied. I applied separately, John applied separately. And we were sort of surprised we got accepted. We passed the background checks, despite the things that we had been imbibing, and then we didn't hear. And then we came to, John is from Washington. So we came to Washington for spring break. We went down to the Peace Corps office and we said. Knocked on the door. I don't know if we had an appointment or we just walked in or something. I can't remember. And so I remember we met with someone and they looked over all the records. They said, oh yeah, we accepted you. Didn't you hear? And we said, no, we didn't hear. You really accepted us? We were so excited. And then they said, yeah, and we're going, we're thinking of sending you to Fiji. I said, oh, is that in Africa? I don't know. Maybe Togo or Tonga. I remember

standing with the Peace Corps staff, looking at the Horn of Africa, looking for Fiji.

SZTUK: [00:05:25] They didn't even know where it was.

SMALLWOOD: [00:05:26] They didn't know what it was. So then they brought in someone else who was saying to all three of us, you know, you stupid people, this is in the South Pacific. So this was getting better and better. So then they said, are you two married? The one from the South Pacific. And we said, no. And they said, well, we can send you to the same island, to the same country, to Fiji, if you're not married. But if you want to be on the same island, you have to be married. So I said, OK. It came from my New England experience of an island.

SZTUK: [00:06:02] You had a Peace Corps shotgun wedding.

SMALLWOOD: [00:06:03] We had a Peace Corps shotgun wedding. And I said, how many islands can there be? Thinking two, you know, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. That's all I knew. And so they said, oh, there are 330. So we looked at each other and we said, oh, well I guess we'll get married. I mean, we'd been living together for two and a half years, or three years, I can't remember. And we got married in July and we joined the Peace Corps in October.

SZTUK: [00:06:30] Great. Great.

SMALLWOOD: [00:06:33] And it was, it was. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:06:38] In 1970, you were one of the first groups. Not the first group, but one of the early groups to go to Fiji.

SMALLWOOD: [00:06:44] Yes, we were the second. Fiji IV. There was a Fiji II that was an education group. And Fiji III was a small group, I think they were fisheries or forestry, mostly guys. And then there was a Fiji I who was education. So we were the third education group. The thing that was notable about our group, aside from the fact that the lottery happened in December of that year.

SZTUK: [00:07:10] A lottery for?

SMALLWOOD: [00:07:11] The draft. That was really, I mean, because I was a pacifist at that point. But the whole draft was traumatic. But. And so I will mention that shortly. But one of the things that was notable is that there were six couples and Fiji II had just lost three couples, married couples, which meant that they lost twice as many when you lose a married couple. So they were determined with Fiji IV, I don't know about Fiji I, we only heard about Fiji II losing half of their married couples. Because they wanted to.

SZTUK: [00:07:50] You mean they left early?

SMALLWOOD: [00:07:52] They left early and the marriages broke up.

SZTUK: [00:07:56] Oh, OK.

SMALLWOOD: [00:07:56] And both of them happened at the same time. So they were determined. They had hired psychologists this time and they were interviewing us, really, I mean, asking all kinds of personal questions, like about our sex life. And I said, that's none of your business. But they were really intent on making sure that we were going to stick it out, because they were also very clear that they planned to send the married couples to the outer islands. We were really filling teacher slots. People were leaving the rural areas.

SZTUK: [00:08:29] Yeah.

SMALLWOOD: [00:08:29] And we were going in to fill the teacher shortage, which was fine with us. And they also had had bad experiences with sending single volunteers to the outer islands. Because at that point the transportation, you know, if you were in Lau. Or actually Lau was more accessible than Kadavu and Lomaiviti at the time. So, yeah. That was distinctive. All the marriage training, marriage counseling. I liked that it was in Hawaii. I mean, of course, I've never been to Hawaii.

SZTUK: [00:09:06] Your training was in Hawaii?

SMALLWOOD: [00:09:07] Yeah, it was in Hilo. We were the elementary group. Language training was good, five, six hours a day. My only critique of it is that they didn't let us. They were following an older model that they didn't want us to see any, write anything. And I had just finished a college degree. I was used to write everything down, and so I would leave the lesson and go write it all down. And they used to say, no, you can't do that. It has to be all oral. I said, my mind doesn't work like that. So but we got a good base in Fijian. And we did student teaching. And a fellow called Paul came and gave us some training in education about the curriculum. I'd never taught before, I'd never been trained to be a teacher. I'd minored in education, and I had tutored in college and in high school with African Americans. So I was, I don't know, I thought I could probably do this.

SMALLWOOD: [00:10:02] As it was, I took to it like a fish to water, and it's what I've done the rest of my life. So it was a good fit. The other, one of the things I remember, one of my memories of Peace Corps training, is that I did my student teaching in fifth grade at Hilo Elementary, and the woman was very pregnant and she went into early labor at seven months. She was supposed to wait it out for me, but she didn't, the baby didn't wait it out.

SZTUK: [00:10:32] OK.

SMALLWOOD: [00:10:32] So there I was after about two weeks, with no teaching experience. And the principal said, well, you know, I was some warm body. And she said, you look like you're comfortable here. Why don't you take over the class? Take over the class, baptism by fire. So it worked. I was there for six weeks.

SZTUK: [00:10:51] Wow.

SMALLWOOD: [00:10:52] And then they offered me the job. So I went back to the Peace Corps and said, I just got a job offer. This is really cool. I've

never been in Hawaii before and I'm thinking of taking it. And they said, now Betty, you signed a contract to go to Fiji. I said, well they've offered John a job too. We can both stay here. And they said, no, you can't do that. You're under contract. You're one of our six married couples and we have a space for you in Fiji. Take our word for it, Fiji is more beautiful than Hawaii. So we said, OK, we'll try Fiji.

SZTUK: [00:11:26] Do you ever regret that decision?

SMALLWOOD: [00:11:29] No. But I've never been back to Hilo Elementary. I've never actually been back to Hilo. The other thing that happened to us in Hilo is that I experienced prejudice as a white person and I was a little thick because I didn't get it at first. They kept calling us haole, and it wasn't, I got that it wasn't a nice term. And then I sort of talked to the people and I said, so why don't you like me, just because I'm a white person? And they said, yes. And I said, my name is Betty. Hi, how are you? And so ultimately we got friends, but this is at the local coffee shop in town. But it sort of stuck in my mind that just because I was white, they didn't like me.

SZTUK: [00:12:15] Yeah.

SMALLWOOD: [00:12:15] It was a, like, so I learned a lot in Hawaii.

SZTUK: [00:12:20] So after your training in Hawaii, then you got on an airplane and you flew to Fiji.

SMALLWOOD: [00:12:26] Right.

SZTUK: [00:12:27] And what was your first impression when you hit the ground there in Fiji? Do you have any memory of that arrival experience?

SMALLWOOD: [00:12:37] No. A little bit overwhelmed.

SZTUK: [00:12:39] Or was it no big deal?

SMALLWOOD: [00:12:41] No. We were excited. We had learned a little Fijian by then. What I do remember is that, and then they had us all over at Nasinu Training College. That's where we were. We didn't go do any home visits.

SZTUK: [00:12:57] That was in Suva?

SMALLWOOD: [00:12:58] That was in Suva, outside of Suva. And we were there all of three or four days, three days. And then the director came. Oh, we have an assignment for John and Betty. We're going to send you out to Gau. I think they told us we were going to go to Gau. Navukailagi District School. And there's a boat leaving in two days and we don't know when the next boat is. So everyone says you should go on this boat. I said, go on the boat? I mean, it was like. So I think it was the shock of, maybe it was three days, I can't remember. But we had to get some canned goods and get some pots and pans and.

SZTUK: [00:13:42] To set up a household there?

SMALLWOOD: [00:13:44] To set up a household. I mean, there are no stores there. So they told us there are no stores. And so it was just sort of like a blur. And that was like three days after arrival in country. And it's true, a next boat didn't come for about two months. The boats only came there about once every 2 to 3 months at that time.

SZTUK: [00:14:07] But you went immediately after arriving in the country and there was two months until the next boat. So you didn't wait two months?

SMALLWOOD: [00:14:15] No. We would have missed the beginning of school. So we arrived with some things and, um. Yeah. So that was my impression. So my real impression was arriving on this island, and I can't even remember where we stayed at first. Or they had a house they had. Oh, there was a Peace Corps there before us. Her name was Joanna. She was in Fiji II, and she fell in love with Jimmy, who was in Fiji II on the other side of Gau.

SZTUK: [00:14:47] Another Peace Corps volunteer?

SMALLWOOD: [00:14:48] Another Peace Corps volunteer. So she moved up to be with him even though they weren't married, which didn't seem to bother anyone then. And so we got Joanna's house.

SZTUK: [00:14:58] Oh, OK.

SMALLWOOD: [00:15:00] But they were away because it was school vacation. I don't know what happened. They came back. I can't remember that. I did see her. So we were just sort of there on this place. And I, that's when the Fijian really kicked in. And I remember. So we had this house, we had Joanna's bed, we had a table, we had a chair. And it was very comfortable. And I do remember the Fijians, they would tease us. And they would say, you know, we didn't kill anyone for the house. I said, huh? And they said, well, like in the old days, we would kill people and we would put four skulls under the posts to make the house strong. I said, oh. OK.

SZTUK: [00:15:55] Well, it's funny that they would make a joke out of that.

SMALLWOOD: [00:15:57] Yeah. Yeah. And then we quickly learned. We got a cat right away. We call him Goosey Goosey, which means dish towel in Fiji. I don't, Fijian, dish rag. But there were mice pretty soon. So. But I remember writing home to my mother, who was a rather proper Bostonian lady, and I said, Mom, you'd be so, you should. I'm so happy. I have three houses. Imagine, I'm 22 years old and I have three houses. I have an eating house, sleeping house. I have an eating house and I have an outhouse. I think my mother was sort of proud that we had joined the Peace Corps. But, uh, and she came to visit.

SZTUK: [00:16:42] Oh, she did?

SMALLWOOD: [00:16:43] The following winter. My mother had cancer when I was in college. In fact, I left. I was at Washington University, and I came back. And so she was sort of in remission at that point. And she had

another ten years and she died after that. But she came all the way. We couldn't get her to Gau because, you know, these boats didn't come very often, but we went to Ovalau. And some of the people from Gau from those villages were related to the people on the other on the side of Ovalau that looked at Gau.

SZTUK: [00:17:21] Mm hmm.

SMALLWOOD: [00:17:21] And so they went through all the ceremonies. And my mom sat on the ground, and they were good sports. And then we went to New Zealand for that winter break. But the couple of times. One of the questions is, what did you do during your breaks? Well, one, I served as a bride and matron of honor at the only time in my life that anyone has asked me to be in a, stand up for them, for marriage. And Pat Siplow and Bill Thomas, they were.

SZTUK: [00:17:57] Other Peace Corps volunteers?

SMALLWOOD: [00:17:58] Mm hmm. Mm hmm. So they were, it's a long story. They'll have to tell you their story. But he's a great storyteller. And you should interview him, wonderful guy.

SZTUK: [00:18:10] I'll make a note of that.

SMALLWOOD: [00:18:10] Yeah. They're up in Rochester, New York. So we had visited them in Taveuni. And she took my measurements, and she made me a dress. And I kept the dress for years. Got married in the, uh, they got married in the Catholic Church. And the other times, the other big times we came in, sometimes we didn't come in because I didn't do very well on the oceans. And they were like 24 hour boat trips on the small copra boats, and I would get seasick. And sometimes the boat didn't come around school break.

SZTUK: [00:18:45] You didn't mind staying out there on the atoll? You didn't get island fever or? You get antsy, you get anxious.

SMALLWOOD: [00:18:54] Sort of. Yeah. And then there was one time, I think it was one time we were there for six months. And then after that, it was the principal who was from Tailevu who didn't want to be out there during the spring break. And he just closed the school. He said, enough. And we're leaving now. We'll come back, school will open when the next boat comes.

SZTUK: [00:19:16] Oh, a long break.

SMALLWOOD: [00:19:18] That's where I really learned my Fijian, and I spoke pretty good Fijian by the end. I was dreaming in Fijian. I said, I learned Fijian to have girlfriends. Because, yeah, I could speak English to John, but I really, aside from the schoolteachers.

SMALLWOOD: [00:19:39] We taught fifth grade, it was very cool. I think what I know now is that they did it right in terms of language acquisition. They developed their skills, their, um. They learned to read, their literacy and their numeracy, they did in Fijian. Because English only started as the class, the medium of instruction, in fifth grade. That means that they weren't learning to read and write in another language. They were learning to read and write in their own language, which is what we do, which is really the way to do it. You have oracy in a language and from the oracy you develop literacy. And so they were fluent in Fijian and they could read and write and, you know, add and multiply and divide and all those basic skills when they hit me in fifth grade. So, um, it was wonderful.

SZTUK: [00:20:37] And that's when their English started?

SMALLWOOD: [00:20:39] They had lessons and, well, they had lessons in third grade for Master SELE. So. It was a really good experience. I have some pictures. This doesn't have pictures in it, but I remember the names of the children I had, that first class. I had 15 of them and in some ways they were very backwards and in some ways they were very forward. Like there was a girl called Vinilovi, who was severely retarded, and I had no idea how to teach Vinilovi. And the students, mostly the girls, just said to me, don't worry, Betty. We'll teach

Vinilovi. Oh, they had a name for me. They called me Mistress Betty. And so they did. I taught them and they taught Vinilovi.

SMALLWOOD: [00:21:38] The other thing that was a challenge for me is that in 1969 or 1970, they still had corporal punishment for the children. And there was no way I was going to do that. I mean, I said. They expected me, the children expected me, and they said, oh, we'll hit him for you. Two and two is five, you know, hit him. I said no. And so I just became known as the teacher who wouldn't hit people. Actually, my husband did. And I was horrified that he would do that. I said, how can you do that? He said, well, that's what they expect you to do. And I said, but you have to work by your own code. We're not here, a guest in their country, to hit their children. So that was a major issue.

SZTUK: [00:22:25] What were some of the forms of corporal punishment that they used?

SMALLWOOD: [00:22:28] Oh, they just had a board and a stick. And the students, they didn't know what to do with me because I wouldn't hit them. And actually that John and the children said your punishment is much worse, than just hit us and get it over with. I would make them explain why they would be mean to him and get conflict, we call it now conflict resolution, and try to work out the problem with the other person. And come to how you're going to give restitution to him, how you're going to work it out. But I love teaching. I found I loved teaching.

SMALLWOOD: [00:23:12] The other thing that was significant about that time on Gau, especially the first year, is that's when independence was. We got there in January of 1970, and independence was on October 10th, when they became independent. And the women taught me the dances. And a British representative came to the island. And so I was dancing with the women. The pictures, um, I was not, they wanted me to be in the front row. I said, no, no, I'll be in the back row following all of you. But they put me in all the of the tapa and the *sevusevu* and the whole bit. And this British guy said, see that white girl there? She's English, right? And they said, no, she's American.

And he said, you know, we should have British here. I said, we got, we have an American. She's a Peace Corps. He was so angry that there weren't British there, there was an American there. He got on his boat and he left.

SZTUK: [00:24:14] Yeah, that's pretty severe.

SMALLWOOD: [00:24:17] The other thing I think I'd like to put in this interview or to communicate is that I really liked having my Peace Corps assignment being that of a teacher. I found, I've seen that current volunteers are like youth leaders and they say, oh, that's real. I read somewhere that that's real Peace Corps work. I found it, I liked being a teacher there. Not only did I learn that I like teaching, but it was a role they knew. I knew what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to go to each school every day.

SZTUK: [00:24:52] Right.

SMALLWOOD: [00:24:53] And they knew what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to go teach school every day. And then they took care of us because it was subsistence economy and we couldn't be expected to fish and farm. But so it all worked. And then we did community work around that. But our real job and, you know, they talked about the three goals of Peace Corps. I think I did my job for them. Provide technical assistance when requested, where requested. I taught school.

SZTUK: [00:25:25] Sure.

SMALLWOOD: [00:25:26] So it was, you could check me off. And enough of the kids passed the exam in sixth grade. And John taught seventh grade. They didn't trust us with the exam years, which was six and eight.

SZTUK: [00:25:39] Well, that was the time when there was a teacher shortage in Fiji also.

SMALLWOOD: [00:25:43] Right. Right.

SZTUK: [00:25:44] So it really filled a need.

SMALLWOOD: [00:25:45] Yeah, it filled the need. Yeah. So what else can I tell you about?

SZTUK: [00:25:53] Let's back up, because I think we kind of skipped over when back when you volunteered to go into the Peace Corps. We didn't talk about your family and friends' reaction. Did you get a lot of support or were people kind of surprised that you did this? Do you remember any of the reactions you got from friends and family?

SMALLWOOD: [00:26:17] I think it was general support.

SZTUK: [00:26:19] Yeah.

SMALLWOOD: [00:26:19] I think my mother was. They knew we weren't fitting in there. It was really turbulent times and I. We were the only people we knew that joined the Peace Corps. It's not like we had a whole bunch of friends and they all, we all went different places. I remember the local newspaper wrote up, the Brookline Gazette or Chronicle or something. They put a picture of me in my wedding dress, it was like a jersey thing. And they said, local girl joins the Peace Corps. So but I was from Brookline and Kennedy was from Brookline. And, you know, so this was just ten years after that. Um, I don't know. We were so happy to be joining the Peace Corps. And John. I joined it for the sense of service. John joined, well, it was a deferment at the time, but he wanted to see the world. And so he was really excited and we were really excited and, um, I don't remember any hostility.

SZTUK: [00:27:43] Two years is a long time to be away from home.

SMALLWOOD: [00:27:47] Actually, the. We were ready to leave this country at that time.

SZTUK: [00:27:54] Yeah.

SMALLWOOD: [00:27:54] It really. I can't say we were the hippies of the sixties because we went to college. We stayed in college, but we pretty left leaning. We really. I think for the people who, I think you're about a few years younger and you didn't experience this, but we really were disillusioned when Walter Cronkite would come on the evening news every night and our president was lying to us. It was a sense of deflation of our version of the American dream. So the hard part was not leaving. The hard part was coming back and adjusting, which we didn't do very well when we came back.

SZTUK: [00:28:33] Yeah, adjusting can be difficult and we should talk about that. But before we do, just kind of walk me through your typical day on Gau, working there, teaching, living in your little house. So what was your typical day like?

SMALLWOOD: [00:29:00] We'd get up. Go to our little [inaudible], an eating house. And we had a little, just a little stove, like a two burner propane stove.

SZTUK: [00:29:14] Yeah. Gas stove?

SMALLWOOD: [00:29:17] Yeah, gas stove. We'd make tea or coffee, instant coffee, and would have some, I don't know, something. And then we would go and we'd teach and we would have lunch at one of the teacher's house and his wife would prepare lunch and then we'd go back and finish. And I remember school secretary, school meetings and I was a secretary, so I would write the notes first in English and then in Fijian. And then we would play with the kids after school, and they would bring us food because we didn't have any way of getting food and there was no place to buy food. And hang around. And sometimes John would go out. They included us in the *mataqali*, an extended family, because that's how they functioned. They didn't know what to do with these separate people, so they included us in. And so sometimes the children would come and stay with us and clean the house.

SZTUK: [00:30:23] They treated you like family?

SMALLWOOD: [00:30:26] Yeah. From the beginning. They thought we would be very lonely living alone. We were just married, so we thought it was great. We had a little hut to ourselves. But they didn't think that. So they would send children to be with us. I liked teaching, but I didn't really need them night and day, so we tried to get rid of them. And then we'd go into the village. I had a little problem with going into the village, so that took a while to sort out. They had a coconut log across the river on each side. Actually, Qarani was closer. There was no logs. But I kept going to Qarani and not Navukailagi, which was. And they said, how come you're not coming to the village? I said, I can't cross that. I can't walk.

SZTUK: [00:31:17] Oh, so you didn't live in the village, you lived on the school compound?

SMALLWOOD: [00:31:21] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:31:21] OK.

SMALLWOOD: [00:31:22] And so they. And they would run across the coconut bridge, all of them. And so finally they put, very shortly after, they put some poles in. And then I still wasn't coming. And I said, there's no handle. So then they put the handle on and they called it the Betty Bridge.

SZTUK: [00:31:47] Is it still there?

SMALLWOOD: [00:31:48] Yeah. They did say, they reminded me. They said, don't go into the woods over there at night. I said, well, I don't plan to, but why not? And they said, well, you know, we just stopped being cannibals about 40 years ago and not everyone bought into this. I said, yeah, right. And they said, but he doesn't live in the village. I said, OK, I won't go there.

SZTUK: [00:32:16] Oh, OK.

SMALLWOOD: [00:32:16] But I didn't walk around by myself. I had this husband.

SZTUK: [00:32:21] Sure. So you had some really strong ties with the community there and the people in the village. You've been back several times since, right?

SMALLWOOD: [00:32:28] Yeah, about six or seven times. Yeah. They, last time, or one of the times I was there, I said to Tevita, who came to that thing at the museum. I said, well, you know. I introduced him as my friend and he said, no, Betty, after 40 years, we're more than friends, we're family. And so. I do, they are. I didn't realize that as a Peace Corps volunteer, but all the times I've gone back since they are the happiest, the kindest, the nicest, and the poorest people. All rolled into one. And living on this village that has water coming into it and has not advanced, I wish they had all the amenities. I was hearing at our board meeting about they wanted more running toilets. They had no flush toilets out there.

SZTUK: [00:33:35] Right, flush toilets and solar power.

SMALLWOOD: [00:33:36] Yeah. I mean, I don't want them to be backwards. I want them to have all the amenities. So that all the young people will come back and live there. It's a beautiful place, that island. They grow all the best food.

SZTUK: [00:33:51] I'm sure. So anything you want to say about family or talk about your relationships?

SMALLWOOD: [00:34:04] Well, I'm thinking of the time we were there, but it's really my memories are all the times that since.

SZTUK: [00:34:13] Well, that's fine.

SMALLWOOD: [00:34:13] I think one of the things I'd like to mention that's sort of that third goal of, I don't know where it fits. But when we were, the second year I think. Or was it the first year? I can't remember. But this boy in our family, Alapate, who was not a biological child. He was adopted. He was the son of Manasa's sister, but he didn't have any sons. So

he just *kerekered* the son. She didn't have a husband apparently so. Anyway, he turned out to be the brightest thing around, brighter than his children. And he was one of the only ones that passed the eighth grade leaving exam. The way this worked, at least back then, is if you didn't pass the eighth grade leaving exam, that was the end of education, at least on the island.

SMALLWOOD: [00:35:14] Alapate passed the exam with flying colors, but there was no one to pay his school fees. And I think we must have done this his second year, must have been the second year. And so they were all saying, well, I guess he won't go on, this is it. And so I remember John and I just looked at each other again, like this decision about getting married. And we just looked at each other across the room and say, well, we'll pay your school fees. We weren't quite sure what we were going to do at age 24, but we figured we hadn't even spent all our Peace Corps stipend because there was no place to buy anything on the island.

SZTUK: [00:35:52] Nowhere to spend your money.

SMALLWOOD: [00:35:52] We ended up with money. So we agreed to pay for his secondary school education, and he did that until he joined the military at 17. And he went on to become, he's one of the people that drives me around and he's a corporal or he was a military. I mean, he had a high position in the military, and he went on through the military and he became a medic, became a peacekeeper in the Middle East, and very well known, very well respected. And then we did this for many of the other children in the family from about 1970 until '95, when the government sort of took over the cost of secondary education.

SZTUK: [00:36:37] That's pretty recently.

SMALLWOOD: [00:36:38] Yeah, whenever that happened, because if they came from the outer islands, they need to have some place to stay and someone paid the food or. So we just said, just write us. The kids wrote us, they wrote us in Fijian, they wrote us in English, and we did

the money to the principals. And so the prince would get their report cards. And so we sort of kept in. They appreciated it. I like to think that their relationship with us was, I mean, that was a monetary way of keeping in touch, and a needed way because there was no one else to do that. So that and so I would see pictures of the kids all growing up and, um, they've now named a little girl after me. I think I told you that. Her name is Betty and she's nine.

SMALLWOOD: [00:37:32] And this month, if I can figure out how to do it, I don't know about the technology, but someone will help me with that. I'm going to start try to start pen friends with some of the grandchildren and some of the family children from Fiji and some of the kids from Quaker meeting and from the Quaker school I'm associated with.

SZTUK: [00:37:52] That would be great.

SMALLWOOD: [00:37:53] So we keep in touch. One of the things that is, I think back about the Fijians and Fiji that I think helps with their pride in themselves is the fact that they control their own land. To me that's a big issue. There are very few indigenous people around the world that still have control over their land.

SZTUK: [00:38:22] Right.

SMALLWOOD: [00:38:26] Uh, the Fijians back when we left, they said they were going to come off the islands if there was a coup and when there was. But the other thing I can tell you, so I feel for them and I support their efforts to, um. And Alapate does not trust this government. We're not going to talk politics here, but I, and it's in the constitution, but there are some questions that I hear my Fijian family talking about it. The other thing I'd like to put into this interview so that people, if anyone ever listens to these things.

SZTUK: [00:39:09] I'm sure they will.

SMALLWOOD: [00:39:11] Is our finding when we were invited back to do an evaluation, John and I, in 1995. It's through a friend of mine, Betty

Cunningham, who worked for the Peace Corps then. We were PhD students at George Mason together. And she couldn't, she wanted to do it, but she couldn't do it. And so she called me and she said, will you go? Well, will I go? Of course I'll go. And John came with me. And so it was evaluating people who were training the volunteers. It was program managers, to be managers.

SZTUK: [00:39:53] Mm hmm.

SMALLWOOD: [00:39:54] We stayed with our Indian friends who thought this was so funny. The government was paying people to be managers. These Indians had a sixth grade education and they were the biggest merchants in Fiji. The concept that we would train someone. Anyway, our finding, to put it short, is that the success or the failure of these volunteers depended on their proficiency in the language. John and I spoke, both spoke Fijian and we understood and we didn't let on, but we would be around the taniwha, around the circles, and we're hearing the Fijians talking about the volunteers and what they were going, how they were going to manage them. And the volunteers were just sitting there smiling. And there was a few of the volunteers, these guys, who were joining in and participating and speaking Fijian. Not perfect, because who speaks, I don't speak it perfectly, I just mutter along. And they were the more successful ones. And some of the volunteers.

SZTUK: [00:40:57] In that village setting.

SMALLWOOD: [00:40:59] Well, I don't know. I think these were town settings. This wasn't, this wasn't Gau. These were on the main island. So that was our finding. I still have the report. I'm going to scan it in. But [inaudible] and they said, oh well, we're older and we can't learn the language. Fijian is not a hard language. And I think speaking the language is very important.

SZTUK: [00:41:25] Sure.

SMALLWOOD: [00:41:27] So that is, um, I think the other tie we had to Fiji is we left Fiji in 1972 or whatever. We came back and after we'd been to Africa and got masters degrees and I didn't have any children. I'd been married for about eight years. And I told the people on our island that. At first they said, well. You know, ultimately I said, you know, your custom, in your country, you have customs, and in our country we do too. And our custom is that for the first child to go well, it needs to be born in the village of the mother. And so the first thing they said when they saw me back is, you know, you have not returned to your village of the mother, *koro nei tina*.

SMALLWOOD: [00:42:29] And then they felt very sorry for me. And they did all these herbs and they did all these charms and all these chants. And they gave John and I our own house, hut, for those few weeks. And I think they thought we didn't know how to conceive a child, because, I don't know, but they gave us lots of space and I got pregnant and then a boat didn't come. So I really was pregnant and I was throwing up.

SZTUK: [00:42:55] How long were you there, three weeks?

SMALLWOOD: [00:42:57] Well, we were supposed to be there for three weeks, but a boat didn't. And I had a teaching job in Montgomery County. I was an ESOL teacher at Sligo in Eastern Junior High, and there was no way to communicate. I thought I would lose my job.

SZTUK: [00:43:09] Right.

SMALLWOOD: [00:43:10] And they held it for me. They didn't know where I was, but they held it for me. So that's where I got pregnant.

SZTUK: [00:43:17] Great story.

SMALLWOOD: [00:43:17] So we had to bring the boy back. So we did when he was a teenager.

SZTUK: [00:43:24] Oh, that's great. I bet it was a big experience for him.

SMALLWOOD: [00:43:29] It was. And, you know, we've brought his son back. So I think that this relationship that we have with this *mataqali* will continue, because now my sons, they're all on Facebook.

SZTUK: [00:43:50] And they're connected with people that they've met back in Fiji, your Fijian family.

SMALLWOOD: [00:43:53] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:43:55] Well, that's great.

SMALLWOOD: [00:43:56] I'm gonna set up this pen friends with some of my Fijian sisters' daughters, because they're all on Facebook and Facebook Messenger. And so I think that. And Tyler went back, you know, the one who's an actor now?

SZTUK: [00:44:12] Mm hmm.

SMALLWOOD: [00:44:12] And he learned to play rugby there and he bonded with Tevita's sons. And so. And they did something very special. This, uh, my Fijian mother Alena died and they, I understand there was what they consider sacred space, but they took me to her gravesite. And then her daughter, who was in the village, she died in October. So, but I got to see her. And when she held my hand in 2017, she said goodbye. And we both knew it was the last time we would see each other. So I would like to continue my relationship. I'm not sure how I'll be able to do that. What's going to make sense? I'm 71 and a half now and I have.

SZTUK: [00:45:06] You have plenty of plenty of years left.

SMALLWOOD: [00:45:08] Yeah, but I have some. I don't have cancer or anything, but I have some. I need to have monthly infusions to keep me around places once a month. So I don't know, but Fiji has a place in my heart.

SZTUK: [00:45:27] Well, that's obvious after all this time. I mean, I don't even have to ask you if you think Peace Corps had an effect on the rest of your life, because that's pretty evident and that's continuing a relationship you've had.

SMALLWOOD: [00:45:39] Yeah, but it also gave me my career. It gave me two years of teaching, which got me my next teaching job, which got me my next teaching job, and then got me into graduate school. They didn't have these Peace Corps scholarships that they have now. But by the time I went to graduate school, I knew what worked. I just didn't know why. But they hired me to teach in their, to teach their what they call English Language Institute. So I was teaching Saudis.

SZTUK: [00:46:11] OK.

SMALLWOOD: [00:46:11] But I had already been teaching and I was married and I was safe. So it not only gave me the relationships, but it gave me a career. And I've been teaching, working in the field of English as a second language, and it's given me an appreciation of the importance of speaking the language of your students. And that was what got me a job in Montgomery County. They required you to have lived, worked overseas and to have learned another language and all of that I got through the Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [00:46:49] Great.

SMALLWOOD: [00:46:50] So. Yeah. You know, my. I said this in the video I did for, uh.

SZTUK: [00:47:02] The 50th anniversary?

SMALLWOOD: [00:47:03] The 50th anniversary. So if I just broke even in terms of what I did there, I didn't do any harm. I don't think we did any harm. It's made me a better American. It took me out of my comfortable middle class life, and I think I was very lucky to get to go to Fiji and to experience the most beautiful place I've ever been in, with the nicest people, but also extreme poverty in a sense, a rural sense. And it

gave me a sense of other. And yet I feel that the Fijians have what so many other indigenous people don't have, and that is their land.

SZTUK: [00:47:55] Sure.

SMALLWOOD: [00:47:57] And they have an intense pride. And I really wish for them that they can continue that.

SZTUK: [00:48:07] Yeah. So is there anything else you'd like to say in summary?

SMALLWOOD: [00:48:13] I think if. You asked me who was I speaking to. If I'm speaking to people who may think of joining the Peace Corps, and I alluded to this in the beginning. The hardest part was not joining, was not leaving America. I mean, we were 22, just married and free. The hardest part was coming back. We didn't fit in. Our friends had moved on and started having babies and doing sort of bourgeois things and wanting houses and stuff like that. So we went back overseas again and we didn't really settle down until about, you know, maybe ten years later.

SZTUK: [00:48:56] So it was the beginning of a whole different lifestyle for you.

SMALLWOOD: [00:49:01] Yeah. Yeah. I regret maybe we didn't stay a third year or stay in the Pacific. I think I would have been very happy to do that. But this husband of mine wanted to go to Africa, so we went to Africa.

SZTUK: [00:49:21] All right. Well, thank you very much, Betty.

SMALLWOOD: [00:49:23] Thank you.

SZTUK: [00:49:24] And this concludes our interview.

SMALLWOOD: [00:49:26] OK.

[END OF INTERVIEW]