

Katherine Ackerman Porter Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Katherine Ackerman Porter served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi from 2011 to 2013 as a community health adviser.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Katherine Ackerman Porter

September 25, 2019
Cary, North Carolina

By Ivan C. Browning

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

BROWNING: [00:00:01] Today is September 11th, 2019 [sic]. This is Ivan Browning. I am interviewing Katherine Ackerman Porter, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi from 2011 to 2013 in a community health adviser project. Most common question is why did you join the Peace Corps? So let's do that one first.

PORTER: [00:00:31] All right. That sounds good. Um, I initially joined the Peace Corps, um, when I had graduated from, uh, my undergraduate program at University of Maryland. I wanted to get more experience in global health. I had taken some courses in global health, and I had a few opportunities to do projects abroad, um, usually during those spring break trips. And so I had traveled to the Dominican Republic, um, Jamaica, Honduras, um, and I had some very rewarding experiences, but those experiences were only a week long. I knew that I wanted to get more experience, um, in global health. And so that's when I submitted my application to Peace Corps.

BROWNING: [00:01:22] How did you initially hear about the Peace Corps?

PORTER: [00:01:26] I attended an informational session at the University of Maryland, and I think one of the big reasons, uh, one of the big things that drew me in was the, uh, idea that Peace Corps would help you with graduate school after. And sometimes Peace Corps will pay for your, um, your grad school. And so I will admit that initially that was, uh, you know, something that that drew me in, um, and, and that's why I applied.

BROWNING: [00:02:02] Okay. Good enough. Uh, did, uh, did you have a specific country or project in mind when you, during the application process?

PORTER: [00:02:16] Um, I was interested in, um, going to Latin America initially. I had taken Spanish in high school. I hadn't really, um, been, I wasn't fluent by any means. And so during my application process, I know that that was something that, um, kind of held me back from being sent to a Latin American country. So, um, but I was also open to anything. During my interview, I said that I was interested in going anywhere, and my recruiter said, can you please just give me an idea of some place? Um, and so I thought that, you know, um, an African country would be very different from my experience. So I did put Africa on the top of my list.

BROWNING: [00:03:05] Well, let's turn back the clock a little bit. We, we know you graduated.

PORTER: [00:03:12] Mm hmm.

BROWNING: [00:03:12] So this was your undergraduate degree. And how long after that was the, you know, your application acceptance into Peace Corps?

PORTER: [00:03:22] Sure. I applied when I was still an undergrad. Um, and then going through the medical clearance, that took a little bit of time. I had to get my wisdom teeth removed. Um, I also, unfortunately, I did not

have health insurance, so I had to get very creative with finding ways to, um, see doctors, um, get all the check marks, all the everything, um, together for my application. So that took a little bit longer than expected. I think it overall, it took almost a year before I learned that I was accepted into Peace Corps.

BROWNING: [00:04:01] So you had already graduated by this time?

PORTER: [00:04:03] Mm hmm. Yes.

BROWNING: [00:04:04] Well, going back a little further into your childhood and your family. Um. Did you have any, in your home growing up as a, as a child, did you have any exposure through your parents to international interests?

PORTER: [00:04:27] Yeah. Um, not really actually.

BROWNING: [00:04:30] Yeah.

PORTER: [00:04:31] Um, I think my first exposure was when I was in high school. Um, my high school offered a, um, kind of an alternative spring break trip to Jamaica, and I took advantage of that. And we went for a week, and I worked with an orphanage, and we built a water cistern. And it was an eye-opening experience. I had never left the country before that. Um. And so that was something that really resonated with me. And, um, and soon after, I knew that I wanted to continue traveling and meeting new cultures and, and, and learning more about, um, just issues globally. Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:05:17] Mm hmm. And, um, you know, when you're, you're in your family situation, you know, before going off to college, did you, you know, do domestic vacation type travel or what was that like?

PORTER: [00:05:34] Yeah. My family was very big in camping. Um, we did a lot. We took a lot of camping trips every year. Um, we spent a lot of time with our, our family members. Um, so it's a lot of, a lot of family vacations with other family members. Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:05:52] So your, your camping experience, uh, could have prepared you for some of the, uh, rigors and of being in the Peace Corps and differences between the comforts that we normally enjoy and, and what people in other countries experience, right?

PORTER: [00:06:12] Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, I wish I took some of those learning experiences a little more seriously as far as learning how to start a fire and that sort of thing. I had to relearn those skills when I, when I went back overseas.

BROWNING: [00:06:28] Yeah. So how did you feel when you got notified that you were accepted?

PORTER: [00:06:34] I was, I was just ecstatic. I, it was something that, you know, going through the application process and thinking of everything that you could do to prepare. Um, you know, I was reading books, I was reading blogs, I was trying to inform myself as much as possible, and it was just making me more and more excited about, um, joining. And I was patiently waiting for that invitation, checking the mail, and, um, and then the envelope finally came, um. And my, I was living with my aunt and uncle, um, at the time, and my uncle called and he said, I think this is the, this is the letter. So I rushed home. I was at work. I rushed home, picked up the letter, um, and I was too nervous to open it there. So I went back to work. I also had to be at work, so I went back to work. Um, and I opened it there and it said, congratulations, you're going to Malawi. And I was like, oh, great! Where is Malawi? Luckily, there was Google and, and that's how I learned my first few facts about Malawi.

BROWNING: [00:07:51] Great, great. Well, what did, uh, your friends and family think of your decision to go and join the Peace Corps?

PORTER: [00:07:59] Um, I think they were really supportive. They, they, my parents were always encouraging me to do, to take advantage of opportunities to, to learn and explore. And they were really supportive. Um, I think they were, you know, a little, maybe there was a little bit of

worry, you know? There is that that concern of, you know, are you going to be okay? We're not going to be able to see you as often and that sort of thing. But overwhelmingly everyone was really supportive and, and thought it was a very adventurous thing for me to do.

BROWNING: [00:08:38] Good. So how much time was there between your acceptance and leaving for training?

PORTER: [00:08:48] Um, it was actually about two months, maybe three months. I found out just before Christmas time, and then I left for training in February.

BROWNING: [00:08:59] Okay. And in that period of time, did you have any second thoughts about it, or were you just still all fired up?

PORTER: [00:09:06] I was pretty fired up for the most part, but I did go through some emotional, what am I doing kind of moments. Um, but I was really excited. And, you know, once I had that date in mind, I was planning the this tour de family. So I took road trips to say my goodbyes. Um, and of course, there's that feeling of, you know, kind of this nostalgia, this, this worry that you're going to miss out on everything. So I did have those moments of questioning. Um, but then I also told myself at any point in time, I could always come home. If it wasn't for me, I could come home. So I, you know, even up to the point where I left, it was very emotional on the plane ride to go to training. Um, but I was like, at any point in time, I could just get back on the plane and turn around and come home. So it kind of gave me that, it's, it'll be okay.

BROWNING: [00:10:06] Did you have any initial staging in America, or did you fly direct from, you know, wherever to Malawi?

PORTER: [00:10:16] Um, staging was in Philadelphia. So we were there for about three days and we got some shots. Um, our last suppers before we left. And, and we got to meet the other trainees, and, um, and then we were off.

BROWNING: [00:10:35] Mm hmm. And what, uh, what size was the group of trainees?

PORTER: [00:10:40] There are actually, I think there were about 40 of us. Twenty volunteers were in the health, um, field and then 20 volunteers were in the agriculture and environment sector.

BROWNING: [00:10:53] And which sector were you?

PORTER: [00:10:54] I was in the health sector.

BROWNING: [00:10:57] Okay. Okay. And had that been your education in what, what was your degree in?

PORTER: [00:11:04] My degree was in public health, so it was a great fit. Um, yeah. And so this would give me an opportunity to use those, those college skills.

BROWNING: [00:11:15] Did, um, did your Peace Corps initial offer, you know, say what you were going to be doing in Malawi or no?

PORTER: [00:11:24] It did not. It said you will be a community health adviser. And I wasn't sure what that meant, especially coming from, you know, I was, I was just, I had just finished my undergrad. I wasn't sure what I could contribute. I was hopeful that I could contribute a lot. But, you know, there's always those concerns.

BROWNING: [00:11:47] Well, we'll find out.

PORTER: [00:11:48] We will.

BROWNING: [00:11:49] We'll find out during our chat. Um, so after staging in Philadelphia for a couple of days, describe the, the route that you took to get to Malawi.

PORTER: [00:12:05] All right. Oh. So we left Philadelphia at like 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, something ridiculous, to get to New York City. Um, I don't

remember what airport we flew out of, but we got there extra early since there was a lot of us. Um, and I remember that was a very interesting way to meet your, the fellow trainees, because you have lots of personalities at 2:00 in the morning. And, um, you know, we were all excited. I don't think anybody really slept. We were just really excited and had so many questions. What's it going to be like? And, um, you know. So we, our flight took off and I was just nervous, like, here we go. This is the beginning. And, um. And then I'm sure we had layovers. There's no direct flight from New York City to Malawi, surprisingly. Um, but, uh, yeah. And then we, we landed. We were there.

BROWNING: [00:13:18] What time of day was it when you landed?

PORTER: [00:13:22] Well, it didn't feel like it, but it was in the middle of the day. The sun was out. And, um, I remember our plane landed on the tarmac, and, you know, if it felt like when they opened the doors, the light was just streaming in, and you're kind of squinting when you're walking down the, the stairs. And, and there we were, you know, in the middle of it.

BROWNING: [00:13:49] So what was, you had to climb down the stairs to the, to the tarmac?

PORTER: [00:13:55] Yes.

BROWNING: [00:13:56] And then walk to the terminal. Was the terminal similar to an American airport?

PORTER: [00:14:03] It was not. It. It was, um, much smaller, um, than any airport I had really flown through. Um, but something that was really, I don't know, amazing when we landed. Um, there was a welcome committee of fellow Peace Corps volunteers, um, who were standing, there was kind of this outdoor patio, and they were standing and just yelling, just like, welcome! And just so much excitement. And I remember with the sun glaring in my eyes and like, you know, this overwhelming feeling

of, oh my gosh, I'm here now what? I did get tears in my eyes, but it was, there was a great welcome committee. Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:14:48] Well, that's a nice touch.

PORTER: [00:14:50] It is nice.

BROWNING: [00:14:50] Very nice touch. So from, from the airport, uh, you were, where did you go?

PORTER: [00:14:58] We went to. We climbed into some busses and drove about maybe an hour to Dedza College of Forestry. Um, and this is where the initial, I guess, training began. We spent about a week there, um, where we got some the, our first taste of the language, I guess. Um, and, you know, um, some of the technical training. It was very, um, introductory the first week. They called it week zero during training. Um, so it was just getting a feel of what Malawian culture is all about. And, um, and then week one, we moved to our homestay villages.

BROWNING: [00:15:46] So what language were you speaking in or being exposed to in week zero?

PORTER: [00:15:50] Week zero I was learning Chichewa, which is, uh, the national language of Malawi. Um, and then uh, by week one, I was learning Chitonga, which is a language that's spoken in the northern lakeshore region. Maybe about 100,000 people speak it. Um, and that's the language I began learning once they, they placed me in this Tonga region.

BROWNING: [00:16:25] I see. So when you went, uh, for week one, you went to a homestay environment?

PORTER: [00:16:35] Mm hmm.

BROWNING: [00:16:35] Describe a bit about what that was like.

PORTER: [00:16:37] Sure. Um, we, I was in this homestay village called Mkomeko. I'm so surprised that I still remember it, the name of it. Um, and I was living with a family of three children, uh, a mother and a father. Um, and they. I had a little, um, mud hut that was next to the family's mud hut. Um, and we, we would cook over fire and we would take baths in these little straw, like, I guess they built kind of a room out of straw. And that's where, like, you'd take your bath. Um, and we had pit latrines. And so I learned how to squat over a potty and, yeah.

PORTER: [00:17:28] And, um, my first day that I got there, I, you know, I didn't know the language. My family didn't speak any English. They only spoke Chichewa. And, um, the one common thing that we could, I guess, communicate with was by dancing. And so the kids were excited because, as you know, I'm very expressive. I use my hands when I talk a lot, and I'm just kind of goofy. And the kids were very drawn to that. And so we were having sort of dance parties late into the evening. So the children would be singing these, kind of like hand game songs, you know, and chanting and that sort of thing. And we would just have a little dance circle. And that was kind of my life. Since I wasn't learning Chichewa in the village, the best thing we could do was just dance.

BROWNING: [00:18:21] And in your, um, in your sleeping accommodations, did you have a bed?

PORTER: [00:18:26] I did. Peace Corps issued us a mattress and it was made of foam. And they recommended that you keep the plastic on the mattress because it can get very damp in the mud hut. And you didn't want your mattress to get moldy. So I slept on this damp or, I'm, yeah, this mattress that was on the floor.

BROWNING: [00:18:47] Okay, so you didn't have a bed frame or anything?

PORTER: [00:18:49] No bed frame. Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:18:51] No pad.

PORTER: [00:18:51] Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:18:52] Was it comfortable?

PORTER: [00:18:53] It was pretty comfortable. It was pretty good. Um, I did, we. We had a little leak in my house, and it was rainy season in Malawi, and so I, I would sleep in my bed, but because of the drip was right over my bed, I would also have a raincoat on. And I set up the umbrella so it was open over my feet to try to keep the rain off. And I mean, part of the issue was I didn't want to be any trouble to my family. It was really nice of them to host me. On top of that, I couldn't even communicate that I was being rained on in the first place. But that lasted about a week and I finally told one of the trainers who spoke Chichewa that I was struggling to get a lot of good sleep, but they were very helpful and they helped the family patch up the roof. And the rest of my homestay was much drier.

BROWNING: [00:19:47] So, um, what were, what was the meal time like with the family?

PORTER: [00:19:52] Yeah. You know, um, it was interesting. I, sometimes I would help my, um, they, they called the mother *amai*. I would help my *amai* cook in the kitchen, but, um, mostly she wanted to, to kind of host the guests. So she kind of kicked me out of the kitchen, and she'd want to do all the cooking. Um, and, uh, we would. I, I would eat in my room, and they would have one of the children come eat with me. And then the rest of the family ate in the kitchen, um, which I thought was interesting, but it, it was, it worked out well.

PORTER: [00:20:30] I got to know my, my pseudo siblings during that time. Um, the children were aged, you know, 12, 14, and 16 and, um, and they didn't speak English very well. They, they had picked up some English in their, in their schooling. Um, but, you know, it was very, it was pretty limited. So mostly I, I just would say verbs that I had picked up in my language class and like and try to communicate. They were always so gracious and patient with me. And they would smile and nod and teach me new words. So that was that was interesting.

BROWNING: [00:21:12] Did, um, so you had a couple, um. So your initial phase, you got there. And did you have any technical training in addition to the language training?

PORTER: [00:21:25] Mm hmm.

BROWNING: [00:21:26] Describe that.

PORTER: [00:21:27] Sure. We had um, we had language training twice a day for about two hours, and then we had technical training twice a day for two hours each. So you'd have kind of class for eight hours total. You'd have language for two hours in the morning, then two hours in the afternoon, technical two hours in the morning, two hours in the afternoon. And our technical training was really focused on community health education and um, and using these, um, these PACA tools, which are participatory [Participatory Analysis for Community Action]. Oh, gosh. These tools that you can meet with the community and understand their needs. You do a needs assessment when you first get into your community and, um, and you look at what some of the issues are and try to partner with community leaders to come up with solutions.

PORTER: [00:22:21] So a lot of the projects were, um, using tools that would meet community members to come to, um, to identify some of the needs. So we would do these activities that were like, you know, drawing on a piece of paper to identify what the major problems, I guess, issues that were affecting people the most. So if it was, you know, something to do with maybe people were really sick because of poor water or, um, you know, maybe mothers had to walk a really long distance just to be seen, you know, during the under five clinics, that sort of thing. So we learned what it was like to work at a hospital setting, but also work with community members.

BROWNING: [00:23:13] So in the, in the training village, um, how long did that last? How long was your training?

PORTER: [00:23:21] Um, I think our training in the, our homestay was about six weeks long, I believe. And then we spent, um, one week during doing a language intensive, uh, course. So we would go. So everyone went in their, in groups to a certain region of Malawi, and they would get this intensive language, um, you know, perspective. So this was really helpful for learning Chitonga, because the entire time I had been learning another language than my homestay family. I felt very behind because I couldn't practice Chitonga. So we went and did the homestay or, I'm sorry, did language intensive. We had the opportunity to go into the community and practice the language and during that time we were learning. We were taking language classes six, eight hours a day and just really diving in deep.

BROWNING: [00:24:24] Of course, with Malawian teachers, right?

PORTER: [00:24:26] Yes, yes. We had some really great Malawian trainers who were the, the language training was, was really exceptional.

BROWNING: [00:24:37] So that's good. And because the area that you were eventually assigned to was not a, I mean, they still spoke some Chichewa, but that was not their main language.

PORTER: [00:24:50] Right.

BROWNING: [00:24:52] So, okay. And um, so when did you first see your, um, village of assignment?

PORTER: [00:25:02] So right after language intensive, since we were already in our regions, we were split off and um, and got to visit our communities. Um, and so I was replacing a volunteer who was about to close her service. And so I got to stay with her and meet the people that she had worked with. Um, so I think we're there in our, in our communities, uh, maybe for about three days. We got to spend a few days and get to know the area. And, and I think that was really great to have that overlap too, you know, meet the neighbors and, and kind of get that introduction, especially since she was leaving. Um, I know the neighbors were sad to see her go, but she was so great about saying,

well, you have a new volunteer and you're going to make memories with this volunteer, and she'll help you and you'll teach her. And, um, so that was really nice to not go in blind. I was really grateful for, for that overlap.

BROWNING: [00:26:09] But when, when she left, that was it. You were on your own?

PORTER: [00:26:15] Yeah. So we actually, um, after our site visits, we went back to, um, the capital, and we had to swear in. And then the next day, we moved into our community. So that's when we brought all of our luggage to move in.

BROWNING: [00:26:37] During training did, uh, did anybody decide that it was not for them? Or did Peace Corps decide that, that the volunteer was not for Peace Corps?

PORTER: [00:26:48] Yeah. Um, we did have one volunteer leave during training. Um, and that was right about when we started homestay. So we only got to know that, that trainee for the first week.

BROWNING: [00:27:03] Okay. So most everybody that, that went.

PORTER: [00:27:06] Most.

BROWNING: [00:27:07] Completed their training successfully and, and then went and took up their assignment.

PORTER: [00:27:12] Mm hmm.

BROWNING: [00:27:13] And you were on your own. And where was the nearest volunteer?

PORTER: [00:27:17] I had, um, I had three volunteers who were, um, a close distance from me, about maybe 15 miles was the closest, and then another was 18 miles and maybe like 22. Um, and they, in Malawi, they like to cluster the volunteers so you're not too far away. But you

also still have your, your own projects that you can work on. Um, so yeah.

BROWNING: [00:27:45] So what did it look like when you, um, you know, first saw your assignment village? What, what was the geography and?

PORTER: [00:27:58] Well, we were just coming out of rainy season, so everything was lush. It was, everything was so green. The grasses were really tall. Um, you know, it was just. It felt very lush and tropical. Um, and so my house was really close to Lake Malawi. I mean, it was about a mile away from Lake Malawi. You could take a quick little bike ride there. Um, and so I had the lake nearby and then, um, we also had, um, a small hill like mountain that, um, that was also nearby, um, and lots of farmland. So it was a very quaint village.

BROWNING: [00:28:43] So the topography was it, you know, pretty level or did you have some mountainous terrain nearby?

PORTER: [00:28:50] Mostly level, except for this one mountain in the corner, like kind of just outside of the town. Um, and in that mountain there was a very beautiful waterfall.

BROWNING: [00:29:01] So you said there were farms around, uh, this was an agricultural region, not a, not a city, I guess.

PORTER: [00:29:10] Mm hmm.

BROWNING: [00:29:10] And so how did that translate into, um, the local food and diet? How did that strike you?

PORTER: [00:29:18] Well, local food was, um, the same, uh, every day. I would say, um. We had, um, we had something called *nsima*, which is made from corn flour. Um, and it's kind of the consistency of mashed potatoes. But you use *nsima* to, um, and you pick up *nsima* with your hands, and you use, um, you eat your side dish with your *nsima* all at once, so you pick it up with your hands, both items, and eat it that way. Um, but we also had *kondowole nsima*, which is, um, made from

cassava flour. In our region we had a lot of cassava. Um, so that was very typical of our region. Um, there usually wasn't. We didn't eat meat very often. That was kind of a special occasion. Um, but we did have fish since I was right on the lake. We had a pretty, pretty good access to fish.

PORTER: [00:30:24] And they had these, um, little tiny fish, kind of like the size of sardines that were called *usipa*. Um, very salty. I will admit it was not my favorite. Um, but we also had *chambo*, which was like this big fish, just very tasty, um, and butter fish. And so we had access to fish, but I would say I mostly I would, um, if I was cooking for myself, I would probably eat, um, kind of rice and beans. And we had access to tomatoes and onions, usually all year round. Um, sometimes we'd get cabbage in the village. Um, but mostly if I went into a larger town or city, then I'd be able to get access to other vegetables to kind of add to the, the variety.

BROWNING: [00:31:17] Did you have to deal with any health or injury issues?

PORTER: [00:31:23] I was sick all the time, but it's my own fault. Um, one, I, I did get malaria, um, which Peace Corps frowns upon because you do get, you know, antimalarial medication, and you're supposed to take it. You know, depending on what type of antimalarial medication you have, um, you know, there's a regimen, and I missed a couple of doses. And what do you know, I get malaria. Um, I was very much in denial when I had it. Because when you get malaria, you get, um, really intense fever, and you feel like you have the flu and your bones hurt, and, and you start kind of having crazy dreams, and this lasts for, like, maybe an hour, and then all of a sudden, you feel better, almost 100 percent better. And you're like, well, that was a fluke.

PORTER: [00:32:20] But then about 12 hours later, you have the same exact symptoms, the flu like symptoms, nightmares, all of that. Um, and then slowly, you know, over the course of a couple of days, which you shouldn't let it go that long. Um, you will, um, it'll start speeding up. So it'll be every eight hours. Every four hours. So I was in denial. And finally I went to get tested for malaria. And they were like, you have it.

So, unfortunate. But, um, Peace Corps gives you a first aid kit. And luckily, I had everything I needed to, to get healthy. But I'm glad that we caught it when we did, so that's good. But yes, I had all kinds of crazy symptoms besides that, but malaria was probably the biggest one.

BROWNING: [00:33:12] Did you sleep under a mosquito net?

PORTER: [00:33:14] I did. I did sleep under a mosquito net and I grew to really appreciate the mosquito net. I kind of felt, you know, kind of like a, you know, it was like, it felt like a nice protection. If I didn't sleep under a mosquito net, then I couldn't really sleep well. I just felt safe under the mosquito net.

BROWNING: [00:33:32] Did you ever have to go to the, to the capital for to seek treatment or?

PORTER: [00:33:38] Yes, a couple of times that, the malaria of course. Peace Corps had me come in for evaluation. Um, and, um, another time. Um, this, I got really sick, um, because I took my antimalarial medication, but I didn't take it with a lot of water, which you're supposed to do. That's, that was my fault again. Um, but the pill had sat in my esophagus overnight, and so when I woke up, it had burned a hole in my esophagus. It was terrible. And everything was, um, like, too acidic to eat or drink. So even water felt like it burned.

PORTER: [00:34:20] Um, and so luckily, Peace Corps was coming through, um, because they were doing site visits and they stopped in to check on me. And I just mentioned that I, you know, wasn't feeling so great. And they said, hop in the car, let's go. So that was great. I got Peace Corps transport all the way to Lilongwe, which was great. Um, and then once I got there, they weren't really sure what to do. I stayed in the capital for a few days, and they were talking about sending me to Pretoria in South Africa, um, because that's where, um, kind of the bigger medical hub was to see if they could, they could get me fixed up.

PORTER: [00:34:59] Um, but I will admit that my, I had left my passport in my community about six hours away. Um, but I said, oh, I tried to play it off. I will say that. Um, I was like, oh no, I'll get better, I'll get better. Um, and eventually I did. I was able to start eating white rice and, and slowly eat solid food again, which was good. But there, you know, it was rough going. They had to, at one point I was so dehydrated. Um, I was feeling really, really weak that they took me to the embassy and, you know, gave me, um, an IV of liquids. It was a whole thing.

BROWNING: [00:35:42] Well, that was a rough experience, I'm sure.

PORTER: [00:35:46] It was.

BROWNING: [00:35:47] Um. So, um, how was it, um, being on your own in a, in a culture very foreign to, to ours?

PORTER: [00:35:58] It was, it was interesting. I feel like I eased my way into it. Um, in the beginning, I would have my door wide open, almost like, come say hi to me. I'd love to make new friends. Um, and, you know, I, I made a point to go take a walk down to the market every day. Um, and part of that was Malawi has a really strong culture of greeting people. So you just greet everybody. I'm just constantly asking people how they slept and how their afternoon was. Um, so. But I really liked that you didn't feel so lonely because you would be greeting people. You'd be making eye contact and meeting people.

PORTER: [00:36:40] And, um, so I just made a point to go out and try to learn the language as best as I could, and, um. Yeah. And I just little steps. I think in the first few months, um, Peace Corps has you they, they say don't start any new projects. Just, just get to know people. And I, I tried to go out every day to just explore.

BROWNING: [00:37:07] Mm hmm. Well, we're going to, uh, talk about some of your, um, you know, things you did away from your job. But I want to spend more time focusing on what you actually did as your work assignment.

PORTER: [00:37:25] Sure.

BROWNING: [00:37:26] So, um, what? How would you describe a typical day of your, of your work assignment, one of your work assignments?

PORTER: [00:37:35] Sure. Um, I think a typical day, um. I, I started working with the local secondary school, um, almost immediately just to kind of build structure around my day. Um, so I started teaching life skills to the equivalent of ninth grade and 11th grade students. Um, and so that was, that was really great for me to build structure because, um, I didn't have a specific assignment. My job was to go in to my community and learn what the needs were. And it's a little bit, it was a little bit hard for me to find, um, you know, to plan my days, I guess. So having that structure was really helpful.

PORTER: [00:38:23] So a typical day I would go to the secondary school, ride my bike over there, um, teach some life skills, head home for lunch. Um, and maybe I'd meet with, um, some of the nursing staff at the hospital. Um, they had HIV clinics, so I would go over and help them with the HIV clinics. Um, mostly it was just an opportunity for me to, um, work with community members. I don't think, um, it wasn't like they needed the staff, but they appreciated that I was willing to come over and and assist with, um, marking things in the books or just, you know, um, greeting people.

PORTER: [00:39:12] Um, I also worked at the hospital with the under five clinic, so we would weigh babies and, you know, take measurements. Um, there'd be health talks every, every, you know, once a week. And so I'd participate in those either volunteering with the nursing staff or, you know. But my language was very poor, especially in the beginning. So usually I just did a lot of observing of, you know, others doing a lot of the speaking. Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:39:44] When you say life skills, what are what are you talking about?

PORTER: [00:39:49] Sure. Life skills. Everything from, we would have these lessons on building self esteem to being a good, um, you know,

civilian, to talking about democracy. And, and there was a life skills curriculum from the Department of Education, the Ministry of Education. So, um, I followed their curriculum, but I also spiced it up a little bit to give it some pizzazz. Um, so we would do, uh, we, I tried to create games, you know. I, we played kind of a Jeopardy type of game to help the students, um, you know, learn in a fun environment. Um, because I think for the most part, uh, the schools were very much, um, writing notes on the board, and students would copy the notes in their notebooks. But I wanted to bring a little something extra, um, especially since I didn't speak the language.

PORTER: [00:40:48] Um, all of the students were learning English, but I'm sure they weren't fluent, and I probably spoke too fast. But if we could turn it into a game, then I think that they could, you know, pick things up a little bit more. Um, but it was always, um, interesting at the end of the semester when we had the final exams, I would have some interesting reads from the students. I remember one time, um, one of the questions was, how can you increase your self esteem? And one student wrote, supply and demand. And I was like, oh, okay, I guess. I guess we can say that. I'll give you half credit.

BROWNING: [00:41:27] Not exactly the answer you were looking for.

PORTER: [00:41:29] Yeah. He just saw two blanks and he was like, all right.

BROWNING: [00:41:33] So you mentioned that you had a bicycle, yeah.?

PORTER: [00:41:37] Mm hmm.

PORTER: [00:41:38] Was the school, uh, a distance where you had to bicycle there?

PORTER: [00:41:42] Yeah, the school was a couple miles away. I could easily walk, but it was always faster to ride your bike.

BROWNING: [00:41:50] So was this bike handed down from the previous volunteer?

PORTER: [00:41:54] It came from Peace Corps when we, it was Peace Corps issued. They, um, gave us a bicycle and a water filter and our mattress and a medical kit and sent us on our way. We had all the tools we needed.

BROWNING: [00:42:13] What about, um, technology? Did you have any access to that?

PORTER: [00:42:17] We did. I forgot to mention, Peace Corps also gave us a little Nokia phones, um, one of the more original models. Um, and there was pretty decent access to, um, to cell reception in my community. So, um, we were able to. What you do is you buy these little scratch off cards and you put the code into your phone, and that's like your airtime. That's what you can use to, to call or text. Phone calls were pretty expensive. I never called home on my phone. Um, text messages were cheaper. And there was also they'd have these kind of deals that they would have, um, daily that you could get free text messages, you know, up to 50 free text messages or that sort of thing.

PORTER: [00:43:08] So that was a good way to keep in touch with fellow volunteers, check in on each other, you know, maybe, you know, plan a visit, something like that. But it was especially helpful in the beginning when you first get in the community and you're like, what am I doing?

BROWNING: [00:43:29] Did you do all your work in the village, or did you have any outreach type things that you did?

PORTER: [00:43:36] Um, my primary work was in the village, um, and we did do a lot of outreach within the village kind of catchment area. I think we had about 10,000 people, um, within our village. So we would, you know, go to different communities and, and that sort of thing for some of our HIV projects. Um, but then I also was engaged in, um, some of these girls empowerment camps. So, um, the one, the big one was Camp GLOW, which is Girls Leading Our World. And that was probably my favorite, favorite project that I got to work on.

PORTER: [00:44:20] Um, so we would, um, bring in secondary school girls from all over the country. Um, we usually had the camp at a, you know, a secondary school in the, in the city capital or the country capital, so in Lilongwe. And these, we, it was very, you know, typical camp. We sang camp songs. We encouraged girls to, um, kind of find their voice, um. Oftentimes girls in secondary school, um, there might be 5 or 10 of them in a classroom of 50 or 60, and their voices get, um, you know, they. I think the boys speak up, are more often to speak up in the classroom. And I think this gave them an opportunity to, you know, be brave, um, build their self-esteem, start thinking about careers if they want to start a business or go on to university, that sort of thing.

PORTER: [00:45:21] So we provided kind of these life skills classes and talked about things that oftentimes they don't get to talk about, um, especially, you know, women's health. So often, um, you know, it's taboo to talk about sexual health or, you know, and, and there are some practices that can be, um, you know, very unhealthy. And so, um, it was good to kind of, you know, dispel some myths and, and let these young girls know how they can, you know, grow to be healthy. And, um. And yeah, it was, it was always my favorite. You know, we would, we had several camps throughout the, the two years that I was there. And I tried to get to most of them to volunteer at those camps and, and be a leader for these girls.

BROWNING: [00:46:15] How were your language skills doing as time went on?

PORTER: [00:46:19] You know, they. There was one woman in my village who I think when she and I chatted, we were talking, I was fluent because we somehow understood each other. But if I, if I spoke to anyone else in the community, I don't think that they would think the same way. Um, and I think she was just extremely patient with me. And we would do a lot of, you know, dancing things out and, and actions, lots of actions to show what we wanted. Um, but part of the, the, not in. One of the issues was I was working at a very transient hospital. Um, we'd have health staff come in for maybe two years, and then they'd move away. It was a teaching hospital, so we had a lot of nursing staff who would just be there for a short period of time. Um, so even speaking with

some of the health center staff, most of them just spoke English anyway, or they probably spoke Chichewa and I didn't know enough Chichewa to chat with them.

PORTER: [00:47:26] Um, but also the where my community was located, it was kind of at the, I guess, the cusp of where people would also be speaking Chichewa. So my language skills were not, they weren't good because I had Chichewa words, Chitonga words, Chich-English, you know, all these. I just kind of wung [winged] it. And that's why I think I was really good with speaking with this one woman in my village. She didn't speak any English, but somehow we just communicated really well with each other. Um, but if I visited other friends in other parts of this area, if I spoke Tonga, people wouldn't understand because I was also speaking Chichewa and it was a mess. But I tried. I tried and people were patient with me.

BROWNING: [00:48:14] So how did the, what, what did you think the locals thought about you? How did, what was their perception of you?

PORTER: [00:48:24] Um, I think that they thought I was very silly, I'll be honest. Um, there was a, I. Because I, I was, I'm very animated. So I would talk to people in my community. And the way to say thank you was *yiwu*. And I would, you know, sing it. I would be *yiwu, yiwu, yiwu!* And I'd move my hands around and do a little dance. And people just thought I was this silly, silly American girl. But I think it made people smile for the most part. I think people just, you know. I don't know, they appreciated that I gave them some comedic relief, probably.

PORTER: [00:49:05] Um, but yeah, I think sometimes I would surprise people. I learned a couple of key phrases to help with, um, you know, I guess I would surprise people. You know, I knew random vocabulary words that I could throw into conversation, and people would be impressed. They'd be like, why does this girl know how to say waterfall in Chitonga? That's so strange. Um, you know, so I think that kind of also brought it back to integrating into the community, because I would have these interesting phrases that people would remember that I was,

I was at least trying and trying to integrate and be a part of the community.

BROWNING: [00:49:48] So in the. Did you ever have regularly scheduled vacations or long weekends or holidays?

PORTER: [00:49:59] Yes, I. Well, I was what they call a site rat. I really enjoyed being in my community. I spent, um, one Thanksgiving in my community. Um, and I kind of wish I did go out and spend time with other volunteers because it was a little bit lonely when you're thinking about Thanksgiving back home. And, um, and so that was one thing that I regretted missing out on that. But for the most part, for holidays like Fourth of July or, um, other holidays, we would try to get together with other volunteers, um, and have that kind of celebratory, we miss the U.S., we're celebrating here kind of thing.

BROWNING: [00:50:44] I see. And, uh. Uh, tell me a little bit about, uh, you know, how, uh, you met your future husband.

PORTER: [00:50:56] Well, I met my future husband, Christian Porter, at, uh, in language, in language intensive. He was one of, we were two of six people learning the language of, Chitonga language. Um, and so we became friends pretty quickly, you know. Uh, we, uh, lived about, um, oh, gosh, maybe like 60 miles from each other. Um, and, you know, we'd get to see each other every so often. But we also lived on this, off of this major road that didn't have a lot of transportation. And also Malawi was going through, um, kind of, um, like a fuel shortage. So it's really difficult to find a vehicle that would take us to see each other. So sometimes it would take all day to go visit when it was only 60 miles away.

PORTER: [00:51:53] Um, but yeah, we, we met in language intensive and we became really good friends and we were able to stay in touch by text messaging each other. And then, you know, as you get to meet people, you start dating. And dating in Peace Corps is just a very different experience. You don't go on a date necessarily, but you just become very fond of each other.

BROWNING: [00:52:18] Did anything change from year one to year two in the work place?

PORTER: [00:52:24] I would say I grew much more confident by my second year. I was getting a better feel of what I was capable of. I think also my expectations were more realistic by the second year. Um. And I had the ability to actually do real work at that point. I think in the beginning I was a little bit lost. I was, you know, finding ways to build that structure during my day and find my, my niche. And then by the second year, I knew I had great counterparts that I could work with. And we started talking about doing, building the foundations of these projects and getting started with that.

PORTER: [00:53:09] So by the second year, we had written a grant for pit latrines in a community, um, that, uh, there was a lot of diarrheal disease. And so, um, this community is right next to the lakeshore and, um, you know, it's, it's sandy. It's really difficult to have like a solid pit latrine. So we built, we wrote these grants so that we could build pit latrines, um, in the sand. So we could get the cement and everything and have a solid structure for families to, to use. And then therefore, they have clean water and, and that sort of thing. So, um, that was one big project.

PORTER: [00:53:48] And then another big project that I did my second year was, um, we. There was a, uh, a primary school that was really close to the lake. It was right like on the beach. Um, and then during rainy season, the water would get too high, um, so students couldn't travel to that, to the primary school. So they made a second primary school, and we built. The structure was already there, but we wrote a grant so that we could get a nice roof on there. Um, and then we also, um, put in a chalkboard so that the students could still learn because otherwise they were, it was too dangerous for them to, like, cross this water that would, it would just flood through there. So, um, those were two big projects that I really enjoyed working on.

BROWNING: [00:54:39] Mm hmm. So you, uh, were you replaced by another Peace Corps volunteer to continue doing approximately the same thing or? And, you know, carry on some of the work you'd started?

PORTER: [00:54:53] Yes. Um, by the, when I was leaving, I did request one volunteer to replace me. At that, and overall Dwambazi had, um, four volunteers in the end. But it's not typical for Peace Corps to have a fourth volunteer come in. But there was a few projects that I had kind of, I knew that they were there, and there was really, um, a lot of support from the community. So I knew that the volunteer would be able to pick right up. Um, so I saw a lot of positive with the fourth volunteer coming in. So I was replaced by, by another volunteer. And, and we kept in contact so I could kind of check in on my old friends and hear what's going on in the village.

BROWNING: [00:55:40] I see. And, um, since, since you left Malawi, have you maintained any kind of contact with, um, with people in the country or with other PCVs that were serving at the time you did?

PORTER: [00:55:55] Yes. Um, I am still close with a women's group that we worked with. Um, they're called Luso La Manga, and it's a group of ten women who came together to start a sewing project, and they started the sewing project maybe ten, 15 years before I even got there. Um, but we helped, um, helped support them so that they could, uh, kind of get their products out there a little bit more. Um, so we, and by we, I mean all of the Peace Corps volunteers in this, in this region, the, um, in the Tonga region. Um, so we would all take turns going to visit them and, um, work on projects to help them build their inventory and, um, and that sort of thing. So I'm still in contact with them. They're really fantastic.

PORTER: [00:56:48] And they've taken in, um, a lot of orphans who, um, their parents have passed away from HIV related diseases. So they've, you know, they've taken in these orphans and they're putting them through school. So it's just a really great project that, that I was, I enjoyed and I enjoy hearing from them. They're doing really great. They just built,

um, a shop in, in their town, which is exciting. And so we use WhatsApp to, to text each other. So that's nice.

BROWNING: [00:57:26] Okay. Um, since returning to America, describe your, you know, ongoing involvement with, uh, Peace Corps volunteer groups.

PORTER: [00:57:36] Sure. Well, um, when we first came back from Peace Corps, um, Christian and I moved to Houston. He had a job and I didn't know what I was going to do, so we moved to Houston. I never thought in a million years I'd end up in Texas. So I was a little bit nervous. I was like, what's this going to be like, a whole new cultural experience? I love Texas, um. But moving there, I had no friends, and the first thing I did was go on Facebook and look for, um, a returned Peace Corps group. Did that even exist? And I did find one. And we started attending the happy hours. And, um, I met a lot of recently returned volunteers, and we became fast friends. You, you have this, um, I don't know, this history, this, like, commonality that really brings you close to other people have served.

PORTER: [00:58:32] Um, so I was really active with that group, and, um, and then we moved to North Carolina about two years ago, and I thought the same exact thing. It's time. The best way to make friends is to find the Peace Corps group. So again, I went on Facebook and found a local Peace Corps group, and we became very active. And now I am currently serving as the president of the North Carolina Peace Corps Association. And I'm sitting across from the former president of the North Carolina Peace Corps Association.

BROWNING: [00:59:05] Yes, guilty as, guilty as charged. The, um, I guess to kind of wrap up our, uh, interview. How would you describe the effect of your Peace Corps service on your life?

PORTER: [00:59:23] Well, that's a big question.

BROWNING: [00:59:25] It is.

PORTER: [00:59:26] Um, I think it's a really big piece of me, of who I am. Um, I think I've, I watched myself go through some of the most challenging experiences of my life, and I came out the other end, and fairly unscathed. And I think I'm a stronger person. I, I'm really even more impassioned about global issues. And, um, I'm, I have an, a bigger enthusiasm about learning about different cultures. And, um, it's just, it's, I think it's always going to be there. And, um, and I'm really grateful for that. I think it's, it's projected my, you know, future career and, um, and I'm happy that it's always going to be a part of who I am.

BROWNING: [01:00:27] Very good. Well, thank you very much for talking with us and doing the interview.

PORTER: [01:00:33] Thanks, Ivan.

[END OF INTERVIEW]