

Jeniffer Rivera Rodriguez Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Jeniffer Rivera Rodriguez served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Costa Rica from June 2016 to August 2018 on a youth development project.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Jeniffer Rivera Rodriguez

October 10, 2019
San Diego, California

By Julius Sztuk

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

SZTUK: [00:00:06] Today's October 10th, 2019. My name is Jay Sztuk. I'm an RPCV from Fiji, 1974 through 1976, and today I'm interviewing Jeniffer Rodriguez, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Costa Rica from June 2016 through August 2018, and she worked in youth development.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:00:30] Yes.

SZTUK: [00:00:31] Well, thanks for agreeing to be interviewed, Jeniffer. Tell me about your background, where you grew up, and how you heard about Peace Corps and why you decided to join.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:00:41] So first off, I use both of my last names. It's Jeniffer Rivera Rodriguez, and before, like I'd said, I was born and raised in Puerto Rico and I was born in 1993 and my first language is Spanish. My second one is English. And I learned

English because my mom, we moved one year to the U.S. when I was in seventh grade. I learned English and then we went back to Puerto Rico. Right now, I'm a master's student in the Kroc School of Peace Studies, in my second year. I live in San Diego, graduated in May 2020.

SZTUK: [00:01:23] Now when you were growing up in Puerto Rico, did you know anything about Peace Corps?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:01:28] Not a clue. It's not a thing. It's not a thing.

SZTUK: [00:01:32] And that whole concept of like a volunteer service like that?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:01:36] Not a thing. So I never heard about Peace Corps when I was there. But when I was, so my experience, how I learned about Peace Corps was super random. Because I was about to graduate from my bachelor's degree in psychology, and I knew that I wanted to do a master's, but I wasn't sure in what I was going to do it. So I was like, OK, I need to find something to do.

SZTUK: [00:02:05] And where were you living at that time? You were still in Puerto Rico?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:02:07] Yes. So I did my bachelor's degree in Puerto Rico. And so that last year, as I was getting ready for graduation, I started Googling literally for things to do. I was like internships, summer jobs, everything, you name it, starting from scratch because nobody knew nothing. And what happened was that I was there on my computer trying to find things and a thought came to my mind. I was like, I asked my mom, like, didn't Tom Hanks do a movie about being a volunteer or something? And then she was like, yeah, I think he was like a Peace Corps volunteer or something. So I literally Googled Peace Corps. So that was super random, you tell me.

SZTUK: [00:02:52] If not for Tom Hanks.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:02:55] Yeah, he made it happen. I should say thank you. So and then went to the website and read about it, and I was like, I think I'm going to do this. I mean, the idea of traveling and getting out of my little town that I was in and two years was a little intimidating, but I knew that it was going to be fulfilling, you know, in intentional growth there. So yeah, I applied.

SZTUK: [00:03:21] And where did you apply? Because there wasn't an office down there, right?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:03:24] No. So I, before I applied, I actually looked for the info sessions because you can put your zip code and they would like put the options of where you can go. And they had an info session like a week after that day at a college where I lived. So I went to the info session. And then, yeah, and after that, I applied by myself. Um, but when I went to the info session, there was like two more people. Like, it's not a thing I'm telling you. Like, nobody knew about Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [00:03:58] But they, so there must have been a returned volunteer that lived in Puerto Rico.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:04:01] Yeah, so that was the only person representing the entire island. I forgot his name, honestly, because then he gave him my number and then I tried to call him, and that didn't work. So I don't even know his name or where he is, all just to say, I should also say thank you. But he was a RPCV, and he was, that was his job now, doing those info sessions in Puerto Rico because they don't have an office. So he was just doing his own, like that was a side thing, because they didn't have like headquarters or anything. I'm all about, they should do that, by the way, in Puerto Rico. But it's not a huge thing there.

SZTUK: [00:04:36] Right. And when you applied, so you looked at the materials online and so forth.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:04:45] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:04:46] Where did you want to go? Did you have a preference?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:04:48] So I, because you know, when you go to the website, you can see all the countries, right? And I think for me, it was important to find a place that I can speak Spanish because I'm like, I already went through learning English. I knew they'd take advantage of my Spanish. So I definitely knew that I was going to go to Spanish speaking country and then I was thinking about Mexico, Panama, Guatemala, or Costa Rica. And then I don't know why I had this idea of Costa Rica and just being in like this amazing green country and beautiful and a place that everyone wanted to go. So I just YouTube, you know, technology now. It's just YouTube like Costa Rica, Peace Corps Costa Rica, and I saw a lot of videos of volunteers, of their experience there.

SZTUK: [00:05:35] Oh, sure.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:05:36] So I was like, hey, it doesn't look bad. There was specifically a volunteer who lived on the beach, and I was like, I'm wondering if I can live next to the beach. So, yeah, I think I fell in love with the country. I just was watching videos about Costa Rica and the culture there and I was like, I think this is it. It's not hard for me to make decisions about my career. I think I just go with the flow. If it looks good, I don't overthink it. So I think it's just fit right.

SZTUK: [00:06:05] You didn't, you weren't reluctant.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:06:07] No, not at all. I was like, OK.

SZTUK: [00:06:09] Independent.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:06:10] Yeah. And the application process also was super easy, because a lot of people told me that before it was like more weird and I don't know longer. But I think for me, the application process, it wasn't something that I was like, oh, a pain. I think it was really easy and straightforward.

SZTUK: [00:06:27] And Peace Corps was pretty responsive?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:06:31] Yeah, for sure. For sure.

SZTUK: [00:06:34] And what did your family and friends think? Because you were probably the only person that they knew that had considered Peace Corps.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:06:45] So my mom kind of knew, heard about Peace Corps, because she told me the Tom Hanks movie, so that's what she thought it was like. I haven't even seen the movie, by the way, so I don't even know how it came to mind. Um, so they were freaking out for sure. Freaking out. My grandmother was like, are you sure that you're going to let your daughter go? Because maybe they're going to, that's a trap. They're going to sell her or something. You know, everyone was scared. My mom one night came crying to me and she was like, can you please ask them to like send me an email just telling me that this is true? A huge deal. So my family didn't want me to go, because nobody really knew. We didn't know anyone else that went to Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [00:07:31] And especially, you're going off by yourself.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:07:33] Yeah. And I was 21. So and that was my first time also, like living in my small town. So they were just super scared, overwhelmed, crazy, crying. Nobody wanted me to go, but I was like, I don't care, I'm going to go.

SZTUK: [00:07:47] Well, what about your friends? And your brothers and sisters?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:07:51] I have a sister and I have lots of friends. And they didn't also never knew a lot about Peace Corps, but they were like, travel the world, why not? They were super excited I think. It was mainly my family who was really concerned.

SZTUK: [00:08:05] Sure. Well, that's understandable.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:08:06] Yeah, yeah. And for Latino families, like, we're crazy and we just want to be in each other's life every day, every minute. So they were like, I don't know, like, do they have Wi-Fi? Can I call you? How can I contact you? And I didn't know, so I didn't have the answers to their questions. So that was interesting.

SZTUK: [00:08:25] Yeah. Well, it's pretty brave of you to do that, too.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:08:29] Yes. And I remember when I got that email, because I feel like the process of me applying since day one, I feel like day one was me Googling Peace Corps. So from there to getting accepted, I think it was super easy and fast, and I got an interview. So that first team, because you have to take like this test, right when you do, when you are applying, and then after that they were going to contact you and see if they want to interview you. So they emailed me, they're like, we want to interview you, like, do a Skype, have a Skype conversation. And I was like, I was super nervous, by the way, because I don't know. Um, so I just, yeah, I had this Skype interview and that was great. It was just me talking about myself, and I think it's really straightforward, right? You don't, you just be yourself. And then I remember getting that email that I got accepted. I remember I was watching a movie and I was like, oh, this is real. Like, it was really exciting, but also scary. But I knew that I was going to go for sure.

SZTUK: [00:09:35] So was that time when you went to the States in seventh grade, was that the only time that you traveled outside Puerto Rico?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:09:42] So that was my first time. And then I went back to live for a semester because I did the Disney college program with some friends. So we worked at Disney World in Orlando when I was in college. So I think the one that gave me the confidence in my English, and I think that's why I did Peace Corps because I mean, seventh grade. You can learn so much. And but then as an adult, English is different, right? So I did the Disney college program for six months before I graduated, and I think that definitely gave me the confidence in my English to do. Because the training was English, you know, the Peace Corps training. I was going to go to Costa Rica, but everything else was going to be in English. So I think going to the Disney college program. Also should send an email to Disney. It definitely gave me the confidence in my English, which is interesting because they were thinking, we're going to learn Spanish, and I was thinking, I need to learn English, right?

SZTUK: [00:10:35] Because they're programmed to think just the opposite. How good is your Spanish, not how good is your English.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:10:40] So mine was a particular experience.

SZTUK: [00:10:44] Yeah, that's great. And then, OK, so did you do any orientation or training in the States or did you go straight to Costa Rica?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:10:54] So from Puerto Rico, I traveled to Texas. We did like a one or two day, I think it was like one day orientation. And we left the next morning. So I remember we stayed there in the hotel in Texas, in Houston, Texas, and I think I was a little intimidated again. I feel like my English, I was worried

about my English. It was funny. That was like the only concern honestly. I was like, I know Spanish, I don't care, and I don't have a hard time socializing with people, but I was like, am I going to like? I was wondering if the training was going to be super technical or not. But anyway, I was just going with the flow and then that one day. Like, it wasn't a training, it was like a, I don't know, orientation, right? And then the next day we went to Costa Rica. And that's when my training started. And training was intense. Training was too long. It was like three months, right? But then it was like from 8:00 to 5:00 or 6:00 or longer if we had to. It was painful.

SZTUK: [00:11:59] But for most of the trainees, it's intensive language.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:12:03] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:12:03] And you didn't have to worry about that.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:12:05] No. Spanish class was fun class for me.

SZTUK: [00:12:08] You could probably helped with, help tutor the other guys.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:12:11] So we got there and they categorized us or level. I was, of course, superior. But then there was another, there was one other girl who was Spanish was also superior or advanced, because I guess she kind of had an accent, but her Spanish was perfect. But so we had two days of technical training and three days of Spanish and culture training. And of course, for me. Everyone hated Spanish training. But I was like, this is my thing. Because I was just talking with a professor and just having fun. And my assignments, I would get it done like that, in the same day. So super fun Spanish class. Oh my gosh.

SZTUK: [00:12:50] It's interesting that they didn't maybe have a different track for you.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:12:54] No. So I guess.

SZTUK: [00:12:55] You're kind of just spinning your wheels there in Spanish class.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:12:57] So our class was kind of different. Because I guess depending on your level, they will teach you certain things. So for us, there were three girls in my, two other girls in my class, so we didn't learn how to write or the verbs because we already knew Spanish pretty well. So I think our Spanish class was more cultural words and how it changes because I still.

SZTUK: [00:13:21] Some of the local customs and things like that?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:13:22] Yeah, because my Spanish, it is different from Costa Rican Spanish, like they're different. And my pronunciation is different. So yeah, it was less informal. I think it was more informal and more like about the culture, lingo, and all of that. So it was fun for sure. It was super fun Spanish class.

SZTUK: [00:13:44] Let's back up and tell me when you first landed in the country, how did that feel and what was your impression? Do you remember your first impression of the country?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:13:55] Yeah, it was cloudy. I was like, I need sun because, you know, Costa Rica was like, it's going to be sunny every day, but it was super cloudy because we arrived in San Jose. And San Jose is cloudy usually and rainy. And I was sick because of the climate, because me going from 90 degree, 95, to like then Houston and then Costa Rica, that, I was so sick. But it was super cloudy and rainy, and I remember being in the little van and I was like, this does not look cute at all.

SZTUK: [00:14:28] Were you a little disappointed?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:14:30] Kind of. Because Costa Rica, like San Jose, is not a beautiful city. It has beautiful architecture in different places. But like Costa Rica is not, San Jose is different areas. So I was like, OK, everything was super gray. And in the city, San Jose is not a really clean city, so I was a little worried. But then as we didn't stay in San Jose that night, we went to a place a city, a province called Cartago, and there was more nature there. So that was like, OK, it's getting better. But it was so cold. And I think, I don't know if it was my fault or what, but I didn't know like weather wise, like what specific weather was. I don't know. I thought it was going to be sunny, right? So Cartago was cold. It was so cold. It was insane. We were all cold.

SZTUK: [00:15:31] And this is where you did your training?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:15:32] For the first, like three days or something. And then in Cartago. And then from there we moved to the other province called Heredia. And that was where we had our three months training. And Heredia is pretty cold too. So we were up in the mountains.

SZTUK: [00:15:56] So while you were there in training, how many people were in your group?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:16:01] In my cohort, I think maybe like 22.

SZTUK: [00:16:06] So you started to bond with some of your.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:16:09] Yeah, I get it. I feel like for me that I get attached to like two people. So when I first arrived in Houston, I shared a room with my now best friend Taina. And to my surprise, she's half Puerto Rican and half Dominican. So I'm like, OK, you're going to be my best friend. So we bonded in a second. My best friend, for sure. And then, yeah, I think once. I've also I think I was a different person back then, I think I'm a different person now. Because back then I was more protective of

myself and I was like, I don't know who should I trust here. And there's differences between me being Puerto Rican and being born and raised in an island from them all being from the States. So it was, I felt a little like out of place, because when we were having those informal conversations they have, they use different words, right? And they had different games, different songs. So I was like, I feel like my cultural experience then was to with them. I was like, how do I connect with these people because they're singing some songs that I don't even know? So that was definitely interesting.

SZTUK: [00:17:23] Hmm. Yeah. Yeah, it would be because you had the continental U.S. culture to deal with and then the culture of your assignment.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:17:33] Yeah, because I think my host family, I only spoke Spanish. So we just got along like in a second, right? So I didn't have no problem. My whole family, by the way, amazing. And my host sister's going to visit me at Christmas.

SZTUK: [00:17:47] So you lived with a family during training?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:17:49] Yes. All the training, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:17:52] OK, that's good.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:17:53] Beautiful family, mom, dad and two daughters, and got along with them in a second. And again, like my host sister's going to visit me, we're going to go to Puerto Rico for Christmas. We bonded like strong.

SZTUK: [00:18:07] Is she your age or a little younger?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:18:09] I'm 26 and I think she's like 22. So kind of like the same age.

SZTUK: [00:18:14] Oh, that'll be fun.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:18:16] Oh yeah. That was, I mean, for other volunteers, they had their experience. But I think for me, I loved my, and I love my host family from training. Awesome for sure. And I also kind of was a spoiled girl in my group because my house was nice. It was pretty fancy.

SZTUK: [00:18:34] What was the community like? Was it a city or a village or small town?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:18:37] It was kind of city, yeah. Um yeah. We had everything there. Everything super accessible. So yeah, it was. I wouldn't call it a big city, but it was a city.

SZTUK: [00:18:52] Ok, so not a real hardship. You had running water and electricity.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:18:55] Yeah. The only thing that sucked was I didn't have a water heater, so you have.

SZTUK: [00:19:00] Cold water.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:19:01] It wasn't cold water. It was freezing. I fainted a little bit. I like, whenever I shower, I was like, I needed to do my thing, like prepare emotionally. Because it was out of this world cold. It was ice cold water and they just, they shower like that. They were fine. It was just me. So that was an experience, but I had to shower so.

SZTUK: [00:19:24] Well, it's a, yeah, different technique that you have to learn.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:19:30] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:19:33] Well, OK. So then, uh, what was a typical day like during your training?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:19:42] Uh, I would say, well, I will wake up like at 6:50 or 6:30 and then everything was so cold. Then just get ready. Had some breakfast. My host mom will always cook something that I could take the next day. So I took my lunch every day and she made good food. Spoiled girl for sure. She even made pizza from scratch. Thank you. And then I was just getting ready and take the bus with. I had a friend who lived super close to me, so we would just take the bus together. And then we would take the bus every morning and arrive at another city. But it was like next to our city. And walk to the place that we will, it was just like a community center. And we will all just be there like at 8:00 a.m. and start the day.

SZTUK: [00:20:38] So all the volunteers weren't in the same neighborhood. They were scattered.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:20:41] Yeah. Yes. Like, you needed to take the bus to visit other people. You can't walk. Like I could walk to my friends. So I don't know. I don't know what the category I don't have. I don't think it's different cities, but maybe barrios. I don't know.

SZTUK: [00:20:56] Suburbs.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:20:56] Yeah, yeah. Near but not walking distance. We had to take the bus. But yeah.

SZTUK: [00:21:03] So then you come together at this training center and?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:21:07] Yeah, spend an entire day there, literally the entire day. It was exhausting. Oh my gosh, we were uber grumpy for sure. We were, because it was too long. I mean, I can't, you know, human beings. I don't know white people. Our model of working is so traditional, it hasn't changed, and we need to be in a room from 8:00 to 6:00 p.m. Come on. You lose me after noon. After lunch, I'm gone. So we were exhausted, all of us. They probably hated us a little bit because we were just like

complaining. Because it was just a lot of info. Info, info, info, info. Every day.

SZTUK: [00:21:45] And on top of the language, you were in community youth development programs. So which is kind of open ended, right? So did they have specific?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:21:58] Skills?

SZTUK: [00:21:58] Yeah, or things that they wanted to impart with you?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:22:03] Yeah, so for us, for example, we had to go to schools sometimes and do like little workshops and practice. So because I know other groups now, they usually have like TEFL and SED together. But for my cohort it was just youth development, so we would just always be together, except for Spanish class. But they did some specific training to us, like really regarding like the youth resources that were in Costa Rica, going to schools, getting, you know, but getting to know the education system there. Um yeah, because we. And then training about like health and safety, so different things. Yeah. But it was two, yeah, two days a week, the technical, and then three the Spanish and cultural training.

SZTUK: [00:22:58] Three months of that.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:22:59] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:23:00] Did you guys, while you were in training, did you get any breaks where you can just go off and have fun with your friends or anything? Like for the weekend or anything like that?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:23:10] Depending on your host family, because we were like, we didn't have much money, right? So I think and we did sometimes went to like the river or just like something close, but we were just so exhausted that we didn't do anything like.

We did travel after training, though, and we were like more relaxed. But in training, it was just like, it was so much time. We just exhausted on the weekend. So it depended really on your host family because my host family, they did that sometimes, so I would just go out with them. But I think as a group in training, we probably maybe went out like no more than four times, which sucks. Because also they scared us and they were like, you should not go out and you should not drink. Literally, they say no. Apparently, because other groups, they ruined it for us. So we were good, a good group. We didn't go out. Because we had a lot of bars there. We could go out after training. That was the thing, apparently, but we were like, scared. We were like, oh, I don't think we should go because we're going to be those people.

SZTUK: [00:24:13] And maybe that was one of the advantages of staying with a host family rather than everybody staying in a barracks or something because you would spend the evenings with your family instead of just hanging out at the bar with the rest of the group.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:24:24] Yes. Yeah. So it was a lot of hanging out with their host families, for sure.

SZTUK: [00:24:29] And then so you finished training and then where was your assignment?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:24:37] So I was assigned in a province called Guanacaste, and that was the place I wanted to go. So I was like, really thankful for that. It was a rural, semi-rural community about like two thousand people and it was, in a bus, it was maybe like five hours away from the capital, so it wasn't that bad. And it was like one bus that I only had to take. So that was an advantage. And I was, yeah, I arrived there with another host family and I was like, uh, because I had fun with my host family. But like, you had to live six months now with your host family before you could live by yourself.

SZTUK: [00:25:25] OK. But later on, you were allowed to live by yourself?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:25:29] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:25:29] And why was that? Was it for safety?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:25:32] Apparently, yeah. Yeah, they were super straight with that because I know some volunteers wanted to live by themselves, like after three months, and they said no. That was, I was also lucky and I had a good host family. But I'm an adult. I wanted to live by myself and they were so strict about that. But anyway, I lived with them the six months and then they had like a small apartment like behind their house. I just moved there. But I needed to wait six months, which was insane. But my host mom cooked for me every day. That was fun. I was definitely spoiled for sure, and I had Wi-Fi, that was pretty fancy. And also a bike. Um, but it was super hot. Guanacaste is dry and it's hot and it's weird weather.

SZTUK: [00:26:22] So it wasn't coastal?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:26:25] Uh, it was. No, it wasn't coastal, no. But I wasn't that far from the beach though. Like if I could go to the mountains I could probably see the beach. So in a bus? Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:26:38] So you say the town was about two thousand people. What were the houses like? Were they modern houses? Electricity and running water?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:26:48] Most of them, they did. I think where I lived, most of the houses were right. It was more like an outside of where I lived, that they were in more like poverty, but where I lived. It was like this town, the center of town, so houses were pretty normal. Water, people have Wi-Fi, you know. I would say, like medium, how do you say like? Many class?

SZTUK: [00:27:12] Middle class?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:27:13] Middle class, yeah, it was middle class for sure.

SZTUK: [00:27:17] And then did you work at a school or you were assigned to a school?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:27:22] So all of us had partners, project partners, in schools. I worked in a high school.

SZTUK: [00:27:30] A local counterpart?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:27:32] So I work in the local high school and then we were free to choose our project partners. So we were free to choose other partners, and honestly, my school was not pretty. It was.

SZTUK: [00:27:53] Pretty?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:27:56] Yeah, my school was not pretty, and also I thought. So Peace Corps, my service description when I applied, it didn't say you're going to be working in a school, that's going to be your thing. It said. I applied for a position in sexual education because that was my experience in. So literally, nowhere there it says you're going to be working in a high school. And I think we all say that like, hey, we were not expecting to work in a high school most of the time. So, and they admit that, OK, that's our fault, because that was their expectation of, like, we needed to work.

SZTUK: [00:28:31] Where did you think you were going to work?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:28:33] With an organization. I think that was my expectation, to work with a local organization or service providers, but I didn't know that I was like, that could be a thing. Maybe I was aware of that, but I didn't know that I actually needed to go to the high school and sit down with

them. So, yeah, we had to be there and my high school, it was a little crazy. They had, I was replacing a volunteer, so I thought, oh, maybe it's going to be easier. She already had her project going on, but no, like her project just disappeared and stopped.

SZTUK: [00:29:08] Really?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:29:09] Yeah, um. So which was interesting because she created a beautiful project, but I don't know what happened that it was just, there was no leader after she left. So that was tough trying to, because to be honest, people didn't care. The professors were burnt out. They didn't have time. It wasn't really a professional setting. The culture there, it's really laid back. So they just wanted to like, chill and talk. Um, so that was interesting to go there. And I guess my expectation was, you're going to be working, right? But I think it's true what they say about the first year in service. It's just you getting to know people, honestly, and building relationships. Like I did not do a lot of the things that I wanted to do my first year because people were just trying to trust me and get to know me.

SZTUK: [00:30:01] Right. You have to build trust.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:30:02] Yeah. But I reached out to other project partners, and then I mostly worked with the local woman's office. They had a woman's office there, and I love her so much. Flordelis. She's my best friend, too. I still talk to her. I was talking to her like two days ago. Um, she was my main project partner because I loved more doing stuff for like community, you know, I think cause the school environment there, it was toxic. It wasn't. It wasn't really good. I don't know. Like they were not, they didn't understand sustainable change. They didn't understand peace and justice and all of that.

SZTUK: [00:30:46] Are you talking about the faculty, the students?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:30:49] The faculty. I think the students were fine. I mean, you know, like any other teenager. But I think the faculty were not committed to just creating sustainable change, committed to life skills, to self-esteem, and to mental health and to supporting their students more than just beside academically. I don't think. And of course, I know now most of the things, I know better now. But back then I was trying to. It was a little frustrating because I was, I don't know, I didn't know what to do. I was younger and I was, I didn't. I wasn't expecting for me, literally, having to take the lead on everything. But that's basically what you have to do when you get in, you have to be confident and move people around. But I didn't know better. Now I know better. But yeah, I think my. So I kept working with a high school, but I think what I enjoy the most was working with the community, working with the woman's office, with the local clinic, health clinic. I think those were great project partners.

SZTUK: [00:31:58] OK, so you kind of expanded your scope?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:32:00] Yes.

SZTUK: [00:32:01] And you just found out about these things and started doing them.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:32:04] Yeah, I think most of my meaningful work were with the other organizations because it was. And it was funny because all of the other. It was a small town, so everyone knew each other, so we would meet. They had like a local network that will meet like every twice a month or something from service providers for that community. And we were all frustrated with the high school because they, the high school, it was just, it wasn't a good environment to work in, like the faculty that were not committed. And then the principal got changed and the new principal came in and he does not care about life skills at all. He does care about grades.

SZTUK: [00:32:42] But this being kind of a middle class community, people were literate?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:32:46] Yeah, yeah. And maybe middle class, I wouldn't maybe use that word because we have a different understanding in the U.S., but I think for Costa Rica, middle class meant that they were not hungry.

SZTUK: [00:33:01] Hmm.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:33:02] Um, that they could go to school and have shoes, you know?

SZTUK: [00:33:08] They were going to school and their parents probably went to school.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:33:11] One of their parents went to school, but none of the parents actually went to college, for example, and maybe one of them worked. The other one didn't work. So, yeah, it's not the same understanding we have here. But people like, yeah, they have food on the table. Maybe one of them had a car. If not, they were going to take the bus. That's normal. But yeah, I was disappointed with my high school. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do. I was like, how do I make these people want to take on this, right? Because the idea is for it to be sustainable. Like I could do many things and I did many workshops at first because they just wanted to me to do workshops, but then I was like, OK, this is not going to be sustainable because I'm going to leave.

SZTUK: [00:33:55] When you leave, then what happens?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:33:56] What happens? And I think Peace Corps and my training did emphasize that sustainable, sustainable. But it's hard to create sustainable projects with. Also because I was young, I was a woman, and they don't take us as seriously. I think a guy's experience is different than girls' because I talked

with my friends and they were like, we just go there and professors are harassing us and trying to like, you know, be cute with us and flirting. Really, I don't. I'm not. I don't. I'm not here for that. So it was being a girl, being young, being 21, 22. It was difficult for them to get me seriously and in the high school environment, though, because I feel like outside it was different. Like, I don't know. Yeah, it was different for other service providers than the high school.

SZTUK: [00:34:47] So what were these other groups that you got involved with?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:34:49] So, for example, the woman's office, the local clinic. Uh, I'm trying to remember their names. The municipality, the local municipality there.

SZTUK: [00:35:00] Which would be like the city government?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:35:03] Yeah, yeah. Um, the different like spiritual groups and another, what was it called? Just any service provider. It was so many, any service the city would get. I would just go with once, you know, to their meeting and check it out. And it was cool because that was part of this network. But I forgot who their leaders, what's the name? But the network that I was working with that was like the hub for every service provider. So I was aware of what was happening locally, and we were all literally just trying to work in the high school because it was so difficult. So that was interesting.

SZTUK: [00:35:51] And you stayed there for your entire service?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:35:53] Yes.

SZTUK: [00:35:54] At the same school?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:35:55] Yes. But I divided my, I went to the high school like two days a week and then two other days to the municipality and then the woman's office.

SZTUK: [00:36:03] OK, so you were free to do that?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:36:04] Yeah. That was amazing. Yeah, they gave me. They were like, as long as you go like at least one or two days at the high school, we will be good with that. So I liked that flexibility that I could just create my own schedule. I think that was nice and focus on the things that I like more. Because I'm still a human being, you know? Because it's funny because like, you go there and I feel like people don't think you have needs and people just talk to me about themselves. And but I was, for me to take care of myself will be just doing the things that I want to do, that I enjoyed, which was mainly working with a woman's office, with a health clinic. Because I think, in my experience, it's so easy to get lost in their culture, right? Because that's where we were for there to build relationships and cross-cultural experience. But I think at one point it was just overwhelming because sometimes people would say, hi, you know, but they don't really sit with you. How are you doing? Right? They don't. Yeah, they don't see that. They just think we're just there to work and work and provide things for them. So that was interesting.

SZTUK: [00:37:12] You must have developed some personal relationships with people.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:37:16] Oh yeah.

SZTUK: [00:37:16] Some of these people you worked with and made a lot of friends there.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:37:20] For sure. I mean, that was the most important thing. If you tell me Peace Corps relationships, I built so many amazing, long lasting relationships. Like I'm going to go to a

wedding on Christmas of one of my friends. So I definitely got to know so amazing people that it was just like, people that basically adopted me as their daughter. And that's super meaningful.

SZTUK: [00:37:45] Well, that's not an uncommon that people maybe don't find their job so rewarding.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:37:51] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:37:51] But the relationships they build with the people in the community are what really has the lasting impact.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:37:56] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:37:57] So that's how you felt?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:37:58] For sure. For sure. And I think maybe my work, I wasn't like, if you asked me, were you satisfied with your work, professional aspect of the service? And I'm like, you know, I've learned to be satisfied now because I feel like I wanted to do so many things that I couldn't do. But I think I'm at peace with it now. And I'm like, you know, you never know that people that you influence, right? The people that you said something that it's going to stick to them forever.

SZTUK: [00:38:29] Right.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:38:30] So I just humble myself and I'm like, do you define your own success? And if I'm defining my success was in building those relationships that I know they're going to last forever. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:38:41] Now you didn't look and talk like these other Peace Corps volunteers that came from the continental United States.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:38:48] Yeah, I don't have blue eyes.

SZTUK: [00:38:49] So do think you think you were, were you treated a little differently you think? Or maybe they had trouble understanding why you were there.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:39:02] You know, definitely they expect when they think about Americans, they expect someone who has blue eyes, blond hair. But they didn't treat me differently. They were excited that I was from Puerto Rico because it was Latin America, and Puerto Rico was known for the music, right? We have a lot of artists, so they knew what Puerto Rico was and they thought I knew all the artists. So it was fun. Then they always tell me, oh, you have such a beautiful accent. Like, how is your country? How does your island look and how is the culture there? So I think they were excited to get to know me. So that was fun. Um, but yeah, I don't think I got really like, oh Nina, she's not a gringa or an American. I think they were kind of excited to get to know me. So that was fun. They always make fun of my accent.

SZTUK: [00:39:53] Really?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:39:54] Yeah, for sure. Um, so but they didn't treat me with the magic that they treat the blue-eyed people, right? Like, they're like, excited about my own culture. But I think in that they forgot that I was coming from the Peace Corps, which is a U.S. program, you know? Yeah. They were like, oh, you're just one person that's here to work, you know? Yeah, I don't think they treated me as the Peace Corps volunteer. They treat me as someone who is just there to work with them.

SZTUK: [00:40:28] And so after your six months with the host family, you finally got your own house.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:40:37] Which was in the backyard. It was basically in the backyard.

SZTUK: [00:40:39] Oh, it's the same family but.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:40:41] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:40:43] You moved from the main house to the back house.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:40:44] Exactly. Um, it wasn't a cute apartment, but I was just like any need my own because, you know, when you live with a host family, you need to socialize with them every day.

SZTUK: [00:40:56] Yeah.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:40:56] And that's exhausting, come on. Your personal time, you just don't want to talk. So I just moved there and I didn't stay there my entire service, because then I met this lady who had this amazing house and lived by herself. And then I moved with her, which was a mistake. But I learned. Because she was a little crazy. But I was like, I'm not going to move again. She was just, she was a control freak for sure.

SZTUK: [00:41:21] She was a local person.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:41:23] Yeah. So from living by myself, I moved with this lady because my apartment was not, it was not cute. It was. I don't know. A lot of insects every day and no. So I moved with this lady, that's. Appearances are not, you should not always follow that. But I moved with this lady because she had this beautiful house and it was difficult because she was older and she was stubborn and she wanted me to do the things the way she did it, which was a completely different experience from my other host families. And yeah, I was a little frustrated with that. But then I think again, going back to my relationships that I had, they were awesome. Like, I would just go with my friend's house all the time and have lunch there. So I think there was a balance. Definitely there was a good positive balance there and also added to, I was like, well, do I want to

be sad and stressed or do I want to just do this and be positive? You know, I think again, like the person who I was when I entered Peace Corps and then when I left, complete different people for sure, one hundred percent. And I think what I learned is that you need to get a little comfortable in life and you needed to have the right attitude towards that. You have some agency in what your life is going to look like. So, yeah, came out a better person, for sure.

SZTUK: [00:42:47] Yeah.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:42:48] Yes. And then I knew that I wanted to do a master's, right? So what happened was my last year in Peace Corps, I was like, OK, what I'm going to do after this? And then again, my fate is just written in a book because I was just randomly going through the Peace Corps magazine. And then I saw this ad about the Kroc School of Peace Studies in University of San Diego, and I was like, this sounds interesting, peace studies. I've never heard that before. So I look into it and I liked it, and then I applied. And then because, you know, you have those Coverdell Fellowships and this school is part of that program.

SZTUK: [00:43:24] OK.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:43:25] They pay, they offer 50 percent reduction if you're a Peace Corps volunteer. So I got accepted and I got the 50 percent tuition. And because I was like, if I don't get this, I'm not going to, because San Diego is really expensive and right, it's a little crazy. And then to my surprise, I said, by the way, I'm from Puerto Rico, like, actually, I am from, I'm not from the States. So there was a scholarship for me available. So I'm a, I have a full scholarship here.

SZTUK: [00:43:58] Wow, congratulations.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:43:58] Thank you. From these amazing family who are Puerto Rican. So they were like, we got you. The Grillo-Marxuach family. They're amazing. And they offered to cover the other 50 percent plus more, stipend for me to live here. So I have zero loans thanks to them.

SZTUK: [00:44:16] Oh wow.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:44:17] I am living, I'm spoiled, I'm living my life. But I'm saying it's because I'm very I'm such a spiritual person. I do, and I think God has control of everything, and I always try to put it out there to the universe. Words of affirmation. And I try to stay really positive. And just, I mean, after I got, I applied, got the 50 percent and then the full tuition, I was like, I mean, I have to come here, I have to. And I remember getting that email. I literally started crying because I'm like, you know, loans. You can be a slave for your student loans forever.

SZTUK: [00:44:50] Yeah, sure.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:44:51] And I was blessed enough in undergraduate that I didn't have to take any loans. I could pay for my bachelor's degree. So I was like, oh, I don't want to take a huge loan because this program, it's like forty thousand dollars or more, I don't know. So full scholarship, I mean, it could get. And I think it's because of, you know, peace studies and Peace Corps. I think everything just aligned, because we were talking like, would I be here if it wasn't for Peace Corps? I don't know. I don't think so. Because I was just going to keep. I studied psychology, so I was just going to become a psychologist, right?

SZTUK: [00:45:26] You might be working at a clinic in San Juan.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:45:29] Yeah, probably. And have tons of student loans. But I've never been here in San Diego before, and I'd say,

well, I already did Costa Rica. I think I can survive anything. So, yeah, I mean, now I'm here.

SZTUK: [00:45:46] And they have hot water here.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:45:47] They do, and I live in graduate housing. I live by myself in San Diego. Oh, I mean, it doesn't, it can't get any better than that. And I thank Peace Corps every time someone asked me, oh, what got you here? What's a big experience that changed your life or that reflective stuff? Immediately, I think about Peace Corps. I am the person that I am today because of Peace Corps. Best experience of my life so far. I think it just awakened something that I could have never figured out by myself. Yeah, there's something about getting out of your comfort zone that if you allow it, it will transform you forever, for sure.

SZTUK: [00:46:28] I think so. Getting back to your time in Costa Rica. Are there any really memorable experiences that you could think of? Like when you're sitting around with your friends and telling your stories, what's your favorite story to tell?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:46:47] My favorite stories are meeting my friend Flordelis, who was my project partner. She basically adopted me. I would eat lunch every day at her house. I don't know, there was something special about people feeding you. And it felt so genuine like she I didn't have to pay, you know? It just felt like she just literally wanted to do that for me. And I said, wow, there's good people out there. Because they just opened the doors of her house. I could be a, you know, she just trusted me. So that was pretty amazing for sure.

SZTUK: [00:47:21] Did she have a family there?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:47:23] She did. She was a mom of three daughters. And, you know, she had her husband and it was a busy house and they just welcomed me with their own. I would just go to

church every Sunday and after that go to her mom's house and she would cook for me the things that I liked. So I think I was like, I don't even know if my family treats me like that. It was like the next level.

SZTUK: [00:47:43] You really were spoiled.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:47:44] Oh yeah, I was spoiled. I was the spoiled one of my group. And so that was definitely special. And I think my cohort, they're my friends, all of them. I mean, we already we already have 2021 reunion coming up, like we already we just we literally love each other like brothers and sisters, and we fight like brothers and sisters. It's just, I mean, we were the same age, our cohort was really like in the same age range. So I think that allows us to be even closer. And we will plan trips in Costa Rica and we would, like, do a lot of stuff together.

SZTUK: [00:48:23] So when you got some time off you guys would go off?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:48:25] Yes, yes. We'd just stay in a hostel for like seven dollars a night or ten and just spend time with each other. I think we met, and we made an effort to meet, at least like once a month or every now and then to do things. So that was pretty special. Like I knew, we can always make it. So that was definitely my cohort. We have a Facebook group, we have a WhatsApp group, we still communicate for sure. That was pretty special.

SZTUK: [00:48:52] How about the other volunteers in your group? Did you make any lasting friendships and are you still in touch with them?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:48:58] Oh yeah. Yeah, my best friend Taina Lenny's from Peace Corps. I just spent the summer with one of my friends

who I went there with. Stayed in her house for the entire summer for free.

SZTUK: [00:49:10] Ah, where is she from?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:49:11] She's from Fresno, so I was doing a summer internship there, which I applied to, and then I realized that she lived there and I was like, oh, by the way, can I live with you? And she was like, yeah. So everything worked out for me. Um, and yeah, and even my best friends are from there and we talk almost every day, we message at least because, you know, now technology is so easy to keep in touch.

SZTUK: [00:49:37] It's easier to communicate.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:49:38] Yeah, because I don't even imagine like back then, like, how do you keep a letter, right? What if it gets lost in the mail? What if you lose that person's address? What are you going to do? So I think for now, for us, it's a lot easier for our generation just to stay in contact constantly.

SZTUK: [00:49:53] Yeah.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:49:55] So that's a good thing about technology that allows you to, and I have so many friends from Peace Corps, from Costa Rica in Facebook, right? They see me. They comment on my things, oh I hope everything is well. Now I have to post everything in Spanish and English because I have friends from there and friends from here. So it's an interesting dynamic. Um, relationships are super important in Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [00:50:20] Well, you have something in common. Did you notice that when you came back, since you'd had this common experience with other Peace Corps volunteers, that you were closer to them than maybe your old friends from back home?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:50:37] Um, what was the question again? Sorry.

SZTUK: [00:50:39] Well, this common experience of Peace Corps, did that give you a closer tie with these people than others?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:50:48] I think so, because we were just in training for three months, so we didn't see after that we didn't see each other every day. But I think going to training, there's something so special about sharing spaces with people. Like in school, for example, your friends are usually from school, from work. When you spend intentional time with each other, like share space, that creates a bond. If you allow it, of course. And I think for us, we were so stressed. So for us, it was just to joke with each other and to, you know, bully each other. And I think that, us being in the same situation, that just created a whole other level. And we share so many memories, and I think we were all in that coming out of age, you know, phase where we were like trying to see who we were.

SZTUK: [00:51:44] Early 20s.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:51:44] Like, at least for us, you were like, OK, who are we again? Like, what do we want to do in life? I think for all of us, we were just looking for direction. And I think that created a special bond for us. Because my friends back home, they didn't understand. They wanted to stay in their comfort zone. And I think for us, I think my group, we were just like trying to figure life out. I think we wanted to do good service, right? But we also wanted to figure out us. So I think that was special. Yeah. And we still talk to each other. It's amazing. When we all live in different places like New York, Philly, Pennsylvania.

SZTUK: [00:52:27] Well, you've only been back for a couple of years, but you'll probably have reunions in the future.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:52:31] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:52:33] Tell me what did you like most about Costa Rica and what did you like the least?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:52:38] The most, for sure, food and produce. It was so easy. Produce is so accessible and so cheap. I mean, you would go to the farmer's market with five dollars and you have meals for the entire week. So that was amazing. Of course, the nature there, diversity is amazing. I mean, I have like toucans in my backyard coming, you know, that was so beautiful. Um, that and how people were really welcoming to their homes, those are my favorite things. My not so favorite things where how the laid-back culture there, they just really want to talk to you and drink coffee every day, all the time. So I think that's my American side where I come in, that I just want to work, come on. Like I just want to get some work done. So I think that was really difficult, the laid back culture.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:53:35] And also men and cat-calling and harassment, that sucked. Latino men, dude. That has not happened to me in San Diego. Costa Rica, every time you would walk and there was a man, he would say something to you. Oh, I just I knew that I had to cross. I knew that I had to avoid when I was by myself, I had to avoid men at all costs because they would just catcall and be inappropriate. And that was hard because I'm like, you can say so much. But when it's constantly like, I don't want to have to be like, hey, I don't like that, all the time. I shouldn't have to do that. So we, the girls, we share that frustration and that, oh, that sucked for sure. I was like, here we go. They would want to, Latinos, when they say hi, they want to give you a kiss on the cheek, and I don't like that. So at one point I had to be like, you know what? I don't like this. And I had to say to someone, hey, I don't like when just, you don't have to kiss me on the cheek. So a lot of harassment, for sure, that sucked. So, yeah, but mainly positive things though. Like those are, I usually never share negative things about my Peace Corps experience, honestly, because above all, it was really positive.

SZTUK: [00:54:52] Yeah. So you mentioned the food. You know, one of the things that people when they enter the Peace Corps, people think you have to go somewhere and eat weird stuff. But you didn't have that?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:55:07] No, I didn't have to eat any weird animal. No. It was rice and beans and meat, veggies. Oh, the food there. I learned how to eat healthy in Costa Rica, for sure, because in Puerto Rico, we don't eat really healthy at all. Lots of fried stuff. But I think in Costa Rica, they eat super healthy, local. I mean, like the chicken from the backyard, you just killed it like today. So the food was amazing and it was so cheap. The local produce, it was incredible. I think other exported things were more expensive, like, you know, things that came from the U.S. and stuff. But the local stuff was wasn't expensive. But the food, good. Gallo pinto, every morning. It's just like the rice from the day before, with the beans from the day before, and just refry it and an egg, piece of avocado. You got me there. So different and I don't know. It was good. It was good food.

SZTUK: [00:56:09] Since you've been back and you're here at school, do you ever have occasion to talk to people? Or when people find out that you were in the Peace Corps, do they ask about it?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:56:21] Think I'm special?

SZTUK: [00:56:21] Or maybe look to you for some advice? Do you encourage people?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:56:31] Yes, 100 percent. Mainly a lot of undergrads here are interested. There's also in my cohort, they are like three other girls who went to Peace Corps. But a lot of people ask me about my experience and I'm like, best experience of my

life. You should do it. It will change your life if you have the right attitude.

SZTUK: [00:56:49] No hesitation.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:56:49] Yeah, I'm like, best. Honestly, of course, it wasn't like I had negative experiences there, but I think above all, I always recommend people and I'm like, feel free to contact me if you need more advice. I think and I always tell lots of my friends. Actually, one of my friends went in Peace Corps because I told her. I was like, you should do it. And she's there right now in Costa Rica.

SZTUK: [00:57:14] Oh is she?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:57:14] She went. We got to meet each other before I left. Because when I left, she just arrived and because I was like, you should do it. And she's there. She's also having fun. So I always, they should pay me for this, I always tell people, you should do Peace Corps. It changed my life forever. Definitely no hesitation. I always tell people to do it. But also tell them, by the way, you need to have the emotional intelligence to do Peace Corps because it's not easy to be out of your comfort zone.

SZTUK: [00:57:50] Right. Well, you have your ups and downs. And like you mentioned earlier, you have needs to. I mean, you want people to care about you, it's not just how are you here to help us?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:58:02] Yeah, so how do you balance that? Because in the end, it's mostly about them, you know, like it sucks to your ego, you know, but you are serving the country, their country. You want to learn their culture. So, yeah, it's a good way.

SZTUK: [00:58:22] Also you're representing America, and you want to leave them with a.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:58:27] A good impression.

SZTUK: [00:58:28] A good impression.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:58:28] Which for me, it's just weird representing America because I am from Puerto Rico. So I think like my particular experience, which is representing humanity. Like, I don't know.

SZTUK: [00:58:39] Well, yeah, but you kind of reinforce that diversity in America.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:58:46] Yeah, I guess so.

SZTUK: [00:58:47] Everybody's not blond haired and blue eyed.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:58:49] Yeah, right. Hopefully, they've got that. But yeah, it was. It was good.

SZTUK: [00:59:00] Any other experiences or any thoughts to wrap up?

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [00:59:03] Any thoughts? Um, would I do it again? I always ask myself that and I think if I would do it again, it would have to be with my partner if I get married, because I'm not going to go through that by myself again. So when I get married, I will definitely consider it when I'm like, why not? Maybe go to Costa Rica, I don't know where, but not right now. I mean, like, if I would do it, it would be like a long term because two years is a long time. But maybe, I would say I would say maybe. Maybe I would do it again, and I'm just so grateful that I went. It's just everything worked out, school, my career. It took a huge, I mean, and there's other volunteers here and we're like, that's part of my identity, to be a Peace Corps volunteer. Like when I express myself in some way, the conversation, Peace Corps is there, for sure. It's like such a, cause I was like, before that, people, I was like, why do people carry this identity with them so strongly? But I feel that I'm a RPCV,

that's something that I tell people. Like, I went to Peace Corps, and that means so much to my life, to my daily life I think. The way I speak, the way I think. I don't know. It's more than doing the job and bye. I don't know about you, but I'm like, I take it everywhere, wherever I go, which is nerdy. I don't know. And every time I meet someone, oh, you were a Peace Corps volunteer? Me too! You know, it's like a bond.

SZTUK: [01:00:43] Well, you're part of a club.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [01:00:44] Yeah. So those are maybe my final thoughts.

SZTUK: [01:00:48] Great. Well, it's been a great interview, and I appreciate you taking the time.

RIVERA RODRIGUEZ: [01:00:52] Well, thank you for listening to me. I've been talking for so long.

SZTUK: [01:00:56] All right. Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]