

Charlaine Loriston Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Charlaine Loriston
Interviewer: Evelyn Ganzglass
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Biographical Note

Charlaine V. Loriston served as a Peace Corps volunteer in November 2016 to November 2017 in a health education program.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Charlaine Loriston

August 15, 2018
Reston, Virginia

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:03] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968. And I am interviewing Charlaine Vanessa Loriston, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Guinea, West Africa, from November 2016 to November 2017. Let me start the interview, Charlaine, by asking why did you join the Peace Corps?

LORISTON: [00:00:35] It's funny you ask that. First, I'll start with a memory that came back to me when I was sitting in my hut one day. And what actually, what was the impetus behind my application? I was sitting in my hut one day and I was reminded of something that I wrote in fourth or fifth grade. Yeah, it was the strangest thing to recall that. But I remember sitting in my hut and I'm thinking, wow, I'm actually doing what I said I wanted to do when I was in fourth or fifth grade.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:10] How cool.

LORISTON: [00:01:11] And I couldn't believe that I bought that into existence and didn't even realize it until that moment. But I was working as a wellness consultant, building wellness programs for companies that had Humana insurance at the time.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:33] So you were out of college by that time?

LORISTON: [00:01:35] Oh, yes. I've already gotten my master's degree, etcetera, in health education. And I earned my bachelor's from Florida State in exercise physiology. And so I was working, doing a lot of prevention education. I was a professor at the community college down in Miami, it's in Broward County specifically, and again building wellness programs as my full-time job, doing a lot of program development and management. And I just got to a point where I felt that I wasn't doing anything impactful. And I remember speaking to a friend of mine, her name is Frantz. And I was, I guess you can say I was complaining about where my life was and feeling unfulfilled and feeling as if I wasn't doing what I wanted to do in terms of helping people.

LORISTON: [00:02:40] I've always been very service oriented and I didn't like where my life was. And she said to me, you know, have you ever considered the Peace Corps? I mean, this sounds like it's right up your alley. And I said, no, I've heard of it, but I'm not exactly sure.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:59] What it is?

LORISTON: [00:03:01] Yeah. And so that day I remember I was laying on my bed and I grabbed my laptop and I did some research and I said, hmm, this is right up my alley. I spoke to another friend of mine who suggested, well, you know, you know, you can do the Make the Wish Foundation or something like that. And I believe her brother also served in the Peace Corps, if my memory serves me. But I didn't want to do anything that was religious based or anything. I wanted something that was unrelated to anything political or anything like that, because I wanted to strictly focus on servicing others and being an educator, because I love doing so. And so I decided to submit my application. I believe I

submitted it probably the day before it was due. And I said, well, if it's meant to be, it will be. And I'm so happy that it was.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:07] So how long did it take for you to get notified that you were accepted?

LORISTON: [00:04:11] The funny thing is, um, the application was due December 1st, and when I received an email that stated that I would get a response within six months, I should get a response by June. I had my interview and I waited and I believe it was March 15th. I still have the email. I was so shocked. I was in the middle of a client meeting and they stepped out for a minute. So I decided to check my phone and looked at my email and I got the email. And I remember just I was so emotional and when my client came back in, they were just like, are you okay? And I said, yeah, I'm okay. I'm just shocked right now. And they said, what happened? I was like, I just got the most amazing news. And I said to them, I'm going to share something to you, but do not tell anyone. But I'm going to be leaving you guys in November. I'm going to the Peace Corps. And they were so excited.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:19] So you heard in March for November. It took that long?

LORISTON: [00:05:24] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:24] Wow. Okay.

LORISTON: [00:05:25] I arrived in Guinea on December 1st. I didn't realize that I would be leaving in November until maybe about a month ahead of time when I finally received a communication that said, no, you're going to be leaving in November for staging. But yeah, I found out in March and I kept it a secret because I didn't want my employer to know. Only my clients knew because I had a very good relationship with my clients. And they were so excited. And they, they were my biggest cheerleaders, basically.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:04] Had you applied for Africa?

LORISTON: [00:06:06] So my original, um, my original approval was for Benin.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:11] Ah.

LORISTON: [00:06:13] Yeah. And maybe a few months later, I received an email that said, hey, you need to reselect because we made a mistake. You cannot go to Benin because of your eczema. And so I said, okay, well, I'll just move my second choice to my first choice, my third choice to my second, and leave the third option open. I knew I wanted to go to a French speaking country simply because I knew Spanish was a cop out for me. I've been exposed to Spanish all my life, and once upon a time I was fluent. And now, because I don't use it, it's pretty rusty. But I wanted to go to a French speaking country because, one, my background is in a French speaking country as well, Haiti.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:01] Hmm.

LORISTON: [00:07:02] And I can read.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:04] So your family's from Haiti?

LORISTON: [00:07:06] Yes. I'm Haitian. And although I read French, I listen to French music. I wasn't fluent and I wanted to go somewhere where I can improve that and really understand how to speak French. So I wanted to go to a French speaking country, and Guinea was my second choice and it became my first. And I'm so happy about it. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:31] So your clients knew. What did your family think about this?

LORISTON: [00:07:38] My mother did not know anything. And she still is, she still will tell you. She still doesn't understand what the Peace Corps is and why I would do it. But all of my extended family were extremely excited for me. They were very proud of the fact that I followed my heart and I did something for me. I've always been one to do something for everyone else, and I never, ever did anything for myself. And this was something I did for me.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:08] So are you first generation Haitian?

LORISTON: [00:08:10] I am.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:12] Ah. But you grew up in the United States?

LORISTON: [00:08:14] Born and raised in the, in Miami, Florida. First born. So first generation American. And my parents immigrated into the U.S. around their teens, late teens. And um so I had a lot of struggles. And in terms of language barriers, I had to teach myself a lot growing up for school because I couldn't go to my parents and say, help me. They didn't speak English. So, um, so they spoke Creole and both of them speak French. And it's funny because my mother said, well, it took you going to the Peace Corps to finally want to learn French. When you were a kid, you were absolutely opposed to it. I thought French was just too difficult and I did not want to. But my dad, who spoke Spanish, it was easier for me to pick up Spanish.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:15] But of course, Haitian French and Guinean French probably are not that much?

LORISTON: [00:09:21] Very, I would say Haitian French is more like French in France, more formal compared to the French that I learned in Guinea. But I now know the grammatical rules and can differentiate between French and Creole now. So it's.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:45] Great.

LORISTON: [00:09:45] It's better.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:47] So you continued working and then you quit your job?

LORISTON: [00:09:52] Yes, I finally told my job the first week of November. I sent an email to my supervisor, my vice president, and I can't remember what the other person's position was. And my supervisor was like, well, can you let me know ahead of time? I said, no, I need to talk to all of you at the same time. I think he was nervous that it was going to be

something negative because he wanted to get ahead of it before the VP was notified. And I remember they all, all three of them sat on the other side of the table and I said, well, um, this is my two weeks' notice and this is what's going to happen. And they were so shocked. The vice president, and I can't remember what Jackie's position were. They were so excited.

LORISTON: [00:10:40] And my manager was concerned. He said, are you sure? You know, what kind of living arrangements are you going to be? And I said, it's okay. I'm going to be okay. You know, I remember what it was like the first time I went to Haiti and using a latrine outdoors and have to use a bucket to get water out of a well.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:02] So you are well prepared having been in Haiti.

LORISTON: [00:11:05] Yeah, but I actually did not expect for me to really have that same type of living in Guinea. I didn't expect it at all.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:16] So what did you expect?

LORISTON: [00:11:18] Nothing.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:19] You didn't know what to expect.

LORISTON: [00:11:19] I didn't even research Guinea. Nothing. I said I wanted to go in with an open mind. I did not want to know anything about what's going on politically, what the environment was like. I just wanted to go there and learn while I was there, and I'm glad I did that.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:36] So where did you all meet up?

LORISTON: [00:11:38] We all met in Philadelphia. We had our staging on November 27th. Oh, there's a story behind that. I was supposed to arrive that Sunday, but when I got to the airport in Miami International Airport, my suitcase broke and it was like, oh my God, I panicked. I ended up missing my flight because I had to leave the airport to get a new suitcase. It was a suitcase that I've had for a long time, and I cried

my heart out and I was like, oh my God, what am I going to do? I missed my plane and it was the most emotional day ever because everything was going wrong.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:13] Had nothing to do with a suitcase probably.

LORISTON: [00:12:18] Yeah. It was like everything is going wrong and I'm not there at the time that I'm supposed to be. So I called Peace Corps and there were no other flights leaving for Philadelphia out of the Miami International Airport. It was just a disaster. And so eventually Peace Corps found a flight leaving from the Fort Lauderdale airport later that evening. And so I got my new suitcase, went back home, relaxed for a while, and then went to the Fort Lauderdale airport and arrived to my staging extremely late. So I finally got to meet my group the very next day. When I did arrive to that evening, I there was one gentleman who saw me with my suitcases and, um, my suitcase and my duffel bag. And he says, are you here from the Peace Corps? And I said, yeah. He was like, I'm Andrew. And he gave me a little rundown and um.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:16] He was staff?

LORISTON: [00:13:17] No, Andrew was a volunteer that was part of my group.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:21] Oh.

LORISTON: [00:13:21] And so that was good. Andrew became one of my good friends. It's funny because he had to remind me that it was him that that I met at the hotel that day. But we became very good friends while we were in Guinea.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:37] Okay, so was it the next day then that you flew off or?

LORISTON: [00:13:41] No. We spent three days in Philadelphia in staging at that time. We also had training for Let Girls Learn so.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:51] What is Let Girls Learn?

LORISTON: [00:13:54] It's an initiative that was started by Michelle Obama to really promote the education of girls throughout the world, those who are in countries that had women that were in a disenfranchised situation. And so we were learning about the initiative and how to pretty much implement that in our communities because it was a project that was very active in Guinea. We needed to be aware of it. And so we spent three days in Philadelphia in staging and on November 30th we got on a bus and drove to New York. And from New York we took our flight and were on our way. 30 hours later, actually, 28 hours later, we arrived to Guinea late at night.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:52] Where did you arrive?

LORISTON: [00:14:54] In Conakry. And we arrived late at night. We went through customs, and I remember the airport being extremely hot. I still have the video, actually, of me recording everyone. And I said, welcome to Guinea, guys, we're here. We made it. And we got to the Peace Corps house and.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:16] How many of you were there?

LORISTON: [00:15:19] 30.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:20] 30 who met at staging and 30 went overseas?

LORISTON: [00:15:24] Yes, 30 of us went over. In fact, my group, we were 100 percent up until our in-service training. And after our training, one person was medically evacuated. So we had a very good retention rate for my group compared to the other groups that were still in-country.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:48] So you arrived at the airport. Did it look like Port au Prince airport?

LORISTON: [00:15:53] Oh no, not at all. It was smaller than the Port au Prince airport. Port au Prince airport has air conditioning all throughout. Here where we were, it was very warm. We had air conditioning when we finally got to the customs area. And then we um. [phone ringing]

GANZGLASS: [00:16:22] Keep going. Just keep going. Yeah.

LORISTON: [00:16:26] Okay. After we finished with customs, we went to baggage claim and it was at that time I remember someone said Shasha, and I'm like, who the heck knows my name? And that was Dr. Berry, one of the staff members. We had to turn in bios of ourselves so that the staff could be familiar with us. And one of the things that I put on there was my family calls me Shasha. And so I was surprised. He pronounced it properly and everything. And Dr. Barry was the first one that I became acquainted with from the staff. And, um, and that's when we met our DPT.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:06] DPT meaning?

LORISTON: [00:17:08] The, um, the deputy program trainers. I can't remember what the DPT stands for to tell you the truth. But I met the American leadership, except for our country director, at that meeting, I mean, at baggage claim, and many of the other staff members at that time. Finally, we received our bags and we crammed into this bus. It's so funny. All 30 of us in this one bus and all of our bags. So bags were on top of us. We were all crammed in. And it just so happened to be someone's birthday. I can't remember whose birthday it was, but before we departed, we sang Happy Birthday and we were on our way. And I remember what the airport was like when we walked out and it was just, the heat was the first thing that greeted us and the humidity.

LORISTON: [00:18:11] And I just remember as we were driving to the Peace Corps house, I looked around and immediately I was like, oh my God, I'm in Haiti. It was just so familiar. It reminded me so much of Haiti minus the people at the airport, you know, begging for, uh, to help you with your baggage and things like that. That was the only thing that was different. They did not have that in Guinea. But yeah, we arrived at a Peace Corps house and we met some other volunteers that were going to pretty much break us in and help us out during our training. And we were fed, we showered and the next.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:58] Fell asleep.

LORISTON: [00:18:59] Fell asleep because it was the longest trip ever. And it's funny. Andrew, uh, not Andrew. It was Alex. Alex, one of my group mates. He reminded me during our IST when we reached 100 percent, he reminded me, he said, you know, Shasha, remember that announcement you made in the plane? And I said, what? And he said, I remember I thought you were crazy because you got up and you looked at all of us and you said, listen, I better see every single one of you in February 2019. And I said, none of you are going to quit. We're going to all make this together and I'd better see all of you.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:41] So what was the mix of men and what? I don't even know, what was, what program were you in?

LORISTON: [00:19:45] So I was in the health program and in staging, I want to say it was about 17 of us who were health volunteers, and then the other half was agroforestry. So we staged together. We also had education already in country, but they come into Guinea during the summer, right before the new school year begins. So health and agroforestry, we always arrive around December of that same year. And so we.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:25] There had been groups before in both of those programs?

LORISTON: [00:20:29] Yes. And so we were the, um, technically the third group to come into Guinea after the Ebola outbreak and the Ebola evacuation. And that summer prior, we had two groups, technically three groups arrived together, not just our education, which is G-28, Group 28, but G-29 arrived two weeks after them for their training because they were really trying to get the volunteers into Guinea. So they, um, they put the G-29 health and agroforestry volunteers arriving about two weeks after that education group.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:18] And this is how long after Ebola outbreak?

LORISTON: [00:21:23] Um, I honestly cannot tell you when the, when Guinea was cleared. I do know when they had volunteers in 2014, they were

evacuated. I think it was 2014. They were evacuated and some of them actually returned as Response or were part of our groups that arrived in 2016.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:49] Great. So what was the training like? What happened?

LORISTON: [00:21:53] Training. Oh, my goodness. I just remember that wall of the schedule, of all the things we had to do. It was the longest, most excruciating process ever, simply because of the fact that it was an all-day thing from 8:00 to 5:00 p.m. And that was the first time I probably fell asleep at 7:00 p.m. because it was so exhausting. But training. The agroforestry group and the health group, we trained separately from one another. The agro group, they lived in a completely different village from the health group. We lived in Toumania. T-O-U-M-A-N-I-A.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:42] T-O-U-M-A?

LORISTON: [00:22:44] N-I-A. So the health group we lived in Toumania, we did all of our trainings in Toumania. And the agroforestry group, they did all of their trainings in, um, Yorokoguia. I can't even tell you the spelling because I saw two different spellings on the roads, but they lived in Yorokoguia. In Toumania, we had health posts and health, excuse me, health centers. So we did a lot of our trainings there. We did a lot of trainings in understanding how to deal with maternal and child nutrition. WASH, which is water. Wow, what is the A? I can't recall the A, but sanitation and hygiene training. We did a lot of work on malaria and other communicable diseases that were prevalent within Guinea and.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:53] You were being trained as community health workers, is that it or?

LORISTON: [00:23:58] Pretty much. That's what we were. We were health educators. Our official title, or official title of the program that we applied to, was for health education. But again, our primary focus was maternal and child health and malaria. And so the only time we saw our agroforestry group was when we had trainings at the Peace Corps training center together in safety, medical issues for our personal

medical, for doing our vaccinations if we were behind on vaccinations. That was the only time we saw our agroforestry team because we were a distance from one another. So the. Go ahead.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:51] No, just in my era, we all got our shots before we left the country.

LORISTON: [00:24:56] Oh, we did as well. But some people were either missing shots. For example, I never had the flu shot.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:04] But you got it on your own I guess. Our training was in country, in the United States.

LORISTON: [00:25:10] Oh, yeah. Because in the sixties it was like.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:12] All the training was here. So you just got the shots on your own before you went to Peace Corps.

LORISTON: [00:25:16] I got my shots on my own. That was the only way I can get my medical clearance.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:22] Ah.

LORISTON: [00:25:23] However, one shot that I had to get while I was there was the flu shot because I opted out of it when I was here and they were like, no, you have to get it. I was upset by that because I ended up getting sick from the flu shot and, um, excuse me. And other than that. Other than that, I really and I really had, I enjoyed my training because I learned a lot.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:56] Did you have, you had French training as well?

LORISTON: [00:25:58] We had French training as well. And my French teacher actually never changed during the entire process, even when I transitioned into the local language. His name was Mao and, M-A-O. And um, he, um, he taught us French. He was very funny. We had a, our group was about four of us in each training session. It was small

training sessions based on our language level. I had originally tested as, um, I think it was intermediate low. Yeah, an intermediate low. I did my best, but I kept mixing Creole a lot in my communications and so I tested as intermediate low. And eventually I think by the end of my training, I was advanced low.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:02] And did you have cultural?

LORISTON: [00:27:07] Shock?

GANZGLASS: [00:27:07] Training, no, cultural training as well?

LORISTON: [00:27:09] Oh my God. I think I was one of the only people who were super excited about their cultural training, because it would amaze me at, you know, just to learn about what the people were like, what the cultural standards were like. I thoroughly enjoyed my cultural trainings because it, honestly, and I wrote this on one of my VRS, which is the volunteer reporting form, that I think that was the most. I think for me that was the most important part of my training because it really helped me get a better understanding of how to communicate with the people there. And I absolutely loved when I saw so many similarities to my own Haitian culture. It was just like fascinating to me. And yeah, it was very fascinating to me.

LORISTON: [00:28:01] And I remember when we first got to meet our counterparts, I was one of the people who had to introduce myself to the group in French. I actually, they, I have that video too. I was so nervous, but just to introduce the people, to show them the diversity of America. So it was not only myself, it was another young man named Ivan who is African American as well. However, he's, his father is from El Salvador, and a Taiwanese American. So we all spoke in our individual languages and they were just shocked. We were like, whoa! And we were saying, yes, we are American, but this is the diversity of America. We're not just white.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:50] They surprised by that?

LORISTON: [00:28:52] Oh, yeah. You know, there were so many people who were just like, but you're not white. Where are you from? You know, where are you from, from Africa? And I mean, because they were just baffled by that. And I explained that, you know, you know, the America. America is not just the United States. Most people think of America and they only consider the United States. But you have Central America. You have South America. And I represent North and Central America. And I shared in my presentation to them, after introducing myself in Creole, I shared with them in French the history of Haiti and where I come from and all about who I am. And it was very nerve wracking because I was like, oh my God, I don't feel confident in my French.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:44] But Haitians came from West Africa as well.

LORISTON: [00:29:47] Exactly. And so and I explained that. I said, you know, I don't know exactly where I come from, but in Haiti, we, you know, we gained our independence so early and so many of us were freshly from Africa. We still have a lot of our African roots, but they come from so many different tribes. And I remember even while learning the local languages, it, I remember I wrote it. I still have that journal entry where I talked about how learning their language helped me to better understand my own Creole language.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:25] Interesting.

LORISTON: [00:30:26] It was the most fascinating thing because understanding how contextual theirs were, I was like, oh my God, I understand Haitians better now.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:34] So were the actual words from different? The Creole words were the same as the West African, the Guinean local ones?

LORISTON: [00:30:43] There were some words in the Malinke, which is the language I learned, which is a Mandinka language of the Mali empire, basically, includes the Mandinka language. And Malinke, there were certain words. I was just like, wait a minute, that's the same word in

Creole. And in certain ways, like the sentence structure, for example, in Malinke, when we were in a class learning certain concepts, I was the only one who got it because I was just like, oh my God, Haitians, we, we do this as well. And now I understand why we say things like *fèmen tèt papaw* and we all understand what it means. But other people, if I translate it in English, it doesn't make sense. *Fèmen tèt papaw* in English, um, in Creole means close your dad, I mean, close your dad's head.

LORISTON: [00:31:43] That's the literal translation in English. But the contextual meaning is close the door or close the cabinet door. If you leave a cabinet door open, your mother would say, *fèmen tèt papaw*, and we know that means close the door. So there were certain things in the Malinke language and the way they were explained things, other volunteers they didn't get. I remember one volunteer was saying, this is so dumb, it makes no sense. And I had to turn around and I said, it makes no sense to you because you're, it's all about perception. You have to think in terms of, you just have to think differently. And I got it because.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:26] You grew up with that.

LORISTON: [00:32:27] Yeah. And so I was able to pick up the Mandinka, uh, Malinke language fairly quickly and, uh, it hurts because sometimes I'm like, wow, I don't have that around me every day anymore. I don't want to forget it. So constantly I'm looking at notes that I have on my phone and.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:51] Well, they're probably Guineans here with whom you could speak.

LORISTON: [00:32:54] Oh, yeah, there are. But most of them are from the Fula tribe, which is a different language.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:00] Oh.

LORISTON: [00:33:00] So we had training in four different local languages and some of us had a language that was very small but in the area that they were assigned to. I was assigned into Upper Guinea, which is a predominantly the Mandinka people. The Mandingo is the informal name that we call them here in America. But they're Mandinka and in central part of, uh, of Guinea, which is the Fouta Djallon, that's the Fula tribe. And they speak Pular. And so some people were learning Pular. But all of us had basic training in Susu because when we trained in Conakry, Toumania, and Yorokoguia, that was the Susu tribe, which is actually another sector of the Mali empire. So they're part of the Mandinka family as well, but they speak Susu. So all of us have basic Susu in order for us to survive while we were in our training there. But once we were assigned to our villages, then we learned the language there.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:17] So did people speak French as well?

LORISTON: [00:34:19] Oh yeah, people speak French as well. French is the national language. Some of us were again learning Susu, Pular, Malinke. Some of us were learning Kissi, K-I-S-S-I, and Malinke because they were assigned into the forest region. My group was the first group to have some volunteers in the forest region, which was completely off limits for Peace Corps volunteers because there was still a lot of tension in Liberia and the, uh, that part of Guinea was affected because of what was going on in Liberia.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:58] Yeah.

LORISTON: [00:34:59] And so those two volunteers who were assigned to the forest region, they were actually 2 hours away from my village. I was very close to the forest region. And so Guinea has five natural regions and four, um, I can't remember what it's called, but I'm going to say departments. The five natural regions are the Forest. Upper Guinea. Then you have the Faranah region and you have Basse Côte, which is Lower Guinea where Conakry is. And the Fouta Djallon, which is Middle Guinea. I was in Faranah, which is technically part of the Upper Guinea department of Haute Guinea. So I was in the Faranah region

very close to the Forest. I was maybe about 2 hours from the Sierra Leone border, and I was, I was ten, a ten minute walk away from the Niger River. And that's where we would sometimes go to swim, wash our clothes.

LORISTON: [00:36:09] I even jumped off a cliff at another volunteer's site about, uh, he was about 11. No, Cara was 11 kilometers. So about 20 kilometers from my village towards the actual Faranah center. I would go there sometimes we would meet up with those volunteers of Faranah region. We would, you know, just have a good time together and we one time met up for one of our birthdays and I jumped off a cliff. I climbed up, first of all, the tree vine, climbed up the cliff, followed the kids, and it was maybe about 20 feet high. And I said, oh Lord, I don't know if I can do this. By the way, I'm not a good swimmer at all.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:58] I hope the water was deep.

LORISTON: [00:36:59] It was deep. But luckily, two of the volunteers who served in Faranah with me were also lifeguards. So I was like, great, you guys are lifeguards, you can protect me. Make sure I make it when I get down. It was my very first time ever. In fact, I remember it was in February because it was the same day I also broke my fever. I had a very bad fever that entire week, and I finally broke my fever. Didn't think I was going to be able to meet up with them. And I did. And I was so happy to just jump off that cliff. It took me three tries because I was so nervous and I remember the third try. I said to myself, you know, Charline, you took a chance. You took a risk. You're here in Guinea. Clearly, you're brave enough and you're surviving. Just do it. Just go. And finally I jumped and, uh, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:52] Good. A good memory.

LORISTON: [00:37:53] Very good memory.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:55] So you were in training and then you were assigned?

LORISTON: [00:37:59] That was actually outside of training. I realized that.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:01] No, that was beyond it. But so you were assigned to?

LORISTON: [00:38:05] I was assigned to a village called Lyasando.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:08] Lyasando.

LORISTON: [00:38:09] L-Y-A-S-A-N-D-O.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:13] Lyasando was the name of the village.

LORISTON: [00:38:16] Yes, it was actually Lyasando District, which included several other surrounding villages that were deeper into the forest areas in which my health posts serviced as well.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:28] So were you the only one to assign there?

LORISTON: [00:38:30] Yes, we are the, we are alone in our villages pretty much. And I'm sure you were, you had the same experience. The nearest volunteer to me was 11 kilometers away, and she just moved into that village right before I moved into my village because she changed from education and became a health volunteer instead. So they had to put her in a village that.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:55] So talk a little bit about the village. What was that like?

LORISTON: [00:38:57] Oh God. Lyasando. It was dark. There was pretty much no electricity. But I loved Lyasando. I was, I hardly left my village. It was pretty bad. I hardly left because I loved the community I was with. I adopted a family as my own, um.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:20] What does that mean?

LORISTON: [00:39:22] They became my host family. I said, you're my family. You know, I called Tata. Her name is Aminata, but everyone called her Tata. She was also a *sashwan* in the health post. Basically, she was also a, um, I'm trying to get the translation in my head.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:44] Midwife?

LORISTON: [00:39:45] A midwife. But she was a much older lady and I adopted her family basically because I lived right around them. And literally all of the huts that were around me in the homes were her family and her extended family. It was her, her sister wife. Her son was right next to me. Her sister wife's son was on the other side of me. And their husband's home was right.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:16] Sister wife. What is sister wife?

LORISTON: [00:40:18] There was polygamy. Polygamy is very rich in Guinea. Most families are two up to four wives. And it's funny because the entire time I was there, I only met their husband once. Once. I never saw him in it. Just because I was walking in a street one day and he called me. He says, Thinkari. That's my Malinke, my Mandinka name. And I'll tell you about that in a moment. And I was like, who is this guy? He was like, yeah, I'm Tata's husband and Kolanko's cousin. I mean, husband. And I was like, oh, you know, nice to meet you, Mr. Kamara. It was the first time I met him. But my Susu name when I was in training, I was given, I was named Mabinty Ture. M-A-B.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:15] Wait. M-A-B.

LORISTON: [00:41:18] I-N-T-Y. Ture. The tradition in Guinea is that you are named after someone in the family and I was actually named after my host sister in training, um, and she was my host sister and they named me after her. So when our host mom, her, which is her older sister actually, would call us, she would call her Bintu and call me Binty. So that's how I knew which one she was referring to. So uh.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:59] So you had, just to back up. You had host, you were living with host families in training.

LORISTON: [00:42:06] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:06] And then in the village, you had your, did you have your own hut?

LORISTON: [00:42:09] I had my own hut. I had no host family. All I had was a counterpart who was the, uh, the chief of the health post.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:18] What was your hut like?

LORISTON: [00:42:21] I loved my hut. I can show you a picture later. I referred to it as my studio apartment. It was a round hut, no windows, with thatch roofing. And I had a twin sized bed. A table. Two chairs. Three chairs. I had four chairs. One of them I ended up putting outside so I can put my little stove on so I could cook outdoors. And I had three chairs and that was it. And my mosquito netting. But I bought some paintings from Haiti, so I hung up my paintings from Haiti.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:00] And where, did you have water outside or where was the water?

LORISTON: [00:43:03] Luckily, right in the center of, uh, I want to say it's, I want to call it a cul de sac, but it wasn't really a cul de sac. Maybe about ten feet in front of my hut there was a well. And if I had gone to the main road where most villagers go, they get water in the forage, which is the pump. And I had a pit latrine as my bathroom outdoors. And I was so excited because my village had just built it for me, you know, for my arrival. I was so excited. It was, um. And the reason why that is, is because when I was in training, I was. My sister was surprised I did the Peace Corps because I don't do germs. I don't do dirty bathrooms or anything like that. And if it's icky, I'm uncomfortable. So the pit latrines were always icky to me, but I was so excited.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:04] This cured you of that?

LORISTON: [00:44:06] Well, this cured me of it because my pit latrine wasn't closed, which it was open. So that meant for me, I did not have to worry about roaches gathering and, you know, me just, you know, spider webs or anything like that. And I loved the fact that it was open.

So I took a shower underneath the sun, the stars and the moon, and I got hot water by leaving my bucket outdoors. And so in the evening I had a nice warm shower, or bucket bath, if you will. So I thoroughly enjoyed my red door to open into my latrine. And it was just this open space with a hole on the ground with two cinder blocks so that I can squat down.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:54] So talk a little bit about your job. What did you do?

LORISTON: [00:44:57] I worked in the health post. My job was really to do a lot of health education. So I end up helping the women with breast feeding, teaching them best practices for breastfeeding, teaching them ways to combat malnutrition and other diarrheal diseases in their children as well as their homes, you know, their households.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:22] So you had learned all of that.

LORISTON: [00:45:23] I learned all of that, but I also had a background in all of this too, so it came fairly easy to me. So initially I focused a lot on trying to learn the language because the women unfortunately had very little knowledge of French. Many of the women that I saw were either taken out of school as early as the age of 13 to either marry, to be married off, or to work in the farms to help their families with, you know, the economic reasons. And so I was determined to learn the Mandinka language because I wanted to talk to the women, and so I would use my health post. And he, my counterpart, Karni is his name. He's, I said to him, I need someone else to work with just in case, you know, I want, I want a woman.

LORISTON: [00:46:24] And he helped me find someone who also happened to be at the health post. Her name was Tanen. And, um, and so they helped me out a lot because I wanted to learn the language. I wanted to be able to communicate with the women and really just have a relationship with the women. Early on, I was, I was always just around men because they were the only ones I could communicate with. And I had an, you know, I had one guy tried to trick me into promising to marry and be a good friend to his brother. And I caught him and he

became my least favorite person. Luckily, he wasn't a member of my village, but, um, he, um, he. God.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:26] So as a single woman, did you have a problem?

LORISTON: [00:47:30] People questioned it. But I think because I was also much older than they thought and I knew how to deal with that type of attitude. I didn't tolerate many things. I earned respect very early, very, very early.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:46] Do you think that was because you're Black?

LORISTON: [00:47:51] I think my brutal honesty about my position as an individual living in America, being of an immigrant family, obviously, because of, you know, the differences in race, I helped them to better understand. Listen, I'm more like you than you think. And I was very honest with them about everything. We, there was at one point, for goodness sake, that they didn't quite understand what I was talking about in terms of the history of America and why I didn't know where in Africa I came from. And I shared with them Haitian history. They were very, they were very attentive. And I remember one night, you know, someone was like, they don't understand. And I said, you know what? I had my hard drive and I had the Roots. The whole entire Roots collection.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:51] Ah.

LORISTON: [00:48:51] And I said, okay. It was all in English, but I said to them, I can explain to you what was happening, but I'm going to play this. And it turned into a nightly thing. And the crowds just grew more and more and more, and we would have discussions late at night.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:06] Wow.

LORISTON: [00:49:06] I remember one time it was 3:00 in the morning and we were all sitting in my host brother's boutique and there were all these teenagers and people we would, they were asking questions. They were, they were very, they understood what was happening. And every

night it was like, Charlaine, are we going to watch the next one? And one night when we ended at 3:00 in the morning is because they wanted to keep going. They wanted to keep going. And my host brother had to keep buying gas to put in a generator, so we could continue to watch it.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:41] So you showed it on your computer?

LORISTON: [00:49:42] No, uh, he had like this little DVD player device and I had it on a USB and I was able to, we were able to play it that way. At that time, I wasn't comfortable with showing that I had a computer out yet. And in fact, at that time I hadn't even pulled out my own computer. It took me about three months to finally say, wait, Charlaine, you have a computer, pull it out, maybe watch a movie one day. It took me a long time because I was always out in my community.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:10] So your language was really good by that time.

LORISTON: [00:50:13] It was better, a lot better. And I asked a lot of questions and I remember that. I remember the very first time I said something to my host mother, I was like, okay, I'm going to try. And hopefully she understands me. And I said, *akine*. And she said, *akine*. That means good, because she understood me. And I was so excited because I was like, oh my God, I can talk to ladies now and they can kind of understand what I'm getting at because I studied.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:41] Well, you must have been their age as well. Or maybe you were older. You were older?

LORISTON: [00:50:45] Probably. Maybe, you know.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:47] How old were you?

LORISTON: [00:50:48] I'm 33. Now.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:50] Oh, so you were 30.

LORISTON: [00:50:50] I turned, I turned 32 while I was in country.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:57] So you were older than a lot of them?

LORISTON: [00:50:59] A lot of the volunteers?

GANZGLASS: [00:51:01] No, I meant the women in the village.

LORISTON: [00:51:03] Yes and no. Like Tata was probably in her sixties or seventies. And Aiya, she was pregnant when I first met her. And I don't know quite, I'm not quite sure what her age is. Her husband seems super old to me, which is, um, I called him my host brother because that was Tata's son. But she seemed very young. She seemed to me like she could have been maybe 26 or 27. For me to him, I think he appeared to be maybe in his forties. He was a much older guy, and her two boys were my babies. Hey, um, Randy, do you mind passing, bringing my phone for me, please? It's on the table.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:56] Well, we'll show it. Show it to me after.

LORISTON: [00:51:58] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:59] After that.

LORISTON: [00:52:01] Her sons were my babies. They were my heartthrobs.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:05] That's great. How old were they?

LORISTON: [00:52:07] Mamadid, which is short for Muhammad, he was five years old. And Tonto, that was his little name, but his real name is Faculty. And Tonto was two years old at the time.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:24] Ah, very cute.

LORISTON: [00:52:24] They became men on that day. They were circumcised that day, they became men. I was gone by the time I got that picture. In

fact, today I was going to call my village because it's market day and I knew I could reach everyone in one place so.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:38] So, do you continue to talk to them?

LORISTON: [00:52:41] Oh yeah. They reach out to me and. Oh yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:44] So people have cell phones in the town?

LORISTON: [00:52:47] They have cell phones. Everything was like a prepaid service. You had to buy credit in order to communicate but.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:58] How big is the village you were in?

LORISTON: [00:53:00] 2,700 people. But just because we had cell phones doesn't mean we had great service. It was horrible. I hardly used because the service was so bad.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:13] So you clearly had an impact in explaining the United States to them.

LORISTON: [00:53:18] Oh, absolutely.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:20] Do you think you had an impact on the health issues?

LORISTON: [00:53:24] Um, yes. But to an extent. I think because of the fact that I didn't force anything. I did a lot of observing and lots of asking questions. And, you know, if there was something that was wrong, I would fix it right then and there. I remember one time this woman, she was breastfeeding her, she had twins and her, the boy was very well nourished. And the young, I mean the girl, she was extremely small and she was crying. But she was only breastfeeding the boy. And I remember it was bothering me so much that and I got up and I said, okay, I don't know the language, but I'm gonna show her a position so that she can breastfeed them both at the same time. So that the young girl could get something too, to not prioritize just the boy.

LORISTON: [00:54:15] And I noticed that even when I was in training the way food was distributed in my host family. I remember my mom bought a big loaf of bread. The husband got about half. The young boys got about, you know, maybe 20 percent each. And the young girl got a little piece like that. I couldn't believe it. I was like, wow. Is this how we do it? You know, the boys are prioritized. It blew me away. So for me, when I saw that with the babies, I didn't like it. And so immediately she was just like amazed and shocked and the baby was better. And I said, you know, just at the same time.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:57] And her values were to nourish the boy.

LORISTON: [00:55:02] I cannot. That was my assumption based on my observation. But I cannot say for sure if that's where her values were. But based on what I saw, and the girl was just, she was just crying hysterically. She really needed food. But only the boy was being fed at the time. And so I did what I had to do to show her there's a way you can still get both of them and you're not going to run out of milk. As long as you're breastfeeding, your body will make more. You will be able to support those two babies.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:42] So did you get to travel in Guinea at all?

LORISTON: [00:55:46] I didn't. My first time going to travel and actually leaving my region was when I had the accident.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:54] So talk a little bit about what happened.

LORISTON: [00:55:57] Um, it was. It had taken me a long time to finally get something going in my village. And finally I got support for building a community garden and teaching perma gardening techniques. Even though I wasn't an agroforestry volunteer, I made sure I got the training that I needed in that. Because as someone in the health background, I know how important agriculture is to.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:27] And what did you call it, perma garden?

LORISTON: [00:56:29] Perma gardening.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:30] What is perma gardening?

LORISTON: [00:56:31] It's basically a technique that teaches how to max, um, use a small space and use it efficiently with gardening. It's more of a permanent practice in which the way you build beds. So there's a lot of reintroduction of nutrients into the soil, double digging, etcetera, and diverse, um, diversity in terms of the crops that you're planting on one bed. And this was especially something I wanted to show so that the women can have their own personal plots to be able to improve on what they're feeding themselves. I wanted to really promote garden to table practices and really show them ways on how to utilize the foods that they are already accustomed to and teach them different ways to prepare them in order to increase the nutritional quality. How to really use what was available to them.

LORISTON: [00:57:41] For example, I remember one time I interviewed a woman who told me that the powdered formula that were imported would help her baby get stronger than her own breast milk. And that was a misconception. And I'm thinking to myself, who caused this? Because someone came in to teach these people this. And this is why, you know, they think that these imported chemicals are better for them than what's available to them in their own soil.

GANZGLASS: [00:58:18] Yeah.

LORISTON: [00:58:18] And so I finally got the school principal, the students, everyone was super excited because I was also going to do a school garden program and teach basic nutrition to the kids, you know, through this gardening program. And they were so excited. And so the day I finally got to, um, I had been working for about two weeks on clearing the grounds. It was a bad area full of trash and, you know, just high grass. And I finally got it cleared and I worked every morning with the *dapo*, which is like, I'd have to draw it to explain to you what it is. I don't even know.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:02] A hoe, I guess?

LORISTON: [00:59:03] I guess, you know, and I would, you know, remove the weeds. It was just a lot of work. And then that Sunday, July 2nd, was the day I finally finished. You know, we finished putting up the fencing so that the livestock won't bother the beds that I was planning to build upon my return. And because I had worked on that garden all morning, it was the first Sunday I actually decided to not be in church. They knew that that was my personal day as the Christian that was there. That was my way to get them to understand I needed a day to myself.

GANZGLASS: [00:59:49] What religion were they?

LORISTON: [00:59:52] Muslim. And I don't follow a particular religion, but it was the only way for them. Because if I said I was Muslim, they would have expected me to go to the mosque. And, uh, and so I used Christianity to get a Sunday to myself. And I started that probably around May because I was out before every single day because my health post is open every single day. And then later on I was like, I need to make sure I do for myself too, because I didn't want it to become an expectation that I was going to be there seven days a week and never.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:31] Yeah.

LORISTON: [01:00:31] Do for myself as well. So. I took Sunday for myself, but that was the first Sunday since then that I got up early. And I started working on the garden before my other volunteers came to help me. And it was around 2:00 when I was like, holy crap, I didn't realize all this time had passed. And I said, I have to go. And I went to my hut. I cleaned up my hut, washed up, ate my breakfast finally, which is pretty bad. But ate my breakfast, then packed up my items and I told my kids, *indena juma*, which translates into, I'll be back Friday. And, um, I went to the main road. Normally, I always stop at my health post if I'm leaving the village to go to Faranah or to go buy groceries or something like that, or to run an errand, go to the, you know, the Department of Public Health or to get like a print job done, which was 35 kilometers from me.

LORISTON: [01:01:49] And that's also where I was going to meet up with the other volunteers in the Faranah region so we can secure a vehicle to travel together to the Fouta region. I was going to the Pular part of Guinea and we were going to celebrate the 4th together with other volunteers that are in that region that we haven't seen in months, and some of them almost a year, because there were other volunteers that I was with that were. Actually I was the only volunteer of my group that's in that region. And so I made very good friends with the other volunteers. And so I didn't stop at my health post like I normally do, and I just stayed on the side of the road and waited for a vehicle because it had already been pretty late. I never leave my village that late. It was around 5:00 p.m. I normally always leave in the morning and I'm back no later than 6:00 p.m., depending on when I can secure a vehicle.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:54] And securing a vehicle means just any car driving along?

LORISTON: [01:02:57] Yes, hitchhiking, basically. And but when I'm in Faranah, there's a *galawatu*, which is pretty much like the garage where you can get different taxis. And so it's easier to get a cab there, but you have to wait until that taxi fills up. And sometimes that's a 6 to 7 hour wait.

GANZGLASS: [01:03:17] Yeah.

LORISTON: [01:03:17] So I would just listen to an audiobook or read a book or just observe people, observe my surroundings. That was, it was always. I don't know, I would just watch people for hours and it was nothing. Or I would just watch the kids or watch the animals and. It was surreal, I guess you can say. And that day I got into the first available vehicle. It was also the first time I ever got into a van taxi.

GANZGLASS: [01:03:52] Oh, it was a taxi?

LORISTON: [01:03:52] It was actually a taxi and it was a van. They had a room for one more. And I got in. And I remember when we, about when we were about 11 kilometers past my village. And the only reason I knew that is because the big fromager tree, which is a huge tree, they're

super old. Some people say they're as old as about 6000 years. Huge. But this tree is how I know how to get to Kara's village. In fact, a story about these trees.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:37] What are they called?

LORISTON: [01:04:38] Fromageur [fromager]. F-R-O-M-A.

GANZGLASS: [01:04:46] F-R-O-M.

LORISTON: [01:04:46] M-A-G-E-U-R. Every new village that was, I guess, created or established. That's how you knew a village was in that town, because every new village.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:00] Had a tree.

LORISTON: [01:05:00] Had that tree, and that tree was planted to establish that village. And so that's, that's what I learned. And I was like, wow, every village has it. And so the historian of the village can tell you about who founded the village. And it was very fascinating. And everything is oral history. So it was very fascinating. And I loved sitting and learning.

GANZGLASS: [01:05:24] Mm hmm.

LORISTON: [01:05:25] It was just, I loved it. Anyway. I got into that cab and when I got to that fromager that marks where Kara's village is, where you turn to go to her village. I remember looking up at driver and I remember looking at the wheel and I'm like, wow, the alignment of this wheel is very off. This is very dangerous. This is not good, you know. And I kid you not, 15 minutes later, there was a scream. I looked up from my phone and I said, holy crap. And I thought I put my phone in my bag. I had two phones. I had my satellite phone an iPhone very similar to this, because it was the only way I could use the internet to do research. And, um. And, um. Next thing I know, we were rolling over and.

GANZGLASS: [01:06:20] So did somebody hit?

LORISTON: [01:06:21] No one hit us. It was a tire that blew out.

GANZGLASS: [01:06:25] Oh, a tire blew out.

LORISTON: [01:06:26] A tire blew out. And because the vehicle was too heavy, the car, the driver couldn't control the vehicle. And we ended up flipping over and rolled into the forested side. Thank God it was the forested side of the road. Um, and eventually we, um, collided with a tree. Um, and some of us were ejected from the vehicle. Some of us were thrown from the top of the vehicle to the other side of the tree. Those that were in the front seat of that, um. They didn't make it. We lost three people in this crash. And, um. And I was partially ejected from the vehicle and hanging, hanging from the vehicle like this, basically, that's my feet. And the rest of my body is on the ground and my ankles were pinned inside of the vehicle. And, um.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:35] I mean, were there people around to come, to help?

LORISTON: [01:07:38] Luckily, there were other vehicles on the road who saw what had happened, and they immediately came to help. And I remember, because I had my satellite phone, I remember my bookbag was still in my possession because I held on to it tightly and closed my eyes and just made my body limp as soon as I saw what was happening. And I was like, just stay calm. Let's hope for the best. And I remember after impact, I thought I was okay. I felt no pain whatsoever. And I was like, okay, I'm all right. I looked around and observing what's happening, ears just ringing. And the woman next to me just looked so confused because she was sitting to the right of me. But we were ejected and she was sitting now on top of the car door.

GANZGLASS: [01:08:26] Wow.

LORISTON: [01:08:26] And I'm, you know, laying on top of the car door because I hit, um, my right side. And the women, the woman and the young man that was sitting to the left of me, they were pinned down from their backs inside of the vehicle screaming. And I was just pinned down by

the ankles. So I lucked out in that regard because I was thrown out of the vehicle. And, um. Mm hmm. I just remember feeling nothing, and I thought I was okay. I went in my bookbag, grabbed my satellite phone, called the very first volunteer, Sam. And it was with him I was going to stay with until the other volunteers and I met up that very following morning. It's difficult for me to get a car out of my village, so I needed to leave a day early. And um, and um, he didn't respond.

LORISTON: [01:09:24] And I knew at the time he had a meeting with his boss with, um, with USAID. Um. And so he was a Response volunteer who had COSed [close of service] a few months prior. But he came back to Guinea because USAID hired him and they wanted him to continue the project he was doing in Guinea. So he came back. So I was happy that he was there, but he didn't pick up. So I called the next person in line that I knew was already in the lower part of Faranah that I was meeting with. It was Colin. And I called Colin. I said, Colin, I was just in a motor vehicle accident. I'm 5 minutes outside of Timbo on the way to Faranah. Come get me quick. And then my phone was snatched out of my hands by one of those bystanders who came to help. And he said, get off your phone. Why are you on your phone? And I was like, I need my phone, give me back my phone. And they tried to pull me out of the car, but I was pinned down and I said, no, no, no, don't move me. And, um, and I found myself giving instructions, you know, move this.

GANZGLASS: [01:10:38] But you were conscious though, which is great.

LORISTON: [01:10:40] I didn't lose my, um, I didn't lose consciousness. Um, in fact, none of us lost consciousness, obviously, except for those who lost their lives. And everyone was awake. And I just remember there was screaming and it was just all of this fluid falling on me. I never looked over, which is so funny now that I think of it. I never looked over to see what was actually falling on me. Um.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:07] Was it people's blood?

LORISTON: [01:11:09] That's what I assumed, because I felt no pain. And the thing is, I remember looking at. I remember in my mind, I was like, oh, it was

just a woman on top of me. She was bleeding. Because now the people that were sitting next to me were now on top of me, along with the chair that we sat on that pinned me down along with hundreds and hundreds of pounds of okra sacks. So I had all of that on my ankles. And, uh, and I remember making the note that, oh, it's coming from her. I'm okay. Let's just remain calm. Just focus on my breathing. I just said to myself, just breathe. You're okay. And I remember looking at her and I said to her in French, Madame, calm down, calm down. This was before the men tried to pull us out. And it was at that moment I realized, holy crap, I can't speak to her. She doesn't understand French. And I had no idea how to say those words in the language.

GANZGLASS: [01:12:10] Yeah.

LORISTON: [01:12:11] And so. Eventually I was pulled out of the vehicle after I gave all the instructions on how to get everyone out safely. I was carried to the side of the road and they tried to get me to lay down and I just kept getting up. They're like, no, you need to lay down. I kept getting up and I was just like, I'm okay, I just need to focus on my breathing. Then, I mean, I kept asking for my phone and the guy was like, you don't need your phone. Let's focus on your da-da-da, you know? And it was at that moment I realized they're not going to listen to me. And so I had to tell him, *je suis un américain avec le Corps de la Paix*. And from that moment, everything changed. I'm an American with the Peace Corps.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:06] And then what happened?

LORISTON: [01:13:08] Then they started paying attention to what I needed. Eventually another car came by trying to assist and they emptied their car. And then they lifted me. Everyone else was still on the side of the road. They lifted me, put me in the back of the car. And then by that time, I saw three white people running my way. And I'm like this.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:31] And they were the volunteers?

LORISTON: [01:13:34] They were the volunteers that I had called. They were the ones I was supposed to meet up with the next day because Colin, just like me, he has a difficult time finding vehicles out of his village. So he also came the day before, which is what I was trying to do. And, and. And I went like this. This in Guinea means come here. We do here, but they do this. That means come here. And it was so funny because it just was instinctive for me to do like. And so the Guinean people saw that and they saw the white people running my way. They were just like, oh, she wasn't lying. She's an American. I had been mistaken as a Guinean so many times. My phone assigned to me by Peace Corps was disconnected several times because they kept saying, my ID doesn't match my, uh, I guess the identification didn't match because they kept putting that I was Guinean.

GANZGLASS: [01:14:34] Guinean.

LORISTON: [01:14:34] It was hilarious. I didn't, I didn't, I wasn't offended by it. I was just happy I fit in. It felt good to fit in. It felt good to not feel, I guess, in an odd situation. Because everywhere I looked, everyone looked like me. Yeah. But when Colin arrived, he was just like, you need to go to the hospital. And I was like, I know. Don't worry, I'm okay. Go get my bag. Get my phone from that guy's hand. He has my phone. Go get my suitcase. Go get my bag. Go get all of that from over there. He was like, you need to go. You need to go. I was like, I'm okay, Colin, just do that for me. And eventually I was on my way to the hospital.

GANZGLASS: [01:15:21] Where was the hospital, nearby?

LORISTON: [01:15:23] It was a rural hospital, not really equipped to handle, um, what had happened. But it was, I was about 5 minutes away from where I was getting off. I was very close to where I was getting off, and Faranah was where the hospital. In the Faranah center, sorry, not the region but the center of Faranah. And so they took me there and immediately I was held down. And then by this time, Sam had gotten the call from Colin and rushed to the hospital. And he, they actually closed down the hospital. And Sam had to fight his way to get in because they didn't believe he was American. He's also black. And

one of those volunteers, the white volunteers, had to come out and say, no, he's with us, because they would not let him in. And he kept saying, no, no, no, I'm an American. And they would not let him in.

LORISTON: [01:15:23] And, um, when Sam came in, I remember when I saw him in September, he said to me that Kara first stopped him and he said and she said, it's not good. Brace yourself. Now, during this time, on my mind I'm still thinking I was okay.

GANZGLASS: [01:16:50] You're fine.

LORISTON: [01:16:50] Yeah, I didn't feel anything. Hmm. And then when Sam got in the room, he ended up being behind me on the bed, and he said, Shasha, you kind of have to unwrap your hair, okay? Because everyone knew my hair was always covered. And he said, I'm going to have to remove your head wrap. And I was like, okay, whatever. And Colin's holding my hand. It's going to be fine, Shasha, you're going to be fine. And, you know, and I remember getting so annoyed by him, just, you know, everything's going to be okay, Shasha. I could see the panic in his face. But for me, I'm like, Colin, I'm okay. Relax. And so I remember making a comment to him and I said. First of all, I made an internal note to myself, Charlene, don't curse him out, don't offend him. Just be calm and say this as nicely as you possibly can, because he was annoying. And I looked at Colin, I said, Colin, sweetie, calm down. I'm okay, but you need to stop that shit.

LORISTON: [01:17:49] And I remember men holding down my legs. Colin holding on to my hands. Another one holding my chest down. Sam holding my neck and chin from behind. And suddenly all the pain came. They had to sew my head back together because I had a degloving injury where you could see my skull. And this was recently operated on, but it came all the way back here. They had to shave my head, pull my scalp forward. You could see here this is part of my scalp because it's so dark. They pulled my scalp forward and sutured me up with silk.

GANZGLASS: [01:18:39] They could do this in this little hospital?

LORISTON: [01:18:41] That's all they can do. And they did it with silk without anesthesia, because without that, I would have bled out. So all that liquid I felt.

GANZGLASS: [01:18:50] Was you.

LORISTON: [01:18:50] Was my head. And I don't know, maybe it was my mind that, that protected me from looking over to see it was blood. But I never looked over to see what was falling on me. And even though I saw the woman and noticed that she wasn't bleeding on me, my mind still registered.

GANZGLASS: [01:19:11] Which is great.

LORISTON: [01:19:12] That it came from someone else. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:19:16] So what happened then?

LORISTON: [01:19:19] Then they couldn't do anything for me. But while I was there, I remember saying.

GANZGLASS: [01:19:24] Why did the pain start then?

LORISTON: [01:19:28] Because that's when they were suturing me up.

GANZGLASS: [01:19:29] Oh.

LORISTON: [01:19:30] Without anesthesia.

GANZGLASS: [01:19:30] Oh.

LORISTON: [01:19:32] Yeah. That's when I finally was like, holy crap, what is going on? And even during that time, it didn't dawn on me or register to me what had happened. I literally learned truly what kind of head injury I had in November. That's four months later. It still didn't register. You know, I saw the wounds and it didn't register. But when I was in the hospital, I remember.

GANZGLASS: [01:20:04] So you stayed in this little hospital?

LORISTON: [01:20:06] I stayed in this hospital. But while I was there getting sutured up, Kara was making phone calls and Luke was making phone calls to the Peace Corps. I remember seeing Luke taking pictures. I guess they told him to take pictures. I remember telling them, call safety and security. Call this. And they were like, Shasha, don't worry about it. We got it. We're going to take care of you. But I was just like giving instructions. I'm like, you guys, I'm okay. Just make sure you do this. Call my counterpart. Do this and do that. And the Peace Corps told them, the medical officer there, he told them, put me in a taxicab to send me to Conakry. And if it had not been for them fighting and telling them, absolutely not.

LORISTON: [01:20:53] Because at least from my village to Faranah, the roads are smooth. I had no bad road that I was dealing with. But from Faranah to Conakry, that would have been an 8 to 10 hour drive on very bumpy bad roads. And he wanted me to get in a cab. And it had not been for those volunteers, the following morning I would not have been airlifted into Conakry.

GANZGLASS: [01:21:20] So they sent a plane? Or a helicopter?

LORISTON: [01:21:22] They found a company that had a plane that was willing to come into the Faranah airport that had been shut down ever since, um, Guinea. I think I want to say it had been shut down since Guinea gained their independence from France. Um, about 60 years ago. So France took all of the planes, all of the trains. They took everything. So they had this airport that was not being used. And so eventually that's where I was airlifted from. And I remember, um, when I was. They, they called for an ambulance from Kissidougou, which is in the forest area and that, that by the following morning that ambulance arrived to get me, to bring me to this airport. And those volunteers all met up with me. They did what they're not supposed to do. They all got on motorcycles.

LORISTON: [01:22:23] Because they followed me there and when the medical officer got out of that plane and he saw me, you know what he said? Oh, you guys, you guys were right. This is serious. I could not feel my legs. I had extreme pain in the neck, the degloving injury. There was so many things. I broke my jaw. None of this is my teeth. This is all temporary cemented until I can get teeth. None of this.

GANZGLASS: [01:23:01] Hmm.

LORISTON: [01:23:02] And I got into that plane and from then. Things started to finally be exposed to me in terms of what happened or, you know, I had many images. And some volunteers that happened to be in Conakry for the STEAM camp, which is for science and technology and engineering. They were the education volunteers, Lisa Einstein and, uh, and Josh. I can never remember his last name. They stayed with me at the hospital. And these were volunteers I'd never met, but they stayed with me at that hospital when I got to Conakry overnight, they stayed with me. And it was when I finally got to the hospital, I finally got antibiotics, I finally got pain relievers. I finally got images.

LORISTON: [01:24:06] I had on the same bloody, dirty clothes for three days. And I kept begging for someone to wash me. But the men nurse, they felt uncomfortable because that's, they can't do that. They can't touch women like that. And eventually the safety and security manager and the PCMO, the medical officer, the female who's the local person, the host country national, they came in. They washed me. And then I had the same disgusting things on.

GANZGLASS: [01:24:39] So. So you were in the hospital in Conakry for a month?

LORISTON: [01:24:43] Three days.

GANZGLASS: [01:24:43] Three days, and then you were evacuated out?

LORISTON: [01:24:46] And then I had to, I couldn't walk and because I couldn't feel my legs. And then they said, you know, at first I was supposed to go to Morocco, but then Peace Corps at the last minute, they said, we're not

going to send her to Morocco. She needs to go home because if she goes to Morocco, she's going to be there for a very long time. And sure enough, you know. I had to prove to, I don't know who it is with the airlines and the airport, but they would not have allowed me on the plane if I could not walk at all. And so the PCMO, the female PCMO, Missy Vaughn. She was not the idiot who said, put me in a cab. It was the American doctor who said that. Missy Vaughn, you know, she worked with me. I held on to her and.

GANZGLASS: [01:25:50] So you had to fly on a commercial flight?

LORISTON: [01:25:53] Mm hmm.

GANZGLASS: [01:25:53] In a seat?

LORISTON: [01:25:54] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [01:25:55] They didn't air evac you out in a?

LORISTON: [01:25:57] That was my air evacuation. And luckily, Peace Corps put me in first class so that I can actually lay down. And but they put the nurse in, um, in economy. So the flight attendant had to several times go and get her to assist me while I was on that flight. It was a 28 hour to 38 hour trip. We had several stopovers as well. Um.

GANZGLASS: [01:26:33] But the same, same plane?

LORISTON: [01:26:36] No.

GANZGLASS: [01:26:36] You had to change.

LORISTON: [01:26:37] I had to change planes, I think once, I believe, so. I just remember I had to get in a wheelchair and but at least I had to prove that I could at least climb the stairs into the plane and get to my seat because the wheelchairs can't go in the aisles. So I had to be able to prove that. And so before they can clear me for the flight, we had, they had to get me from the hospital, put me in a Peace Corps truck. And

with the nurse, we drove to this airline personnel. They came to examine me. And then I had to show them that I can at least walk and look, like I said, I've been working with that nurse trying to, you know, get a few steps. And she said, just hold on to me. And so to get to my seat, I had to hold on to her. Um.

LORISTON: [01:27:36] And when he gave me the clearance, that same day I was discharged from the hospital, given all of my medical equipment and additional medicines that I can have while I'm on my flight, and I was on the way to the U.S. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:28:02] And to the U.S. where?

LORISTON: [01:28:05] Um, I was taken to my home of record in South Florida. And I arrived at the Fort Lauderdale airport. And I arrived to the Fort Lauderdale airport where my mom saw, met up with me, and she was hysterical. I was like, calm down. I'm here. And my brother saw me and he was just like, what the hell? You said it wasn't serious. My first time seeing myself in the mirror was when I was in one of the legs of the flight, and I went to use the restroom and I looked in the mirror. I didn't even recognize my own face. I was shocked. And I was like, holy crap. I saw my mouth. My head was wrapped up, my face was extremely swollen. And I was, I, I was shocked. I was like, wow.

LORISTON: [01:29:05] But I got to the hospital in Fort Lauderdale. They immediately admitted me. And from then on, my nightmare began. Um. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:29:22] And your nightmare is rehab, you mean?

LORISTON: [01:29:27] Um, negligent care. Um, inadequate care.

GANZGLASS: [01:29:34] Overseas or here?

LORISTON: [01:29:34] Delayed care. You know what? Compared to what I had overseas, I almost wish that I could have just been treated in Guinea because they treated me with respect and they did everything they

possibly could. But when I got here, I spent five days in that hospital. That first night they said to me. They did, the first exam they did was the CT scan, and they said, you have foreign fragments in your chin. That's what this scar is here. And in your head. We're going to have to perform surgery to remove the foreign bodies from your head. Five days later, I was prematurely discharged from the hospital. They claimed I walked out without a need for physical therapy. They never performed that surgery in the entire time I was in the hospital. I kept complaining of the fact that my arm was hurting, that it was difficult to lift my arm, and they completely ignored it.

LORISTON: [01:30:38] And it was, it was just a lot. And when, after I was discharged, I was specifically told by the social worker they would not discharge me until my bedside commode, my shower chair, and my walker were delivered to my home. I got so frustrated in the hospital because I kept verifying that the stuff didn't get to the home, my house, but the nurses kept coming into my room. Where is your family? Are they not eager to get you yet? They literally were rushing me out of the hospital. And you need to, you need to leave. We need the bed. And eventually my uncle finally came to pick me up, and I had opted to stay with my aunt because she had more room to, for me, you know, with the walker and stuff instead of my mom's house.

LORISTON: [01:31:33] And I wanted to be somewhere where it was quiet because my mom has my grandmother who's dealing with Alzheimer's and dementia and my alcoholic uncle and I just could not be in that environment. I needed to be somewhere else. So I went to her sister's, and but I had to go to my mom's house first because my sister was still, I mean, her sister was still at work. And when I finally got to her home later, when she got home, I had no, none of my medical equipment as I was promised. And I called the company and said, where are you? They said, we'll be there by 9:00 p.m. They never arrived. I called at midnight. They said, we don't have an order here for you. And I'm like, what do you mean? I spoke to someone that confirmed it was there. So there was a lot of back and forth and phone calls, emailing the Peace Corps here to let them know what's going on, emailing the social worker.

LORISTON: [01:32:27] Eventually, I sent an email to the social worker at the hospital about what had happened, because my aunt, you know, at the time she was dealing with a herniated disk, so she couldn't help me get out of bed to use the restroom. You know, it was the most difficult thing, and I had none of the equipment that I needed.

GANZGLASS: [01:32:47] They should have put you in a nursing home, in a rehab home. Okay, so then what?

LORISTON: [01:32:54] After that, I found myself every day making phone calls, trying to get doctor's appointments. I couldn't get into a neurologist, you know, I had finally gained sensation back in my right leg by then, but my left leg had decreased sensation. And I had obviously the issues in my head and neck. I couldn't get into a neurologist. You know, I had my, I was asking.

GANZGLASS: [01:33:26] And why is that?

LORISTON: [01:33:27] Because every phone call that I made, you know, they didn't have availability. And I kept telling them about the emergent situation, but they were just like, we don't have any availability. We can see you in December. We can see you in September. It was just so delayed. Then when I got the oral maxillofacial surgeon, every time I went, they were just like, okay, come back, come back, come back. And so nothing was ever done with my mouth. And I went to my own personal dentist who gave Peace Corps a plan for me, and Peace Corps didn't agree with that plan because, you know, he's not an oral surgeon. He's a cosmetic dentist and family dentist. And then there was, you know, all of the other specialties that I needed to see. Orthopedics. I could not, because the hospital never checked what was going on with my arm, I could never get into orthopedics.

LORISTON: [01:34:27] There was only one thing I was finally able to do on my own. I found a primary care doctor and I went to that doctor and I explained to them my situation and I asked them, I said, can you please give me a referral for physical therapy? Because the hospital when I called the

social worker, she confirmed that the hospital claimed that I did not need physical therapy. And so my primary care doctor gave me a physical therapy referral. And eventually my brother, he referred me to the place where he had physical therapy when he got into an accident, and I was able to start physical therapy with them. And they are the ones who helped me, you know, regain my strength from the walker. And eventually I was able to get off of the walker, by the time I finally got a walker. But that was the only thing I was doing, physical therapy.

LORISTON: [01:35:22] But they couldn't do much with the arm because we had no idea what was going on with the arm. They only had information about the rest of my injuries. And eventually when I finally got a neurologist, that neurologist confirmed that I had a hematoma in my head and a concussion, and she suggested for me to get an EMG to see if I had nerve damage. You can see here, this is where I was pinned down. And so I set an appointment for the following week for that. And three days before the appointment I get a phone call and they leave me a voicemail and they said, we can't do your EMG. We only saw you as a courtesy to the hospital, so we're going to have to cancel your appointment. So I call it Peace Corps and I'm like, this is what's happening.

LORISTON: [01:36:17] And by then the nurse that I was working with, she said, you know what? Pack your bags. And Peace Corps transferred my case to D.C., because I was in Florida for 40 days out of my 45 days of medevac and nothing was done. Nothing.

GANZGLASS: [01:36:36] Horrible.

LORISTON: [01:36:37] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:36:37] So then you came here and treatment actually started?

LORISTON: [01:36:40] And treatment actually started. And that's when I finally got a better idea of what my injuries were. That's when I finally, you know, had the bone graft put into my mouth because of the broken bone. I had the teeth extracted. I had, you know, the root canals for the other

areas that were affected. I finally got an imaging done in my shoulder that verified that I actually had a torn rotator cuff. I mean, there were so many things that finally happened as soon as I got to D.C.

GANZGLASS: [01:37:13] And where did you go?

LORISTON: [01:37:15] I was, um, I was in, um, I. Most of my services were with GW [George Washington University]. With GW. I was all around the Foggy Bottom area. All of my doctors were in Foggy Bottom and um.

GANZGLASS: [01:37:32] And you're still going through that now?

LORISTON: [01:37:34] I go to doctors every day. After I see you, I have another doctor's appointment. Until this day, every single day, I have over 15 different diagnoses.

GANZGLASS: [01:37:44] But at least you're getting treatment now.

LORISTON: [01:37:46] I'm getting treatment, but I also have a lot of headaches that I'm dealing with because ever since I was separated officially from the Peace Corps, I was on medevac because my case was so severe. Four months I was on evacuation status. That's why even though I left the country and I arrived in the U.S. by July 6th, I wasn't officially separated from the Corps on the 14th of November. So during that time, you know, I developed things like anxiety. I developed insomnia. I mean, so many things happened because it was just a lot. It was so much, so much. I got verification that I definitely did damage a nerve. My knee was impacted, my hip was impacted, my neck, my mouth, my shoulder, you know, my head.

LORISTON: [01:38:47] I mean, there were so many things happening, like me walking into traffic and not even noticing. There were things like I was getting lost in a train system. It was, it was literally, you know, losing train of, I mean, losing train of thought, losing my words, completely blacking out.

GANZGLASS: [01:39:09] But you don't have any of that now. I mean, you don't seem to.

LORISTON: [01:39:12] It's, it's better. It's better. I still have issues in terms of, um, memory and things like. But it's nowhere as bad as it was in the beginning. And.

GANZGLASS: [01:39:29] Wow.

LORISTON: [01:39:32] I missed the best part of my service. I want to go back, but I really want to go back so bad.

GANZGLASS: [01:39:41] Well, first you have to get well. First you have to get well and then.

LORISTON: [01:39:44] I know.

GANZGLASS: [01:39:46] So let's hope it's soon.

LORISTON: [01:39:51] A year has gone by since I've been in D.C. I arrived August 13th and it's been a year since I've been in D.C.

GANZGLASS: [01:39:59] And how are you being supported?

LORISTON: [01:40:02] Um.

GANZGLASS: [01:40:04] Is a Peace Corps paying?

LORISTON: [01:40:05] I, after I was medically separated, my case transferred over to the Department of Labor. And so now I am under worker's comp for federal employees and I qualified for disability and, um, and this is disability payment through that FICA, which is the federal employees thing and um. So that's how I support myself and I've been very fortunate. When I was first medically separated, I had already made a decision to stay here because the doctors here were already familiar with my case. Obviously, I don't know anyone here. My family is in Florida. And I had secured a place to stay.

LORISTON: [01:40:59] And then at the last minute, that person, who also was a former Peace Corps volunteer, got a job in Jordan and decided that she no longer wanted to rent a room. And so, um, and I had savings at that time, so I knew I was going to use my savings to just rent a room while I get medical care. And when she did that, I had no place to live. And when Peace Corps separated me, I was just like, what am I going to do? I remember finally breaking the news down to a volunteer in Guinea who really was my support system, my only support system, who can understand what I was going through. And she sent a text message to another education volunteer, unbeknownst to me. And then she told me, hey, Amanda's going to send you a Facebook message. Her mom said that you can stay with them.

LORISTON: [01:42:04] And that's how I ended up in Reston. That volunteer's mother opened her home to me. And from there, I stayed there up until June. And it was at that time, my medical situation had gotten to a point where I needed more support. And Randy and Mary Jo [Adams] offered their home to me so that I can focus on my, um, my health, but also have the support that I really needed for my mental.

GANZGLASS: [01:42:40] Mm hmm.

LORISTON: [01:42:40] Um, my mental state as well. Um, and I'm very happy and fortunate for that because then the other place that I was in, I was home alone a lot. And after I finally had the surgery a year later to remove the fragments out of my head, um, the symptoms that I was having since before the accident of lightheadedness and dizziness finally resulted in me losing consciousness. And that happened right here at the dinner table, um, during breakfast. My mother was here, Randy and Mary Jo. You know, we were talking. This was after my surgery, and suddenly, after explaining to them what I have to do next, suddenly I started feeling really bad and.

GANZGLASS: [01:43:27] Passed out.

LORISTON: [01:43:27] I guess I passed out. All I know is, by the time I came to, paramedics were on top of me and performing chest compressions and CPR. Had it not been.

GANZGLASS: [01:43:40] Yeah.

LORISTON: [01:43:40] I would have been by myself and, um.

GANZGLASS: [01:43:46] You've had a rough go of it.

LORISTON: [01:43:50] It's been tough. It's been tough. So they've been a blessing to me because I am here without my family. And it was I knew the best choice for me so that I can focus on my health. My mother has a lot to deal with my grandmother, my 94 year old grandmother. And it's a lot.

GANZGLASS: [01:44:21] Yeah.

LORISTON: [01:44:22] And so.

GANZGLASS: [01:44:26] Wow.

LORISTON: [01:44:29] So it's just, I'm just dealing with a lot with trying to get better. And I have a lot of setbacks. I mean, I have good days. I have bad days. But, um. And just, um.

GANZGLASS: [01:44:46] You're lucky to be in the position you're in.

LORISTON: [01:44:51] I'm blessed. Despite all, all of that has happened, I'm here. I'm breathing. I'm. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:45:05] Should we end the interview with that?

LORISTON: [01:45:10] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [01:45:12] Good. The good days.

LORISTON: [01:45:17] You know what, though? And I have to say this because I tell everyone, despite everything that has happened, submitting that application was the best thing I've ever done.

GANZGLASS: [01:45:29] That's great.

LORISTON: [01:45:32] It was the most wonderful experience.

GANZGLASS: [01:45:35] And you'll go back.

LORISTON: [01:45:40] I'm going to go back. I'm sorry. Oh, God. Jeez.

GANZGLASS: [01:45:43] No, it's fine.

[END OF INTERVIEW]