

James Reiersen Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

James (Jim) Reiersen served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from July 1973 to July 1975 as a physics teacher.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

James Reierson

October 17, 2018
Washington, D.C.

By Julius Sztuk

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

SZTUK: [00:00:00] OK. Today is October 17th, 2018. This is Jay Sztuk and I'm interviewing Jim Reierson, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from July 1973 through July 1975. Jim was a lecturer in physics at the University of the South Pacific. Welcome, Jim, and thanks for agreeing to be interviewed today.

REIERSON: [00:00:28] You're welcome.

SZTUK: [00:00:30] So let's start off by telling us a little bit about how you initially heard about Peace Corps and why you joined.

REIERSON: [00:00:37] OK. Well, it might be easier to start with where I came from.

SZTUK: [00:00:44] Sure.

REIERSON: [00:00:45] Because I grew up on a small farm in Nebraska. And my father was not a college graduate and my mother had gone to college for a couple of years and taught school. But anyhow, I grew up on a small farm, and this was in the forties and fifties, so we didn't have electricity or running water until I was in the fourth grade. And I went to one room schools three of my grade school years. Then I went to high school. There were 17 in my high school class. And then from there, I went to the University of Nebraska and majored in physics. And after that, I went to Iowa State and got my doctorate in physics there. So I was I guess 27 years old when I kind of walked out into the sunlight after being buried in physics labs and so forth most of my young adult life.

REIERSON: [00:02:02] And so I missed the sixties, essentially. I didn't miss it, but I was doing math and physics and stuff. And so I came out to Washington, D.C., area for a job. And I mean, I had heard about the Peace Corps before that, but as I said, I missed the sixties pretty much, and I missed, I had war deferments while I was doing my physics research. So I missed the Vietnam War. And I came out here and I worked for a not-for-profit that worked for the Air Force, defense stuff. But I kind of had this, I guess, feeling that kind of I owed the country something or that, since I had friends that had gone to Vietnam. And I'd heard about the Peace Corps, and that sounded pretty cool.

REIERSON: [00:03:02] And then when I came out here, I met some returned volunteers and they impressed me as really nice people. And so that got me thinking about it. And after working for three years, I decided I would kind of like to try teaching physics, because when I first got out of graduate school, I was totally burned out from whatever it was, 20 straight years of schooling, and I didn't want anything to do with a university type atmosphere. But after three years of working, I thought, well, I ought to try teaching sometime before I forget all the physics. And so it kind of my reasoning was, well, if I apply for jobs, I'll wind up teaching at a junior college somewhere, you know, for a couple of years to see if I like it. Or I could do something like go in the Peace Corps. The pay is a little less, but not much less. And I could have an adventure at the same time.

REIERSON: [00:04:23] So I applied for the Peace Corps and filled out the paperwork. And, you know, I was semi-serious about it. But what I said on there, and they ask you, where do you want to go and what do you want to do? And I said, I want to teach physics at a college or university in the Caribbean or South Pacific. I figured, fat chance. And so about a month or so later then I got this thing back from the Peace Corps saying, we've got an opening in Lesotho. They have a little college there. And so I looked on the map and back then Lesotho was, I don't know if it's still a country or not, but anyhow, it was completely surrounded by white apartheid South Africa, little black enclave there. And they had a university with a couple other little other little enclaves.

REIERSON: [00:05:25] And I said, uh. So I reply. I said, no, that's not quite what I had in mind. I mean, I sound like it might be too much like real Peace Corps. So I turned them down. And then I went, uh, it was getting close, and this was about the, I guess, summer of '72. I decided I needed, uh, I did my Europe. Back then there was this book, Europe on \$5 a Day. So I bought a copy of that and I spent like five weeks seeing Europe on \$5 a day, staying in hostels and stuff like that. And I took a leave of absence from work when I did that and I came back and got a new apartment and started work. And I'd been to work less than a week back to work, and the Peace Corps called me up and said, how would you like to go to Fiji? And I said, that's what I had in mind.

REIERSON: [00:06:38] However, I just went back to work and told them I was going to go back to work and I've just signed the lease on my apartment and stuff, so I guess I can't do it. And so, I dropped it. And then, so I figured that was the end of the Peace Corps for me. And then like, uh, it's like March of '73. I was at a party and there was a young lady there who worked for the Peace Corps. And so I was chatting with her and she had something to do with the Pacific region. And so I said, they ever find anyone to teach physics in Fiji? And she said, no, do you want to go? I said, OK. And so this was like April or so. And so I quit my job and dispersed my possessions and, uh, drove my car back to Nebraska to tell my parents I was going.

REIERSON: [00:07:56] I told them I was going to see them for the last time. My father says, I don't know, Jim, you had a really good job. I don't know why you're doing this. That's probably what all fathers say.

SZTUK: [00:08:07] Sure.

REIERSON: [00:08:07] And so. But then I went on to San Francisco where they had the staging there. So after I kind of, after I said yes to this lady and filled out a few forms, I never heard from the Peace Corps again. I guess things were a little looser back then. And in fact, I didn't know how I was supposed to get to California. And they said, well, buy a ticket and then send us a bill and we'll reimburse you. So that's what I did, they said.

SZTUK: [00:08:37] So they did give you a date to show up?

REIERSON: [00:08:39] Yeah, they said show up on July 4th.

SZTUK: [00:08:42] This must be one of the longest recruitments ever.

REIERSON: [00:08:45] And so I flew to San Francisco on the 4th of July and I said to myself, they won't be doing anything on the 4th of July, anything official. And so a friend from graduate school met me and we spent the day looking around San Francisco and all this kind of stuff. So I walked into the hotel like 8:00 at night and went in this meeting room. And there were all these other new recruits who had spent the whole day in meetings. And it it turned out, well, what we figured out was that kind of everything was done by contractors, and they were getting paid time and a half or double time for working on holidays. So they had all these meetings on the 4th.

REIERSON: [00:09:38] So we were there for about two days to get our shots and, you know, get some orientations and stuff. And his name was, I forget his first name. [Berenado] Vunibobo. He then was at the U.N., I believe, but he was some kind of a minister or something in the Fiji government, so he was there to escort us down. So I sat by him on the plane on the way down. So that's how I got in the Peace Corps.

SZTUK: [00:10:16] So yeah. So that was, like I said, it was pretty long recruitment. You have second thoughts at any time in there?

REIERSON: [00:10:26] No, after I said, after I said I'd do it, then I got pretty gung ho. Well, so I guess one of the questions on here was, what was the first thing you did when you found out you were going to Fiji? First thing I did was I went to the library and looked at the encyclopedia and then the National Geographics, because I didn't know what Fijians looked like or really anything about it other than it was down there in the South Pacific. So then, as now, it seems like the only way you can arrive in Fiji is in the middle of the night or early morning. I mean, it's always dark when you, whenever I've gone there, I haven't been there that many times. But it seems like you're always getting there at 4:00 in the morning or something, some weird time. So I guess one of the questions was, what happened when you first got there or whatever?

SZTUK: [00:11:28] Yeah. Anything memorable about when you first hit the ground there in Fiji. How'd you feel and did anything impress you?

REIERSON: [00:11:37] When I first hit the ground, it was dark and so the Peace Corps met us there with a few rental cars and stuff. And I remember almost killing myself on that because I, you know, tried to get in on the wrong, on the.

SZTUK: [00:11:56] The wrong side?

REIERSON: [00:11:56] Wrong side of the car and hit the steering wheel on my way in. And then they took us to, uh, I was going to say the Coconut Inn, but I'm not sure that's around there.

SZTUK: [00:12:08] Is that like a boarding house?

REIERSON: [00:12:11] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:12:11] Next to a river?

REIERSON: [00:12:12] Yeah. And it was run by an American guy who'd married a Fijian, and which was interesting in that he, I don't know how he'd gotten to Fiji, but he'd been in Fiji and he met his future wife and they were planning to come to the United States. And then he found that he couldn't legally get married. They wanted to come back and get married in the United States, and back then they couldn't legally get married in Fiji. I mean, in Fiji, in Tennessee, to a black woman. And so he said, to hell with this, we're going back to Fiji. So he was running this Coconut Inn.

REIERSON: [00:12:59] But anyhow, the first thing I remember then is that they had a kava ceremony. And, you know, you're walking. What I remember myself thinking, you know, staggering off the plane after not sleeping. And then it's dark and you're here and you're plopped down on a mat and they're stirring up this muddy water and stuff and, you know, give you some, you know. I distinctly remember thinking, if I drink this, I'm in. I mean, I'm here for two years. I mean, it's, you know.

SZTUK: [00:13:36] Did they give you any kind of warning about that ahead of time or tell you about kava?

REIERSON: [00:13:39] A little bit, I guess, but I didn't, you know, among all the other stuff. So that was that. And we did our, um, then we were assigned. There were four of us assigned to a language instructor and Komai, Ratu Komai was our language instructor. And so we spent, I guess, six weeks with him. We spent two weeks at a village outside Suva, the capital city, about 40 minutes outside called Cautata. And it's a, uh, so that's where we went kind of for our first two week village stay. And what I remember there is, well, I guess the other, kind of the other aspect was that this was 1973. And as I got on the plane leaving the U.S., John Dean was on the television in the airport and, you know, the Watergate thing was just getting wrapped up.

REIERSON: [00:15:01] And what occurred to me when we went back this summer for the 50th anniversary, getting on the plane there to go to that, we have Donald Trump. I mean, it's the same, in a sense, in both cases I was kind of, felt like I was in a position where I'm kind of apologizing for our

country's leadership. And so when we got to Cautata, you know, they had a kind of a meeting of, you know, meet and greet with all the people in the village and stuff. And it's close enough to the capital city that a lot of people commute and work. So a lot of people even back then had, were very good in English. Had good English.

SZTUK: [00:15:52] Mm hmm.

REIERSON: [00:15:52] And like the guy that was the chief, he had a job as an editor of the Fiji Times.

SZTUK: [00:15:59] Oh, no kidding?

REIERSON: [00:16:00] And but anyhow, we didn't know all this at the time. So we're kind of standing around and this little guy walks up, and he says to me, Otis Elevators. I said, huh? Otis Elevators? And he points at his shirt and it says Otis on there. And it turned out he was the Otis Elevator repairman for the country of Fiji, which at that time had one elevator.

SZTUK: [00:16:28] I was going to say, he couldn't have been very busy.

REIERSON: [00:16:29] Some building in Suva had like, you know, it's five stories or something. So he was the guy who kept the elevators running. Then another guy comes, walks up, and he goes, what's this about the Watergate? And so, uh. You know, I was expecting, you know, how do you like the food or something?

SZTUK: [00:16:48] Yeah. And to be in a Fijian village.

REIERSON: [00:16:51] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:16:53] And to be quizzed about current affairs in the United States. That was probably surprising.

REIERSON: [00:16:58] Yeah. Yeah, that was surprising to me. And I guess the other thing I would say about the village, that kind of occurred to me at the time was, uh, then I guess there were a couple of houses that had

electricity. They didn't have any running water, anybody. So we had outdoor toilets and stuff. I guess one thing was that it hadn't occurred to me that you could have water trap toilets outside, you know, because not coming from places where it froze, you assumed that.

SZTUK: [00:17:31] So that was an advancement from where you grew up.

REIERSON: [00:17:33] Yeah. Yeah. And what I decided was that in many ways, kind of the, I don't know what the measurement is. The distance between where I grew up and the village in Fiji was in a lot of dimensions, smaller than from where I grew up to living in Washington, D.C., before I went to Fiji. In terms of electricity and things.

SZTUK: [00:18:05] Sure. Yeah, I was going to ask you that. How do you feel like your background growing up in that kind of area without electricity and indoor plumbing, do you think that made it easier for you to adapt when you went to another country that didn't have those conveniences?

REIERSON: [00:18:23] I think so. Yeah. I mean, it wasn't as unusual for me, you know. And I think a lot of the stuff that you learn on a farm, you know, kind of translates in that you learn how to fix a washing machine with a pair of pliers. That's the only tool you have, and that kind of stuff. So. And there were things, you know, I guess one of the things. Like back when I was growing up, the guys my father's age would sit around telling World War II stories. And in the village at night when they were doing *talanoa* around the kava bowl, you know, the old guys were telling World War II stories.

SZTUK: [00:19:16] Right.

REIERSON: [00:19:16] So there's a lot, some of the same kind of stuff. So anyhow, we did two weeks in Cautata and then we did some time in Suva and some time, I guess, a couple other places. But then we were supposed to go to another village and it fell through. And so we, uh, Komai took us to Bau Island, where he was from. We spent I think about two weeks there, essentially living with his family. And his father, his parents were alive then, and his father was a big cheese. He was the *mata ni vanua*,

the spokesman for the chief of Bau. And the chief of Bau, at least according to the Bauans, is the most important person in Fiji. I'm not sure all the other Fijians feel that way, but they felt, the Bauans felt that way about themselves. And then it turned out he passed away while we, well, like '74 or '75.

SZTUK: [00:20:36] The father?

REIERSON: [00:20:36] The father did, yeah. Komai passed away a few years ago.

SZTUK: [00:20:43] So you were studying Fijian then?

REIERSON: [00:20:45] Yeah, we were being taught Fijian. I can't. I was the class dummy in terms of learning the language and part of it's probably, part of it I blame on my age. I was the oldest, you know, I was like 20. No, I was 31. I think 30 or 31. It was '73. 31. You know, and everyone else was like, or just about everyone else was like early twenties. So I figured it was an old age thing, but then I don't have a good ear for music and things like that. And they did it totally, totally oral, orally and immersive, you know. And to me, it all sounded like a Japanese person trying to speak Italian, just staccato consonants with a vowel after each one, just blasting away there. And so I didn't do too well.

REIERSON: [00:22:00] But the skill I did have in languages that, from graduate school I guess mainly, that really helped out was, I discovered that I could understand practically anything any of my students said. And some of the Indian students, particularly, they had terrible accents.

SZTUK: [00:22:26] Oh, so you could understand their English.

REIERSON: [00:22:29] I could understand their English. I couldn't, you know, or the Fijians' English or the Tongans' English or the Gilbertese guy, you know. But so and I don't know if they could understand me or not. I caught them a couple of times mocking my Midwestern accent. But the one was, like one semester the first day of class, this Indian kid stood up and said, sir, do you have a yacht? And I thought about that a while and I had him repeat it. And then I realized what he was saying was, do I have

a yacht? Because our offices were in the old hangar building of the, down by the breakwater at USP, and that had been the flying boat base in World War II. And so a lot of the faculty had little sailboats and stuff and they kept them there.

REIERSON: [00:23:36] And it turned out that Dan Cantor, the Peace Corps director over there in Fiji, had a little ten-foot little boat, not a massive boat, and he had kept it over at the Suva Yacht Club. And that bothered him, I guess, to have a Peace Corps director with a boat at the yacht club. And so when I came, he says, after he said, you think you can work it out so that I can keep my boat over there at USP? And I said, yeah, if you let me use it sometimes. I knew how to sail a little bit, but not much. And so I said, OK. So we sailed it around one time and kept it there. And so that was one of the, every semester then we'd do a little physics about how yachts work and vectors and wind vectors and things like that. And then we'd go out for a sail.

SZTUK: [00:24:43] Couldn't fit the whole class on that one.

REIERSON: [00:24:44] No, it'd take a couple. Two or three groups of students. So anyhow.

SZTUK: [00:24:53] So your training was primarily in Suva, in the capital city?

REIERSON: [00:24:58] And in villages. And in the villages.

SZTUK: [00:25:01] And then when you completed training, your assignment was?

REIERSON: [00:25:05] I went to USP, the university.

SZTUK: [00:25:08] And that's also in Suva?

REIERSON: [00:25:11] That's in Suva, yes, the capital. And as I said, it used to be a New Zealand, during World War II, it was a Royal Air Force, I guess, flying boat base. And Americans were there, some I guess, and trained. And then after the war it became a New Zealand flying boat base. And then when Fiji became independent in, uh, whenever that was, '60

something, mid sixties, kind of as a gift to the country of Fiji, the British Commonwealth gave that land of the air, of the base. They gave them their land back and so they could use it as a university. And so there weren't a lot of built or new buildings there. When I was there, they were just, they built the library while I was there. But so they used a lot of the old air base buildings as classrooms and so forth. And where I lived was a, uh, had been a bachelor's officer's quarters. And so it was like a long building with a veranda and about half a dozen bedrooms on one end and then a communal bathroom and then a communal kitchen and sitting room.

SZTUK: [00:26:41] OK. Set up like a barracks.

REIERSON: [00:26:42] Yeah. Yeah. And so I was there with other Peace Corps volunteers there, Bruce Carlson and David Tyson and some others.

SZTUK: [00:26:57] So how many Peace Corps volunteers were at USP at that time, do you remember? Approximately.

REIERSON: [00:27:03] There was probably on the order of 15, I would guess.

SZTUK: [00:27:10] Quite a large group.

REIERSON: [00:27:10] Well, I'm not positive now but anyhow, so I after we came back from the 50th anniversary, it occurred to me I start making a list. I wondered, can I write down? I don't know if you want to keep this.

SZTUK: [00:27:27] OK.

REIERSON: [00:27:27] And so one of the attractions was, I guess, is that we had hot showers. And so whenever. We had a lot of visitors. So people that, the Peace Corps volunteers that taught on outer islands or in remote places, whenever they'd come into Fiji once or twice a year, a lot of them would wind up sleeping on our floors and using our showers. So I got to meet a lot of the volunteers that way.

SZTUK: [00:28:06] And so your housing was on campus, which isolated you a little bit from the neighborhood.

REIERSON: [00:28:15] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:28:15] So did you have much interaction with the local neighbors or anything? Or the other staff at the school? Outside of school time?

REIERSON: [00:28:29] Um, outside of school time. It was, uh, most of the staff were Australian and New Zealand expatriates and a lot of them were there for just a few years, you know, kind of relatively short assignments. And majority of them were married and some of them had kids and stuff. And so, but they, you know, I went to some faculty parties and stuff and they had the School of Natural Resources where I taught. Well, back then they didn't give a, I guess you got a Bachelor of Science degree. That's what it amounted to. You didn't, you couldn't major in physics or chemistry. So most of them took a couple of years of physics and a couple of years of chemistry and a couple of years of biology and stuff.

REIERSON: [00:29:29] But so but the faculty, I guess this is a British tradition, they had high tea every day at 3:00 or something like that. So all the faculty go into the staff meeting room and you sit around and drink tea and talk and stuff. So that was okay. And they invited, you know, I got invited to staff parties of various kinds. So that was my main interaction with them. And a couple of them were really nice people and I'm still kind of, I haven't really kept in touch with, but one of them I got back in touch with after I went there this summer. And so I guess the rest of town, I really didn't, other than the Peace Corps volunteers that came through or that were stationed around there. Those were, that was my main interactions. So I did do, I mean, we. I felt, so I felt more of an attachment, I guess I'd say, to the students than to the surrounding community.

SZTUK: [00:30:46] Mm hmm.

REIERSON: [00:30:47] One of my students was this guy named, a Fijian guy named Wami. And this was in the mid seventies and it's back when, uh. So anyhow, he dressed like he was from California. And so a lot, and a lot

of the, well. So he was wearing, you know, tight bellbottom jeans and flowery shirts and stuff. And so were the, a lot of the Indian students too. It's just the way, I think they still dress that way. Maybe not with the bellbottoms anymore, this time with tight jeans and a shirt. But anyhow, Wami was a very charismatic guy. And so when we were going back to Fiji this summer, I got in touch with him. And, I mean, I looked him up on the internet and stuff and figured out a little bit about him, and found out he was, got in touch with him anyway. And so we met, he and his wife, there at the Grand Pacific Hotel for breakfast one day. And he became a doctor and was the head of Fiji School of Medicine for a few years.

SZTUK: [00:32:06] Oh.

REIERSON: [00:32:06] Apparently straightened it out and got it accredited and everything.

SZTUK: [00:32:12] Oh, that's impressive.

REIERSON: [00:32:12] And his wife was a high-end lawyer. But anyhow, so. You know, so you feel like, well, I taught this guy so, you know.

SZTUK: [00:32:30] Had some influence.

REIERSON: [00:32:30] He's a success because of me. So my wife asked him, what do you remember about Jim? And he says, well, the thing I remember is he'd have us over to his place and he'd make popcorn. So my influence on this guy was me teaching him about popcorn.

SZTUK: [00:32:52] So the students at, uh, USP has campuses all throughout the Pacific. So you had some other islanders attending school there?

REIERSON: [00:33:01] Yeah. Yeah, the main.

SZTUK: [00:33:03] Pretty mixed?

REIERSON: [00:33:04] The main campus, well, still is the one in Suva. And they had a mixture of, uh, so I suppose like 80% of the students were from Fiji and

probably then about 60, maybe 70% of the Fijian students were of Indian descent.

SZTUK: [00:33:30] So I think a small percentage of Fijians actually get to go to university. So would you think that these were the elite of Fiji or did they come from chiefly families or?

REIERSON: [00:33:48] Some of them did, yeah. Because a lot of the, if you come from a chiefly family that was kind of your best, you were more likely to get into a good high school. But back then, the university was fairly new since it started in '68. And so back then I guess the really the superstar students were still getting Commonwealth scholarships to Australia and New Zealand. And so like, you know, the ones that were, you know, obviously bound for med school or something like that would go straight from Fiji to undergraduate school. And so the main, the main, uh, one of the main reasons for setting up the university was to stop the brain drain because they, you know, they found that kids that went overseas to school, a lot of them don't come back or anything.

REIERSON: [00:34:56] And so the notion was to stop the brain drain and also to train, because they were at the point where they were starting to need a lot of secondary school teachers and civil servants and so forth, because it had only been a few years since the British had pulled out of Fiji. So, you know, vacancies in civil service needed to get filled by educated people and so forth. So that was kind of the reason for the USP. So the students were pretty sharp on the whole, but they weren't. Well, in physics, there was one kid, a Chinese kid that, you know, when he walked in the door, you could tell he was really smart. You know, he, wow. That guy's smarter, a lot smarter than I am. He could go to school anywhere in the United States. And he did go on and get a PhD. And it wasn't, I don't know where he is now.

SZTUK: [00:36:00] Any particularly memorable episodes or experiences in teaching these kids?

REIERSON: [00:36:10] Well, the boat rides I guess were the main things. I guess the other. Well, when I first went there, I was, their school. Their school year ends in December and starts, well anyhow.

SZTUK: [00:36:34] The seasons are different.

REIERSON: [00:36:35] It corresponds to the, kind of corresponds to the calendar year, same as their school year. And so I got there in July. So it's like, I guess I got there at the semester break and so they'd already have teaching assignments for the second semester, assuming I wasn't going to be there. I mean, they didn't know I was coming for that year. And so I taught math, taught some math at first.

REIERSON: [00:37:06] And then the other thing that was happening then was my predecessor, the guy I was supposed to replace if I would have accepted the first time, I would have replaced, overlapped a little bit and replaced the guy named David Berkowitz. And so he had been the first Peace Corps volunteer there and teaching physics. And this happened to him and then happened to me, is since a lot of the expatriates rotate in and out, my last half. Well, yeah, my last half year there, I wound up being the head of the department because I was the one, no one had been there as long as I had been. And that's what happened to him.

REIERSON: [00:38:05] And he was digging around and he found and applied for some, a grant I guess it was, to get use on a communications satellite. The USP had, I mean, the United States government had in during the sixties launched, start launching communication satellites. And then as they were replaced by better technology, they still had some. They had this one that was kind of floating around over the Pacific or equatorial orbit, you know, geosynchronous orbit. So it was just floating there over the equator, covering most of the South Pacific. And they had time on it that you could, uh, you could apply for time, so many hours a week, when you had the time budget. And so the university got time on it. And the whole thing was to set up, uh, they wanted to start teaching extension courses and using satellite for community so the teacher could be in Suva and answer questions from someone in Niue.

SZTUK: [00:39:25] OK.

REIERSON: [00:39:25] And so when I got there then, my first six months there, a part of my job, I got involved in going to some of these other little countries and surveying them for setting up satellite reception there. And so I went to, back then it was called New Caledonia. I guess it's Vanuatu now.

SZTUK: [00:39:56] Yeah.

REIERSON: [00:39:56] And it was French then and the French were very suspicious. They didn't, they weren't sure they wanted an American satellite. For people, natives talking over an American satellite. So anyhow, I was climbing, had to climb around on the roofs there, raising and kind of waving a television antenna type thing, you know, see if I could get a signal, how good it was. So I did that a couple of different places. And then I went to the country of Niue and set up their, took along some tubes full of antennas that I had put together and receiver and stuff. And we set up their little teaching office, about the size of this room, with a table so the students can come in and sit around and talk to a tutor once a week for an hour.

SZTUK: [00:40:52] That was pretty high tech for those days.

REIERSON: [00:40:54] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:40:55] And how did it work out?

REIERSON: [00:40:57] It worked pretty, it seemed to work pretty well. And they had, they got centers going in several countries. And when I went back this summer, I went on campus and everything was shut down when we were there. But they have a building now that's there, I guess like a communications building, they call it, with huge, I mean, it looks like a building here with the satellite dishes sticking out on it. So they still do, I imagine they have video now too. But and it said something about a gift from Japan. So. So as you mentioned, they've been big in putting, not only putting that kind of thing, but campuses on other countries. So you can. Different island countries, I guess, have different specialties. Some

of them, I think maybe the law college is somewhere, and different cultural things are on other island countries.

SZTUK: [00:42:11] Well, that's impressive. So you were a pioneer in distance learning.

REIERSON: [00:42:15] I don't know pioneer. An enabler.

SZTUK: [00:42:23] Yeah. So what did you enjoy most about living in Fiji and Suva?

REIERSON: [00:42:38] Well, I guess part of it was just kind of the cultural kind of just the mix, the mix of cultures and stuff. Well, you know, growing up in Nebraska, you know, I. It was probably almost, not quite, but almost until I got to graduate school that I really knew anyone that was not of northern European heritage. And so to me, it was just really neat seeing all these different people and getting exposed to some of the cultural things and just. You know, kind of some of the things were just, well, I remember like they had a, you know, they had a cultural exchange or something. But anyhow, a bunch of Aborigines came and put on a show, you know, and did their didgeridoo and their.

SZTUK: [00:43:49] At USP?

REIERSON: [00:43:51] It was either at USP or at the civic center downtown. But the impressive thing was, I don't know if they were faked it or not, but the first guy walks out and he sits down on the corner of the stage and there's a little pile of sticks. And he picks up a couple of sticks and starts twirling them and stuff. All of a sudden he has a fire going, a little smoky fire. And so I was kind of off in the corner while they did their. I thought like, wow, I wonder if he palmed a match or something. But anyhow, then that kind of a culture, just reading about and talking to people from there and from Fiji, you know, like some of their legends and just struck me as so different. And, you know, how could anyone even come up with that, you know, he's talking about various kinds of gods and people getting eaten and people eating other people. And it's just, I mean, just so exotic. I just thought it was fun.

SZTUK: [00:45:05] Since you had this interest in the local culture and legends and stuff, did you get to travel much within the country when you had some time off? Did you spend more time in Fijian villages or the outskirts of Suva or any of the other islands?

REIERSON: [00:45:23] What I tried to do was, uh, like when I have a long weekend, probably say every two months or so, I would go back out to the village of Cautata. And it turned out that one of the guys from the village was a security guard at the university, and so I got to know him. So I'd go out with him, and they used to have a bus that went up. The village had a, owned a bus to bring people in and out. And so you could go down to the bus stop and get on the bus and go out there. And so about once every couple of months I'd go out. I'd tell them I'm coming out for the weekend. There was a lady that, I guess she was kind of my unofficial grandmother, and she would give me her bed and she'd go to sleep with her kids or something. So that's.

SZTUK: [00:46:26] OK, so that training experience became a permanent connection for you.

REIERSON: [00:46:29] Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then when we went back this past summer, we made arrangements through Sala. And I asked her if she knew anyone from the village, in that village, and she came up with a name, and so we communicated on Facebook and he became my spokesman. And so he picked us up at the Grand Pacific and took us out to buy kava. And we went there and spent half a day in the village. And I took along prints of old pictures and gave it to him. So he gave them copies of old pictures I had.

SZTUK: [00:47:12] Oh, old pictures you had?

REIERSON: [00:47:13] From 40 some years ago. Oh yeah, that's so-and-so.

SZTUK: [00:47:18] Did they remember you? Anybody remember you in the village?

REIERSON: [00:47:19] No, I didn't see that many people in the village. And the guy that was a security guard, he died a few years ago. And I mean, so I mean, I suppose some of the kids. I don't know. We all look alike, I think.

SZTUK: [00:47:40] Well, it's been a long time.

REIERSON: [00:47:41] Yeah, it's been a long time.

SZTUK: [00:47:42] And people don't always stay in the village.

REIERSON: [00:47:44] But so I did go to, uh, went to Taveuni and Ovalau, other islands around there. And I went down to Kadavu. So essentially those were all, uh, staying with the volunteers who had essentially slept on my floor. I went to sleep on their floor, you know.

SZTUK: [00:48:14] And so in those days did you go by boat or did you fly?

REIERSON: [00:48:22] I think we, I went by boat to, uh, I don't think you could fly to Kadavu then. And I think I went by boat to Ovalau. And Taveuni I think I flew. And then the one, the one other time was I and two other volunteers went to Tonga on a boat. And it's called the Anyu was the name of the boat, which I think it means the coconut or something. And it was like a day and a half or two day boat ride and all the way over there. But the one thing I remember was all the way. So we were the, there was a Tongan lady and her little boy up on the decks and they wouldn't let us sleep on the deck. We had to have a cabin. Since we were Europeans, I guess. And so they had this little cabin with two sets of bunk beds in it. And so we climbed in there and someone climbed up on the top bunk and it just crashed right through the bunk. So we had to get that all straightened up. And it was just, it was not a very clean boat, let's put it that way. Especially the head.

REIERSON: [00:49:58] But then when we got, so we thought we were kind of all alone on this boat, but except for the captain and the cook and someone down in the engine room. And as we pulled into Tonga, all of a sudden the deck was full of people, and the cargo was bags of cement, taking

cement to Tonga. And I guess the way they did it back then was a lot of Tongans came to Fiji to, you know, to work.

SZTUK: [00:50:32] Mm hmm.

REIERSON: [00:50:33] For a short period of time. Then they'd make some money and then go back home. And so what they would do is they'd stow away. And so they were all stowaways on this boat.

SZTUK: [00:50:43] Oh, no kidding?

REIERSON: [00:50:43] And so it pulls into the harbor there in Nuku'alofa. And sure enough, there's the local Tonga police paddy wagons there and their lights whipping around. And so all the guys get off the boat, get in the paddy wagons. I guess they go down to the station and they let them all go. So that's how you.

SZTUK: [00:51:04] That's right. So they were hiding the entire trip.

REIERSON: [00:51:06] Yeah. Yeah. I never didn't even know they were there.

SZTUK: [00:51:09] That's funny.

REIERSON: [00:51:12] And back then, I think it's probably still true today. Places, countries like Tonga made especially Suva seem like a hubbub of civilization.

SZTUK: [00:51:27] Like Las Vegas or something.

REIERSON: [00:51:28] Yeah. Bright lights and all that.

SZTUK: [00:51:35] Yeah. So you were there at USP for two years.

REIERSON: [00:51:39] Two years, yeah.

SZTUK: [00:51:41] And since then. Well, did you consider extending at all or did they ask you to extend?

REIERSON: [00:51:50] Yeah. Yeah. Oh, I guess the one other thing I wanted to mention about the beat when we were there. When I was there. Is that I guess this is probably true of all Peace Corps volunteers, but it was especially true at the university, I think, and that's because there were a lot of us and we, you know, a lot of us living in the same place and stuff. And so we had these kind of endless, not endless, but we'd always have these long discussions about what are we doing here? Are we doing any good? You know, why are we here? You'd say things like, now wait a minute, you know, this is a country where old people are taken care of. They love kids, you know, they have a fairly good life expectancy and everything, you know. What are we really, what are we doing bringing them into the 20th century? And so that kind of went on and on.

REIERSON: [00:52:51] And, you know, kind of one of the things was it kind of concluded that, well, what I wrote on the blackboard was my equation was the letter P divided by C, which you could read as P into C. And so someone said, what we're doing here is we're pissing in the ocean in terms of helping the world out. And so I thought that was pretty good. But the one positive thing I think we did was that, uh, when I came in the early years of the university, they had a lot of Peace Corps and a lot of volunteers from Canada and other places that kind of their job, what they were doing was what graduate students do in the United States in university. They were teaching the labs and grading papers and doing that kind of thing.

REIERSON: [00:53:51] And so our analyst discussions about this, you know, we finally came to the conclusion that, you know, by the mid seventies, they were starting to graduate enough people from the university that and they could do those jobs, you know, and a lot of them were kids that might want to go on to graduate school and things like that. And so we convinced the Peace Corps, and I remember writing letters and stuff to the Peace Corps, and I mean, to Dan Canter and to the university, saying, you know, we think that you could phase out those kinds of jobs for volunteers and start hiring locals. And so my last year there, we hired for a physics, I guess, lab assistant is what they were called or something like that.

REIERSON: [00:54:55] We hired this kid that just graduated, an Indian guy from Fiji, and so he was there a few years, and then he went on to Australia and got a PhD in physics eventually, environmental physics. So I felt good about that. That was kind of one of the positive things that happened, kind of it was positive in terms of the Peace Corps kind of got rid of some jobs, but they reassigned them to other things.

SZTUK: [00:55:23] At least you feel like you had a positive impact.

REIERSON: [00:55:25] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:55:27] So after.

REIERSON: [00:55:28] So.

SZTUK: [00:55:29] Oh, go ahead.

REIERSON: [00:55:29] OK. So then as I was coming up on July of '75, I guess was kind of the earliest. I mean, my two years were up and what I kind of thought was that maybe I would at least stay on to the end of the school year, which would have been like December, November. And but what happened was that this young lady, Polly, came down to visit me the winter of '74, and she, you know, I'd known her from back here in D.C., and so she came down and visited me. And one thing led to another, as it does in the South Pacific. So she came back here and then we had this long several months of the blue aerograms flying back and forth. And so then she came back to Fiji and we got married there in May of '75. She came back in May and got married in June of '75. And so because of that, I didn't extend. When my time was up, I left after two years rather than extending.

SZTUK: [00:56:49] So you actually got married in Fiji?

REIERSON: [00:56:52] We got married in Fiji.

SZTUK: [00:56:53] Where did that take place? Was it a church or?

REIERSON: [00:56:56] We got married in the Catholic cathedral in Suva.

SZTUK: [00:57:02] Oh, right downtown?

REIERSON: [00:57:04] Yeah. And it's still there and we, they remodeled it, I guess, since we got married. And we tried to go in it this last summer, but it was locked. I mean, they locked the church, these black churches now. And they have guards around the, I mean, they have a compound around the Peace Corps office and they keep track of where the volunteers are at all times and all this kind of stuff that was.

SZTUK: [00:57:31] It's changed quite a bit.

REIERSON: [00:57:32] Changed.

SZTUK: [00:57:33] And you can't get in the embassy.

REIERSON: [00:57:34] Can't get in the embassy. Yeah, the embassy compound has nothing. Because it seemed to me that when we were in the Peace Corps, it's kind of that's what you did on Saturday mornings. You went down to the Peace Corps office and wandered in there to see if you got any mail and, you know, talk to people. And then you'd find these other people that were just into town from some outer island. And they'd said, you got a place to stay? You'd say, uh. But all that is by the wayside now, I guess. But to some extent it was easier back then in a lot of ways, I think.

SZTUK: [00:58:20] Yeah. So how do you feel that that experience of being a Peace Corps volunteer impacted your post Peace Corps life in the past several years? I know you've remained connected through the Friends of Fiji.

REIERSON: [00:58:42] Yeah, that's been a nice way to stay connected. And Polly has enjoyed that too, because she only spent a couple of months in Fiji. You know, so that's been kind of a nice cultural thing. And we brought our kids to a couple events and so, you know, they get a little flavor of it.

I guess I would say one of the things that, uh, I guess in terms of myself, I'm by nature an introverted nerd and, uh. Well, the joke is, how can you tell an extroverted physicist? He's the one that looks at your shoes while he talks. And so I think one of the big things for me is spending the two years in Fiji is that it really made me become more attuned to other people and just kind of being more in the present than I used to be. I mean, I'm still not too good at all of these things, but I'm miles ahead of where I was back then.

REIERSON: [01:00:17] I mean, I guess I kind of felt like, kind of looking back on it. It was like when you're, when I was in Fiji, it was kind of like the record button was pushed in my head, you know, and kind of everything was just. I guess just, I just remember things, you know, it was a very, what you'd call a very vivid experience, a lot of the things. And I felt that a little bit going back this past summer for, you know, the time we spent there, you know, you kind of get back in that kind of mode again. You know, you're kind of, you aren't worrying about your stuff anymore. You're more you don't have any stuff. So you can spend your time thinking about people and finding out about them and they're finding out about you.

SZTUK: [01:01:20] So this trip was for the 50th anniversary of Peace Corps that you made this summer.

REIERSON: [01:01:25] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [01:01:25] And how did it feel to be back?

REIERSON: [01:01:32] It felt, I guess, well, and like 20 years ago, I guess it was '90. Yeah, like 20 years ago, I had gone back to a conference in Denarau Island because I worked for the Mitre Corporation, which is a not-for-profit engineering company. And the stuff I worked on was at that time was oceanic air traffic control. And Fiji controls a big chunk of air space down there, and the conference kind of rotates around and they managed to convince everyone to come down there one year. And I finagled a ticket so I could go down there. But then I only spent, like, a couple of days, kind of after the conference when over to Suva for a day

or two. And I really hadn't told many people I was coming. And so it was just a snapshot.

REIERSON: [01:02:41] And so this time, I guess we were both expecting to be disappointed. Or that we'd heard people say, well, you know, it's more crowded than it used to be. And there's a lot of traffic and the streets are dirty and on and on. But I was surprise, I thought it was great. I enjoyed being around. And we saw, like I mentioned, the student we saw that I hadn't seen before. And the other person we saw was, when I was there, the lady that ran the labs, the lab manager for the physics. A lady named Lemba Savu, and she's spent her career at the university. And so I got in touch with her and she's still around. She's retired now, but she gave us a tour of the university and, um, took us around. And we brought her to the event at the Fiji Library there in Suva. So she saw some other people there that she'd know from the old days.

REIERSON: [01:04:10] And she is, uh, the main thing she showed us going around the campus is that back when I was there, it still looked like an airbase. It was, there were. I guess that's how you make military bases. So you have clean lines of sight. You don't have a lot of vegetation or anything and a few palm trees. That was it. But now it's just like a botanical garden.

SZTUK: [01:04:34] Yeah. Looks more like a college campus?

REIERSON: [01:04:36] Yeah. Yeah. And now Lemba and, uh. Bill Albersburg and Randy Thaman, those two guys were both Peace Corps volunteers who then came back to the United States and got PhDs and then went back to Fiji and were at USP for 30 or 40 years. And Randy Thaman is still there, I guess. I didn't see him, but he's an emeritus type professor now. But anyhow, those two guys and Lemba, at least according to Lemba, planted all the shrubs and trees and flowers and stuff on the campus over a period of several years. They'd go out and find native plants to put here and here. And so that was very impressive.

SZTUK: [01:05:42] Any other, anything we missed or any things you want to say in closing?

REIERSON: [01:05:49] Let's see. I think I've blasted through about everything. Well, I guess the other thing was that, I guess what. Kind of one of my generalizations is that people seem to have kind of hinge points in their life, you know, kind of high points. And then after that, at those points their lives kind of change or that that's the high point and everything's downhill after that. And for some people, it's high school football. It kind of goes on from there. It could be the military or college or, you know. But for me, you know, partly because of getting married there and stuff, but just the adventure of that period was to me a kind of a hinge point in my life.

SZTUK: [01:06:52] A high point in your life.

REIERSON: [01:06:52] Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, after that, you know, coming back here, I kind of would come back and went to work for Mitre Corporation and stuff and had a career as a nerd. But, you know, you kind of do things differently, I think, you know, like, you know, is that I don't want to be a manager. So I didn't become a manager and just, you know, didn't worry about not making the really big bucks. And, you know, a lot of the people that are in Friends of Fiji that, some of them like David Downes and Cynthia Grant, you know, I knew from back there. So it's kind of nice that that was kind of a big part of it.

SZTUK: [01:07:38] Oh right, so some of the people that are your good friends now are people that you'd met because of Peace Corps.

REIERSON: [01:07:46] Yeah.

SZTUK: [01:07:47] Maybe not during your service but because they share that in common.

REIERSON: [01:07:49] Yeah, well, they were there in Fiji when I was there and a lady who was a couple of miles from us, Carol Reeder. She was married and she went, we were in, she was part of the same group of four people that did the training together. And she was married then and her husband, Bob, was also in that group. And their marriage fell apart. Well, it was a

complicated thing. But anyhow, she is around and we're very good friends with her. It seemed like there was something else I was going to say, but I. Nah, I think that's pretty much it. Oh, well, I guess the other thing I was going to say is I guess just a part of when I was talking about how I felt like my tape recorder was running and I felt alive and all this kind of stuff while I was a volunteer.

SZTUK: [01:08:53] Mm hmm.

REIERSON: [01:08:54] The other thing that's happened that I've done that has made me feel kind of the same way is I went, I did a week with Habitat for Humanity down in New Orleans after, a year after Katrina. And I guess I would, anyone that's considering the Peace Corps, I would recommend do a week with Habitat for Humanity and see how you feel about it, because it's very much the same thing except compressed. You're thrown in with a bunch of new people and you kind of have goals, things to do, kind of, and you're assigned jobs and stuff and you sleep on cots and all that kind of stuff. But, you know, you really kind of use, it gives you very much the same, at least it gave me the same kind of feelings of connectedness with these people.

SZTUK: [01:09:51] Yeah, camaraderie.

REIERSON: [01:09:52] And camaraderie and bitching about stuff. So that's my advice to someone who wants to join the Peace Corps. Do a week for Habitat for Humanity first.

SZTUK: [01:10:07] All right. All right. Well, thanks very much, Jim.

REIERSON: [01:10:10] OK.

SZTUK: [01:10:11] This concludes the interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]