

**Ria O'Brien Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Ria O'Brien  
**Interviewer:** Ivan Browning  
**Date of Interview:** February 23, 2019  
**Location of Interview:** Cary, North Carolina  
**Length:** 40 pages

**Biographical Note**

Ria O'Brien (now Edens) served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali from 2003 to 2005 in the water and sanitation sector.

**Access**

Open.

**Usage Restrictions**

According to the deed of gift signed April 10, 2019, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. This interview is in the public domain.

**Copyright**

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

**Technical Note**

This transcript was created by Sonix software from the MP3 audio recording of the interview. The resulting text file was lightly edited and reformatted according to a standard template.

**Suggested Citation**

Ria O'Brien, recorded interview by Ivan Browning, February 23, 2019, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

## DISCLAIMER

This transcript was generated automatically by Sonix software from the audio recording. The accuracy of the transcript cannot be guaranteed. Only the original audio recording constitutes the official record of this interview and should be used along with the transcript. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy or would like to recommend corrections, they are encouraged to contact the library reference staff.

Oral History Interview

with

Ria O'Brien

February 23, 2019  
Cary, North Carolina

By Ivan Browning

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

BROWNING: [00:00:00] Today is February 23rd, 2019. This is Ivan Browning. I am interviewing Ria O'Brien, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mali from 2003 to 2005, in the water sanitation sector. Why did you join the Peace Corps?

O'BRIEN: [00:00:29] That's a good question. And I think every volunteer that I've ever met has asked one another the same question, because I think it's a little bit different for everyone. And I think it never really boils down to one reason. Um, for me personally, there were several, several reasons. Um, I wanted experience internationally. I wanted to help people. Um, I didn't know where I was going to go. You know, when you start the process, you have an idea of what might happen, but they tell you again and again, you know, don't get your hopes up on going to one particular place. It could be anywhere.

O'BRIEN: [00:01:13] And with that in mind, I still was really drawn to the idea of that experience of, uh, traveling the world and, um, being able to be of service somewhere, you know, to give. I think everybody wants meaning in their life, and they want, um, a direction. My direction at the time, what motivated me the most was I wanted to, um, join the Foreign Service. I wanted to work in an embassy somewhere, so I really needed that international experience. And I mean, what a way to do it, right, to be able to travel someplace interesting and help people at the same time. It's, it's, I think, a very fulfilling and rewarding way to, um, find purpose in your life.

BROWNING: [00:02:06] Tell us about how you first became aware of Peace Corps.

O'BRIEN: [00:02:12] It's actually a little bit of a silly story. I remember I was living in Florida. I was quite young. I was, um, I think in my late teens, and my father brought it up and, um, I said, Peace Corps? What are you talking about? What is that? And he started to describe it to me and, um, I, you know, I didn't really think too much of it at that moment. Uh, but the next time I was at the library, because at the time, internet was not big. Um, so the next time I was at the library, I looked it up. And, um, on the rare occasion when I would meet someone that knew something about it, I would ask questions. And it seemed so, you know, fascinating.

O'BRIEN: [00:03:01] And, um, so I was, you know, my introduction to the Peace Corps was definitely a very gradual thing. And by the time I had made up my mind to do that, um, I was already, I think, a year into college. And so, um, it was still some time before I was actually signing those papers to become a Peace Corps volunteer.

BROWNING: [00:03:25] Mm hmm. Well, let's turn the clock back a little bit into your, uh, your childhood and your family. Were there any, uh, indicators or things that in, when you were growing up or what your parents did that kind of made you interested in something besides the United States?

O'BRIEN: [00:03:50] Yes, absolutely. It's all their fault. Um, so my parents traveled quite a bit, uh, before I came along. They actually settled

down and put down roots once I came along. And so they had so many stories, so many fascinating stories of the places that they had been. Um, my brother Dennis was born in New Orleans. My brother Dan was born in Germany. My sister Kim was born in Louisville, Kentucky, and then I was born in Saint Louis. And so everything seemed to, to me during my childhood, everything exciting in the family seemed to have happened before I came along and, you know, um, half of the family, well, actually, everyone in the family besides my brother Dan and I, they spoke German. And so I always kind of felt out of, um, left out of the joke, so to say, you know, and, um, and I wanted that experience too.

O'BRIEN: [00:04:51] I wanted to have something like that in my life, uh, where there was that bit of adventure that they had experienced. And, you know, growing up in a place like Saint Louis, Missouri, it's, you know, the heart of America. You're just right in the middle. And, and not to say that Saint Louis is a small town. It's, there is a lot to do there. And it's a great place to grow up. But, you know, tales of Germany and Europe, I had all of these fantastical ideas as a child of castles and things like that. And so it seemed like, um, a wonderful fairy tale. And I wanted to, I wanted to experience that one day.

BROWNING: [00:05:33] So what kind of education did you pursue after high school and where?

O'BRIEN: [00:05:41] After, well, I moved to Florida with my father, and that's the first time he mentioned the Peace Corps to me. We were starting a family business together while I figured out what I wanted to do with my future. I knew I wanted to do more schooling of some type, but I really wanted to put my finger on it and, uh, figure it out before I stuck my toe in the water, so to say. And, um, and my dad needed the help. And so I was helping him with the family business. And, you know, it went back to that idea of, I wanted to go to Germany. I wanted to see those places. I wanted to, um, be able to actually visualize in person those things that I had heard so many stories about.

O'BRIEN: [00:06:27] And, um, I found, you know, I started thinking about foreign service and working in embassies, but I started talking to counselors about how do I get to that point. You know what, what are the A to Z steps to, to get there? And they said, you know, you've got to learn languages, you've got to go to school. And so I plotted out a plan of, you know, doing two years at a community college nearby, two years at an international school, then joining the Peace Corps for international experience. And, um, and then taking the Foreign Service Exam after that, which is, I had done all of those steps except for the Foreign Service Exam. I never got to that step. I changed my mind after the Peace Corps. But, um, yeah. So those, that, those were the steps that I put out in my mind of how I was going to get there.

BROWNING: [00:07:23] So two years at an international, I mean, a community college.

O'BRIEN: [00:07:27] Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:07:27] And you say an international school, was that overseas or?

O'BRIEN: [00:07:32] It was, yes. Sorry, I should have clarified. I ended up going to, it's an American university that's based in Florida, but they have campuses in Germany, France, England, Switzerland, Spain. And my plan was to start off at the school in Heidelberg, which was where my family was from. It felt like fate to me, and I think it was. I started off there in Heidelberg and go for a semester or two there, then go to Paris for one or two, and then end in Spain for at least one semester. Um, but I loved Heidelberg so much. I loved my friends. I loved the lifestyle there that I just stayed for the entire two years. I graduated from Germany, or from the German campus, I should say.

BROWNING: [00:08:21] And at what point did you apply to the Peace Corps, when?

O'BRIEN: [00:08:27] That was, let's see. I came back, um. After graduation, I was planning on filling out the paperwork right away, but, um, as things were, I was in a relationship, and I had an apartment, I had a job, and I started to second guess, you know, my path. Maybe I

should just stay in Germany. I loved it so much there. Um, but in the end, I really wanted to come home to see my family. And so I came back to Saint Louis, and I worked for a while and just spent time with my family. And then I, after I think six months or so, I think it was, then I applied and I got in very quickly after that. I had to make a choice. Do you want me to go into that now or?

O'BRIEN: [00:09:23] So, um, the recruiter, I mean, there's, it's, it's a long process to go through the application. You answer a lot of questions and there's a lot of interviewing. And because I had helped my father with that business, which was a home improvement business, um, they wanted to talk about that a lot, you know, because it's dealing with math and it's dealing with construction and that sort of thing. And, um, so they, but I had also had a lot of experience working with horses. When I was 12, I worked at a carriage company, and, um, so I worked in the stables there, and I took care of the horses. So I had a lot of experience with animals. So they had offered me two choices to work somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa in water sanitation, or to work somewhere in Central America in animal husbandry. And, uh, he wanted the decision at that moment.

O'BRIEN: [00:10:22] And at that moment, I was having a lot of trouble with my allergies. And, you know, my allergies had developed over time in regards to cats and dogs and things like that. And so in that moment, I, I felt like I really wanted to not be working around animals that intensely. And, um, Africa just, I mean, even though he wouldn't. I asked a lot of questions to try to get him to tell me more information about where in these places it would be. But he was, he was very, um, adamant that I couldn't know anything about the country and it had to be about the work. And I thought, you know, water is really important. Water is life. Um, and I think that would, you know, I can pet puppies almost any time. But, um, to do something like that, it just seemed really like I was getting at the heart of the mission of Peace Corps. And so I, I decided to go to Africa.

BROWNING: [00:11:28] Uh huh. And when you graduated from college, what was your degree in?

O'BRIEN: [00:11:34] International relations and diplomacy.

BROWNING: [00:11:38] Very good. So how long was it from time of application until you were accepted?

O'BRIEN: [00:11:46] I don't remember exactly. It was, it was fairly quick. I, I seem to remember it was, um, within a matter of months. Yeah.

BROWNING: [00:11:56] And how did you feel when, when you got the notification that you were accepted?

O'BRIEN: [00:12:01] Ecstatic. Overjoyed. Uh, terrified. Um, a little, uh, shocked, I guess, as well. Just, it was a mix of emotions. Um, it's almost like, uh, someone coming and telling you suddenly that you're going to be a rock star or something in a lot of ways. It's just, you don't expect it, I guess. For you yourself, you always think, you know, I won't get something like this. And then when it happens, it's just, uh. It's, it's something really special.

BROWNING: [00:12:36] Well, you don't want to get your hopes up too high.

O'BRIEN: [00:12:39] No, exactly. And they tell you don't, you know, they say, don't walk into this process thinking that some, you're going to go down a particular path. You're probably going to end up in a completely different path if you end up along a path at all. And so it's, it's really, um, you have to walk into a situation like that with very reasonable expectations. And I tried to do that. I mean, I will admit that my hopes were up. Um, but I, I don't know, I guess I just really didn't think that it would really come to pass. And, and when it did, I was very happy.

BROWNING: [00:13:19] Uh, and what did your friends and family, uh, what was their reaction?

O'BRIEN: [00:13:24] It was a mix. There was a mix. I mean, um. It, there's a whole range. Um, there were some that were overjoyed and super

excited for me. They were, um, some wanted to live vicariously through me. Others were terrified. And they were, you know, they expressed why Africa? You know, I said, well, that's not really up to me, you know, where you go. It's, um. And what's wrong with going to Africa? You know, they need things. Why not go to a place where there is need, you know? And it's a program that's been, I mean, it's different probably for you when you went it was a much newer program, but by the time I went, it had been established for quite some time. It was not the first rodeo for the training staff and everything.

O'BRIEN: [00:14:16] So there are systems in place that are very, um, that they really take the safety and security of all of their volunteers very seriously. And that is evident throughout their literature and throughout anyone that you speak to about their service personally. They, they say, you know, that they feel, um, pretty confident when they're put into this situation of traveling to this foreign country. I mean, some people change their mind down the road. There were some, because realities can be different than imagination. But, um, they, they really try hard to, uh, keep the safety of their volunteers highest in their minds.

O'BRIEN: [00:15:03] So I tried to, you know, tell everyone that I spoke to about this possibility coming up in my life that, um, you know, I didn't know what to expect, but I was going to take it one day at a time and that they should do the same thing, that they should be happy for me and be supportive. And almost all were. But there were some with very serious reservations about going so far away. And they were, um, they didn't. I had to give them ample evidence of the systems in place to, to make them feel more comfortable about the whole situation.

BROWNING: [00:15:41] Mm hmm. Well, how did you mentally prepare yourself for entering into two years of Peace Corps service?

O'BRIEN: [00:15:50] Strangely enough, food was not a really a big part of my life up until then. It didn't really concern me. But for some reason, um, the more I pictured my life in Africa, the more I, uh, was starting to think

about the loss of things like pizza and, uh, ice cream and, you know, croissants and cakes and things like that. And, um, I ended up gaining about 20 pounds before I left. I was really quite small and, um, so not much fit me. But I got up, got onto the plane and, um, and, uh, because, you know, I kept thinking this might be my last piece of pizza, so I'm going to have 2 or 3 instead of one. Um, and so it was it's kind of comical, uh, you know, thinking about that.

O'BRIEN: [00:16:54] And, and also, I think I had, I did have very fantastical ideas about the remoteness. Um, and I didn't really have, like I said, internet was, you know, it still fledgling back then in a lot of ways. And so, um, and especially over there, you know, there wasn't a huge connection over to there. So I, I didn't really have enough knowledge and, uh, um, experience to, to know what I should bring with me. And so I was thinking of these, you know, sort of jeeps out in the desert kind of thing. And I had to have a tent and a sleeping bag and, you know, batteries and, uh, radios that you could crank up. And these things did become useful, but there were other things that probably would have been, um, far more useful for me as well. So, like a camera to record my experience, which I have very few pictures and they're all from other people. And so that's my biggest regret.

BROWNING: [00:18:03] Mm hmm. So how much time was there between you getting your acceptance and leaving for training?

O'BRIEN: [00:18:13] Seems, it's, it's been a while. I feel like it was a matter of weeks or like months or something. It was very, it was very short. It was all, once, once it happened, it was kind of a snowball running at that point. I think it was a matter of months before I was on the plane.

BROWNING: [00:18:31] So your recruiter was pretty accurate in telling you here's your choice.

O'BRIEN: [00:18:38] Oh, yes.

BROWNING: [00:18:38] Water sanitation in Mali.

O'BRIEN: [00:18:40] Yes.

BROWNING: [00:18:41] Or animal husbandry in Central America.

O'BRIEN: [00:18:44] Correct.

BROWNING: [00:18:44] Or wherever. So, so you knew, um, right away that when you were invited, you knew generally where you were going.

O'BRIEN: [00:18:54] Well, once I agreed to a program, then he told me where I was going, and, um, he told me the country and, um, he gave me some bits of resources. They did send me some information in the mail, a packet. And so I was able to look through that. But it's not like today where you can Google everything and, you know, and suddenly you're a master at knowing everything. Um, if you're, you know, uh, studious enough, but, um. Yeah. So I didn't know when I agreed to it, but once I did agree to it at that moment, then he said, okay, are you ready to know where you're going to go? And I said, yes. And then he asked me again, are you still willing to go? I said, I've never heard of Mali.

O'BRIEN: [00:19:40] Most people, when I say that I've been to Mali, they say, don't you mean Bali? And they think of the island, this beautiful island, you know, it's tropical and gorgeous and flowers everywhere. No, Mali is not like that. It's a landlocked country, um, home to Timbuktu. And it's the, you know, the desert is creeping closer every day, every day and every year. And so it was a very dry climate there. It wasn't, um, it wasn't that sort of place.

BROWNING: [00:20:12] Did you, um, have any second thoughts before leaving, uh, about what you were doing?

O'BRIEN: [00:20:19] Yes. Yeah. You know, frequently. It's, you have so many different conversations with people, friends, family, where they make you second guess what you're doing. And, um, and a lot of times I thought, well, is this the right thing for me to do? Should I go to graduate school instead? You know, there are other paths that I could

take to get into foreign service, but, um, the more I thought about it, the more I was like, I felt that this was the path I was to take, you know, that this it really felt like this is where I had been destined to go.

O'BRIEN: [00:20:56] Um, I had done, um, help through my church in middle school and in high school. So we had gone to a lot of different communities and, and helped with Habitat for Humanity and things like that. And so I felt in that sense I was a little bit prepared. Um, but this was something way outside of the league of, of anything that I had done before. And so it was momentous. It was, I mean, Africa. Just the list of shots I had to get at the doctor and, you know, the, you should see the. It was a brand new WHO card and it was, you know, I think there was something like 23 lines that were filled out. Um, there were a lot of shots and there were a lot of warnings about medicines that I was going to have to take during the time that I was there, and creams that I would have to use to protect myself from the sun, from the mosquitoes and, um, you know, warnings about water and all sorts of diseases that you can encounter there.

O'BRIEN: [00:21:53] And then there's always, you know, just the, the difference in societal and government structure. Um, you know, there's not going to be a police station at every corner. You know, it's, you're not going to have the same sort of structure that you're used to out there. It's going to be remote. It's going to be at times, um, there's going to be a sense of desperation in certain cases if you get ill. And so they do tell you about all of this. And, and you second guess yourself many times. But I, I felt that the calling for me was, um, deep enough and the need was strong enough, and I, I just really felt like I was meant to do that. And so I had my, my mind made up and I decided to, to move forward.

BROWNING: [00:22:48] Well, great. So you decided to take the plunge.

O'BRIEN: [00:22:52] Exactly.

BROWNING: [00:22:52] And so then it was time for training. So where and how were you trained for your assignment?

O'BRIEN: [00:22:59] That's really interesting. They had developed a, um, a, a fake village. Um, it looks like a little fake village near a real village. Um, not too far from a river, and it's in one of the lush areas just outside of Bamako, which is the capital city, and they call it Tubaniso, which means house of the doves, and as you know, the, the icon or the, um, what would you call it? The logo for Peace Corps is of the doves, you know, and, you know, doves represent peace. And so this fake village they named Tubaniso, the house of the doves, and there is a facility for, um, gatherings and for meals. And it was a shelter, um, also in case of inclement rain or, or weather. And then there was another one that was open air but covered. So because it gets really hot there. So you have to have someplace else to go where you can cool off and get a little bit of a breeze. And then they would have these little huts here and there.

O'BRIEN: [00:24:11] There were little training huts where we would, um, have, you know, there are about 80 plus languages in Mali alone, and we're all going to different places. And so they tried to get, um, people speaking a language close enough to what they'll be encountering in their village, to prepare them. Um, everybody has to learn French. So everybody has French class. Everybody has to have cultural, um, lessons and geography lessons and lessons on what sort of, um, animals and plants you're going to encounter. So you don't encounter the wrong ones or eat anything that you're not supposed to, that sort of thing. But in these little language huts, we would have, you know, sort of 3 to 5 people depending on the language. And you would have your language instructor who is there to teach you that particular language, and you'd have all of these different lessons over the course of three months. Plus you have your sector training as well.

BROWNING: [00:25:13] These, the people doing language training were Mali, Malians?

O'BRIEN: [00:25:18] Yes, yes. And we also had um, sector areas where, um, you would go. We had five different sectors. We had water san [sanitation], that was mine. Um, health. Um, then we had, uh, animal

husbandry. We had agriculture and then HIV AIDS. So we had five sectors. And they would each meet in their different areas, and those areas were set up specifically for their tasks that they would be working on. So we had tools and implementation there in our training area that we could use for working with concrete to make bricks for wells, and working with concrete to make pads for latrines and all sorts of things. Um, and then, uh, let's see, we also had a medical area and then a play area, a big field that they would keep clear so we could play soccer every once in a while. Another area for, um, volleyball.

O'BRIEN: [00:26:22] And then the sleeping area. We only slept there for the first couple of nights, and then we were transplanted to the neighboring village, and we were given a host family. And then we would travel back and forth every day from the, um, our host family in the village to the training facility. And so they gradually allow you to get exposure to living outside, you know, it's just baby steps. And then at some point during the training, they send you out for what they call demystification. That happens, I think, within the first two weeks where they demystify this experience for you. This is what reality is going to be like. And they ship you out and they let you, um, stay with a volunteer that's currently serving somewhere in the country, and you go in groups of 2 or 3 I think.

O'BRIEN: [00:27:15] I was in a group of two and we stayed for, I think it was about 2 or 3 days with someone in their village, and they showed us what life was like for them. We got to see what they had at their, um, house and in their, in their village and what they were working on. And then we all came back and we shared our experiences. Then later on in training, they did what's called, um. Oh, my, my memory is failing me on this. Um, it's a extended field based training, something like that. Where we go, I think it was for a full week and a half or two weeks, and we would stay with a volunteer who was working on a project, and they would allow us to work with them on, on the project. And I went to a water san volunteer's place way out in Dogon country, and we worked on building a well with, uh, with his well mason team. That was very inspirational.

O'BRIEN: [00:28:19] So that's three months of, of that. And then at the end there's a ceremony and we're no longer trainees. Now we're officially volunteers, and we get to go on a small shopping trip to get incidentals for our, um, for our hut. And then they take, you know, take everybody out and, um, in groups, small groups to where they're supposed to go or, you know, Mali's a big country. It's about twice the size of Texas.

O'BRIEN: [00:28:45] And so, um, they kind of have these, what they call, we call them stage houses or training houses, and they have one in each of the different regions. And it kind of gives the volunteers a home base where they can come together and exchange ideas, get books, trade books. Um, they, they also have libraries there where they can do research about their particular sector and do planning for their projects, and then they can go back out to their villages without having to come all the way back to the Peace Corps headquarters, because that's quite a long trip for the people that are really far out there. Um, but that's, that is the experience of training for at least in Mali. It's different depending on which country you're in.

BROWNING: [00:29:35] About how many people were in your training group?

O'BRIEN: [00:29:39] Ours was the largest they had had so far. I think we had about 60 in our group. It was a big group.

BROWNING: [00:29:50] Did you feel that the training you had adequately prepared you for your assignment?

O'BRIEN: [00:29:56] As much as could be. I thought they did a really good job. I mean, for some people, everybody has a different experience, even if you're, you know, the next village over from another volunteer. Everybody has a different experience. And I know everybody gets, when you're going through the process of joining Peace Corps and everybody tells you that, you kind of, ahh, you know, you get kind of sick of hearing that because you, you, you kind of want answers. You want to know as much as you can in the beginning. And you really

have to let go of that, because you have to just absorb whatever you can and make the experience your own. I thought training was very, was more than adequate for me. They taught me, um, they sent me out with a box full of medications that I knew, uh, how to administer to myself with a book that explained, uh, symptoms of, uh, diseases or illnesses that I might come across, uh, during my time there.

O'BRIEN: [00:30:56] And, you know, they can't make me a medical professional in, in three months. That's, you know, you can't expect that. And they can't make me a master of, uh, two languages in that time. They can't make me a master of the culture. You really just have to absorb whatever you can and try to be as open as you can. And then when you go out there, do your best. Um.

BROWNING: [00:31:20] What's your favorite memory of training?

O'BRIEN: [00:31:23] Of training?

BROWNING: [00:31:24] Mm hmm.

O'BRIEN: [00:31:24] Oh, goodness. Um. Um. So, uh, during training in country, there was also a brief three day training, I forgot to mention this, uh, before we even left the States. Um, everybody flew to Philadelphia, and we stayed at a hotel there and had sort of a conference style training where we talked about cultural shock and what it meant to be, uh, a responsible person overseas and how to represent your country well and to be, um, you know, conscious of differences in cultures. So that way you don't come across as pushing your cultural values on them and, and just being open to having different, uh, living amongst a culture that you may not necessarily always agree with.

O'BRIEN: [00:32:24] For instance, they have, uh, polygamy there. Um, men often marry more than one wife, and it's just a fact of life there. And, you know, you can hate it as much as you want. Or maybe that's something that thrills a guy or something and they're, you know, curious about that sort of thing. Who knows? Uh, but you have to keep a distance from that. You have to you keep your opinions sort of

to yourself, and you have to be open to living amongst people that you may not always agree with in terms of things like that. So that was a little three day training there and that was very good. And it gives you a chance to meet the other trainees and, and really. Before you get on that plane to go, you know, halfway across the world, it gives you that last minute to really solidify your, your decision to, to go into, um, into this as a trainee.

O'BRIEN: [00:33:22] But, um, my favorite thing, sorry, circling back to what you were asking me, my favorite thing during training was actually in country. There was, um, a trainee that had been complaining of something wrong with his finger and had gone to see the medical professionals several times and they, you know, kind of put some ointment on there and, and put a bandage on there. And it just didn't go away, it just kept getting worse and worse. And they said that they thought it might be a flesh eating bacteria. Now, none of us really knew what was going on with this.

O'BRIEN: [00:33:58] But he chose, in the middle of one of our, I think it was a cultural session, um, where the whole group was together at this point, and we were out in the what we called a *gua*, which is an open air, uh, meeting place, but it's covered, so you can get a little bit of a breeze in there. And he chose to wait until we were all together there to, um, ask a question about that. And he sort of asked it, like, as if he were asking for a friend. Only you knew that he wasn't. And then everybody was turning around to look at him like, what? You have a flesh eating bacteria? And, and you could see just sort of the, the blood draining from his face and from several of the people sitting around him.

O'BRIEN: [00:34:47] So it was, and, you know, um, it's possible to encounter strange illnesses like that during your time there. I mean, you're out in the elements and, um, you know, medical care is different there. Not everybody goes to see a medical professional. Some go to spiritual healers or natural healers. And so, um, you know, there are, there's there are cases of people getting schistosomiasis from, um, wading through water because the truck breaks down on the road to their

village. Um, and so they, they didn't, um, irresponsibly go swimming in the river against the advice of the medical professionals that trained them during training. They just were trying to get back to their village. And, um, and so it's, it's things like that that pop up that are very interesting about, um, being in a place like Mali.

BROWNING: [00:35:42] So. When you arrived at the airport prior to training starting, what were your first impressions of the country?

O'BRIEN: [00:35:54] There was a lot going on in that, um, hour or so between, maybe two hours between the airplane seat and sitting there under the *gua* for the first time as a trainee. Um, when I stepped off of the plane, it was dark. It was sort of the middle of the night. Um, flights aren't always convenient when you're flying to developing more, uh, countries. And so, um, it was so dark and it had been such a long, uh, journey up until that point. And, you know, your emotions are so, uh, busy. They're everywhere, and you've got so much going on in your head and you're so excited, but you're so tired at the same time. And then you walk out and it's dark and you can't see anything.

O'BRIEN: [00:36:44] And so it's at that moment for me, it was really hard because I wanted to see everything right then in that moment. I wanted to be, I wanted to know where I was, and it was dark and it's an airport. And, um, you know, it's not always very well lit in a developing country, too, so you can't really see what's going on, but you can see just far enough to get to the next point. And I think the biggest thing that struck me, especially because I couldn't see anything in that moment, was the smell. Um, every place that I've traveled to has had a different aroma, you know? I can think right now what, um, fresh bread, a baguette in Paris smells like. And it just is amazing. Just the thought of that brings back so many memories. And, um, or schnitzel in Germany, you know, or a beer in Bavaria and, um.

O'BRIEN: [00:37:46] And in, in Africa, uh, what you find is that there's an absence of a lot of things and a it's, it's replaced with natural things. So we live our lives in the States just surrounded by chemicals all the

time. You wash your clothes in a machine that has, you know, some sort of detergent that's mixed on it. Then you put it into a dryer and it, you know, it's processed in that way with heat and fabric softeners. So there's all these chemical smells. And then, uh, you walk outside and there might be, you know, some sort of a paper mill down the road. So there's that strong smell. Then you've got the engines of the cars and the exhaust and all of these things you get used to. You don't really detect them anymore from day to day when you're walking around.

O'BRIEN: [00:38:39] But, um, that was what hit me the most, was just the absence of that. You know, suddenly I smelled my own laundry detergent very strongly on me and, um, the perfume of those around me that were also trainees, and then the volunteers that came to meet us, to help us to the training facility, um, the absence of it on them, you know, and the clothing, the fabrics of most people who are traveling to, um, Mali are, are coming back and forth from France and they're usually business people or dignitaries of some type. And so they, they dress finely, but they dress in clothing that is different from what we experience in the United States. Their suits are a very particular kind of suit that they wear there.

O'BRIEN: [00:39:33] And, um, and then the traditional dress that they wear and the ladies often wear, whether they're business or dignitaries or not, um, it's, uh, it's very beautiful. There's a wrap for the head. There's usually a very poofy sleeved shirt with sort of a ruffle on the bottom and then a wrap skirt, and it's usually matched, the skirt, the shirt and the, the wrap on the head. And a lot of times people just wear flip flops. Flip flops are the shoe for every person in Mali. Um, sometimes they're made out of tires, sometimes they come, usually they're bought from vendors from China. So they're sort of, you know, like cheap plastic or something like that. But, um, yeah.

O'BRIEN: [00:40:23] So, um. It was the smell, the, the fabrics and the texture, the, the darkness and just that sort of mystery of, of where I was and not being able to see anything. Um, and it was loud at the airport, of course. And from the drive from the airport to the training facility, I was also struck because now some sights are starting to come out

because there's a fairly well-lit street from, through the town, through the capital, and then off to the training facility and along the road are sort of, um, I'm guessing they're sort of marketing villages that are, um, put there just to sell wares to travelers along the road. Um, and. I was. This was probably the biggest shock because seeing them, they look, you don't know what they are when you're first getting there.

O'BRIEN: [00:41:25] Now, I know that they're sort of just very rickety shelters for merchants to sell things by the side of the road. But at the time I thought, oh my God, these are houses. How can someone live in something like this? Wow. They really do need our help, you know? And you start to jump to these conclusions. Um, and these are just *guas* again, they're, you know, a shady structure that are open along the sides that you can get a breeze, but you can be sheltered from the very strong sun that just beats down on you during the, the summer. But, um, and it was quite a long trip from the airport to the training facility. And then when we got there, you know, you're always coached. Don't let anybody touch your bag. Don't, you know, be careful of your bag. And you think, oh, my gosh, you know, I don't even know where my bag is at this point because the volunteers that come and meet you, they, they get your luggage for you and they say, don't worry, it'll be in the car.

O'BRIEN: [00:42:23] And you think that's just what they want you to think! You know, and all sorts of silly things go through your head. But, you know, there are people there to meet you and calm you down. And, and they bring you right to the, the, um, the cars that have these sort of people movers, um, that take you to the training facility. And then when you get there, it's really dark. There just aren't any streetlights or anything. I mean, there aren't streets, just sort of dirt roads out that way. And, um, it is lit in the *gua* area where they have us meet, and we're all just exhausted at this point.

O'BRIEN: [00:43:02] And, this is actually really funny. They have. They have these, um, chairs that, you know, they are not manufactured abroad. They're definitely made locally by, uh, someone who knows, um, who makes these chairs, but they're a little bit rickety, and, um, they, there

wasn't maybe a lot of thought put into the design. And so they take, um, a basic chair structure that's made out of metal and they weld that together. But then for the part that you're sitting on and you're leaning back against, they chose this very sturdy, sort of, um, flexible plastic material cord, and they would wrap it and then pull it down, wrap it and then pull it. But they were doing it in a vertical manner. So when you sat on it, it rode into places that it shouldn't ride. And we called them the, um, uh, I don't I don't know that I want to say this for all of posterity, but floss chairs, let's just put it that way. They weren't very comfortable to sit in, but. And so people would, you know, bring things with them to sit down onto the seat and then sit onto those. That way they wouldn't have to be uncomfortable when they sat on those.

O'BRIEN: [00:44:36] But here we are, you know, um, just off of the plane, just off of this car ride, not knowing where we are, what's going on. It's in the middle of the night. Where are our bags, we don't know. We're hungry. We're thirsty. What's going on? Who are these people? And now we're sitting on these crazy chairs, trying to look sophisticated and ready to do our work and to receive instructions so that way we can do a really good job. And, um, half of the people are just mumbling to themselves. Are you comfortable in these chairs? You know, as an aside to one another and, uh, just trying to keep a straight face during that. But, um, I should have said that that was my, my favorite story from training.

BROWNING: [00:45:22] Okay, great. And you survive the peril of the, of the chairs in the, under the shelter. And completed three months of language and technical training. And then you were ready to go out to your village. So describe how that went.

O'BRIEN: [00:45:41] Unfortunately for me, um, my village wasn't ready for me. Uh, something had happened. Um, and they, I guess the person who was supposed to build certain parts of my, um, uh, latrine and certain aspects of repairing the house that I was to live in. Um, the work just hadn't been done. I don't know what the circumstances were. And, and the more I asked about it, the more they said, don't worry, don't worry. We'll, we'll take care of everything. And someone actually from

the Peace Corps staff, um, I'm pretty sure it was Adama who was just an amazing, is an amazing person. Um, I think he went out to the village and personally saw to the, the finalization of the things that were supposed to be done to have my, uh, my, my little mud hut ready for me.

O'BRIEN: [00:46:35] And I started to get very nervous during this time period because I think I was about, I ended up being two weeks late going out to village, where I was just in this limbo. I was staying at the stage house, not knowing when I was going to go out to village, feeling somehow personally responsible for this, um, at times, and other times worried that I was going to encounter people in a village that weren't going to want any help or didn't maybe want me there, or I didn't know what to think. Um, and so it was a little bit, um, harrowing during those two weeks. It made the suspense even worse.

O'BRIEN: [00:47:12] But I spent a lot of time with the director of my sector and talked to him, and, um, I read a lot more books about techniques of what I could do in village, and I knew some information about my village. I had already visited there once. Um, and, um, stayed for one night, so I knew that it was remote. Only about 500 people lived there, depending on the season, because people have seasonal jobs there. And, um, you know, my little mud hut was a two room square mud hut, um, where they build the structure out of, um, very twisted, gnarled, very dense wood that they have there and, um, in the shape of a *gua*. But then they add these mud bricks to it to create the walls and some very small windows and a doorway, uh, into the room.

O'BRIEN: [00:48:11] And, um, and then it has these, an exposed roof where you have, you can see the, um, the very large branches that they use there. But then on top of that, you see the, the mud, and they don't use the bricks on the top. They just sort of throw it on there and, and smooth it out. And so they have to repair these once a year because the rains come every year, there's a rainy season, and it nearly disintegrates the side of the house. They always come from the east. So the east side of the house needs, in this case, there's a very, um, logical reason for pointing your door in a certain direction, and it's to

save you from your house melting when the rains come. Uh, and so they fortify the eastern sides of the houses much more than they do the other sides.

O'BRIEN: [00:49:04] And they create channels in the roof mud so that way the water will go a certain way. And they, they have these, um, directional, what do you call those that go along the side of a house that, uh.

BROWNING: [00:49:21] Gutters?

O'BRIEN: [00:49:21] The gutters, yes. It's, it's just a simple gutter, um, very straight, that shoots the water off and not down the side of the roof, uh, down the side of the wall. Excuse me. Um, so you have all these, um, little square huts, but there are also other villages that have round huts, but that's a different, um, ethnic group than the people that I was staying with. The people that I stayed with, they were Bamana people, and they spoke, uh, Bamanankan, which we call Bambara. And. Right. So I, um, there are different ethnic groups around, a lot of different ethnic groups around the country and a lot of different languages. And so things aren't always the same from village to village. And in my village, like I said, we had these, um, square or rectangular structures, mud structures for, um, our dwellings.

O'BRIEN: [00:50:20] And they were usually, uh, separated by, um, what we call compounds. So oftentimes they would create, um, a mud, um, what would you call it? A fence, maybe, or a wall. A wall, um, to keep out certain, um, wild animals and to keep, um, maybe just some, um, security for your own personal, um, area. And it depended on your family structure how that would look. Uh, so, for instance, my family, my host family in my village, uh, there was a father, and he had two wives, and I'm not. Gosh, I don't know how many kids at this point. Um, but they had three. No, sorry, four buildings in their compound. Um, his house. Then each wife had a house, and then he had, they had a kitchen. And there were other smaller, um, buildings with that. He had sort of a storage area. Then he also had, um, a grain storage area. And that was round with a little thatch roof.

O'BRIEN: [00:51:38] Um, but when I first, when I finally got to go to village, I stopped at the, the village closest to mine, which was the market town, and there was a volunteer there who was in my group. And so it was a familiar face. She'd already been out there for two weeks and she's like, oh, you'll be fine, you know, because I'm still really excited and nervous and all of that. And, uh, so she kind of talked me through how things went with her and, um. And that made it, um, a little bit easier. You know, everybody else has been doing this for two weeks, Ria. It's okay. You'll be fine. And so we drove out from the market town towards my village, and, um, Peace Corps drops everyone off initially.

O'BRIEN: [00:52:27] They, um, they have already spoken to the village, and they've organized all of this in advance, so they drop you off and whatever you have shopped for that you're bringing to village is with you at that point. And so they have a people mover, um, they schedule everything out who they're going to take to which village and when. And because I was two weeks past everybody else, they had plenty of vehicles to spare for me. So I kind of got star treatment. I, I will admit, um, it was all about me that day. And, um, so we loaded it up with the things that I had gotten in, um, in the market town, in Bamako, sorry, in the capital. And we drove, um, the half day voyage from, um, the, oh, I think we actually, we left from the Peace Corps office, not from the training village. And, um, we drove about a half a day.

O'BRIEN: [00:53:25] We went to the market town, as I said, first and we met with the volunteer that had already been there for two weeks. And, um, then I guess they just made some final arrangements, and her, uh, work partner ended up coming with us, and she did too. She said she wanted to come with us, and I was like, I would love you to. And so she drove the, I guess it was by car. It's maybe 20 minutes or so, but, um, I drove out past the Fula village and, um, all the way out to my village, but they stopped, um, just outside of village. And, um, I guess it's sort of traditional to do that. That way they can see who's coming

and know that you're not, um, not supposed to be there, that you're welcome there, and that you come peacefully.

O'BRIEN: [00:54:21] And we all kind of stood outside of the, um, I guess you call it a van. I keep calling them people movers, but they don't look like vans anyway. They're European vehicles. But, um, so we, we stood outside of the Peace Corps van and kind of looked into town, and I could hear some noises there. I could tell that something was going on. And as it turned out, they wanted us to wait just outside of town a certain amount of time. They were going to give us a signal because they were all assembling in a, in a place and.

BROWNING: [00:54:54] For a special welcome?

O'BRIEN: [00:54:55] A special, yes, a special welcome. I had no idea that this was going to happen, by the way. And so we drove not into village, but just because you can't drive through villages, there's just no room. It's meant for people to walk, um, you know, from house to house. So we just parked just outside of the village, and we left our my things at the van, and, um, and then we went to the other side of town, which isn't very far because, like I said, it's a very small village. And so we walked all of two minutes to a very sacred place for the village. It's this ginormous tree. I can't, I don't even know how old this tree could possibly be. It's huge and there's just nothing around it. And this is the place where all chiefs in history have been buried when they've passed. And it's a very sacred place.

O'BRIEN: [00:55:54] And all of the elders were assembled in, um, in a certain place. The chief had his place where he was, um, you know, they're sort of lounging on these, uh, plastic woven mats that they like to, to use there. And, and then there are groups of people just everywhere. There's just people everywhere. And I think, um, some people from neighboring villages had come because definitely there were not that many people in village. And so this was kind of a big deal. I was the first volunteer to ever live in this village. And, and so they were really super excited about having me there.

O'BRIEN: [00:56:31] And, um, they had brought in a griot, that is a traditional musician, and he, you know, was playing his, um, uh, *moni*, it's like a really big, um. It looks like a, a mix between a drum and a guitar, or maybe a drum and a cello, but it, it goes out from his stomach. You don't hold it, um, and cradle it like you would a guitar. It sits in front of the belly and then the, the part that holds the strings, the neck shoots out straight, and then he just sort of plucks it just in front of his chest. And, and he's singing and, and they sing so loudly and, um, there are songs where people sing along and then other songs where people sort of repeat things.

O'BRIEN: [00:57:31] And there's this, I mean, it was overwhelming, and it was it was almost a little bit too much. I was like, what is going on here? I mean, there are so many people. And they were all just, you know, the music struck up and it was like a surprise party that I would have never in my life expected. And they were all so welcoming. And, um, and everybody was talking and milling about and shaking my hand, and I didn't know, you know, who everybody was, but I just had this huge smile on my face. I must, my eyes must have been the size of saucers. And, and I was just, like, drinking it all in, like, this is amazing. And, um. And so we're all dancing around and I'm like, what do I do? And they're and they're like, just dance. And I thought, okay.

O'BRIEN: [00:58:23] And, um, and then we had speeches and, um, you know, there's you, you walk into village knowing, um, a little bit of language, but, you know, learning two languages at the same time is a bit much. And only over the course of three months, there's really only so much fluency you can have when you get out to site. And also there are regional and local dialects and, um. And so it's, it's a little bit difficult when you get out, you don't really know what everybody's saying. They could be saying awful things about you and you would never know. But they were fabulous. They were wonderful people. And, um, they are, the people in Mali are hands down amazing people.

O'BRIEN: [00:59:10] It is so important to, um, be hospitable and to treat your, uh, visitors with the utmost respect and care and to give them the seat of honor every time and to feed them even when they're not hungry.

And, um, and they're just wonderful, wonderful, happy people that love a good joke. And, um, and that's the best thing that you walk away from at the end of living in a place like Mali is, is a better sense of community, because that's the most important thing there, family and community and having each other's back and working together for the better of everyone there. And, um, you know, if you walk into that situation with a me, me, me attitude, um, you're going to probably walk out with that too. Um, but it's possible if you open up your mind and your heart to it, you will walk away. I'm most certainly a better person than when you, when you came in.

BROWNING: [01:00:18] Well, you said they, they would want to feed you. What did you think of the, of the local food in the village?

O'BRIEN: [01:00:26] Oh. I would never, ever tell them the truth, other than it's different than what, uh, you're raised with in the States. It is very different. Um, and they do the best they can with, um, very, very, very limited resources. I mean, it's, it's so dry there and the land is not very fertile. And on top of that, half the time they're growing cotton, which strips the land even further. So you've got a lot of dust blowing. Um, and, um, and it ends up in the food. And, you know, the facilities are, are limited, you know, the way they cook. Um, the, let's put it this way. On a daily basis, the, um, the meal is the same every day. So for breakfast, it's a porridge made of *tô*. Um, or I'm sorry, a porridge made of millet, which is what we use for birdseed here, which has sort of a greenish hue to it.

O'BRIEN: [01:01:30] And they just crack the seeds and boil it with some sort of bitter tasting, um, substance that they call a spice. And so what I would do to make it palatable for me, um, was to add Nido, which is a dry milk, um, substitute, I guess. And I would put a little bit in that, that would make it a little bit creamy. And then when I would be out at market, I would get sugar. They sell these clear plastic bags of sugar. Um, and so I would get a little bit of that and I would put that in there. And I, at some point after year one, I got ahold of some cinnamon and I brought that back and it was almost like having oatmeal. By that

point I had gotten used to it. So that's breakfast every day. Every day without fail, that is breakfast.

O'BRIEN: [01:02:24] And for lunch and dinner. Um, usually for lunch, definitely every day it's two what they call *tô*. And for dinner, usually it's also *tô*. But every once in a while, especially when I would buy things and give it to them because they refused for me to cook for myself. They were my host family and they said, you're part of the family. You will eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner with the family. I said, absolutely. But I got my own, they gave me my own for some reason and that was fine. I think maybe the medical team had said, you know, let her eat on her own because they didn't want, um, unwashed hands in the same, um, bowl. And that's what you do, you eat out of a bowl together. Normally as a family, you eat all together, and you, you use your right hand. The left hand is dirty. Very important to note that. That's the dirty hand. So you have to use your right hand when you're shaking hands and when you're handing things to people and when you're eating, always the right hand is the clean hand.

O'BRIEN: [01:03:26] And um, and so *tô* is made also from millet. This is the big staple crop in in Mali is, is millet. And it is, um, pulverized. The ladies do it every day. So it's part of the rhythm of life. Every morning you wake up to hearing what they call *susu*, which is a giant mortar and pestle, but it's made out of wood, and they use these and they pound it. And the ladies all stand along and they take turns pushing down, uh, the pestle to grind the millet petals, uh, excuse me, uh, pellets down until they get it to a powder. And then that's when they cook it. And they, the ladies also take turns cooking. So that way, um, you don't always have to cook every day.

O'BRIEN: [01:04:20] And so, family, this is another reason why family structure is so important. There you get a break every once in a while, right? Everybody comes together. The ladies help, um, help take the load. So maybe one day you're cooking, and the next day you're doing laundry, or you're just hanging out with the kids, or you're maybe working in the garden or something like that. So you have a little bit of variety from day to day, and you're not doing the same thing, um, all

of, all of the time. Right. So, um, uh, every, every day was the same meal. We had the porridge for breakfast, uh, *tô* for lunch and *tô* for dinner and that. So it was very carb heavy. You know, you have this millet grain and it's cooked to be sort of a paste and much the same consistency of something like Play-Doh. And you would pull some of that up with about three fingers.

O'BRIEN: [01:05:15] And then they have a sauce. Depending on the area that you're in, it might be more tomato based or it might be more peanut based. In my village it was much more plant based. They use the leaves of the baobab tree dried and then mixed with pulverized okra that had been dried as well. And so they made a little sauce out of those components. And so it had a very, you know, slimy texture to it, but you would dip the *tô* into this sauce and you would eat that. And for the first three months, I had a very difficult time eating the food. I lost a lot of weight. They were concerned. But by the end of the third month, I was, um, you know, I bucked up and I said, you know, this is just different. I've got to eat it every day for the next two years. So I just have to get used to it. And I was used to it by then.

O'BRIEN: [01:06:09] And now I still think about it. There are other foods that you can get there. Um, the peanut sauce is delicious and they would make that every once in a while. But it was, it was very special food, you know, so you wouldn't get it very often. Very rarely would we get meat, maybe once a week. Um, and when they serve the peanut sauce, it was usually with rice. Um, so I would try to get them rice as often as possible in the, the ingredients necessary to have these. But, um, they, they really preferred the *tô* and, and so that's uh, that was the basic diet for, for the two years that I was there. And I find myself missing it a lot.

BROWNING: [01:06:50] So tell us a bit about your health. Have any health issues when you were serving?

O'BRIEN: [01:06:57] Yes, indeed. We, um, uh, we all had health issues at one point in time or another, some were worse than others. You know, you're instructed in the beginning how to avoid things as much as

possible, but there is no perfect way to avoid things when you're living in these conditions. Especially during the rainy season, the mosquitoes get out of control. They're just swarming, and you can hear them just outside of your mosquito net. I would, you know, curl myself up as small as I could inside of that thing because it was only, you know, fit around my little cot and you could hear them [buzzes]. You have very high-pitched noise just waiting to get at you, and so you'd slather yourself with Deet and all sorts of really awful things to keep them away. And, um, they would go up your nose or, you know, things like that when they were really bad.

O'BRIEN: [01:07:55] But during the dry times, it was, um, a lot easier to avoid them. But I did end up getting malaria several times while I was there. Um, once I got it actually leaving. Uh, and so I had malaria when I came home and I knew exactly what it was. And I called my, my brother-in-law, who's a doctor, and I said, I have malaria. He goes, what? He's, he's thinking, you can't just self-diagnose. I said, brother, I have been doing it for the last two years. I've had malaria before. I know what I have. I need medicine now before it goes cerebral. And, um. And so he prescribed something for me, and, and I got the medicine, and I was, you know, after I had, you know, completely soaked my mother's couch with sweat, I, I got better and nursed myself back into Western civilization.

O'BRIEN: [01:08:49] But, um, yeah, I also got giardia, which is not pretty. Um. Uh, I think amoebas once as well. And these are mostly from eating street food. You know, you can't, when you're on trips, that's your most vulnerable time. Because when you're in your hut, when you're in your village, you have a certain amount of control over things. You can ask visitors to wash their hands with soap and water. You can make sure that your water is kept in a very, um, uh, very clean way. You can treat your water if it's, well water and filter it. If it's pump water, you don't really have to do anything to it at all. It's clean. And um, and then you can boil any water that you're, you're, you know, you think maybe is a little dubious.

O'BRIEN: [01:09:40] Um, so there, I mean, I don't want to give the impression that you're fighting off infection left and right. When you're in your village, uh, once you get that sense of security, sometimes it takes longer for some people than others. But, um, I started to feel very secure in my village, um, quite early on. And then, um. And I, and I had control over everything, you know, not necessarily my diet, uh, because like I said, that food was brought from the family. But, um, in terms of my water, which is the most important thing, but anybody handling your food really needs to be washing their hands properly. And when you're traveling in town for, um, you know, trainings or to try to get your funding for projects or things like that, that's when you're most, most vulnerable because you get hungry, you get thirsty, and you might run out of whatever you have with you.

O'BRIEN: [01:10:36] And then you have to buy from street vendors. And it may not be, uh, prepared well, and then you get sick. And so you have to always be cautious and carry a certain amount of, um, things with you to treat things. Like I used, you know, those little sample Tabasco, uh, bottles that are about an inch and a half tall. I had some of those, and I emptied them out, and I replaced the contents with the bleach used to treat my water. And so whenever I was in a situation where I would get water that I was unsure of, I would fill up my Nalgene, which is a refillable type of plastic water bottle. I'd fill that up with water and then I would treat the water, let it sit long enough to, um, work its magic. And then, um, and also I would let the, the lip of it dry out enough to where, because, you know, if the, the water around the lip of it is not treated, then you can get sick from that.

O'BRIEN: [01:11:36] So, um, you know that, that was one way that I used to keep myself safe during travel. But yeah, um, there were others that got much more sick and had to be medevaced. Um, but there, there were no sicknesses that, um, that were, uh, in the end, uh, fatal for our group. They could have been, but they were not.

BROWNING: [01:12:02] That's good to know. So you were, you were fed and healthy enough to work. Um, describe the, the place where you did your work and, and walk us through a typical day of your assignment.

O'BRIEN: [01:12:15] Right. So wake, shower from a bucket, and my, uh, open air latrine. Beautiful, wonderful thing that I miss, uh, so much. It was very freeing. You hear all the birds and all the wildlife around you. Every morning you wake up from them, from their sounds in the morning. You go to sleep to their sounds at night. And, uh. And it's all around you every day, you know, you're, you're, you're in the field. You, um, you don't have to dress in a suit, you know, if, uh. Well, in my case, I didn't. I was in a village atmosphere. There were some that were in larger cities that had to go to offices, and their experiences are different from mine. But I was living in a community, and I was, um.

O'BRIEN: [01:13:00] Uh, so in the beginning I had to do what's called a FAST. I didn't have to do it, but I chose to do this, which is a type of survey that's done over the course of a week or several weeks, depending on the size of the village and how many people are involved. And, um, and I met with all the interested parties in the village to figure out what their greatest need was. And they were telling me from the beginning, we need a well by the school. And I said, that's all well and good, but let's do this survey that, you know, I was trained on how to do this properly. And, you know, we need to, we need to collect a lot of data from everybody. And then we need to analyze it and then come up with the best thing that's, that your that your community needs. And they said, okay, we'll do your survey.

O'BRIEN: [01:13:41] So I met with everybody. I got to know people this way, which was probably the best thing that came from it. But it also, no, I'll take that back. The best thing came from knowing that the, the choice that they had decided on and the choice that I rested on from the results of the survey, that they aligned and that we had a common goal and purpose and mission. Because the only reason why they, they say to do this when you go in is because in some instances, this doesn't happen all the time, but they have grandiose ideas of what it means to get a volunteer in village. They say, we want a soccer stadium, you know, and, and you have to say, whoa, hold on, pump the brakes. We're not going to do a soccer stadium. I think there are

probably other needs that, uh, could be met with other more basic, um, things that we could do in, in village.

O'BRIEN: [01:14:34] And so, um, that, that was really, I felt confident after having done that survey, and I felt like I knew my village better. I had been able to see everybody's area in the village. I knew all of the water sources at that point. So then I had to get down to the business of, um, figuring out what it was going to take to dig a well there, and you have to know where the water table is. And so I had to descend the current wells in different spots. So that way I could test the soil to see what type of bricks I would have to use to form the walls of the well, and what sort of digging implements we might need to actually get down to the water table.

O'BRIEN: [01:15:22] The water table in my village was very, very low. It was really far down there. And bats had taken up residence in the middle portions, because when the water rises and the rainy season, that water table comes up. And so the edges of the well start to erode away. I think. Um, from day to day, there was no, there is no, you know, form of what I was doing. There are others that maybe are a teacher and so their days are very similar. Um, along the, for the duration of their two years. But for me, every day was a little bit different because there were, it was a longer process to get to where I needed to be. I was the only non-engineer in the group of trainees that were there for water san, so I had a lot more to prove when I walked into this situation, and I was very serious about it.

O'BRIEN: [01:16:28] I had them, and my work partner in the village was very nervous about me descending these wells because he knew that my life was in his hands, you know. They kind of, um, they take on the responsibility of providing and caring for a volunteer when they agree to have a volunteer in village. And it is, um, an honor to have a volunteer in village. And everybody, you know, around there wants to have a volunteer in their village. And when you, your village gets chosen, you're like, whoa, we better not mess this up. And I'm telling him, I want you to tie a rope around my waist and let me go down into this well and so I can get soil samples. And he's going, no! And I said,

yes. Don't worry. They know I'm going to do this. They're okay with this.

O'BRIEN: [01:17:22] We just, you know, I'll show you what we need to, to set up so that way I can do this safely. I had the, um, all of the information in the books that I had with me, the training books about how, uh, how big the diameter of the wood and what wood types I would need in order to create the structure to hold my weight for, um, the descent into the well. And so, you know, I, I had everything very well drafted when I sat down and talked to him through this, it was just the, the only, he wanted this to happen. Um, and he, he wanted to go through the process, but he was just nervous and my well-being, my well-being was at the top of his priority list. And he thought, I want somebody else to do this. And I said, no, it has to be me. And so, you know, from day to day it was a little bit different. Let's just put it that way.

BROWNING: [01:18:16] Was he a government person or just somebody in the village who was assigned to help you?

O'BRIEN: [01:18:21] He, he was not. He had no official title. He was just a well respected, educated man in village. Not everyone in village life is educated, especially not girls. Um, but he, he knew French and um, which was very helpful for me because Bambara was harder. There aren't words for some things in Bambara, you know. And so you have to switch back and forth from French and Bambara in order to get a point across a lot of times. And in some cases, they have assimilated certain French words into their Bambara language because they didn't have them before the French came. Um, so he was, um, just a respected, educated man in, in village. And he was also, not only was he my work partner, he was also my host father.

BROWNING: [01:19:14] I see. So after you did the well descents and survived, what was the, what was the next step to, to get you where you needed to be?

O'BRIEN: [01:19:25] So then I had to draft a proposal for a grant. And there is a lot that's needed before you can actually do that, because you have to have a full assessment of the supplies, tools, equipment, um, everything that you'll need in order to bring the project from zero to done. And, um, so, um, I had also addressed some other needs that I saw, um, in this project. The main part of the project was the well by the school. Um, but along with that, I said, you know, wouldn't it be nice if we had some, um, some areas for the ladies to wash the clothes where the water wouldn't pool up and make breeding grounds for mosquitoes? And they thought that was a good idea. So we decided to put one next to each of the wells, well, one next to the pump where most of the ladies did the laundry. But then we included one next to the new well that was going up, and we planted some trees next to it so they would have some shade.

O'BRIEN: [01:20:26] And then we also, there was a big problem, um, in the areas where they fed the cattle. Um, some of the villagers had some cows and so there was a lot of standing water where, uh, next to the well that they would use to feed the cows. So instead of using the traditional troughs, I designed something that I saw, um, when I went on my training trip, the field trip, I saw them. Someone had built this system where there was a, a reservoir right next to the well, so you can pull the water up and then put the water into the reservoir. It would travel down channels, um, downhill to these troughs, these circular troughs that were just distant enough from each other that the cows could get around them and they could get water easily. And it kept the, the water, uh, waste down a lot. So I included that as a part of the project as well.

O'BRIEN: [01:21:24] So I had to come up, I had to calculate how much sand I would need. Gravel, cement bags, um, what sort of fees I would have to pay to get the, uh, brick making, like, the brick molds and then the, you know, because there's a set up charge for that, and then there's also the purchase price of it. And then, um, then you also have to factor in a certain amount of, um. You know, you don't, you don't want to count exactly how many bricks you're going to need for it, and then make your, your supply list match that. You need to have a

contingency, because not all of the bricks that you create will be whole and perfect. Some will fall over or get trampled or whatever. And so you have to put a certain percent contingency and make extra. And then there's all the digging implements.

O'BRIEN: [01:22:19] And then there's the training of the well mason staff. Um, so there's a whole, um, you know, you have to be able to pay them for their time and, uh, and the education that they're going to give, that you're going to give them. And then it is, it was, part of the plan was the formation of that well mason team, right? That they would then learn a skill by doing this together with me. And then they could go on to do this in other villages during off season when they're not in the fields or doing some other sort of work, that they would have, um, another skill set after I left.

BROWNING: [01:22:59] How receptive were the villagers to, to your plan?

O'BRIEN: [01:23:04] Oh, they were in, they were all for it. They were. They wanted the well, that was the thing that they really wanted. They had already made up their mind about that. He had already, you know, had extensive, extensive conversations. My work partner had extensive, um, conversations with, uh, the, um, the people in village. So I think they had already made up their minds before I got there, and everybody was on board with it. So it was just, they were just, you know, it was like Christmas. They're like, yeah, we're getting what we want. This is great. So whatever, however it was going to happen, they were like, good, however, we can get this done, let's do it. And they jumped in and they were, they were wonderful throughout the process.

BROWNING: [01:23:45] So did you have to secure the funding?

O'BRIEN: [01:23:48] I did. Yes, I had to.

BROWNING: [01:23:50] Where did that come in that period of service?

O'BRIEN: [01:23:53] Um, right about at the, um, midway mark, I was still waiting for word on whether or not I was going to get my SPA grant. SPA stands for small, um, project assistance or something like that. There are several different methods you could choose. It depends on the dollar amount that you are going to be asking for in the end. Luckily mine was on such a small scale. I mean, we weren't building a, um, you know, water tower or anything here. You know, it wasn't rocket science. We were going to be using a lot of natural things around us. We were going to get the sand from nearby, so we would just have to pay somebody for their time to go and get, um, down by the, the stream, some sand for us and then gravel from another spot and things like that. And then most people, they didn't want any money for their time that they dedicated toward doing the, the, the actual work. So it was really just a matter of supplies.

O'BRIEN: [01:24:51] Now, we ended up incurring a lot of extra costs that I, um, so luckily I had that, um, contingency for it because the ground was different, even though I had descended three wells and made sure that the soil was a certain type, it was harder where we were digging. And we went through, oh my God, we went through so many, um, I can't even remember the name for it. It's been so long. But it's a wedge that you use along with a sledge hammer in order to break through. Because the pickaxe, it just, your arms would just ricochet right off. So we had to get very, very strong. Um, we went back to the, uh, blacksmith many times over the course.

O'BRIEN: [01:25:39] And it was, it seemed like the water was lower, um, at that time of year when we were digging, too. And which is, was my intention because I wanted it to be driest. So that way we would hit at the worst spot, if that makes sense. Um, because you want to be able to reach water all year long. So if you dig when the water level is high, then you're going to hit water too soon. And then, um, later on in the year when you go to get water, it's going to be dry because you haven't dug it deep enough. So you have to wait until a certain point to start your work. And so there is some waiting involved.

O'BRIEN: [01:26:19] And during those times when I was waiting, I would do other things like, um, teaching, uh, a little bit of a class in the neighborhood school. And or I would go and help other volunteers with projects that they were working on and things like that. So, um, uh, there are opportunities to do other things when it's a bit slow in village. Um, and I also helped in the fields there when we would do some planting. I helped the ladies with the garden. I had my own garden, um, and I had a puppy that I had in village.

O'BRIEN: [01:26:50] So, um, but as far as funding goes. If you're asking for a lot of money, you might have to do something special. And they're, they, they lay all of that out for you. Um, when, you know, there are professionals there, um, that are dedicated towards the sector that you're working in, and you can ask a lot of questions. You can always come into town. Like I said, there are those stage houses where we were allowed to come in and, um, you know, there were resources there where we could call, um, into the Peace Corps office. We could make arrangements to meet with our directors if we had, you know, extenuating circumstances about something. There is always something that could be done. And there, there are, there's money out there for projects and especially for a situation like you have in Mali. Pretty much any request that you put in, when it comes from a place like Mali, is going to go through.

O'BRIEN: [01:27:47] Now, if you're in a fancy city in Eastern Europe, I've known of people who get denied, um, certain grants because there isn't as much in need and they're asking for something maybe that, I don't want to. That's hearsay. You know, those are rumors potentially. I don't know, but, um, when there's a great need and you can write all of that out in your proposal, if you write it right, you're probably going to get your money.

BROWNING: [01:28:11] So who was giving the grant?

O'BRIEN: [01:28:14] Um, it's a SPA fund. Um, I don't know who. There wasn't, like, a name on it. You know, it's, these are grants that are put together through, I believe it's USAID or something to that. It's, it's,

um. Uh, yeah, I'm pretty sure it was USAID. That was the original funder of, of that.

BROWNING: [01:28:34] Well, did you, did you get to see the well completed?

O'BRIEN: [01:28:37] I did not. It was not complete by the time I was ready to go. Um, and so I, uh, the, the volunteer who came after me sent me pictures. And, uh.

BROWNING: [01:28:57] So from the time you spent in Mali, um, what was your favorite story?

O'BRIEN: [01:29:05] Hmm. So, um, like I said before, I had this puppy, um, and, um, you know, dogs in other countries are not treated the same way that we do in the United States or in the West and Europe and things like that. We, um, some people treat their, their dogs like children almost. And, um, in Mali, that's just not so. They are considered dirty and, um, you know, they're only really used for protection. And, um, they're fed, you know, they feed them, but they feed them the scraps from their dinners and their lunches. So, um, when I brought this puppy back to village one day, uh, they were like, oh, you got a, you got a dog. That's great. And I was like, yeah. And they're like, oh, do you feel unsafe at your house?

O'BRIEN: [01:29:52] I said, no, no, no, no, it's, it's he's my friend. And they, you know, they laugh, they think, oh crazy American, you know, what are you talking about? And I said, no, no, it's great. I'm going to train him. Train him? You know, and when I use that word train in English, it's defined. But in, in Bambara I said I'm going to teach him. You know, they're thinking she must be crazy, you know. And they said, no, no, no, no, no. The dogs, they don't understand. They don't, they don't hear, you know. And when you say hear in Bambara, it means like they don't listen or they don't understand, right? So it means all of those things. I said, no, no, no, no, you'll see, you'll see. And so I had been teaching him over time, uh, to, you know, sit and stay and come and things like that, you know, very basic, you know, run of the mill dog commands that most Americans know for dogs and, and, um.

O'BRIEN: [01:30:44] And once I felt that he had mastered these things after some months, um, I, you know, he was following me over to the house one day and they were making fun of me again about this, this dog. And I was like, oh, really? Well, watch this. And I, um, I told him to, to sit. And he sat down. And then I walked some distance away, after I told him to stay, I walked some distance away over to the other side of the compound, which is, you know, quite a distance. And then I said, come here, boy. And he got up and came over to me directly, and, you know, he's waiting for his next command. I told him to sit, and he sat and told him to stay, and he stayed as I walked away to a different spot in the compound.

O'BRIEN: [01:31:28] And there there's just absolute silence. And normally in village life there is never absolute silence. People are always talking or there's chickens running around and there's always something going on, you know? And so everybody was just, they stopped what they were doing and they were watching the spectacle going on, right? And I'm telling him to stay and come and go and all these things. And, and he was doing everything that I told him. And they could see the pattern starting to form, that he was doing what I told him to do. And he was listening to me, and he was looking at me for his next command. And, and then I stopped at one point and I kind of gave them the ta-da arms like, ha ha! See, you know? And my host brother jumped up and he goes, oh, dog speak English! You know, they hear English, sorry, they hear English.

O'BRIEN: [01:32:19] So all this while, they had been under the impression that the dogs just couldn't hear. But as it turns out, they hear English and not Bambara. And I stopped for a moment and I thought, wow, nope. You just have to take a moment and work with them, you know?

BROWNING: [01:32:38] So, um, overall, how would you assess your service in light of the three goals of Peace Corps? Provide technical assistance where requested, promote better understanding of Americans, and promote better understanding of other people by Americans.

O'BRIEN: [01:32:56] I would say that it is really hard to walk away from two years of living in a country without a better understanding of one another's culture, unless you are in a box the entire time. From moment one, you are, um, introduced to the culture. Um, depending on how the training is, is done. And, you know, because it differs from one country to another. But you do, you are introduced to things right away, and it, and it's a snowball effect. And they um, they gradually, you know, dip your toes deeper, you know, deeper into the water as you go along. But they do it in a controlled manner. That is, is a very, um, easy way to get involved with your community. They give you tools, but it's really up to you in the end. You know, they're not going to make it easy on you. Um, you have to get in there and roll up your sleeves. But it's fun.

O'BRIEN: [01:33:59] And they, if you're in a village, nine times out of ten they really want you there. They have asked for you to be there. They want to talk to you, they want to show you things. And unless you are just, like I said, sitting in a box, um, you're going to learn so much, you're going to see so much. You're going to meet amazing people, and you're going to meet amazing people from your own country that also make this, um, this decision to join Peace Corps. And you're going to meet amazing people over there. You're going to get a better understanding of what it means to be a global citizen, not just, um, you know, a U.S. citizen, but.

O'BRIEN: [01:34:41] And they want to hear from you too. They, they see things on TV and they will ask you so often, you know, they, sometimes they only know about Washington, D.C., New York, and Los Angeles. They think that that's the, the totality of the United States. And when they realize how big it is and, and how different people are from one place to another, they're fascinated and they just, there's never a dull moment. As far as technical goes, that is really, um, that's up to you. You've got to put, roll up your sleeves, like I said, and do the work. But, um, you get ten times what you put into it. It's amazing.

BROWNING: [01:35:22] Well, finally, uh, did your service in Peace Corps meet your expectations? And what has been the effect of your Peace Corps service on your life after Peace Corps?

O'BRIEN: [01:35:33] Oh, gosh. Um. Your expectations are always going to be different than what you encounter. But it's, it definitely exceeds it. I mean, there's, there's nothing really that can, can compare you, I'm sorry, can prepare you for what you encounter when you get there. It's just, um, it's amazing. It's, um, especially when if you're someone who hasn't been exposed to much before, then it must be even, even more out of this world. But it's, it's really great. It, yes, it exceeds my expectations.

O'BRIEN: [01:36:13] And I, um, having come out of that situation, I know that I can deal with just about anything. I, you know, I don't. I, I hear people complain about the stupidest things all the time. And I think, you know, you have a faucet that you can go to and you can turn it on and you can get fresh water any day of the week, any time of the day. And there are ladies out there who have a bucket on their head walking for miles just to get some water that they will then have to treat in order to, uh, help keep their, their family healthy. So yeah, I try not to complain too much. Yeah, it opens doors too. And you never have to deal with a situation where you're at a party and you don't have a story to tell.

BROWNING: [01:37:08] Well, thank you very much for sharing your story, Ria. We really appreciate it.

O'BRIEN: [01:37:13] Thank you for, for allowing me to.

[END OF INTERVIEW]