

David Downes Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

David Downes served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from October 1967 to October 1969 as an English teacher.

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Oral History Interview

with

David Downes

October 17, 2018

Washington, D.C.

By Julius Sztuk

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

SZTUK: [00:00:04] Today is October 17th, 2018. This is Jay Sztuk and I'm interviewing David Downes, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from October 1967 to October 1969 as an English teacher in the secondary education program. David subsequently worked for Peace Corps as a staff member. Good morning, David, and thanks for agreeing to be interviewed.

DOWNES: [00:00:30] Good morning. My pleasure.

SZTUK: [00:00:32] Let's start off with how you heard about Peace Corps and why you decided to join.

DOWNES: [00:00:39] Well, I think probably the first thing that I heard about Peace Corps was from President Kennedy. And one of the most indelible memories I have from college was walking through the student lounge the day that President Kennedy was assassinated. And I know exactly where I was when I heard that news. And he had talked about the Peace Corps.

And there were recruiters who came to Trinity College, where I was going to college in Hartford, who talked about Peace Corps. I had read some. And so it was a variety of different sources that I had heard about Peace Corps. Of course, in those days, that was, I mean, Peace Corps was much more in the news than it is these days.

SZTUK: [00:01:39] So why did you decide to join?

DOWNES: [00:01:42] Well, it was a variety of reasons. One was because I thought it was a cool thing to do and would be a growthful experience for me. I had thought about going into journalism and going to journalism school, but I wasn't really ready for a graduate school. And I thought that the Peace Corps would be a growthful experience. I was also thinking about going into teaching and I thought, well, a couple of years in the Peace Corps would give me some experience in teaching and might increase my chances of getting a good job afterwards. The other reason that a lot of us had in those days was because we felt that the war in Vietnam was an unjust, immoral war. And I spent a lot of time in college thinking about becoming a conscientious objector. I mean, seriously looking into that.

DOWNES: [00:02:41] But I finally decided that I could not. I could not say that I wouldn't fight in any war, which was the requirement. And Peace Corps, although it didn't offer an exemption from the draft, it did promise a deferment depending on your local draft board. And so I admit that that was part of my rationale. I wanted, I felt that serving my country was a good thing to do. I just wanted to avoid doing it in the Army, which meant Vietnam in those days. So those were the principal motivations, I think.

SZTUK: [00:03:22] And how did your friends and family react to you wanting to go overseas?

DOWNES: [00:03:26] I think they were, uh, they were proud of my decision to do that. Peace Corps in those days was viewed as an honorable, exciting way to represent America overseas. And so I think most of my family were, in fact, I think all of my family were pleased. A little anxious, because they didn't know what would happen to me. My grandmother, as I recall, one of the last things that she said to me. She expressed some concern about

whether I would marry someone in the country that I was going to. And I told her that I hadn't met anybody there yet. And I probably would not. I wanted to ease her. That was the last thing I ever said to my grandmother. She died while as I was returning from service.

DOWNES: [00:04:31] But no, everybody else was pleased I think. My father was an Episcopal priest. And so the concept of service was something that I grew up with. And I think they were glad I was going into the Peace Corps. And I think they were also glad that I wasn't going to Vietnam.

SZTUK: [00:04:52] Sure, sure. Now, did you choose to go to Fiji or did you have a preference for country? How did that happened?

DOWNES: [00:05:00] Well, it was an interesting story. I said that I would go anywhere. I didn't want to get excluded because I was too specific about where I wanted to go. But I did say that I wanted to be an English teacher. I was an English major in college. I worked on the, I was the editor of the school newspaper. I had done some other newsletters and so forth with other organizations. And I, at that point, I was thinking about becoming a teacher. So that was really uppermost in my mind. And I waited to hear from Peace Corps and waited to hear and didn't hear anything. And so I decided that, I got offered a teaching assistant job in Massachusetts for that summer. I said I would be available in June of '67. I was told that I, uh, but I was offered this job as a teaching assistant for the summer at a fairly prestigious summer school.

DOWNES: [00:05:59] And I thought, whoa, OK. Since Peace Corps, you know, hasn't gotten around to inviting me, I'll just write to them, change my availability date to the fall, and take this job as a teaching assistant, about which I was pretty excited. And our letters crossed in the mail. And so almost immediately upon sending that letter to the Peace Corps, I got an invitation from Peace Corps to be a TESL teacher in Korea. While I had said that I would serve anywhere, the idea of serving in a really cold climate, which I imagined Korea had, and learning a very difficult language, which I knew Korean was. And I wasn't quite sure. There was a language aptitude test that they gave to all volunteer all applicants in those days. And for some reason, although I've never been a very good

language learner, I must have scored well enough on that for them to think that I could learn Korean.

DOWNES: [00:07:02] Anyway, I called Peace Corps and I said, you know, I'm going to. Our letters must have crossed in the mail. I've made a commitment to this teaching assistantship for the summer. And I hope that you will consider me for a fall program. And I figured emphasizing the fact that I had made a commitment would be something that Peace Corps would appreciate. And they said, oh, that's fine. We'll consider. And I said, but I really do want to be a teacher. And they said, that's great, you know, we'll see what we can do. Shortly after that, I got an invitation to train as an agricultural information officer in Malawi. And I thought, you know, I've never been on a farm or I've never really lived on a farm. I don't know anything about agriculture.

DOWNES: [00:07:55] And in the meantime, I had also been seeing some recruitment material from Peace Corps about Peace Corps going opening programs in the South Pacific and in particular Samoa. And I had read Coming of Age in Samoa by Margaret Mead and thought, well, that would be an interesting. And it was an education program and they wanted English teachers. And I thought, well, that would be an interesting place to serve. And so I called Peace Corps again and I said, I got this invitation to go to Malawi as an agricultural information officer. You know, I really, I want to go in the Peace Corps, but I really do want to be a teacher. And I don't know anything about agriculture. And they said, oh, well, we can, you can learn the agriculture part of it. It's the information officer thing that, you know, that got our attention because you've been a journalist and you've done some writing for that.

DOWNES: [00:08:49] And I said, well, you know, I've seen your ads about going to Samoa. Would you consider me for that program? And they said, oh, well, we specially recruited for that. So that program is filled. Would you consider going to Fiji? Well, I didn't know anything about Fiji. In fact, I wasn't even sure where Fiji was. I thought it might be in Africa. You know, just in those days, Fiji didn't have, you know, the Fiji water had not, you know. And so I said, well, I don't know too much about Fiji. Is it like Samoa? And the culturally sensitive Peace Corps says, I mean, none of

them had ever been, knew anything about the South Pacific. They said, well, you know, all of those islands are pretty much alike. And I said, fine, sign me up. And of course, Fiji and Samoa are similar geologically and geographically. But in every other sense they're different. You know, one is Polynesia, one is Melanesia. Anyway. So that's how I ended up being invited to go to Fiji and deciding that's where I would serve.

SZTUK: [00:10:03] So it was a choice in a sense that you didn't.

DOWNES: [00:10:05] Yeah, it was, it ended up being a choice. But I must say, I was really nervous about, you know, sort of saying to the Peace Corps, no, you know, I don't want to do these other things for whatever reasons, you know.

SZTUK: [00:10:21] Sure.

DOWNES: [00:10:21] But they were very eager to, you know, this was the high point in Peace Corps' size. I mean, this was, I mean, I think that in 1966, which was a year before that, there were like 16,000 volunteers overseas. And so and they were expanding rapidly and wanted, you know, wanted people to join and were helping people to make, you know. And a lot of the positions were for what they called BA generalists, people who had social science degrees and no particular technical skills other than their major in college.

SZTUK: [00:11:11] So then you accepted the position.

DOWNES: [00:11:14] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:11:14] And you got on a plane. And where did you do your training?

DOWNES: [00:11:19] Well, we started off with like a five-day staging in San Francisco before we went into training. And we were with a group from Tonga and a group from Samoa. So it was this massive event in San Francisco. I forget exactly where the event was. I know that we, that I stayed in the YMCA, which was where they put us up, which was in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. So there were lots and lots of people around. And you

were never even sure whether the people you were talking to were going to Fiji or not, because it was all this pre-departure staging where they were completing medical stuff and, you know, and physicals, and they were doing a certain amount of screening as well. In those days, Peace Corps had a fairly strict selection process, and it involved psychological evaluation by staff that were onsite, both at the staging and in in-country.

DOWNES: [00:12:22] They did full field investigations on everyone. I remember that my barber told me that when I went home from school. My barber says, hey, the FBI was around asking about you. And I said, really, my barber? Anyway.

SZTUK: [00:12:41] He's got great hair.

DOWNES: [00:12:42] Huh?

SZTUK: [00:12:42] He's got great hair.

DOWNES: [00:12:44] Yeah, right. And he pays every time, you know, he doesn't tip real well but yeah. So anyway, so we started with a staging in San Francisco. And I might have met my future wife at that staging, but neither of us can remember. I mean, it was obviously not love at first sight because there were like 300 people that we were meeting for the first time. Anyway, so after the staging we flew to Hawaii. And at that point in Peace Corps' history, Peace Corps was sort of at the end of the process of training people in the United States before they had started to move training into the country of assignment. So we were one of the last groups that Peace Corps trained in Hawaii. And the Peace Corps had a big contract at the University of Hawaii to train people going to the Pacific and to Southeast Asia. And so they had lots of different training sites.

DOWNES: [00:13:43] We trained in, uh, on the Big Island of Hawaii in an abandoned primary school. And lived in abandoned cane worker shacks, I think, is probably the best word. Cottages. A half a mile from the school and in a little town called Hona Hina. It was not really a town. There was one shop run by a Hawaiian family. I think they were actually of Japanese descent. But so that, I mean, they stayed open I think because they knew that

Peace Corps volunteers were coming and we're going to have some money. Not much, but some money. So, yeah, so we did our training. And it was from the middle of October until the middle of January, so it was three months of training.

SZTUK: [00:14:46] And was it primarily language training or?

DOWNES: [00:14:49] It was primarily the language training. Half the population of Fiji at that point was of Indian descent. The British had brought indentured laborers from India to work on the sugarcane plantations in Fiji, because Fiji, it was a British crown colony at that point and had been for a number of years. And in order to pay for itself, which is what the British wanted colonies to do, they had to have an industry like sugar cane. And the Fijians were not particularly interested in working on, you know, sugar cane plantations for money because that was a sort of a foreign concept to Fijians. Anyway so there were a lot, so half the population was Indian and half the population was Fijian. And so some of us learned Hindi and some of us learned Fijian. Well, some of us studied Hindi and some of us studied Fijian. Whether how well we learned it was a question.

DOWNES: [00:15:51] But yeah, so the training was primarily language training. We spent more time on language training than we did on anything else. But there were cross-cultural studies and there was technical training and we had some fairly good teacher training. It was not, you know, it wasn't a two or three year master's degree program, but we got some, a fair amount of experience doing peer teaching and also teaching briefly in one of the Hawaiian schools. And so it was, you know, for what it was, it was pretty good. The cross-cultural training was the first time out of the box. We were the first group to go to Fiji. And so none of the Peace Corps staff had ever really spent any time in Fiji. So all of their knowledge was book learning and what they had learned from Fijians, many of whom were teaching, were associated with the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii.

DOWNES: [00:17:00] But there were some who came from government departments in Fiji, both to be language instructors and to be technical trainers. And then the other part of training was basically assessment and helping volunteers to decide whether this is what they really wanted to do and

whether they thought that this was something that they could commit to for two years. And also whether the Peace Corps felt the same thing. And Peace Corps was more than prepared to deselect people during training, in part because that was what Peace Corps was doing in those days. And especially, they told us, because we were the first group going to Fiji and they wanted to make sure that the group that went was well qualified, well motivated, and was not going to, was going to build a good reputation for Peace Corps. And so that's what happened.

DOWNES: [00:18:01] There were like I think like 85 of us who went into training and 23, 27 I think, had either resigned or been deselected or otherwise disqualified during training.

SZTUK: [00:18:18] Wow, that's a big number.

DOWNES: [00:18:19] So we ended up going in country with, I don't know, 50 some. But the, you know, the Big Island of Hawaii is very much like the big island of Fiji geologically and geographically in terms of weather. It rained a lot. This was on the Hilo side of the island. And so it rained a lot and it was hot. And, you know, the beaches were on the other side of the island, which was all very much like Fiji. And there was, I mean, there was a certain, there was certainly a lot of cross-cultural stuff going on in Hawaii as well. Because most of the people that we met were indigenous native Hawaiians or other races that had come to live in Hawaii. And so there was a fair amount of opportunity to practice cross-cultural skills.

SZTUK: [00:19:20] So it was a good transition.

DOWNES: [00:19:22] Yeah, it was. I think Peace Corps did a good job. And at the time we groused about the training and about how stupid it was and how many mistakes Peace Corps staff had made. And their response always was, hey look, you know, if you're going to be a Peace Corps volunteer, things ain't going to work out well all the time. You know, you're going to have to adjust. Things are not always going to be what you were told they were going to be or what they expected. So that's part of training too. I mean, pretty, pretty good excuse. Pretty, pretty clever. Not so subtle excuse for not having done things better planned. But all in all, I think it

was good preparation for Fiji. The language training turned out to be a little tricky because Peace Corps didn't know much about how many people were going to be assigned where and what language people actually spoke there.

SZTUK: [00:20:27] Right. Because of the two primary cultures.

DOWNES: [00:20:29] Yeah. But there are also a number of different dialects of Fijian. So for volunteers who were on outer islands and were in rural areas, there was a certain amount. I mean, they taught standard Bauan Fijian, which is the national language, but a lot of communities did not speak that. So some volunteers had some additional learning to do about the dialect that they were in. Hindi in particular was a problem because they made a decision early on that we should, those of us who were studying Hindi, should learn Shudh Hindi, which is formal Hindi. And the only people in Fiji who spoke Shudh Hindi were the pundits in the temples and Fiji radio. Nobody else spoke Shudh Hindi. Everybody spoke what was called Fijiba or Fiji Talk, which was a kind of a, not exactly a pigeon Hindi, but it was certainly informal.

DOWNES: [00:21:35] And so we. I was a little embarrassed when I first got to Fiji and was assigned to an Indian community, a mixed Indian Fijian community, and I had learned not very much Hindi at all. And but the Hindi that I learned was formal Hindi, which nobody spoke. And so when I would greet people in formal Hindi, they would say things like, I mean, we were already on a pedestal because we were Americans and teachers and Peace Corps volunteers and all these things that sort of put us up on pedestals away from the people that we were supposed to be close to. And then I opened my mouth and say things like, you know, [speaks Hindi], and they say, oh my God. You speak our language better than we do. And I thought, oh come on, that's not. Why did I bother learning it if it's going to distance me from people?

DOWNES: [00:22:36] As it turned out, my Hindi never got very good because I was teaching in a secondary school where the language of instruction was English for all classes. I was the English teacher and one of the school rules was it was forbidden to speak anything except English while you

were on the school grounds. Well, you know, so I didn't get to use Hindi in my job at all, except to the extent that I could, to the extent that I knew Hindi grammar. And I knew some of the differences between Hindi and English that helped me to sort of construct lessons around in English that would address the needs of Hindi speakers as well as Fijian students because it was, it was a mixed race school. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:23:26] So then when you got to Fiji, having done the training in Hawaii, did you have additional training or did you go directly to your site? Did you do any homestays or village stays?

DOWNES: [00:23:36] We did not. Um, no, we did not. We had a, there may have been like four or five days of orientation in the capital, but then they wanted to get us out. The school year had either just begun or was about to begin. This was the middle of January. And so they were very, and most of us were teachers. There were some aggies, there were some co-op folks, there were some forestry folks. But they were clearly in the minority. Most of us who went in were teachers. And so they wanted to get us out to our sites because the schools were waiting for us. So, no, we didn't have any additional training. There was some orientation. There were sort of welcoming things.

DOWNES: [00:24:32] I mean, one of the things that really impressed me was that the chief minister, who became then the prime minister at independence, Ratu Mara, had been in the hospital just before we arrived and basically got out of his sickbed to come and greet us. That was how important he felt Peace Corps was to Fiji. And I've always remembered him. I mean, he was a very eloquent guy. And I always remember his greeting us and thanking us for our generosity of spirit. I mean, it was just really wonderful. But no, we didn't have any orientation. The hosts, the schools and government agencies that people were going to work for, were expected to do some onsite training and orientation for us when we when we got there.

DOWNES: [00:25:29] But no, we didn't do homestays. Which was probably more than Peace Corps could have with the staff that they had and the fact that it was an entirely new program and they didn't have as many connections at

all these schools. It was probably more than Peace Corps could have managed at that point, with 55 of us sort of descending all at once.

SZTUK: [00:25:52] So let's just back up a little bit. Do you recall your very first impressions when your feet hit the ground in Fiji or when you were flying in? What was your initial impression of Fiji?

DOWNES: [00:26:09] Well, it was, I mean, having spent three months sort of anticipating being there, it was wonderful to finally be there, to have our feet on the ground and to actually be there and to see the country and to know that it really existed. And so I think it was an exciting time for me. And I think for most people. There were some people in our group whose goal was to beat the selection process. It was so rigorous and was so intense, that there were some people who reacted to it in ways that were not what the selection people had intended. There was one guy in our group who it was very clear very soon that his goal was to get to Fiji. He had no intention of serving as a Peace Corps volunteer. He got off the plane and basically said, oh, it's hot here. And within a week I think he had quit.

SZTUK: [00:27:18] No kidding.

DOWNES: [00:27:19] But I mean, that's more an indication of what the selection process was than about our group, because, I mean, most of the group were not, you know, didn't have those things. But there were a lot of people who left during training who probably would have been very good volunteers. Peace Corps thought it could judge who was going to be a good volunteer, who's going to be successful and who wasn't. And they were wrong in a number of instances. But anyway, so I was really pleased to be there, sort of a little overwhelmed by all the things that we still had to learn, even though we had been in training for three months. So my reaction to Fiji was really quite positive. Yeah. So yeah, it was, I was excited to be there and excited to get to my site and a little anxious of course because I didn't know what to expect really. [tape break]

SZTUK: [00:28:20] Pick it up again here. All right. So now tell us about your worksite and your living conditions and the people you worked with.

DOWNES: [00:28:30] I had a really comfortable assignment as it turns out. I was in, another volunteer and I were assigned to Navua High School, which was a very new high school. It was only like a year old. And the school committee had been told that they needed to provide housing for the two of us. And so they built a house for us.

SZTUK: [00:29:00] Wow.

DOWNES: [00:29:00] A wood frame house with two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen eating area, and furnished it with beds and mosquito nets and a kerosene stove. And indoor plumbing, including a sink in the kitchen and a shower in the shower and a toilet in the back bathroom. And so it was by most volunteer standards it was very comfortable. And I think there were two other volunteers who are also assigned to Navua, one in cooperatives and another one who eventually came, because he was transferred to the town, who was in agriculture. The guy who was in co-ops lived and worked at the co-op offices. It was mostly rice farmers. And so he was helping rice farmers market their rice.

DOWNES: [00:30:09] But Tim Rowley and I were assigned to the high school and we doubled the staff at the high school because there'd been two teachers there the previous year. The principal, Ron Lal, an Indian guy. And Ratu Simione who was, turned out, was the paramount chief of the whole region, one of like 12 paramount chiefs in the whole country. And he was the other teacher. And so we doubled the staff. The fact that we lived together, and since there was another volunteer in town originally and then a second one in town beyond that, meant that we spent probably more time than was intended or that we had anticipated with other volunteers. I mean, it was just, you know, for whatever reasons.

SZTUK: [00:31:11] What was the name of this community?

DOWNES: [00:31:12] Navua. It's a little town, I guess maybe 30 miles along the southern coast from Suva. So it was a small town, but a lot of shops and it had a post office and a market. And was at the base of the Navua River, or at the end of the Navua River, so there was some local commerce that

was on bamboo rafts that went up and down, mostly down the river. And it was also a port for people going to the nearby island of Beqa. So and the school was reasonably well equipped. Originally, when we first got there, we were still sharing classrooms or space with the primary school, which had been there for some time. And the high school was established in order to serve students who are graduating from the primary school, and who couldn't necessarily afford to go somewhere else to secondary school.

DOWNES: [00:32:26] And so the secondary school was much anticipated and much desired by the community. And so it was, it grew as we were there. Classrooms were built. And I think generally it was pretty well equipped by Fiji secondary school standards. So that was really good. And we were welcomed. Students were enthusiastic about having American teachers and certainly the other two staff members were really glad that they had some help. The fact that neither of us had had much teaching experience didn't seem to matter too much to them. And teaching in Fiji is somewhat different than teaching, I mean, high school in Fiji is somewhat different than teaching high school in the States. And so there were, the expectations were different of teachers. A lot of it was supposed to be control of students.

SZTUK: [00:33:37] Yeah. Discipline.

DOWNES: [00:33:39] And discipline and a lot of rote memorization, which neither Tim nor I were particularly interested in using as a means of education. And so there were some, hmm, there was some rub around that occasionally and about teaching methods and so forth. But I think over time we learned more about the Fiji system and the Fiji system learned more about us.

SZTUK: [00:34:06] So what was your typical day like in Navua?

DOWNES: [00:34:13] Well, Tim and I would have breakfast together and then slog across the soccer field to the classrooms, generally in the rain and generally through a very muddy soccer field. I didn't take me too long to learn that going from the house to the school in my flip flops was a mistake because water would splash up the back of my legs almost every

day. And Navua had lots of rain. In fact, that was one of the reasons that they grew rice there, because there was so much, the rice paddies were easy to maintain. And then I had a, you know, I would have a full calendar of classes. I mean, we had, uh, initially we had second and third form. I never really had second form, but we had several different third form classes, two or three of them.

DOWNES: [00:35:25] And there were different English classes, as I recall. Some were I was actually teaching three different kinds of English. I was teaching English as a second language, because it was a second language for most, well, for almost all the students, they had learned something else from their mothers. And then English as a first language because they were learning English grammar and things that you don't normally teach in teaching English as a second language. Most of that is oral. But there was a lot of writing and a lot of grammatical work and a lot of reading in English and taking exams and that way. And the examinations that they had to take in order to get to the next level in secondary school or to get into university were examinations that were set in New Zealand or in some cases in the U.K. And so they had to meet the requirements of those systems in order to progress.

DOWNES: [00:36:35] And then as it turned out, I was also teaching English as an Elizabethan English as a language, because they had to study Shakespeare, which blew me away. I mean, you know, like really? I mean, you're learning English as a second language and now you're going to get. But you know, so we had to, we did because Shakespeare was on the exam.

SZTUK: [00:36:58] And how did you find the students to work with?

DOWNES: [00:37:02] It was a variety of, uh, a variety of sort of, I mean, I guess it's like any kids. I mean, there were some kids who were sharp as a tack, you know, very eager to learn, ambitious, wanted to get through high school, wanted to go to university, wanted to be successful professionals. And then there were other kids who were there because, you know, it was, you know, got them out of the village.

SZTUK: [00:37:31] Was the population mostly Indian or was it 50-50 Fijian Indian?

DOWNES: [00:37:36] It was pretty balanced, which was unusual as I came to understand. I mean, except in urban areas where there were, you know, I think it was more likely that you would get a mix of students. But not all schools in urban areas were like that at all. But Navua was a relatively small, small town. But I mean there were a lot of Fijian and Indian families who lived in the area and it was the only secondary school that kids could get to by walking or by bus or in some cases by raft. And so it was, uh, I was always impressed by the fact that we had, you know, pretty much half Indian and half Fijians. That wasn't true in all of the classes. But generally that was the case.

DOWNES: [00:38:37] And Indian culture has a lot more similarities to Western culture than traditional Fijian culture and society. And so I think in some ways school may have been easier for some Indian students. Not all, but it may have been easier for some Indian students. I mean, my. The students that I thought were the very best students and most likely to succeed were predominantly Indian. Not all. I mean, there were some very, very successful Fijian students as well. But I think the cultural similarities to Western culture and society.

DOWNES: [00:39:37] Traditionally Fiji is not a numerate society. I mean, you know, sort of using a lot of numbers and using money is something culturally at least relatively new to Fiji. And, you know, ownership, private ownership of things and reading. I mean, the Fijians didn't have any literature until the missionaries had come. And so there were older folks who, you know, parents and grandparents who didn't read English. So I think, I mean, in some ways, Fijians, Fijian students were a little disadvantaged by teaching in what was essentially a British colonial school system.

SZTUK: [00:40:28] Mm hmm.

DOWNES: [00:40:29] Yeah. But they were, they were all pretty good. I mean, there were times when discipline was an issue, and that may have been exacerbated by sort of the freewheeling American, you know, well let's try it kind of approach too. I remember one time I decided that I would teach

the subjunctive in English by playing a song in class. And I forget who sang the song. But it was about if I were a carpenter and you were a lady, would you marry me anyway? And so, I mean it was, you know, if this then this, you know, and so that was intended to be a lesson in the subjunctive. Well, the kids thought that was, you know, nobody had ever played a song in English to them to teach them something.

SZTUK: [00:41:18] Yeah.

DOWNES: [00:41:19] And so things like that. And Tim was also, I mean, Tim was probably more creative and inventive than I was. I mean, he built triple beam balance scales out of bamboo and coins, Fiji coins, you know, and they really worked well. I mean, it was like incredible. But yeah, but I think we found the students to be generally receptive. The classes were big and a lot of times there were two, sometimes three students to a desk. And so they were in each other's, you know, laps. Not literally, but I mean. But a lot of times there were two students and in some cases there were three on a bench at a desk. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:42:07] Sure.

DOWNES: [00:42:10] And then there were after school activities, I mean that was teaching. And then there were after school activities. Which were pretty much run by the students themselves. I mean, the soccer was something. I mean, I certainly wouldn't even try to coach soccer. But I mean, the students knew it really well. And I think that was the primary sport that people played, both Fijians and Indians. Although rugby was more popular with Fijians than with Indians. And then we would at after school, we spent a lot of time preparing for lessons the next day. I mean, we took seriously, because we were expected to, the notion that we had to have written lesson plans for every class, for every day. And the principal would usually ask to see our lesson planning book and review those. We never got any, uh, we never got dinged for not doing that. But sometimes it was a late night trying to get them caught up. And so we spent, you know, we spent afternoons doing that sort of thing.

DOWNES: [00:43:22] And then typically we would cook for each other at night. I mean, we got invited out to families' houses. But that was not, I would say most nights we ate at home. And the other volunteers would come over. I mean, ours was a comfortable place. They could all, you know, both of them could join us for dinner. Sometimes they'd bring the food. We eventually got a kerosene refrigerator, which made life a lot easier. And one of the other volunteers found, I don't know where he found it, but he found a kerosene hot water heater shower, which was a sort of an on-demand kind of thing. So you'd let the kerosene drip and light it and it would explode. And then but then as long as you were running water through the system, you'd have hot water, which made us the envy of a lot of volunteers. We probably the only volunteers in a rural area who had hot water showers.

SZTUK: [00:44:25] Yeah, that was unusual.

DOWNES: [00:44:27] When I tell people in my wife's presence, my wife was also a volunteer in that first group. And that's where we met, where we courted. And whenever I tell people that, you know, our daughter, who became a volunteer in Mozambique many years later, had a rough assignment. And my wife, who was in a small village north of the capital city. She said, yeah, well, I think my assignment was tougher than hers. And in fact, it was. So I mean, she had one of the more difficult assignments and I had. She was taught Hindi in training, which is one of the places that we met each other, and then was assigned to a Fijian village where no one spoke Hindi.

SZTUK: [00:45:13] Sure.

DOWNES: [00:45:13] And most of them, most of the people in the community had never really met any Indians and only knew them by reputation, which was not generally favorable because of the difference in their religion. In fact, well, if she ends up doing one of these interviews, she'll tell the story of how she arrived at her village and they welcomed her. And there was a whole room full of men, you know, seriously over a yaqona bowl to welcome her. And the school manager was acting as her *mata ni vanua*, her spokesperson, and he was speaking to them about her. And they had

been expecting a man because no one had ever said that, you know, they were going to get a woman. And so they were sort of hoping and expecting to get a man who was taught Fijian in training.

DOWNES: [00:46:13] Well, so a woman shows up with, you know, who's only learned Hindi. And so he's explaining all of this in Fijian. She doesn't understand a word of it. She's just sitting there. And all of a sudden everybody in the room starts laughing and cheering and, you know, there's just. And so she leaned over to him. She said, what did you say? And he said, well, I told them that they forced you to learn Hindi during training, but that when you got to Fiji you refused to go to an Indian community. You said you only wanted to go to a Fijian community. And so they backed down and sent you here. And so that put her in good stead with the community. Just one minor example of how clever Fijians are.

SZTUK: [00:47:03] Sure. So outside the school, did you have much involvement with the local community there in Navua, extracurricular stuff or you made a lot of friends there?

DOWNES: [00:47:14] I made a few very good friends, but the. I did not make a lot of friends. I mean, people knew who I was. I knew a lot of people in town. But we lived, I mean, the school and our house were basically in town. And so the people, the neighbors that we had were either other teachers at the school or they were shopkeepers. And the ones that we got to know best were the ones who had the larger shops, because that's where we were more likely to find what we wanted to buy. And a lot of their children were our students. And so I got to know some of those families quite well.

DOWNES: [00:48:09] I got to know the visiting teacher in the area quite well. He went around to different primary schools and sort of provided support to teachers and brought new techniques to them and helped with evaluation of students and principals and so forth and visited a lot of schools. He had studied in the United States, had, you know, I don't know where his degree was from, Australia or New Zealand, and was very helpful in terms of helping us into the community and invited us to go on trips with him. We went up into the bush with him and went horseback riding and did all sorts

of things with him. And he was very eager to do that. And we were very eager to learn from him. So he was probably one of my best friends in Fiji.

DOWNES: [00:49:10] We spent some time socializing with the other two teachers and their families. When we went back recently, it was with their families that we reconnected because the men that we had worked with were both dead. But we were able to reconnect with their families and were close enough to the families to be able to reconnect with them, although they're now, you know, the children are now much older.

DOWNES: [00:49:41] But the co-op volunteers clearly knew many more folks than we did and, I mean, used Hindi daily in his work. I was always a little envious of his position because his position put him in touch with people who were not part of that school community.

SZTUK: [00:50:05] So he was working with adults instead of students.

DOWNES: [00:50:06] Yeah, he was working with adults. And so I was, I had thought that I would be, I would spend a lot more time with the people of Fiji than I ended up doing. In part because there was sort of this, you know, I mean, I wasn't, my situation put me in touch with another American who was sharing the house with me. And so we generally had meals together. And also because I in particular, well I think he spent evenings doing this too. I spent a lot of time in evenings correcting English compositions. And so I wasn't, you know, when I finished in the classroom, I didn't feel like I was finished for the day.

SZTUK: [00:51:04] Mm hmm.

DOWNES: [00:51:04] In fact, it's one of the reasons that I decided not to become a teacher after serving in the Peace Corps. I mean, I love being in the classroom, but the idea of spending every night for the rest of my life correcting student compositions, which is the only way that kids really learn how to write, is to write and then be critiqued. So yeah. So yeah, I wish I could have. And I didn't push myself as much as I might have.

SZTUK: [00:51:38] Did you get a chance to travel and see other parts of Fiji while you were there? Did you get some time off?

DOWNES: [00:51:44] Yeah. Yes. And a lot of that travel within Fiji was to visit other volunteers from our group that we had gotten to know over the course of the three years. I think the main travel that I did was from Navua into Suva, the capital, because my future wife, with whom I was spending time, would come in from her site, which was 30 miles north of the capital. And so it was a convenient place for us to meet on weekends. I also had started a trainee newsletter during training which turned into a volunteer newsletter in country. And so that became something that I went into Suva to work on because it was published from the Peace Corps office and it was hard copy. We didn't have email in those days. And so there was a nice coincidence of having business to do with the Peace Corps office and also seeing Willa, who was coming into town also to do some shopping and so forth.

DOWNES: [00:53:00] But yeah, we had a chance to travel, some with us Asasala, that visiting teacher that I was talking about. I mean, he took, he took to me in particular, he was closer to me than he was to Tim, although we did things together, took me up into the bush to get his horses and bring them back, then ride them back down to Navua. And took me to Beqa, that island off the coast of Fiji. And then we also liked going to the western side of the island where the weather was better. And there were some volunteers who were stationed in some really very nice places near Sigatoka and Nadi. We, at one point, a group of us went to visit a volunteer who was on Waya, which is one of the islands off the western side of Fiji. An absolutely beautiful little site. I mean, it was a half-moon shaped bay, crystal clear water, white sand beaches, palm trees, everything that you would imagine. I mean, everything that you would imagine out of a South Pacific paradise island, right?

DOWNES: [00:54:12] And there was a volunteer in our group who was stationed there to teach at the school, who didn't get onto the main island very much. And the only other European, read white person, on her island who spoke, well, the only other European on the island with whom she might have had some contact, had no interest in her. And so we decided, a

group of us, decided that we would go out to visit her and surprise her. And so we got on and we hired a boat in Lautoka and started out. She had decided at the same time that she would come in to do some shopping in Lautoka. Fortunately, the boats crossed each other, they passed each other, and she saw us and we saw her. And so she decided that she wanted to show off her island to us. And so she got on our boat and went back and missed her chance to go to the big island.

DOWNES: [00:55:16] But that was the kind of travel that we did. During the school break between the two teaching years, at the end of 1968, the beginning of 1969, most of the teachers then took their big leave where they could travel. But at the time, Peace Corps had a rule that volunteers who served in the Pacific were not permitted to go to a metropolitan country on their leave, that the leave was intended to broaden your understanding of the country and area that you were living in. And so it was forbidden for volunteers to travel to Australia or New Zealand on their leave.

DOWNES: [00:56:08] And so the co-op volunteer and I decided that we would go to Tonga. And people would say, well, where are you going on your leave? We said, Tonga. They said, Tonga, really? Because there's not much to do in Tonga. I mean, it's a beautiful, beautiful place. And the person who had been the deputy director of Peace Corps in Fiji had become the country director in Tonga. And so we knew someone who could sort of be our touchstone there. And so we were supposed to travel to Tonga together. At the last minute he couldn't go. And I asked Willa whether she would like to go to Tonga. She said sure. So we ended up going deck passage on a freighter to Tonga.

SZTUK: [00:56:56] How long did that take?

DOWNES: [00:56:58] Forever, as it seemed, and decided that, and the seas were not calm. I mean, it was a rough passage. We decided to fly back. We scraped our money together and decided to fly back. But that was the furthest away that we got. Yeah. So, I mean, most of our travels were on the main island where we were stationed or to nearby islands around there. But the big trip was to Tonga. Suva was a popular place for volunteers from Samoa and Tonga to come because it was the only sort

of, I mean Suva is the only city really in that part of the world. And, you know, there were nightclubs, there was a nightclub at least, and, you know, sort of excitement and tourists and things like that. And so volunteers would come from Tonga and Samoa and they'd say to us, well, where are you going on your vacation? You know, because I mean, you know, where's up from here in terms of excitement? And when we said Tonga, they said, really? Tonga?

SZTUK: [00:58:12] So you've been involved with Friends of Fiji for many years.

DOWNES: [00:58:20] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:58:20] So obviously your Peace Corps experience has had some impact on the rest of your life.

DOWNES: [00:58:26] Oh, it has. It had a big influence on the rest of my life. I mean, I worked for the Peace Corps for about 15 years after I left volunteer service. I had been nominated by the Peace Corps staff. And I think this is probably the reason I got involved working for the Peace Corps. At that time, there was a program called the Peace Corps Fellows Program, which was a program that brought volunteers to Washington at the end of their service, their volunteer service. And they worked in Washington for a year in a variety of different offices and did some recruiting and worked in a variety of offices. And then were sent back overseas on the Peace Corps staff as associate country directors to be program managers or trainers or administrators or, you know, a variety.

DOWNES: [00:59:27] But it was one of the things that Peace Corps did to try to keep, to make sure that returned volunteers filled the ranks of the Peace Corps staff. Because, I mean, Shriver, Sargent Shriver, the founder, was very interested in ensuring that there always would be room for returned volunteers on the Peace Corps staff. And it's one of the reasons for the five year rule where you can only work for Peace Corps for five years, and then you had to go somewhere else before you. I worked for them for 15 years because of a fluke, but so I was the volunteer from my group that was nominated for the Peace Corps Fellows Program, that came back to Washington. Actually, I did some training in Hawaii for the next group

going to Fiji before I came back. I came back to Washington to interview for the Fellows program. Did not make it into the program because they had decided to sort of scale it back at that point. So they interviewed a lot more people than they had positions for, and I just didn't have the particular skills that they were looking for. I was also a little gaga over high buildings and fluorescent lights and, you know, that was a little bit of culture shock.

DOWNES: [01:00:45] But as I left the exit interview, I ran into a Peace Corps staff member, who continues to be a friend to this day, a guy named Dick Wall. And I ran into him in the hallway, and he saw that I looked dejected. And he said, what's the matter? And I said, oh, I just found out that I wasn't, I'm not going to be in the Fellows program and I don't really know what I'm going to do. I didn't have any other plans. I thought this was going to be what I was going to do. And he said, oh never mind, do it yourself. I said, what do you mean, do it yourself? He said, no, we'll find a job for you and, you know, you work in the States for a while and you get selected for a job overseas. I said, really? He said, well, listen, there's a party down the hall. In those days, you could have parties at Peace Corps headquarters with beer and wine. He said, come on down the hall, you know, come to this party.

DOWNES: [01:01:37] And so he dragged me to this party down the hall and introduced me, again, a name that I will never forget. Gerry Ziolkowski, this absolutely drop-dead gorgeous personnel person, you know. And I was enthralled, A, that I was talking to this really good-looking woman, and also that she was going to help me. Because apparently this was one of the things that she did. She helped returned volunteers find jobs. She got me a job as a recruiter in the Northwest where I had gone to school. I worked there for several months. A job opened in the placement office in Washington, being the placement officer for the South Pacific, selecting the volunteers who would go to serve in Fiji and Tonga and Samoa. I applied for it, got the job. And from there it led to a long, long. And then I went back to Fiji.

SZTUK: [01:02:33] Sure.

DOWNES: [01:02:34] After a couple of years as the regional program officer based in Fiji, but then being responsible for programs around the Pacific and a lot of other places. And then finished my five years with the Peace Corps, came back to Washington looking for leads on jobs back in Washington, because that's where I'd, you know. And Peace Corps in the meantime had been made a part of ACTION, which was the umbrella agency that Nixon created to, well, as a lot of us thought, hide successful Kennedy programs. And so they were looking for someone in their policy and planning office to be the program analyst for what they called international operations. I said, international operations, what's that? They said, well, it's the Peace Corps. It was the only international program they had. But so I became the program analyst for ACTION's Office of Policy and Planning, which was a civil service job. It wasn't a Peace Corps that used the Foreign Service reserve personnel system.

SZTUK: [01:03:39] Right.

DOWNES: [01:03:39] So I started working for ACTION, worked for them for five years, became sort of in many ways the liaison between Peace Corps and ACTION at an operational level. And almost to the day, the five-year rule was you had to be out for as long as you had been in before you could come back to Peace Corps. Almost to the day, Carter issued an executive order making Peace Corps an autonomous agency within ACTION. And one of the things that made Peace Corps autonomous was to have the policy and planning function moved from the ACTION Policy and Planning Office back to Peace Corps. And so I got transferred back to Peace Corps. And I could have kept my civil service job, but I never could change jobs because that was, you know. Or I could switch back to the Foreign Service system at Peace Corps and get an immediate raise and a promotion. And so I said, fine, I'll take the, you know.

DOWNES: [01:04:39] So I worked for the Peace Corps for another five years. So I worked for Peace Corps a lot longer than. So it's had a big influence on my life of being a volunteer. And I began to feel like Methuselah at the end of my 15 years because whenever anybody couldn't remember something, they'd come to me because I had been there longer than most people. And ended up in a job where I was managing the revisions to the Peace

Corps manual, and so a lot of the transmittal letters that sent revised manual sections to everybody in the agency had my signature on them. So people, people I had no knowledge of, would say, oh, I've heard of you. I'd say, oh really? Anyway. So yeah. So it had a big, big influence and so and I kept in touch with Peace Corps after I left, not as close as when I had worked there, but I still had a lot of friends.

DOWNES: [01:05:42] My best friends to this day are people that I met at Peace Corps. And the people we spend lots of our time with are returned volunteers and other ex-staff members. The director of the Budget Office and I, as the director of the Planning Office, used to get together for lunch over hamburgers and beers to try to figure out a way to get people to do planning and budgeting together.

SZTUK: [01:06:14] Mm hmm.

DOWNES: [01:06:15] We were never very successful. People didn't, resisted that. But anyway, so that was, so yeah. So it had a big. And then it was, I was in touch with Alice Alexander who had sort of started the Friends of Fiji and who, over dinner at something that she had organized, once said, well, you know, this is getting to be really quite a job. It takes a lot of time, you know, to do all this stuff. And I said, well, why don't you create a board of directors for the organization and then, you know, share some of the responsibility with other people? And she said, oh, that's a great idea. Would you be on the board? And I said, well, yeah, but. You know, I was, I had gone from Peace Corps at that time and I said, yeah, well, you know, OK, if I could pick the job that I could have, I'd be on the board. She said, well, what job do you want? And offhandedly I said, well, how about wisdom? I could be in charge of wisdom. She said, OK, you're on. But yeah, so I've kept in touch with Fiji a lot through having been one of the founding board members back in, well, I think we talked earlier about it being in 1991 or something.

SZTUK: [01:07:37] Yeah. I heard you've been back recently.

DOWNES: [01:07:41] Yeah, we just went back for the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Peace Corps program and had a wonderful, wonderful

time. We had won a two-week stay at a house in Nadi on the dry side of the island and a very nice house, at a Friends of Fiji raffle or auction, I guess it was. And so we had a place to stay for that. Our son, um, you know, I mentioned that when we went back to Fiji on the Peace Corps staff, we were there for a couple of years. And we lived most of that time in Suva and our son Chris was born in Fiji at that time. We left when he was six months old. He had never been back to Fiji, didn't really feel any connections to Fiji, but we had asked several times whether he wanted to go back and, you know, my aunt had offered to take him back to Fiji. Well, the last thing he wanted to do was to go on an international trip with his great aunt, you know.

DOWNES: [01:08:54] But anyway, so we asked him again whether he wanted to go with us for this this trip. And he said, yeah, I think I would like to. And so he went along with us and had a very good time. And that was part of, one of the best parts of the trip for us was to see how much he enjoyed being in Fiji and learning about it. Interestingly enough, he is a Hare Krishna devotee at this point in his life and there were a number of Hare Krishna communities, quite vibrant large communities in Fiji. And so he had an opportunity to interact with them and go to some of their events and we joined him for that. So that was a great, great thing.

DOWNES: [01:09:39] And we got to meet people that we had not seen for a long time. But some unexpectedly. We went to Willa's school where she had taught, not thinking that we would meet anybody who remembered her. And she knew that most of the teachers that she had worked with were either dead or were somewhere, and she didn't know where to find them. We got lost on the way to the school, picked up a man who was walking down the road trying to get to the bus five kilometers away, and who offered to take us or show us where the school was. And we were grateful. So he came in the car. And we got chatting with him and it turned out that he was one of Willa's students 50 years ago. And, I mean, it was like this amazing.

SZTUK: [01:10:37] And he remembered?

DOWNES: [01:10:38] He remembered that there was a European woman who taught at the school. You know, I mean, she didn't teach all the subjects. She taught English. So but he remembered that there was a European woman who taught at the school, which was something that would be remembered, because it's probably the only European that's ever taught at the school. And certainly the only European woman who's ever taught at the school. So. But they figured out that he must have been in her class. And then there were a couple of other people who turned out they were at the school at the same time. They weren't in her class, but they were at the school at the same time, and they were there that day for some other event. And she was just blown away by the fact that, you know, she actually.

DOWNES: [01:11:28] I went back to Navua and met one of my former students, who had become a teacher himself, had been the principal of the high school where I had taught, and was now retired and was a volunteer at the school. And said, you know, he sort of learned a little bit about volunteering from Peace Corps volunteers, you know. And so I sort of took credit for his success in life, at least in a small part. So, yeah. So anyway, so we had a wonderful, wonderful trip back. We had only been back one other time, 20 years ago in I guess it was 1998. So the 30th anniversary of Peace Corps' time in Fiji.

DOWNES: [01:12:28] It was also the time when Peace Corps had decided to close the program in Fiji, which was a very bittersweet occasion. The government of Fiji was very gracious about it. They had not asked Peace Corps to leave. They didn't want Peace Corps to leave. They threw a huge party in Suva to thank Peace Corps for its time in Fiji at Government House, which is the mansion that was reserved for the president of Fiji and the colonial governor and all. And Mark Gearan, the director of the Peace Corps from Washington, had come out to be part of this ceremony of thanking Fiji for their participation in the Peace Corps and then saying goodbye. I know a lot of us didn't think that it was a very good idea. And as it turned out, five years later, Peace Corps went back into Fiji and but it was, there was a hiatus in the program.

SZTUK: [01:13:39] Mm hmm.

DOWNES: [01:13:39] But we were there for that, at that, for that occasion. In part because we had just won the Friends of Fiji raffle and had two tickets to Fiji that had been donated by Fiji Airways.

SZTUK: [01:13:56] That worked out well for you.

DOWNES: [01:13:57] Yeah, exactly.

SZTUK: [01:13:59] All right. Well, we've compressed 50 years into a little over an hour here. Any last thoughts or did we miss anything?

DOWNES: [01:14:06] Well, uh. Just I mean the Peace Corps has had a lasting impact on my life in a lot of other ways as well. I mean, I continue to encourage people that I meet who are trying to figure out what next to do in their lives to consider Peace Corps, whether they are young people or older people. And, you know, I still count a lot of folks from Fiji as some of my best friends over the years. And so, yeah, I mean, I've had a number of other different kinds of jobs since Peace Corps, but probably none that would compare with two years as a Peace Corps volunteer. I still count those as the two best years of my life, other than the 44 years that I've spent with my now wife, Willa. But she too had a good experience I think in Fiji. And so yeah, so it's been, it was a good run and I'm glad for all of the opportunities that Peace Corps provided.

SZTUK: [01:15:26] All right. Well, thanks very much, David, for the interview.

DOWNES: [01:15:28] My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

SZTUK: [01:15:29] This concludes the interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]