

Michael Roman Oral History Interview
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Biographical Note

Michael (Mike) Roman served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kiribati from November 2000 to June 2002 in an education program.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Michael Roman

June 21, 2019
Austin, Texas

By Edwin Blanton

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

BLANTON: [00:00:02] Today is June 21st, 2019. This is Edwin Blanton. I am interviewing Michael Roman, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Kiribati from November 2000 to June 2002 working in the education sector. Michael, I first want to ask what, uh, what interested you in joining the Peace Corps?

ROMAN: [00:00:28] I was, uh. Volunteerism has always been something a part of me and my dad instilled into me when I was young, delivering baskets in the middle of winter in Rochester, New York, to needy families during Thanksgiving, during Christmas. So I always knew that I wanted to volunteer. In college, I led the Catholic Church youth group to do soup kitchen volunteer work. I was an RA in the service line corridor and service was always a part of me. So I guess the big draw for me was, hey, I can do spend two years of my life serving. And that was the big draw.

ROMAN: [00:01:13] I went to an intercultural festival in Hamilton, Ohio. I went to Miami University in Ohio and my friend took me to an intercultural festival and there was a Peace Corps table there. And some old returned Peace Corps volunteer was telling me stories about what he did in Africa with snakes. And I was like, that sounds awesome. I picked up a brochure and next thing you know, I'm interviewing for Peace Corps. Yeah.

BLANTON: [00:01:44] And did you have a specific country or a project in mind?

ROMAN: [00:01:49] Uh uh. My degree was in elementary education. And so being a minority, number one, being a male, number two, I have people throwing job offers at me because I wanted to work in the inner city and, uh, so that kind of led to my Peace Corps assignment. I wanted to be in education. That was what my degree was in, and I didn't have any. I don't even know that you could prefer at that time where you would go. And I, I told my Peace Corps recruiter that I was allergic to fish, hated hot weather, and severely prone to motion sickness. And I got invited to the Pacific Islands that had only fish, hot weather, and boat travel. So, yeah.

BLANTON: [00:02:54] So what was your reaction when, when you received your assignment?

ROMAN: [00:02:59] Where is this? Yeah.

BLANTON: [00:03:05] All right, so and how were you trained for that assignment?

ROMAN: [00:03:09] Well, the typical, I think, at least back then, it was three months of training with a host family, living, learning how to eat, talk, walk again. The culture, the language. Yeah. Hard core, three months in the islands. So we were trained in country. We weren't trained somewhere else. We were trained in the country. And, um, yeah, we learned on the job basically.

BLANTON: [00:03:42] And to what extent to the training accurately prepare you for your assignment?

ROMAN: [00:03:47] Oh, hmm. It was very structured. The training was very structured. And when I got to site, it was very unstructured. So I think they may have told us, this was 19 years ago. I think they might have told us, you know, be aware that it's going to be a lot less structured than this. But when I got to site, school was not in session. And it was, I think I had a couple of days before school started. And there was, okay, go out and find the store, find the church, find people. And I didn't speak the language. I did, but I didn't. And it was it was a learning curve, a big learning curve.

ROMAN: [00:04:45] And then the kids came and it was even a bigger learning curve. I think the kids taught me more about how to speak Kiribati than I, like more intensely than I got in those three months because the kids can't speak English, like you have to do it. So sink or swim.

BLANTON: [00:05:06] And so what exactly did your, did your job entail then?

ROMAN: [00:05:11] I was a teacher trainer in Abaiang, in my first. I was moved to a different island. Um. Something very bad happened and, um, to a volunteer. And they took all of us off and they tried to resolve the situation. So I was only at site for maybe a week, maybe a week and a half, before this terrible thing happened, and, um, it was never resolved. So I was moved to a different island very, very, very far away. And my job there was not so much a teacher trainer, but a teacher.

ROMAN: [00:06:01] So I had elementary school students, the students that had the most trouble with English, and I would help them in small groups. So I would be like a resource teacher, pull them out and, and work with those students. And then I would also share what we were doing, obviously, with the teachers, and they would take some of what we were doing into their own classes and use it if they weren't getting through to their students that they were working with.

BLANTON: [00:06:36] So being in a, in a location that was far away, where there are other Peace Corps volunteers close to you?

ROMAN: [00:06:42] So my island, my second island I could ride across in less than a minute on the bike, maybe 55, 56 seconds on the bike from one end to the other end. And I lived on one end of that 55 seconds, and she lived on the other end of that 45, you know, distance. So it was really, really close. She was a health volunteer. I was the education volunteer. At the time, there was only health and education in the country, so. I was structured compared to her because I had a starting bell, a lunch bell, a closing bell. I had meetings with teachers. She worked in the community as a community health worker. And it was just, it was, it wasn't structured, not like mine.

ROMAN: [00:07:37] But there was one other volunteer there on that island. My first island, we were, it was a bigger island. And when I say bigger, I mean longer. Coral atolls are not big and long, but there were four volunteers on that island and the distance between each one was probably about an hour bike ride. So it was much more conducive to having a closer Peace Corps volunteer on the smaller islands.

BLANTON: [00:08:16] Mm hmm.

ROMAN: [00:08:16] There were only three villages on the smaller island, and one of those villages was the government village where the schools were. So you can't really count that as a village because it was all the government workers, but they did count as a village. We had the northern and southern, that's where most of the population was. Probably about 700 people at the time.

BLANTON: [00:08:38] For the island or for the village?

ROMAN: [00:08:40] The island.

BLANTON: [00:08:42] Okay.

ROMAN: [00:08:42] Yeah.

BLANTON: [00:08:45] And so talk about what your living arrangements were like.

ROMAN: [00:08:48] I had my own house. I had the mansion of the, the Peace Corps, aside from the director, but I had cinder block tiles. I had a split level, I had a stairway, I had a concrete floor, I had a concrete hole for relieving myself. It was nice. It was a nice, nice house. I think I had the best house in the entire nation for a volunteer. It was on the teacher compound. So we lived with all the elementary school teachers. The JSS [Junior Secondary Schools] just had their own teacher compound, which was literally a few seconds bike ride and I wouldn't even bike it. I would just walk down that road.

ROMAN: [00:09:43] And the middle village is where all the teachers lived and then where members of Parliament or this island council had houses there. I had my own pump in my house, so I didn't even have to go to a well, I just pumped the water out of the, they call it a Tamana pump, but it's, I can't even describe it. It was so convenient. But I had the indoor, I call it my indoor plumbing, and it was nice. Yeah.

BLANTON: [00:10:20] So what was it like living so close to your coworkers than your host country nationals that were coworkers then?

ROMAN: [00:10:29] So I got really close to them. Um. They're all on Facebook now. I go back to the country every year or every year and a half, and I still see them. I still meet up with them. Some of them are living in New Zealand right now. Some of them are in Australia, some of them are in the Marshall Islands. Some of them are here in the States. So I've been extremely involved after Peace Corps. But it all started with the idea that and I get roped into this. In Kiribati, family is everything and everyone is family. It's such a small community.

BLANTON: [00:11:16] Mm hmm.

ROMAN: [00:11:16] You can imagine, one minute to go from one end of the island to the other end. If you went the long way, it took me probably about ten, 15 minutes on a bike. But a lot of that was the airfield or like bush land, so not a lot of people live out there. But everyone is really close. And I became extremely close with my, everyone, with my teachers, with my,

um, with Corey. Corey was her name, the other Peace Corps volunteer, so with Corey's family as well.

BLANTON: [00:12:04] Did you see Peace Corps staff often and what was your interaction with them?

ROMAN: [00:12:14] I don't ever think I saw a Peace Corps staff come to my site just because to get there it was like a four and a half or five hour flight on the one and the only plane. So the time when I would see Peace Corps staff would be when I would go to the capital for, we had three meetings a year. So at the breaks of school, we would go in and have a meeting. That would be the time where we would buy food, stuff that we can't get on the outer island. M&Ms, eggs, bread, like the luxury stuff. Juice, toilet paper, stuff like that.

ROMAN: [00:13:07] That's the only time that I saw Peace Corps staff on the outer island that I worked on. They did come to, when there was the incident, to the closer island. They did come out there and for obvious reasons, they had to meet with police and everything like that. But aside from seeing them outside of emergency responses? No.

BLANTON: [00:13:40] Can you talk about like your, your language capacity and what role did that play?

ROMAN: [00:13:47] I think my language is still horrible, but I can hold a conversation in Kiribati. But everybody else who hears me speak says it's good. I don't believe them. I think they're just being complimentary. Um. It was hard because I have, my mom and dad are Mexican, and so I have Spanish in my head and I would mix up Spanish with Kiribati, with English, and I would have a hard time. That was hard. But once I started being able to think in Kiribati, then it was a lot easier. And I don't I think I've reached that point of being able to think everything in Kiribati still today. I know I haven't. Yeah.

ROMAN: [00:14:44] But language is, language is important. I mean, on the other islands, yeah, people spoke English, but it was almost, I don't want to say an embarrassment to speak English, but people made fun of you if

you spoke English. Like there's a strong, the official language, if you look it up, is English. But that's only because of the Brits and they're a former colony. And a lot of people can speak English, but the people, they're proud of Kiribati, they're proud of their country. They're proud of their language. So they're proud of who they are.

ROMAN: [00:15:27] And so, yeah, I had to learn to Kiribati. And that's when I broke through. That's where, I guess you could say, I gained entry when I would be able to speak any Kiribati. And especially with the kids, you have to speak Kiribati. So.

BLANTON: [00:15:48] And about how long into your service did you feel fairly confident with the language?

ROMAN: [00:15:55] Maybe after a year. Yeah. Not in the first three months, no. That, uh, that prepped you for the bigger lesson and that would be going to site. But nowadays I can go to Kiribati and I'll be fine. And when I do go to Kiribati and I speak Kiribati, everyone thinks I'm like a half caste because I'm brown, but I don't have a flat nose, so I must have gotten that from someone else. So yeah, but then when I speak Kiribati, they're like, oh!

BLANTON: [00:16:40] Can you, um, can you describe the school in which you worked? Let's start with like, what was, what was the building like?

ROMAN: [00:16:47] So the school is called Margaret Field Primary School. And it was, if you think about a row house, one level row house, it was just a long cinder block room with partitions for different grade levels. And on the top was a tin roof. So when it rained, it rained. And the tin roof made it sound like the world was crashing down on you. It was old. The chicken wire that held the windows, that barricaded the windows from things flying in, was rusty. It's new now. They rebuilt it and it's still called Margaret Field Primary School. But at the time it was just a cinder block house, row house.

ROMAN: [00:17:47] And there were no. Some classrooms had desks, but not like these, not like the desks that with a chair that you're sitting in. They

were, I guess you could say what we would consider stools. And instead of sitting on the stools, they would sit on the floor and they would use that for their desk. Some schools, we got an AusAID donation of desks, and they were kind of like this, but metal bars framed and two seats per desk with a table up on top with a desk on top. That didn't come until like well into the second year. But, yeah.

BLANTON: [00:18:34] And AusAID, do you?

ROMAN: [00:18:35] AusAID is Australian AID. So there's NZAID and there's Australia, uh, New Zealand AID and Australian AID. And a lot of the donations or a lot of the support to the country come from those countries. They're like the big brothers of the Pacific.

BLANTON: [00:19:00] So how would you then describe like a typical day of, of teaching?

ROMAN: [00:19:08] As the sun rises, the chickens would crow. And then I would hear the clanking outside and those clanks would be bottles that the men of the village would carry up with, um, up the coconut trees. And they would set those bottles to capture the sap from the coconut trees. And that sap would be used to cook or to make drinks or for [inaudible], even to make candies, for a variety of reasons. Those clinking bottles would be in unison, in chorus with the crowing of the chickens. And that's how every day started. And then soon after, the sun would start to rise. And as the sun was rising, that's when you would hear songs from the men up on top of the coconut trees, singing, harmonize, harmoniously, harmoniously with other men in the village.

ROMAN: [00:20:09] And they would sing about everything, from famous Kiribati songs to made-up songs, from life on the land to lost girlfriends. I was like, man, that's a way to get your news out there, buddy. But that's how every morning started. And then I would wake up. I would pump my water in the bucket and take it to the bathroom and do a bucket bath. And then the night before, I would always. So I would boil the water, I would filter the water, and then I would put it in my Nalgene bottle to sit

overnight so that when I woke up, I would have a cool-ish bottle of water to brush my teeth to and then to drink throughout the day.

ROMAN: [00:21:07] When I finished with that process of getting the water for my bucket bath, I would get the water for my boiling for the next night's water supply. And then I cooked tortillas. Like I said, I was allergic to fish. So there really wasn't food. There was flour, water. On the weekends at celebrations, people would save chickens for me to eat, sometimes pig. But the weekend is usually when I ate. Throughout the week it would just be tortillas and ketchup, whatever I brought back from Tarawa, from the main island at the conference, tri, tri-monthly conference. After I was set, I would make Milo. Maybe have some crackers, some biscuits.

ROMAN: [00:22:17] And then the students would start arriving probably at 8:00, and school would start and I would start work. And then I would have tea, which would always be Milo and crackers, and then teach in the afternoon. And by 2:00 we were done. And then after 2:00, I would prepare my lessons for the next day. And then, um, on certain nights I would go out with Ita. He was like my best friend, my, what, the wife of his was, I think, like the fourth grade, equivalent to like the fourth or fifth grade teacher. And they lived right next door to me. So he and I would go out and catch fish with all the village men at sundown, at dusk. And it was the most beautiful thing.

ROMAN: [00:23:16] The fish that we caught were called flying fish or, well, in English, yeah, flying fish. And these fish actually flew and they would jump out of the water and they could fly meters, maybe 15 meters, 25 meters in the air. And then they would go back down. And we would have, the sun was setting and we're on the Pacific Ocean. And the ripples were fuchsia, were orange, were red. That was the most beautiful thing. And I'm out there with ten different canoes from the village, and we're all working together to trap schools of fish. And all we do is just dip our nets down, dump them out in our canoes. Some will jump out of the flap and they'll escape. And Ita always said those ones were the most delicious, the ones that escaped.

ROMAN: [00:24:18] And then we would go back, bring the fish to the village. The women would cook the fish. The women would also cook the rice. They would be the ones that made the food. So men of the ocean and women of the land is pretty much how it works. And then some nights people would get up at midnight and go out fishing. They would come back with two new loads of fish and they had loads of lobster or crabs or. It was just, it was a seafood diet. That was, that was great. Man, you're bringing back memories.

BLANTON: [00:25:07] Good. Um. Let's, you know, I want to talk more about the school day and kind of what the, uh, how you actually taught. What did that look like as far as like materials that you used with the students? Or did they have, did they have recess? Did they have extracurriculars? What did, what did that look like?

ROMAN: [00:25:31] So when the kids came, so I had a pull up class so they would come actually to my house. I would pull them out from their classes and we would do teaching there, because they were the ones that needed the extra attention and it was too hard to have them stay in the classroom. So they would come to my house. I decorated it with letters, with the whole language teaching materials, pictures. And every day we would do lessons on, depending on where they were, maybe it was memorizing the letters, what they were called, or what they sounded like. The long sounds, the song, the short sounds, the diphthongs, the different, different parts of, uh, phonics basically from that language, and then put that together through a whole language.

ROMAN: [00:26:33] So we went from letters to words, from words to phrases, from phrases to sentences. And this was a whole year long, year long curriculum to get them to recognize the letters, recognize the words, put the words together, and then being able to spell them and say them at the same time. Some were, they didn't make it past knowing the sounds of the letters. Some, they made it all the way to, hey, I'm reading in English. It just depends on where they fell in the spectrum of language acquisition.

ROMAN: [00:27:17] And every student had their own IEP, basically individualized education plan. And that was something that I talked about to the teachers, because then the teachers, it was basically rote memorization and spit back. And that was it, which worked for a lot of students, but didn't work for these students. So that was my everyday language instruction.

BLANTON: [00:27:54] And did you ever get feedback from the head of the school?

ROMAN: [00:28:00] Yeah, Vivianni. She, she loved what I was doing. And I was, I think I may have been the only one that assigned homework to the students. And they all had their own little Ziploc bags that they would bring home with the materials I wanted to do overnight. And they came back with the materials for me. But every night I would be assigning homework to them. And they did it because my mom and dad would go out to like McDonald's, Dairy Queen, and stuff like that and get Happy Meal presents that they didn't, and or toys that they didn't, and that they were going to throw away. And so I use those toys as incentives. And that, that worked. And then we had a big prize giving at the end of the year for the entire school. And whatever I didn't use, I saved up and used them for that too. So, yeah, I brought my capitalistic idea.

BLANTON: [00:29:13] So did you have any secondary projects?

ROMAN: [00:29:18] I run. So in college I ran and I, I took running shoes to Kiribati, but they got trashed after like one week. It is just, it was bad. It was like. And so I said, Mom, Dad, you sent me some new shoes? And I got a box at Easter. I opened it up. It said Merry Christmas and it was shoes that I had asked for. And I would just go run. And on a constant basis every day when the sun went down. When I wasn't out with Ita, I would go run in the field right by our house, right by the compound, and kids would chase me. And I'm like, all right, let's, let's work with it. Let's do two laps. Come on.

ROMAN: [00:30:12] And they started doing two laps with me. And then I got more kids. And pretty soon I had like a running team. And that was kind of what I did. And then also when I went to the main island, Tarawa, I

would buy ping pong stuff. So we would have after school ping pong, we would have after school running. And then I would randomly help people, older people, that wanted to apply for SPMS, South Pacific Marine Services, so to work on ships. And help them with their essays and stuff like that. But mainly my work was in the elementary school.

BLANTON: [00:31:01] Mm hmm. So when you wanted to let Mom or Dad know you needed more running shoes or Happy Meal toys and that sort of thing, how would you communicate with them?

ROMAN: [00:31:14] Letter, paper, pen, stamp. Mm hmm. But one time I was able to call them from a bush. It was, Peace Corps was doing some kind of experiment with LSAT phones, and they want me to test it from where I was, because where I was was one of the most remote islands in the Gilbert chain. And so I went out to the airstrip and I hid behind the bush because if the kids saw me with that phone, they would be all over me. So I called my mom and I talked to her and it was like I was calling her from next door. It was amazing. I didn't say any issues then during that phone conversation. I love you, Mom. Oh, can you also send me this and this and this and this?

ROMAN: [00:32:09] But it was always. And they knew. They, they know, I, I. They knew I was a runner and I was always tearing up shoes. So they would always send a new pair every couple of months. So.

BLANTON: [00:32:31] Well, looking back at your tour of service, what do you think were your main accomplishments?

ROMAN: [00:32:36] Nothing. They changed me more than I changed them. And I, I can say proudly that I'm 100% wrong in thinking that because I have been in contact with the country ever since leaving. And one of my former students, two of my former, they married each other. One owns a business, an eco hotel chain, and another one is a climate warrior. So before she had her baby, she toured around and did climate activism. She was a very outspoken person. And she, yeah, she, she amazes me.

ROMAN: [00:33:31] A lot of my students are married, have children of their own right now, and I haven't gone back to my island, my island of service. But I have seen students from Tarawa who moved to the main island and thank me, come up to me. I took them out to dinner, met their family, their kids, held their kids. I'm like, damn, I'm old.

BLANTON: [00:34:05] So when you go back every year, every year and a half, you actually go back to the main island rather than your, your site of service?

ROMAN: [00:34:13] And my very first, where I was removed from. Because my host family that has become, for all intents and purposes, my extended family half of my life live on, are from that island. So I always go back. I always go back. I take care of Kiribati mom and Kiribati dad back to their island, and we stay at that eco friendly hotel resort.

BLANTON: [00:34:51] How did your Peace Corps experience influence your plans for the future?

ROMAN: [00:34:57] Oh, my God. It changed everything. I thought when I was going to undergraduate, I would teach elementary school and retire and I would stay in Ohio. That's it, game over. That was my plan. That plan ended before I even began because of Peace Corps. Peace Corps opened some many doors of opportunity to me that I didn't even think was plausible when I was an undergraduate. When I came back from Peace Corps, I went into AmeriCorps.

BLANTON: [00:35:40] Hmm.

ROMAN: [00:35:41] So I went from the islands in the middle of an ocean to basically an island in the middle of corn and soy in Iowa. And talking to. I worked at Central College in Pella, Iowa, as a service learning coordinator for one year, one academic school year. And then I ended up talking to an anthropology professor. And even back then I was talking about global warming and how I thought this wasn't good news for Kiribati. And at that time, um, a Kiribati relative of mine was sick. That was actually my Kiribati mom and I was visiting her and my Kiribati brother, Asia, who now has passed away.

ROMAN: [00:36:37] Said to me, don't. Don't go over there. And he was pointing at a guy in a wheelchair and the guy that nobody was around him. I'm like, leprosy? What's, what's up? It's like, no, he's got HIV. And there was a big stigma against people living with HIV and AIDS. And prior to joining the Peace Corps, I worked with children and, children and families impacted by HIV and AIDS, and I knew the stigma and the problems that they were going through. So I got, I never went. I listened to him. I never went, but that stuck with me. And I knew that this was a problem.

ROMAN: [00:37:29] And so at Central, I started talking about HIV being an issue, and I knew it was always seamen, people at sea, rivers, people who worked on ships. And I wanted to do something about it. And that was my first master's in biomedical anthropology, working with HIV AIDS Task Force in Kirbati, trying to build more humanitarian views on HIV and AIDS and people living with the disease. And so I worked with the, I worked with UNAIDS and the HIV AIDS Task Force to create social awareness campaigns, educational campaigns, and doing kind of like what I was talking about earlier. Wilcoxon rank signing tests, pre and post survey exams, and data analysis with those with children, with youth in high school.

ROMAN: [00:38:32] And because it was something that nobody wanted to talk about because it was a taboo subject. But this American who can speak Kiribati was willing to talk about it. So I basically went on a HIV tour, HIV AIDS tour with them, the Ministry of Health and another Peace Corps volunteer who was working with HIV and AIDS Task Force at the time. While I was there doing it, the ocean. Well, no, my first day, my first week of my post volunteer visit. It was that when the ocean washed over. That was the first time. So this was back in 2000, November. It was a king tide, I think.

ROMAN: [00:39:33] But, you know, the palm trees started waving back and forth. The ocean grew bigger and bigger and waves crashed deep down into the land. And I thought we were going to die that night. I thought all of us were going to die that night. When I got up the next day and we were all alive, looked out and I saw, you know, houses missing roofs, corrugated

tin flown into the field, and men picking up downed tree parts and branches. Women weaving new thatch and young boys on top of roofs. You know, they all worked together to recover. They don't wait for UN or Red Cross. And there is none, none of that. None of that was coming. But the community pulled together to kind of rebuild.

ROMAN: [00:40:30] And the same thing kind of happened when I was in Tarawa doing my masters. And it got to me, I was like, man, this is, this is something serious. This is something that the world needs to hear and pay attention to. And that's kind of how my life turned into advocating for Kiribati on an international scale with global climate change. And that's about the time that the current, the former president took office and it got on his radar and he started talking about it. So while I was doing HIV AIDS work, there was this bigger issue of, hey, that village is now under water. It receded, but why are there fish swimming next to the hotel entrance, you know?

ROMAN: [00:41:25] And so that, that is kind of where it took an impact on me. I'm off of HIV and I'm looking at climate change, which impacts the health in a different way. I don't even know what your question was. I went off on a tangent.

BLANTON: [00:41:46] Right, right. Well, it was looking back at how, how Peace Corps has just impacted like the future, your life after Peace Corps.

ROMAN: [00:41:53] Oh, yeah. So I got that done. I got my master's and a year afterwards, antiretroviral treatment was implemented in the country so people didn't have to fly to Fiji anymore for treatment. They actually had something up and running and I was like, did I have something to do with that? I don't know. But I know that I put you in touch with Kiribati HIV AIDS Task Force, and I was there for meetings and stuff. So if I had a little part in that, great. If I didn't, great. I don't care, because people are getting treatment.

ROMAN: [00:42:39] I applied for, when I worked at Texas A&M, and then I applied for a PhD program and it was going to be to continue my work in HIV and AIDS and with the medical ministry. But then my first year, I lost my

ability to walk, talk, and see. And it, obviously it came back, but I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. And the treatment that I was on at the time was [inaudible]. It was submusculars, I think. And they're muscular shots. So the needles are like that long.

BLANTON: [00:43:29] Like three or four inches.

ROMAN: [00:43:32] They're, yeah, like they're big needles and they need to be refrigerated. They need to be a certain temperature. They need to be injected in sterile environments. And they're like, Mike, you can't go and do PhD research for a year with MS. Because our treatment wouldn't be conducive to that. So I had to sit down with my advisor and say, you know what? I'm not going to do HIV anymore. He says, is there anything else that you would be able to give us? I said, well, there is this thing called global warming. And he's like, all right. Can we, could we do that in Kiribati? I'm like, probably not. I would have to do it in New Zealand and with communities, because I was looking at what happens to communities when they leave.

BLANTON: [00:44:29] Mm hmm.

ROMAN: [00:44:29] So migration as a result of climate change. And he's like, all right, let's go with that. Climate change it is, well, the global warming at the time. Global warming it is. All right. So I applied for a Fulbright and I got the Fulbright. They wouldn't pay for the medication because it was considered a preexisting condition at that time. So even though I got this great government grant, I couldn't accept it because I had a disease. And that's when the University of Pittsburgh stepped up and they said, Mike, you got this disease while you were a student at Pitt. We're going to step up and pay the cost of your medication. You just have to fly back from New Zealand and pick it up. So there I am flying back from New Zealand and pick it up.

ROMAN: [00:45:24] I go, I do the research on climate change, migration, and communities. Well, I lived with my family that I was with in Kiribati. My Kiribati, I call her a sister, but she's really like a cousin I think, migrated to New Zealand on a work permit visa allows everything. And so she

was living in New Zealand at the time and there was about, I don't know, 40 or 50 families in the town. And so they all lived together. Like any diaspora group, they were all living together. So that's where the bulk of my research occurred. I did research on Kiribatis who lived in the USA, Kiribatis who lived in Fiji, Kiribatis who lived in New Zealand, and Kiribatis who were living in Kiribati, about their ideas of climate change. What have they seen, what has happened?

ROMAN: [00:46:25] And finished my PhD. And I do that, publish some academic texts, some articles. But no one's picking this stuff up because it's academic. No one's going to sit down and read a 300 page dissertation to find out about climate change. So what are they going to do? They're going to go to social media. And my Kiribati cousin is a great photographer, great, great videographer. He's just brilliant. And he and I get to talking like, have you ever thought about doing a Humans of Kiribati, like a Humans of New York? And I had to explain to him what that was. And he jumped on board. He was like, yeah, let's do it.

ROMAN: [00:47:14] And that started because, number one, I was frustrated at academia because nobody knew anything and no one would read that anything. Feels like Robert Mueller with the Mueller report. Why do I gotta go in front of everyone and explain it? Why do I gotta do a song and dance? But you have to because people won't read. And so we started Humans of Kiribati after Cyclone Pam hit. Now, in the Central Pacific, it's typically the calmest part. So you've got a little between the convergent and the northern and southern convergence zones. The winds go in opposite directions, leaving the middle very, very calm. And Pam totally disrupted that.

ROMAN: [00:48:08] Pam came up to Kiribati, destroyed Tamana Island, which is where I was stationed, and destroyed Arorae Island, which was just south of us. And then the impacts of Cyclone Pam went all the way up to the northern Gilbert Islands. And so the main island was impacted. Abaiang, which is even further north of the main island, was impacted and other islands were impacted. So we are a couple inches to a couple of feet above sea level. And then when you throw a cyclone in there, that

destroys everything. And so when that happened, that's when I was like, the world has to know.

ROMAN: [00:48:54] So that's when we started social media. And I think we're up to like 164 or 165,000 followers on Instagram and Facebook combined, maybe 177. And every, three is the lucky number in Kiribati. *Te mauri, te raoi ao te tabomoa*. It's the health, the peace, the prosperity. It's like their national saying. So every three days we post a new story about Kiribati on Humans of Kiribati. And while I do highlight climate change, Kiribati is much more than climate change. And so it's. Yeah, it's a big focus. Yeah, it's something that scares the shit out of me because I've seen what it does.

ROMAN: [00:49:50] And my family has lost, my family. My cousin's friend has lost a child due to water borne illness. And so many after so many children get sick and pass away. And that's the real impact of climate change. It's not polar bears to me. The real impact is seeing babies die. That something that nobody talks about. They always talk about in the future. But to me it's not in the future. [Inaudible], where my Kiribati father is from, his village is gone, completely. And while people will say, well, yeah, [village] would have been gone, it's, it's, it wasn't a good village because it was built, you know, it was built in vulnerable place. But give that may be, it's still not fair that his village is gone. That still doesn't change the fact that it's gone.

ROMAN: [00:51:01] And most of Kiribati is, I see, in trouble. And it's not going to be the money that causes, it's not going to be the money that saves. Because money, greed, capitalism, pollution that is all linked together into what has caused the problem. And that's why I traveled around just trying to make people aware that, hey, this is happening. This has happened. This is not something in the future. Putting a human face to climate change really gets people more than charts and graphs and bars and predictions and things like that, scientific predictions. While the science is, I agree with the science, I think that people can relate to a face better than they can relate to science.

ROMAN: [00:51:58] And so, yeah, the Peace Corps has changed my life in so many ways. I was kicked out of the Peace Corps. I was, I was kicked out when I went home for a vacation in the USA. I came back and the plane wasn't flying. And they didn't know when the plane would fly again. So, you know, I have motion sickness.

BLANTON: [00:52:26] Mm hmm.

ROMAN: [00:52:26] And I lived on an island, one of the furthest islands, four and a half hours on plane. It would have been two weeks plus on a boat. And I didn't want to be on a boat for two and a half weeks, dehydrated. And would I die on that trip? My country director said, if you don't get on the boat, you have to go home to the USA. And so I didn't want to die on a boat. I was, I was afraid. And so I hid. I had three days to say my goodbyes. I would not go back to my island. I hid with my family that I call my family now, my Kiribati family. And they, they hit me from Peace Corps. And they took me to the airport the very last day.

ROMAN: [00:53:22] And I'm not mad at what happened because I think the day my commitment, the day my service to the nation. No, what do I say? Oh, it's the day my service to the country ended was the day my commitment to the nation began. And I'm not mad at what happened because I never got to finish my service. So these 17 years has been a way for me to finish my service. And I honestly don't know if my service will ever end. I'm committed.

BLANTON: [00:54:04] Well, on that note, is there anything else you want to add about your Peace Corps experience?

ROMAN: [00:54:13] No.

BLANTON: [00:54:15] All right. Well, thank you.

ROMAN: [00:54:17] Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]