

Julius Sztuk Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Julius (Jay) Sztuk served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from 1974 to 1976 as an architect.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Julius Sztuk

September 3, 2018
Bethesda, Maryland

By Patricia Wand

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

WAND: [00:00:06] Today is Monday, September 3rd, 2018. This is Patricia Wand and I'm interviewing Jay Sztuk, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Fiji from 1974 to 1976 in the Fiji 21 group. Jay, first of all, thank you so much for your interest in the oral history project.

SZTUK: [00:00:35] Well, thanks for letting me doing this.

WAND: [00:00:36] This is a wonderful, a wonderful project and a wonderful opportunity for you to share some of your thoughts and experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer. So let's begin this conversation by your telling me, why did you join the Peace Corps?

SZTUK: [00:00:53] Yeah, that's a, that's a good question. To be honest, I hadn't really given it a whole lot of thought ahead of time. You know, I'd known about the Peace Corps. I'd heard of the Peace Corps, but never really considered that this was something that I would do, but it was kind of a

spur of the moment thing. I had a friend who had been down to the Peace Corps office and was really interested in joining the Peace Corps.

WAND: [00:01:31] Was that the office in Washington, D.C., or someplace else?

SZTUK: [00:01:34] No, it was a recruiting office in San Diego, which I grew up in East County, San Diego. So she had gone down and picked up all the materials. And I happened to be over at her house that evening. And she was really disappointed because they had moved from Canada and never became U.S. citizens. So she was ineligible. And I was sitting there looking at all this material that she had brought home. And I thought, well, this looks like, this looks like pretty interesting. You know, this looks like it could be fun. So I filled out the application and sent it in. And that's about as much planning as went into my applying for the Peace Corps. It was more or less a whim.

WAND: [00:02:22] Where were you in your life at that point? What were you doing? What was that time frame in your own life?

SZTUK: [00:02:30] Well, let's see. I was, I guess I was 21 or 22 at the time, and I was, I actually had a small business of my own when I graduated from high school. I bummed around for a little bit. I'd hit, you know, the day after I graduated, a friend and I actually stuck out our thumbs and we hitchhiked from San Diego to a place called Kiona, Washington, up in the Yakima Valley, where his grandparents owned a ranch. And we had this idea of just bumming around the country for a few months. So we hitchhiked up there, stayed a while, and hitchhiked back. Then I had to get a job.

SZTUK: [00:03:16] So one of the skills that I had picked up in high school was, and something that I liked, was drafting. I always liked drafting class. So I got a job as a draftsman doing kind of residential plans for a small company there. And it was something I had a knack for. I was good at it. So after, by that time, by the time I was 21, I actually had my own business in Pacific Beach, California, Pacifico Drafting Service. So that's what I was doing. But I had nothing really to tie me down. It was, you know, working independently, but it was just a friend and I that were doing this. So I didn't

really have any strong commitments. And I was free to really explore any opportunity that might come up. And that's what happened.

SZTUK: [00:04:15] So after I got accepted into the Peace Corps, it took a while, you know, after I was accepted and then to get an invitation letter. So we closed down the shop. My idea was that we would keep the business open and my partner Gary would run it until I came back and I would have something to come back to. But Gary wasn't interested in doing it on his own, so we just closed up. And I went to work for somebody else for a couple of months while waiting for the, uh, to depart for Peace Corps.

WAND: [00:04:51] So that was pretty exciting times. Tell, before we go into that first big step here. Tell us about your own family of origin and where you grew up. And did you have siblings? Did you live in a house or an apartment? What were the things that surrounded your growing up years that got you to the high school where you learned drafting and learned to love that type of work?

SZTUK: [00:05:19] Yeah, well, I grew up, like I said, in primarily in the East County in San Diego, in a town called El Cajon. You know, this was in the fifties and sixties. Yeah, I had, I've got an older brother and older sister. My sister was already had already moved out. She was 15 years older than us. She was already married when I was pretty young. But there aren't really any influences there I can think of.

SZTUK: [00:05:54] It was a time, especially maybe especially in Southern California, when kids were kind of raising themselves. You know, we didn't spend a lot of time at home. Parents were busy working and trying to pay the bills. And so I think we grew up without a lot of supervision or guidance, which is probably why, you know, I didn't go the academic route and go to college when I graduated, but it was kind of an environment where people didn't have high aspirations. It's just like get out of school and get a job, you know, have a typical family life. So I can't really say that that influenced me in any way other than that I was willing to try just about anything. You know, for an adventure.

WAND: [00:06:58] Yeah, yeah. You were empowered to do a lot of things on your own.

SZTUK: [00:07:01] Yeah, I didn't have a plan to follow, so that kind of freed me up to take off to Fiji on a whim.

WAND: [00:07:07] Right. Well, so what did your family say when you told them you wanted to do Peace Corps? What did they say?

SZTUK: [00:07:13] Well, it was, I don't know. It was kind of mixed. You know, my parents had broken up long before that. So my dad, you know. He was fine. Actually, my dad grew up during the Depression, and he ran away from home when he was a young kid, about 12 or 13. And he had rode freight trains across the country. In fact, you know, when we were like, my brother and I were like ten or 12 years old, he used to tell us we ought to run away. So.

WAND: [00:07:45] And have the adventures that he had?

SZTUK: [00:07:47] Yeah. So he thought this was a good idea also, you know, if you could travel on Uncle Sam's dime, you know, that was great. So he was all for it. My mother, you know, on the other hand, you know, mothers don't want to see their kids, you know, travel halfway around the world and be out of contact with them. So, you know, she didn't think it was a great idea. But no, you know, nobody really protested loudly or try to talk me out of it. She might have not, she might have thought it was kind of a dumb idea, but she didn't try to talk me out of it, that's for sure.

WAND: [00:08:22] And the siblings, your older sibling, did they have any memorable response?

SZTUK: [00:08:26] No, not really.

WAND: [00:08:28] Right. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:08:30] I'd say so.

WAND: [00:08:31] Right. So OK.

SZTUK: [00:08:33] It was something that, you know, nobody would have ever thought about in our family to do something like that.

WAND: [00:08:39] So what about your Canadian friend who wasn't able to? Did she ever get a citizenship so she could join Peace Corps?

SZTUK: [00:08:47] I don't know. You know, I haven't seen her in, I haven't seen her in a long time, but I don't think she ever did.

WAND: [00:08:53] Right. That could have been an impetus. So let's think about then you've closed your business, you've gotten apart or gotten a temporary job in order to get yourself, keep food on the table, shall we say.

SZTUK: [00:09:06] Right. Right.

WAND: [00:09:06] And go into Peace Corps. So what, you know, tell us about arriving at training. Where did you train and what was that like?

SZTUK: [00:09:16] OK, so we trained in country. We had, we actually had an orientation in Chicago several weeks before we took off. So I think it was a bit of a screening process. They flew everybody to Chicago. The country director was there on and one of the local Peace Corps office staff members, one of the Fijian guys, and they were there to tell us a little bit about what serving in Fiji would be like. And then also they had the country director sat down with everybody individually and had a little one on one interview. And they were actually a couple of people that got screened out at that time.

WAND: [00:10:01] Mm hmm. Interesting. How many were you?

SZTUK: [00:10:03] There were probably. There were 36 that ended up traveling. So there must have been 38 or, you know, 38 to 40 at that session in Chicago. Yeah. So I passed that screening, luckily.

WAND: [00:10:20] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:10:22] And then a few weeks later, we all departed for Fiji. I remember, you know, people came from all over the country, but we took the same flight from Los Angeles. So everybody flew to LA and then got on the, I think it was a Continental flight at that time.

WAND: [00:10:41] Did you have a little home leave between your Chicago orientation and going to Fiji or did you go directly?

SZTUK: [00:10:47] No, there were a few weeks there.

WAND: [00:10:49] Oh, a few weeks. Uh huh.

SZTUK: [00:10:50] Yeah, I think, I don't remember exactly how long it was.

WAND: [00:10:53] And you all flew together in a group?

SZTUK: [00:10:55] Yeah. Then we flew together in a group. They didn't have direct flights at that time. So we stopped in Hawaii and then flew from Hawaii to Fiji. One of the things I remember about Hawaii was, you know, we had met, some of us became friends at that short trip to Chicago. But, you know, you're still meeting new people on this trip. So we got off in Hawaii. We actually had to get off the plane for a couple of hours. And there was a guy who was just really excited. He was from the Midwest and had never seen the Pacific Ocean before. And it was just, it was really fun to listen to this guy, was just so excited about being in Hawaii.

WAND: [00:11:38] Yeah, yeah. Right. And there he was going to Fiji where he was going to see the Pacific a lot.

SZTUK: [00:11:43] Yeah, yeah. Actually, he spent a lot of time in the Pacific after that.

WAND: [00:11:48] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:11:48] But yeah. So then when you fly to Fiji, the flights always get in very early in the morning and this was, it was October. So, you know, the seasons are different there. And at that time of year, the sunrise is early. So the sun was coming up as we were flying in. And it was really, I'll never forget that sunrise. It was the most dramatic sunrise I'd ever seen in my life, you know, just a red, red sky. And it was really, really beautiful. So that was really exciting too. It was a good introduction or good welcome to Fiji.

WAND: [00:12:25] Mm hmm. It painted the whole world red at that point as it was. Yeah, yeah, that's great. That's a great image. And so when you say early morning, 5:00? That early?

SZTUK: [00:12:40] Maybe closer to 6:00, 5:00 to 6:00, yeah.

WAND: [00:12:44] Fiji is located near the equator?

SZTUK: [00:12:48] South of the equator.

WAND: [00:12:49] South.

SZTUK: [00:12:51] And just west of the international date. Actually, the international dateline runs through part of Fiji.

WAND: [00:12:57] Oh, OK. Right.

SZTUK: [00:12:57] You know, it jogs around a little bit. Yeah, but I think it's about 17 degrees south.

WAND: [00:13:04] Mm hmm. Yeah. So. OK. So you got in on an early morning in October.

SZTUK: [00:13:13] Yeah.

WAND: [00:13:13] Which would have been fall in the U.S., although in Southern California you can hardly tell the difference.

SZTUK: [00:13:20] Can hardly tell, yeah.

WAND: [00:13:21] So that seasons weren't part of embedded in your cycle.

SZTUK: [00:13:26] But it was, uh, I guess that would be spring in Fiji.

WAND: [00:13:30] Mm hmm. And how does that distinguish itself from other seasons in Fiji?

SZTUK: [00:13:36] Well, the summers in Fiji, which summer is Christmastime there, is usually the wet season, so it's hotter and wetter at that time of year. We were getting into the rainy season and it's also hurricane season. So I don't, I just remember it being very hot and humid, but the weather. Actually the weather was quite nice when we got in. It was sunny, it wasn't too wet yet.

WAND: [00:14:08] Yeah. So where did you go for your training and where did you live? What kind of, were you in homestays or were you in a hotel or how did your training go?

SZTUK: [00:14:17] OK. So yeah. So when we landed, the airport is on one side of the island and the capital city is on the other. The airport is in Nadi. We landed and they bused us to a hostel for the first day, so we stayed at a place called the Coconut Inn. And we got our gamma globulin shots there for hepatitis, and just spent one night there at the Coconut Inn in Nadi. Then we took the long 12 hour, I think it was a 12 hour bus ride on unpaved roads to Suva, which is now a trip that you can do in about three and a half hours. Not a very nice paved road. Back then, the busses, uh, the busses didn't have glass in the windows. They were just open air busses and they had tarps that rolled down, that you'd roll down when it rains. So during the course of a day, a day's bus ride, you'd have sun and showers and on and off. And by the time you got to Suva, your hair would be caked with mud, you know, you'd be exhausted. So that was our second day.

WAND: [00:15:30] This is your second day? After getting the gamma globulin shots in the first day, then you got to rest one night and they put you in this bus.

SZTUK: [00:15:38] Right. Right. Yeah. So it was good. You know, the group was bonding and we were having fun. Then we got to Suva and they put us up in a, in a small, I don't know, it's more like a boarding house than a hotel. What was that place called? Loloma Flats on Gorrie Street in Suva.

WAND: [00:16:01] Laloma?

SZTUK: [00:16:01] Loloma. L-O-L-O-M-A. Loloma. And so we stayed there for the duration of our training. The training was a mix of language training that was conducted there in Suva at a place that was just a short walk from where I was staying. And then we had two home stays during that time also.

WAND: [00:16:32] What language?

SZTUK: [00:16:34] Some of the group was learning Fijian. And since I was going to be, you know, on the technical side working in the public works department where most of the workers were Indian, I was trained in Hindi. And we had a little cross training too, so you got a little taste of both languages. But the homestays were with local families. So my first homestay was at a place again back on the other side of the island in Lautoka, a sugarcane farming area called Field 40. And we stayed with an Indian family out there for a few days. I don't think it was a whole week. I think they were five-day home stays. And one of the language instructors accompanied us. They'd have, say, three or four trainees and one language instructor. So you're out there staying with the family, but during the day when they're going about their business, you still did your language training. He was conducting classes. So that was.

WAND: [00:17:49] How did you find the family?

SZTUK: [00:17:51] Oh, it was great.

WAND: [00:17:52] Were you by yourself with the family or was there another volunteer with you?

SZTUK: [00:17:56] I'm trying to remember on that one. Yeah, there was one volunteer in each house. And I stayed with a shopkeeper there in Field 40, very nice people. You know, this one thing about Fiji and probably most countries, you know, people are very welcoming and they treated us very well, whether it was, whether they were Fijian or Indian. It was the same experience, very open.

WAND: [00:18:27] And what about, um, did you participate in any of the activities that week with the family themselves? Did you go out to the field and see how they worked their farm?

SZTUK: [00:18:43] No, no, we didn't do any of that.

WAND: [00:18:46] You just socialized with them in the evening?

SZTUK: [00:18:47] Just socialized with them, yeah.

WAND: [00:18:49] Right. And how was your language at this point?

SZTUK: [00:18:52] Well, I was picking it up.

WAND: [00:18:54] Uh huh.

SZTUK: [00:18:55] Yeah. So one thing I've learned is that I don't have any trouble memorizing vocabulary, but I'm not a big talker. And to really get proficient at a language, you have to talk a lot. So I was good at memorizing things. But when it came to conducting conversations, then it was a little bit difficult. And the national language in Fiji is actually English because they were an English colony. So unless you were in a remote Fijian village, you probably spoke English most of the time.

WAND: [00:19:52] So you had that as your backup.

SZTUK: [00:19:54] Yeah.

WAND: [00:19:55] So most people did know some English except in rural, isolated areas?

SZTUK: [00:20:00] Yeah, everybody knows knew some English. But if you were, if you were living in a village, a Fijian village, everybody would speak Fijian. If you were living in town, it was a mix, you know, because it was multicultural, multi-ethnic society. So the common language was English.

WAND: [00:20:21] Mm hmm. So speaking about the society for a minute. Multi-ethnic society. So there were Fijians and there were Indians. Were there other groups of cultures? Other cultures there too?

SZTUK: [00:20:36] Yeah, there are Chinese. Other islanders. There's a small island in the north called Rotuma, where the people are actually more Polynesian, but it's governed by Fiji. So there were Rotumans. And English expatriates. At that time Fiji had just gained its independence, so there were still a lot of expatriates in the country from the UK.

WAND: [00:21:06] Oh, right, right. Did most people who meet you, did they think you first maybe were British rather than American?

SZTUK: [00:21:15] Yeah, they're more. They were most likely to think you were Australian.

WAND: [00:21:19] Oh.

SZTUK: [00:21:20] At that time they, and probably still now, that most of the tourists came from Australia or New Zealand. Yeah. But it was most, most commonly when somebody would walk up to you on the street, they'd say, hey mate, you know?

WAND: [00:21:36] Right, right.

SZTUK: [00:21:37] They'd think you were from Australia.

WAND: [00:21:38] And how did that make you feel, when somebody thought you were Australian?

SZTUK: [00:21:42] Oh, I didn't feel one way or another about it. I mean, it was honest mistake.

WAND: [00:21:45] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:21:45] So I just explained that I was American.

WAND: [00:21:48] Right, right. Yeah. OK, so you're in training. You've just had, you're in the middle of language, Hindi particularly, training, and you've had one homestay. So what about your second home stay?

SZTUK: [00:22:02] Yeah. So then we went back, went back to Suva for a couple of weeks and then had a second homestay. And very much like the first one, again it was a different town, a different family, but very much the same thing. Our instructor came with us, a guy named James Norian, young kid. He was a lot of fun.

WAND: [00:22:24] Was he American or?

SZTUK: [00:22:25] No, no. He was an Indian.

WAND: [00:22:26] Indian, uh huh.

SZTUK: [00:22:28] Local guy. He had good English and he was a good teacher. So we hung out with him during the day time. We would usually, you know, we might take a walk, you know, to the beach or something and have language classes for a couple of hours. And yeah, it's mostly just conversational stuff, but and then we'd go back and we'd spend the evening with the family. We'd talk and have food. And in Fiji, the evening social life usually resolves around, revolves around drinking kava, which is a drink they call yagona in Fiji, which is the root of a plant that they pound into a powder and then strain in water, you know, strain through a cloth. Not alcoholic or anything. Just has kind of a mild effect.

SZTUK: [00:23:25] But all of the people in Fiji, whether they're Fijian or Indian or whatever, typically drink this stuff at night. And back then in '74, there wasn't a lot of other entertainment. You know, they had radio, there was no television or a lot to do. So the evenings, people would gather at their friend's house and sit around and drink kava and play cards and tell stories.

WAND: [00:23:58] Tell stories.

SZTUK: [00:23:59] Tell stories.

WAND: [00:24:00] And were they, were they likely telling stories using English or Hindi in the storytelling?

SZTUK: [00:24:11] Well, yeah, it was a mix. Let's see, if you, this second homestay was in a town not too far out. Nowadays it's less than an hour drive, back then I think it was about two and a half hours. But the further you get out of town, the more people will just speak in their own language, especially if it's only Indians or only Fijians in the place. So I think, I think there would speak more Hindi, which was good because, you know, we're learning, getting indoctrinated.

WAND: [00:24:53] Mm hmm. Yeah. So your language is gaining. So what other things did you do in training? What other, um, did you have courses. Did you have work to do? Physical work or other kinds of work?

SZTUK: [00:25:09] No, no, not for those of us that were on the technical side. So our training lasted 60 days and then we went to our assignments. The teachers had another 30 days where they actually went and did some student teaching, I think, or, you know, they went to sites and actually spent time in the classrooms. But the few of us that were engineers or architects or whatever technical job we had, we finished a month, we finished training a month before they did, and just went straight to our work site.

WAND: [00:25:56] So are we ready to look at the work setting now?

SZTUK: [00:25:59] Sure.

WAND: [00:25:59] Your assignment. Where were you assigned? And were you assigned with anyone else in the group or were you assigned to a particular, say, host country national that you worked side by side with or that you collaborated with? What was your assignment like? Where did it take you?

SZTUK: [00:26:18] All right. So I worked in the Public Works Department in the architect section at the old government building in Suva. Yeah. It was a, it was kind of a different assignment and different than I expected. So when I was, uh, when I applied for the Peace Corps and I was looking at the recruitment materials and things, I thought with my skill, they would probably send me to teach at a trade school where I could teach drafting or something. There were a couple locations. I think there was Afghanistan and Morocco where they, you know, the material said they had trade schools there. And I thought, well, they'll probably sent me to one of those places. But then I get the invitation to go to Fiji and work in the Public Works Department.

SZTUK: [00:27:15] So this job was a little different because I wasn't training anybody. Like I said, they had just gained independence and there were still a lot of expatriates in the country. So they had quite a few expat architects working there, architects, engineers, quantity surveyors, and all of the Public Works Department. And the technicians, the draftsmen, and the engineers in training and so forth were local people. So we had a mix of professionals from the UK and then Indian and Fijian technicians who were, who were in the course of training to be architects and engineers. They would work in public works for some time and then they would, the government would send them to Australia or New Zealand or Papua New Guinea.

WAND: [00:28:18] So they had to go offshore to become, to study engineering?

SZTUK: [00:28:22] Right, right. Like the University of the South Pacific had a campus in Papua New Guinea. So the architects would go there and take a course and then they would come back and then work it off. They'd have

to work for a certain number of years to repay their training. So that was the mix of people that I worked with and my predecessor. There had been a Peace Corps volunteer there before I arrived, and he didn't last very long. He actually got kicked out of the country. So.

WAND: [00:28:57] Do you know why?

SZTUK: [00:28:59] Well, I think it was a drug issue. He actually got deported. So. So when I got there, I was kind of already under a cloud and they weren't really expecting much. They didn't have a high opinion of Peace Corps volunteers. Or they probably were expecting the same kind of thing, right? So at first it was a little awkward. They weren't really giving me assignments. I kind of, there were, there were teams working on different projects in the office, and I got kind of shuffled around here and there. But eventually, you know, I got started working, you know. And then they realized that I could actually produce some work and contribute. So it took a while. But then I was finally accepted as a, you know.

WAND: [00:30:07] Can you think of what you may have done? Was there a particular kind of, uh. Was there a particular incident or series of incidents that stand out in your mind that may have gained their confidence in you?

SZTUK: [00:30:22] No, I don't think it was any particular incident, and I think it was just going to work every day and doing my job, you know.

WAND: [00:30:29] Showing up.

SZTUK: [00:30:30] Right. Showing up and doing something, you know. And I would have, I would have preferred, you know, if I could have done something like where I could have trained people or taught at a technical school or something like that, but it didn't work out that way. So I just made the best of what I could there. So I worked on a team with, uh, there was one architect from the UK, David Pollard, and an intern architect. It was a local Indian guy, Subhan Ali. And we worked on the design of a maternity wing for the main hospital in Fiji. It's S-U-B-H-A-N.

WAND: [00:31:13] S-U-B-H?

SZTUK: [00:31:19] H-A-N. Yeah, and we, and the three of us got to be very good friends. In fact, I'm still friends with Subhan. He's in Australia, but we reconnected through Facebook a while back so we're still friends. Yeah, I don't know where David's at. He kind of disappeared.

WAND: [00:31:45] So you're working on a maternity clinic? Or maternity hospital?

SZTUK: [00:31:50] Maternity wing for the main hospital, yeah. It was a pretty, pretty big addition to the hospital. And in addition to that, we did some smaller projects, rural nursing stations, where they would send a nurse out to work in some remote village. And they, she would, they would build a dispensary. It was a small building with the nurses quarters on one side and one or two rooms for a dispensary on the other side. So we would go out to the villages and survey the sites, and we had pretty much a standard design for those things. But back in those days, we were doing things manually. It wasn't, you didn't pull up a set of plans on your computer in front of you.

WAND: [00:32:38] Each one had to be drawn.

SZTUK: [00:32:41] Yeah. So we were drawing.

WAND: [00:32:42] And how many of those, do you remember how many you worked on for those rural clinics?

SZTUK: [00:32:46] Oh, probably half a dozen or so.

WAND: [00:32:48] And is this a project that the Brits had started, or was this a project that the Fijians had done after they got independent, that they started working on these medical clinics?

SZTUK: [00:33:06] Well, you know, I don't know. You know, the maternity wing was something that was built with aid from the UK so.

WAND: [00:33:17] OK.

SZTUK: [00:33:17] So I'm sure that they, you know, they had a lot to do with getting that project started. I'm not sure about the clinics, whether that was. It was probably a carryover from the British time.

WAND: [00:33:31] So what year was Fiji made? Did it gain its independence?

SZTUK: [00:33:35] 1970.

WAND: [00:33:36] 1970. And you were there four years later, right? 1974. Right. I've gotten us off the track here a little bit. But it's relevant, I think, because you were at in Fiji at a very pivotal time for the country and you were able to make a contribution working side by side.

SZTUK: [00:34:08] Yeah, yeah. So at the Peace Corps Connect, one of the speakers said something about service not being about the job. And that's I think that's especially true in my case. Like I said, since I've worked in a job where I wasn't really providing training, I was just a coworker with the guys. So I guess I was making an impression, you know, as an American there. But I think mainly the important part of my experience was the community that I lived in, you know, and not so much the job. You know, because I became very close to the people in the neighborhood where I lived and some of the families there, you know, and we're so close today.

WAND: [00:35:03] Really?

SZTUK: [00:35:03] So that was, yeah, that was to me that was probably had more impact than the job itself. Well, it was these personal relationships with the guys at work, David, Subhan, and the other folks I worked with, but then the people that I lived with in the neighborhood.

WAND: [00:35:27] Tell us about the people you lived with. First, where did you live? Were you in?

SZTUK: [00:35:32] I lived just, you know, Suva is the biggest city in Fiji, and I lived in a suburb of Suva that's three miles outside of town. So hence it was called Three Miles. Yeah. And there were two other volunteers. We lived in a quarters that was built, actually built by the U.S. Army in World War II.

There was a camp where the U.S. did some staging and training for the Pacific Theater out there, and they actually had Fijian, Fijian military working side by side with them, you know, as scouts. So this camp was where some of those U.S., or this place where I lived was the former U.S. camp there in Suva.

SZTUK: [00:36:35] And now these buildings were left behind. The Public Works Department owned them and they were vacant. So might as well put the Peace Corps volunteers there, right? So three of us that worked in the Public Works Department lived in a house out there. There was, the other two were engineers. One was a civil engineer and the other a mechanical engineer. So the civil engineer was working in the same building as me in Suva. And the third guy, Tom Anderson, spent most of his time on the western side of the island. So he wasn't home very often.

WAND: [00:37:15] And was he also involved in public works?

SZTUK: [00:37:19] Yeah. But he was actually working on commissioning the hospital on the other side of the island. So he was away most of the time.

WAND: [00:37:26] So Tom Anderson was one volunteer who lived with you. And who was the other one?

SZTUK: [00:37:31] Allen Hee.

WAND: [00:37:35] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:37:36] H-E-E.

WAND: [00:37:42] OK. And so.

SZTUK: [00:37:43] They both got in there before me. I think they were in the one or two groups before me, so they were already settled in when I got there.

WAND: [00:37:56] So tell us about how you ingratiated yourself, how you became so, so connected really to the neighbors or your community there?

SZTUK: [00:38:08] Yeah, well, I got a good story about that. You know, this kind of goes along with the theme of things not being planned very well in my life, but just happening accidentally. So I'd been out there in, living out there for several weeks. And I don't know what the neighbors really thought of us, whether, you know, because usually when they see Europeans, they would think they were tourists, right, and didn't expect somebody to become living next to them. I didn't think they really expected us to be there for a long time. But, you know, you kind of nod and wave to people when you're on your way to the bus stop. But we didn't really have any any close connections there in the neighborhood for a few weeks.

SZTUK: [00:39:11] But then I was coming home from work one day. We'd ride the bus back and forth to town. So I'm coming home on the bus and it was standing room only. So I'm standing up in the aisle. And then these three guys got on and they'd had a little bit too much to drink. So there was a Fijian guy, half caste guy, which is part European, part Fijian, and a Japanese guy. And so they get on the bus and start. The Fijian guy starts to try and strike up a conversation with me, right? And I'm trying to be polite but not engage too much. It was kind of funny. The Japanese guy could barely stand up, but he was hanging onto the strap and every time we'd go around the corner he'd go careening, you know, this way or that way, and he managed to hang on.

SZTUK: [00:40:15] But so it starts out typical thing, you know. Hey, mate, where are you from? You're from Australia? No, I'm from the U.S., blah, blah, blah. But anyway, then we get to Three Miles, right? And we all get off the bus there right in front of the State Theater. The State Theater is kind of landmark there. And then this Fijian guy's name was Paula. He looks surprised because I got off the bus. I go, well, I'm just staying up here. And he goes, oh. So he grabs my arm and he goes, oh, come with us. I go, nah, that's okay. I've got stuff to do. And, you know, he was insisting that I go upstairs with him.

WAND: [00:40:57] So you got off? He lived nearby?

SZTUK: [00:40:59] Yeah.

WAND: [00:41:00] The bus stop.

SZTUK: [00:41:00] Yeah. And then I was thinking back of a situation that happened just a couple of weeks before. Similar thing, but with some older guys that weren't quite as drunk. But again, they invited me to go somewhere with them and I was kind of making excuses. And the guy told me, he says, when somebody invites you in Fiji, when somebody invites you, always go because you don't know what's going to happen. You don't know who you're going to meet, you don't know what's going to happen. And he said, next time is no time.

WAND: [00:41:28] So who told you that? This was a local Fijian?

SZTUK: [00:41:32] Yeah. And this happened a couple of weeks before that. So I kind of remember that and I thought, well, OK, what the heck? So I went upstairs with these guys and there was a flat above the State Theater where some Fijian people were staying and the local guys were hanging out there. They'd go there and drink kava at night. So that's how I met and became friends with these guys in the community who, you know, I'd seen them around or they had seen me. But this is the first time we actually sat down and, you know, drank kava together and had a conversation. So it was kind of fortuitous.

WAND: [00:42:14] So was your conversation in English or in Hindi?

SZTUK: [00:42:18] Yeah. Again, like.

WAND: [00:42:20] Or a combination?

SZTUK: [00:42:20] In this neighborhood, we had Indians, Fijians, half caste, Rotumans, Chinese all hanging out together in the evening. So typically, you know, everybody spoke English and there were bits and pieces of Fijian and Hindi thrown in because people will, everybody speaks a little bit of whatever. But English was the common language. Yeah. So they're up there that night, you know, I went up there and we drank kava or grog as it's commonly known there. And you know, and I met a lot of the local people in the neighborhood and we got to be friends. And, well, a lot of

them are no longer with us, but some of them are. I'm still friends with even now.

WAND: [00:43:15] And did they? And they still live in Fiji?

SZTUK: [00:43:18] Not all of them, no. No, actually, not many.

WAND: [00:43:21] Not many.

SZTUK: [00:43:21] Not many people are still back there in Fiji. One in particular is in Sacramento. So there was one family that in particular that I was close to. There were three brothers that were kind of around my age and a couple of younger brothers. And so two of those brothers have passed away that were near my age. The younger one lives in Sacramento. But on this last trip that I was in Fiji.

WAND: [00:43:52] And when was that?

SZTUK: [00:43:53] This was in June.

WAND: [00:43:54] June of 2018?

SZTUK: [00:43:56] Yeah, June of 2018. I had gone to see the wife of one of the guys who died, you know, and I found out that a younger brother. Now this guy was just like 12 or 13 when, you know, but he was just one of the younger kids that, he used to hang around. But I found out that he was back in Fiji and he had gone to Canada for some time, but he was back in Fiji. And so she called him up and he got all excited and wanted me to come out to his place in Navua, which is just a little bit out of Suva. So I did and we had a really good time. I'll tell you, it was great. Like I said, he was a lot younger than us, so we didn't really hang out back then. But he still felt close to me, you know, just being part of the family. And you know, now that we're grown up, I actually, this trip I really felt a strong connection with him. You know, I felt like if he were my age at that time, you know, I would have been as good a friend with him as his brothers. Yeah.

WAND: [00:45:12] What things did he remember?

SZTUK: [00:45:14] Oh, he just, he remembered me being around their house all the time, you know, and we didn't talk about anything in particular. But just that, you know, the way I was part of their, I was like part of the family. And this was unusual because being a British colony, like I said, there were still a lot of expats around, but they lived in their own community. They lived in an area called the Domain. They were a different class of people. So even though there were a lot of Europeans in the country, at the level of the people that I was, the community that I was living in, you know, their social status, they didn't hang around with white people. They didn't have people over to their house, you know, stuff like that. So that's what he remembered was I lived like them.

SZTUK: [00:46:09] You know, I was really, I was part of the community, not just, you know, one of these expats that lived in their own neighborhood and have their own clubs. And I think that's where Peace Corps is really different than and why the local people like Peace Corps and America so much, is because we don't, it's not, you know, a situation where we go for a couple of weeks and then leave, or that we go and live on an isolated compound. But the volunteers live with people in the community and they stay for two years. They stay for a long time. So you really build a strong bond with the people you live with.

WAND: [00:47:03] So when you met these tipsy locals who insisted that you join them for a little social life that night, then did your other Peace Corps friends ever join that group as well? Did they ever sit with the local men?

SZTUK: [00:47:26] Yeah, well, the guys that I lived with in the house?

WAND: [00:47:29] Yes.

SZTUK: [00:47:29] Yeah, yeah. Not, I guess not as extensively as I did. But they did. Yeah. Because the guys would come over to my house, you know, after a while, you know, they would come over to our house and we would drink kava and play cards there and stuff. So yeah. So I guess that experience actually got, I got them more integrated in the community too. Then they got to know these people.

WAND: [00:47:59] Right.

SZTUK: [00:48:00] Also.

WAND: [00:48:01] Yeah. Have you ever.

SZTUK: [00:48:02] I guess I was, you know, maybe the difference between me and them is, you know, they wouldn't have gone off with these drunk guys and I would.

WAND: [00:48:15] You were more adventuresome from the get-go.

SZTUK: [00:48:18] Yeah.

WAND: [00:48:19] Well, coming from your childhood.

SZTUK: [00:48:21] Yeah, yeah. I feel comfortable in a lot of situations, you know, so. Yeah.

WAND: [00:48:32] Just asking in terms of now, what is this, 40 years later? Yeah. Are you in touch with either of those two other volunteers? And have you ever talked with them about this experience of being socializing with the locals?

SZTUK: [00:48:47] No, no. I saw Alan one time. Alan's from Hawaii and I got in touch with him one time when I was passing through there, which was probably in the nineties, I think maybe. But no, I'm not in regular contact with him. And Tom, I don't know. I've tried to look Tom up, but I don't have his address or any contact information, so I haven't talked to him since then.

WAND: [00:49:19] Right, right.

SZTUK: [00:49:20] Yeah. Yeah, we weren't. We weren't terribly close, you know, we just, we shared a house.

WAND: [00:49:24] Yeah, you shared a house. So I was going to ask, the quarters where you were living that was then built by the U.S. Government, owned by the federal works department. Was that, were the local people also living in those same quarters? Or were these, was your bus stop near that, those quarters and another community? In other words, how incorporated were those quarters, those U.S. built quarters, into the community?

SZTUK: [00:49:58] Yeah, it was, it was pretty close. I mean it was a, it was a small, you know, it wasn't the entire base anymore, but there was a small cluster of buildings there, and some of it was being used by the South Pacific Commission. They had some classroom buildings there. Ours was one building that wasn't being used, but it was right next to residences of local people. There's no fence or any separation.

WAND: [00:50:26] I see.

SZTUK: [00:50:26] So it was right there in the community.

WAND: [00:50:30] Right, right.

SZTUK: [00:50:30] Yeah. And they lived in similar houses. This was just an old wood frame building with clapboard siding, single wall construction. So you had wood boards on the outside, but no finish on the inside, bare studs, and a tin roof, you know, which was pretty much the way the local houses were built.

WAND: [00:50:52] Right. Did you have running water to the building itself?

SZTUK: [00:50:56] Yeah. Well, there was a separate kitchen and bathroom building outside. Yeah. And that had running water. Yeah, we were in town. Yes. We had a few luxuries that people in the village didn't. We actually had running water.

WAND: [00:51:11] And electricity?

SZTUK: [00:51:12] We had electricity.

WAND: [00:51:13] Did you have?

SZTUK: [00:51:14] We had a kerosene boiler that was for washing clothes. It didn't have an agitator, but it would heat the, it would heat water and you would stir your clothes around with a stick.

WAND: [00:51:31] You did.

SZTUK: [00:51:32] That was a luxury.

WAND: [00:51:32] You did the machine part.

SZTUK: [00:51:34] We had a refrigerator.

WAND: [00:51:34] You had a refrigerator. So was that run by kerosene also or was that electricity?

SZTUK: [00:51:40] No, that was electric.

WAND: [00:51:40] So you had electricity to your house.

SZTUK: [00:51:41] Yeah, yeah.

WAND: [00:51:42] Right, right. Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:51:44] Yeah. There were some advantages to living in town.

WAND: [00:51:46] Yes, yes, indeed, indeed. So I love the story about your meeting your peers, if you will. And how were those men gainfully employed? Did they have jobs, most of them, or were they?

SZTUK: [00:52:03] They did. Some didn't. Yeah. Yeah, it was a mix. Some people worked on and off. Some people did different. You know, that's, and that's the thing in Fiji, it's um. They're usually some are related. Some are just friends in the community. But it didn't matter whether you had a job or didn't have a job, whether you had money or you didn't have money, you

were just part of the group. So some people contributed to buying the kava, you know.

WAND: [00:52:36] And some didn't.

SZTUK: [00:52:36] Some people didn't. But it didn't really matter, you know?

WAND: [00:52:39] Right.

SZTUK: [00:52:40] Things were cheap at those times.

WAND: [00:52:43] Was there any particular incident that you remember by which you became invited into one of their family homes? Was that, or was that just a kind of fluid and it just happened?

SZTUK: [00:52:58] Yeah, it was just kind of fluid. Like I said, I became real good friends with a couple of guys in particular that happened to be brothers. So I ended up spending a lot of time with their family and you know, over at their place. It was back and forth, you know, they were at my place, I was at theirs. I remember, this is kind of a funny story, but one time one of the guys, Jan, he was over at my house and I was cooking. I don't know. I think I made a pot of chili or something. And so I invited Jan to eat with me and we're sitting there. And then I looked at him and he had tears in his eyes. And he says, I never ate with a white man before. And I go, really? It's not that big a deal. But, you know, and you don't realize that kind of stuff, like how important it was to him. But you know, like I said, you know, it's not that big a deal, you know, but it was a big deal to him.

WAND: [00:54:01] Did he, was he able to tell you why it was a big deal or did he just make that observation?

SZTUK: [00:54:06] Yeah, that pretty much just say, you know, just like I said, they didn't expect the Europeans to live with them. You know, there was always, there was always a different class of people, right? But then it got to be kind of a regular thing. And the guys, they liked it when I made chili or made spaghetti or.

WAND: [00:54:33] Something that they probably had never tasted before.

SZTUK: [00:54:37] Yeah, right.

WAND: [00:54:38] Yeah.

SZTUK: [00:54:38] Yeah. And I'm not that great a cook, but you know. And their grandmother would always send stuff over for me, you know.

WAND: [00:54:46] Aw, nice.

SZTUK: [00:54:47] And like these older Indian women, they don't expect to see, you know, a man living by himself. And they're worried, you know, who's feeding him and who's taking care of, you know, who's doing this and that? So they would always send the boys over with roti and curry and, you know.

WAND: [00:55:07] So they wanted you to be healthy too?

SZTUK: [00:55:10] Yeah.

WAND: [00:55:11] Yeah. So you modeled a different behavior for men by doing your own cooking?

SZTUK: [00:55:21] Oh, maybe, yeah.

WAND: [00:55:22] Yeah. You demonstrated a different approach to life. Yeah. So, well, this, these are great, great stories. And it sounds like you've sort of moved through the first year and into the second year. And was your second year any different than the first year for you or did it all kind of blend?

SZTUK: [00:55:50] Well, by the second year, I really was pretty comfortable there. You know, like I said, I'd gotten into this routine of hanging out with the guys in the evening. I was probably drinking way too much kava, but yeah, that was, like I said, that was the social life. I just happened to have a high tolerance for it, which was maybe a good thing and maybe a bad thing.

WAND: [00:56:15] Well, you said it's not alcohol?

SZTUK: [00:56:17] It's not, no, it's not alcoholic, but it has a mild kind of narcotic effect. You know, a good thing about it, as opposed to alcohol, it doesn't wind people up or, you know, in fact, it calms you down. So you never have any, you don't have arguments or fights or anything with people drinking kava, which is pretty common when people are drinking alcohol.

WAND: [00:56:48] Right.

SZTUK: [00:56:48] So that was one of the good things about it. But when you drink a lot of it, you can get, uh, you can get a condition like, they call it *kanikani*, which where your skin starts to get scaly and crack. And I actually got that. That's how much I drank so. I got *kanikani*, your face would. It started out like here on your face. And when the cold weather would start and your skin would crack, and you'd get it on your arms. And it probably wasn't really healthy, which is, it's probably good that I left after two years.

WAND: [00:57:21] Did you recognize these symptoms when they appeared on your own body?

SZTUK: [00:57:27] Oh, yeah.

WAND: [00:57:28] And did you chastise yourself or decide to change your behavior or did it not make that difference?

SZTUK: [00:57:35] Well, you know, no. It was kind of a, it was kind of a medal, you know, it was like it made me unique, you know, that I, uh. You know, here again, I was an American, but I was, uh, living that culture to the extent that I, you know, I got this condition. But the whole kava drinking thing's a different, different story. It's very common in Fiji. In fact, it's not. It's gotten to be a problem, problematic, because people get kind of addicted to it. And then they don't take care of their families. They don't go to work, you know?

WAND: [00:58:32] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [00:58:33] Although back then, it was a good, it was a good social life and a good way to mingle with the local community. Overall, it's not really a good thing to do in excess.

WAND: [00:58:44] Did it, did you experience any effect it had on your work life?

SZTUK: [00:58:49] No, no. You know, I was young. I could stay up till the wee hours and still go to work in the morning. In fact, we used to, it was a tradition at work actually. The architect section was one of the last bastions of kava drinking. But we actually had a bowl in the office every morning and every afternoon. It was common. If you'd go out on a worksite, a construction site, to do an inspection, somebody would run up to you with a bucket, a bowl of grog, and I was going out all day long. So it was real common.

WAND: [00:59:26] So describe what it is that you drank it from. How was it served?

SZTUK: [00:59:33] It's usually served in a coconut shell, you know, that's scraped smooth and clean and, you know, you mix it. Traditionally, they'll mix it in a big wooden bowl called a tanoa that's carved out of one particular tree in Fiji. But in a town where people might not have that, they would mix it in anything. They'd mix it in a stainless steel basin, you know, a big bowl or a plastic basin or something.

WAND: [01:00:05] And then they'd dip it with a coconut shell?

SZTUK: [01:00:08] Yeah, and everybody drinks from the same cup.

WAND: [01:00:10] From the same coconut shell? Right. Right. So that reminds me of a question. What about sanitation and infections or sicknesses? Did you ever feel that you were, that you suffered digestive problems or something because of the kava being not sanitary or not filtered or?

SZTUK: [01:00:34] No, I didn't. You know, I didn't. And that's one of the things that you can't really worry too much about. I mean, obviously, you're drinking out of the same bowl with people, you're bound to get a cold or flu every now and then, you know. But a lot of times, if somebody was really sick or, you know, came in and they said, I've got a sore throat or something, they'd get a quarantine bowl, you know, they could get their own bowl at some places and some places they wouldn't. But no, I never, I never got sick from that. I think at times I did have digestive problems, it was probably from going out in the villages and you know, maybe the water supply wasn't great. Because I did do that. Like you were asking about the second year and things I did differently.

SZTUK: [01:01:21] I got a, I had a few chances to travel within Fiji. So I didn't spend all my time in town. In fact, the folks that rented that flat on top of the State Theater were from a village on the western side called Navolau. It was Navolau number one actually, there are two Navolaus. So on some weekends, we used to go around there and hang out in the village. One of my friends that was teaching got invited to go down to the island of Kadavu one Christmas, and I went with him. So we spent almost two weeks on one of the outer islands there and in a village, which was a great time. You know, those are things that I enjoyed is, you know, taking a few days off and going to another island or going out in the villages and hanging out. You know, it was a big thing to kind of like walk across an island. Cause islands aren't that big.

WAND: [01:02:32] Right.

SZTUK: [01:02:32] But you could walk across in a day or so.

WAND: [01:02:36] Right.

SZTUK: [01:02:37] Yeah, and visit the villages.

WAND: [01:02:38] Explore.

SZTUK: [01:02:39] Yeah, explore.

WAND: [01:02:40] And the villages probably hadn't seen very many white men.

SZTUK: [01:02:44] Not a lot.

WAND: [01:02:45] Right, right. So then the work that you did was pretty much consistent through the two years.

SZTUK: [01:02:54] Yeah.

WAND: [01:02:54] You were working with the Federal Works Department and doing.

SZTUK: [01:02:57] Public Works.

WAND: [01:02:57] Public Works, excuse me, and working on designs that they needed to do for their commitments. Right. Right.

SZTUK: [01:03:07] Yeah. The work stayed pretty constant.

WAND: [01:03:08] Right. And anything memorable about additional Peace Corps volunteers who came or did you meet more volunteers coming into the country or?

SZTUK: [01:03:19] Oh sure. Yeah, well, you know, I had friends there in my group and there were, people were doing different things. We had teachers that were, like I said, most of the group back in those days were teachers.

WAND: [01:03:34] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [01:03:35] Occasionally somebody that was teaching on an outer island might come in and stay with us while they were in town. But I don't have any really kind of standout experiences or stories. But, you know, that was, it was good, you know, knowing the other people and, you know, making friends with the other Peace Corps volunteers. It was a pretty good group. I don't recall any big conflicts or anything.

WAND: [01:04:12] Right.

SZTUK: [01:04:12] Pretty harmonious.

WAND: [01:04:13] Yeah, yeah.

SZTUK: [01:04:14] Yeah. A lot of good people.

WAND: [01:04:15] Yeah. So.

SZTUK: [01:04:19] In fact, there's still a few people in my group that I'm in touch with now, especially while being part of Friends of Fiji, that keeps me, gives me a reason to communicate more often.

WAND: [01:04:29] Mm hmm. Mm hmm. So some Peace Corps volunteers had what are called secondary projects beyond their primary assignment.

SZTUK: [01:04:39] Mm hmm.

WAND: [01:04:39] They had. They either their communities asked them to work on other kinds of projects, or they took on other kinds of projects. Did you have anything like that?

SZTUK: [01:04:48] No.

WAND: [01:04:49] No. Right. So it's getting close now in our conversation to the time where you will probably are ready to depart country. Your assignment is about over.

SZTUK: [01:05:05] Yeah.

WAND: [01:05:06] Where? What were you thinking about then? And what did you do? What were your plans as it came close to a time to leave, which would have been in 1976?

SZTUK: [01:05:19] Yeah, the end of '76. Oh, boy. You know, I would have, actually I would have liked to extend for a year, but my mother was, uh, my mother had open heart surgery. She wasn't doing real well at that time, so I

thought I'd better go home. It was a hard time. Like, you know, after two years, I'd gotten really close with some of the people there in the country so. But I think it was time to go also, you know. So although I, you know, I was sad to leave, I think it was a good time to go. If I had had maybe a different kind of job, or if I had a secondary type of project I might have, it might have been more reason to stay longer.

WAND: [01:06:14] But you had mixed feelings about leaving.

SZTUK: [01:06:18] Yeah, well, even now looking back, I wish I had stayed.

WAND: [01:06:23] Yeah, right.

SZTUK: [01:06:24] But at the time, no, it seemed like it was time to go.

WAND: [01:06:26] Right. So, OK. Take us home with you and tell us what you did when you got home. Or was there something memorable you want to say yet about the time in Fiji?

SZTUK: [01:06:38] About the time in Fiji? No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I, uh. I think, you know, like I said, I think I'd been there for two years. It seemed like a lifetime, really, you know, and was maybe a little too integrated into the local social life there and customs. So it was probably good for my health that I left at that time.

WAND: [01:07:23] So you had gone native?

SZTUK: [01:07:24] Yeah.

WAND: [01:07:25] As we say, right?

SZTUK: [01:07:27] Actually, I've neglected to talk about my wife so far, but I didn't. I met my wife in Fiji. She lived in the neighborhood there.

WAND: [01:07:34] That's pretty important, Jay!

SZTUK: [01:07:36] But I didn't get married there. We didn't get married there. And we corresponded for a while afterwards. And then she came to the States later on and we got married in the U.S.

WAND: [01:07:47] Congratulations. So you brought home the ultimate souvenir.

SZTUK: [01:07:51] The ultimate souvenir? Yeah. And it's that there's, you know, our kids, you know, which I look at my kids and I think, well, if I'd never gone to Fiji, then these guys wouldn't be here, you know, and that. If you ever second guess your ideas or wonder whether you made the right decision or not, you just have to look at your kids and think, well, if things had been different, then they wouldn't have been here. And that wouldn't have been, it would've been a whole different world. So I'm really happy about that. Yeah, so my wife and I have been married for 40 years now. And yeah, that's good. So.

WAND: [01:08:38] So we can't let you leave Fiji without your telling us how you met your wife.

SZTUK: [01:08:45] Well, you know, it was. She was just living there in the neighborhood, you know, so through these guys, the friends that I met, you know, they introduced me to her and her father. Actually, her father was Gilbertese from Kiribati, Tarawa. Or Tarawa. And immigrated to Fiji. So she's part Gilbertese. And he was a great guy. So we used to go sometimes after work and have a couple of beers with him. It was always fun to hang out at their place and that's how we got to know each other. It wasn't, you know, there was no big romantic story behind it. We just got to know each other and liked each other. And like I said, we kept corresponding afterwards and then she came to the States and we got married.

WAND: [01:09:38] So did she come to the States with the intention that she was going to marry you? Or did she just come so that you could see one another again?

SZTUK: [01:09:45] I think with the intention of getting married, right? Yeah.

WAND: [01:09:51] Right. Right. Yeah.

SZTUK: [01:09:55] But you know, that kind of. It's a different kind of environment than we have. You know, where you hang out with your friends, you know, you don't go on dates and stuff so much. So that's, we just met like that, you know, hanging out, became close.

WAND: [01:10:15] Yeah. So then when you, again, you were sad to leave and you. But you felt like it was time for you to come home. And so what did you do then when you came home?

SZTUK: [01:10:28] When I came home? Well, so when I came home, you know, everybody will probably tell you this. Adjusting back to the States is sometimes a bigger culture shock than leaving, you know. When I got home, course, you know, I had to support myself, so I had to get a job. Luckily, some of the guys that I had worked with before, like I said, somehow knew I was coming back or whatever. But I got a message when I got home and there was a job waiting for me.

WAND: [01:11:01] Wow, so.

SZTUK: [01:11:02] Working for an architect in Mission Bay in San Diego. Yeah. Yeah. So I kind of quickly got back in the routine. I'd been away for two years and had all these experiences, you know? But you come back and your friends are pretty much doing the same thing they were before, going on about their lives and, you know, starting families or working and acquiring bills and buying trucks and stuff. And after a while, it was just kind of, um. I think this might be a common thing too when you come back, is you've had all these experiences, nobody really relates to them. And after they hear your stories a couple of times, nobody cares anymore. So then you just fall back into the routine and it's pretty easy just kind of to finish up that phase of your life and you move on.

SZTUK: [01:12:01] And, you know, like for me it was different because I married somebody from Fiji and we always had kind of a connection to other islanders or other former Peace Corps volunteers, you know, we've kept in touch with.

WAND: [01:12:20] Mm hmm. And so when you, uh. When your wife came, did she look for a job, or was she going to study? Or did she literally just come to visit and be with you and hadn't made plans beyond that?

SZTUK: [01:12:38] Yeah. No, she hadn't made plans. She didn't have any inclination to study. So she just came and, you know, she had to get used to living in the States and everything was new. You know, it was like going to the supermarket is like Disneyland, you know? Or you could go to the laundromat and watch the clothes tumble over for hours. So it was kind of fun seeing her experience all these things, you know. I mean, but she, you know, she blended in really. She's really a kind of gregarious, outgoing person. So she fit in really well. I don't think she had any big adjustment problems other than getting used to stuff and getting used to the language, the American English, and, you know, things like that.

WAND: [01:13:30] Yeah.

SZTUK: [01:13:31] But she did. And now she's more American than I am.

WAND: [01:13:36] That happens so often. So in the last few minutes here, let's look a little bit about your career and the things that you've done. You got started working as an architect.

SZTUK: [01:13:49] Yeah. Yeah. So, yeah. So like, I don't know, this could be a good or bad thing. Like I said, when I came back, somebody was looking for me already and wanted me to go to work for him. So I didn't explore a lot of other things. And I really didn't know, like this non-competitive status that Peace Corps has for federal jobs. I didn't know much about that. I didn't. So I didn't look into it. You know, it could have, that could have changed my career if I had considered that instead of just going to the private industry like I did. But I started working at this job for an architect there in the Mission Bay area of San Diego. Really nice guy. Great guy. I learned quite a bit from him and still I wasn't licensed. And like I told you before, I never went to school for architecture. Everything I learned was on the job.

SZTUK: [01:14:48] And then after a few years, I decided, we decided to move to Santa Barbara, where my sister lived. And I got a job up there working for an architectural firm that did school and hospital work, you know, it was different class of work. And I could see that although I had an aptitude for this stuff and I was productive, I was going to get left behind because I wasn't a licensed architect.

WAND: [01:15:24] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [01:15:24] So that's when I started preparing myself to take the exams. I'd had enough time in there by then that I could qualify, so I started studying on my own. It was kind of a, kind of a joke around the office because I was studying all the time. You know, we'd have a break and I'd go sit in the break room and I'd crack the books open and speed reading and all that stuff. But I had to cram all of this stuff into a few months that other people had spent five years in school learning, like teaching myself structural engineering and mechanical engineering theory and stuff like that. And the history was really a hard, hard thing, you know, there was a couple volumes of architectural history that I had to read through.

SZTUK: [01:16:19] So anyway, I passed all the exams. And in California back then you actually had three sets of exams. You would take this first set, which was two days and included a 12 hour design problem where you actually had to bring in your own drawing board and tools and everything, and you had 12 hours to design this building and do all these drawings. Then after a couple of years after that, you could sit for what they call the professional exams, and after passing that you had to actually go in for an oral exam. So I did all that and finally got licensed.

WAND: [01:16:53] How long did it take you to do that?

SZTUK: [01:16:55] Well, you know, there's two years between the qualifying exam and the professionals and then six months between the professionals and the oral exam. So it took several years, but I think I finally got licensed in 1983. Yeah. And yeah, so I worked in architecture various places doing all types of work from residential work to schools and hospitals. And the economy took a downturn in the early nineties in California. There wasn't

any work. So I took a job back in the Marshall Islands working at a U.S. base there, but I was working.

WAND: [01:17:37] As a civilian?

SZTUK: [01:17:38] As a civilian. I actually worked for Raytheon there, but I was a base architect on this little island called Kwajalein.

WAND: [01:17:48] And you took your family?

SZTUK: [01:17:49] Took the family. We were there for six years.

WAND: [01:17:51] And when, what was that, what years?

SZTUK: [01:17:53] '92 to '98. And that was great. It was nice to be back in an island country, although it was a different, uh, different situation because we were on this, part of this American enclave there. It wasn't living in the community like Fiji was. But it was nice to be back in the islands, and from there I saw that the people working for the government had a better deal than I did. So I started applying for government jobs and got a job in Japan, working public works at a Marine Corps base. And we went there and stayed for seven years.

WAND: [01:18:37] So what years were those?

SZTUK: [01:18:40] That was to 1998 to 2005. So this Peace Corps experience living overseas kind of started something. If I hadn't had that experience, then later in my life I might not have been so inclined to try to go overseas again.

WAND: [01:19:02] Opened doors for you that you hadn't even imagined when you filled out that application.

SZTUK: [01:19:08] Right. Although, you know, ever since I was young, I always wanted to travel. I still want to travel, but I don't know if I would have had those experiences if I hadn't joined the Peace Corps.

WAND: [01:19:18] Right, right. Right. Pretty exciting.

SZTUK: [01:19:22] Yeah.

WAND: [01:19:23] So you've recently retired, is that what I remember?

SZTUK: [01:19:26] I retired in July.

WAND: [01:19:28] In July? That's pretty recent. That was two months ago or less. Yes. And you retired from the U.S. government?

SZTUK: [01:19:35] Yeah. From Department of Veterans Affairs.

WAND: [01:19:45] So just tell us a little bit about your family. You have a wife who's?

SZTUK: [01:19:51] I have a wife.

WAND: [01:19:53] From Fiji.

SZTUK: [01:19:54] Yes.

WAND: [01:19:55] Raised in Fiji. And how many children do you have?

SZTUK: [01:19:58] Four kids.

WAND: [01:19:59] And how old are they?

SZTUK: [01:20:02] OK. My oldest, Christopher, he was born in 1979, so he's actually 39 now. I've got three boys and a girl. The next is my daughter, Della, who is 34. And then we've got twin boys, Daniel and Dylan, who are 29. Actually, they're 28. They'll be 29 in January. And six grandkids.

WAND: [01:20:37] And six grandchildren, wow.

SZTUK: [01:20:40] So my oldest grandson is 18 now and I took the two oldest boys to Fiji with me in June, the 18 year old and a 15 year old grandson. And it

was a great experience. One thing, they're great traveling companions because they're easy. You know, you don't have to worry much about them. They can take care of themselves. They'll sleep anywhere. They'll eat anything. But having the Fiji connection there. I mean, Fiji is in their DNA.

WAND: [01:21:14] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [01:21:14] And my wife still has brothers and sisters living there in Fiji, so they got to meet their distant cousins. And when we went to Beqa Island to build the playground project, I was telling the Peace Corps volunteer there about their connection with, you know, my wife is connected to a different island, and all of these islands have a relationship. You know, they may be friends or they may be enemies, right?

WAND: [01:21:45] Mm hmm.

SZTUK: [01:21:45] So I was going through the lineage and her great, I guess great, great grandfather's name was Narokete. He was from this island called Kadavu. And she says, oh, we have two Narokete kids here at the school from Kadavu. So my grandsons and these two little kids somehow share a distant relationship.

WAND: [01:22:13] Cousins at some level.

SZTUK: [01:22:14] Yeah. So she went and called those kids and tried to explain it to them and they weren't buying it. You know, these are your, this is your family there.

WAND: [01:22:26] They said, no, they're American.

SZTUK: [01:22:27] They were kind of confused. But I had brought three ukuleles with me down there that I was going to give away. So we all signed one of the ukuleles and gave it to the two boys so.

WAND: [01:22:39] Right.

SZTUK: [01:22:40] Yeah, so they'll remember us.

WAND: [01:22:43] Absolutely. Well, you've changed the lives of those two grandchildren. That's wonderful. So your four children are, shall we say, launched and doing their own things?

SZTUK: [01:22:56] Yeah. Yeah.

WAND: [01:22:58] Yeah. That's wonderful.

SZTUK: [01:22:59] Yeah.

WAND: [01:23:00] Well, before we end this, is there anything else you want to add?

SZTUK: [01:23:09] Uh. Yeah, well, just. I guess that, you know, this Peace Corps experience has obviously molded the rest of my life, especially, you know, having married a local and we've been connected to Fiji and to Peace Corps all this time. And now our kids and our grandkids also have this connection. So, you know, you can kind of second guess the decisions that you make in your life and whether, you know, your life would have been better one way or another if you had done this or done that. But obviously, I have no regrets.

WAND: [01:24:04] Right.

SZTUK: [01:24:05] You know.

WAND: [01:24:05] Right.

SZTUK: [01:24:07] And that's, you know, I'm happy with the way everything's turned out. And my kids and grandkids and the connection. And I'm ready to do it again.

WAND: [01:24:17] Well, it's not too late.

SZTUK: [01:24:18] Yeah, if I could do it again, I would.

WAND: [01:24:20] Right. Is your wife now a citizen?

SZTUK: [01:24:22] Oh, yeah, she's been a citizen for some time.

WAND: [01:24:22] Well, then you could go to the Peace Corps together.

SZTUK: [01:24:25] Sure.

WAND: [01:24:25] Yeah. Keep it in mind.

SZTUK: [01:24:28] Yeah, give her a call and talk her into it.

WAND: [01:24:29] Right. All right. Thank you, Jay. This has been a wonderful.

SZTUK: [01:24:35] Thank you, Pat.

WAND: [01:24:35] Wonderful conversation.

WAND: [01:24:37] This is Pat Wand on September 3rd, continuing briefly my conversation with Peace Corps volunteer Jay Sztuk. And I asked him how the Fiji islanders make kava. He is going to tell us now, including the name of the plant from which kava is made.

SZTUK: [01:25:01] All right. Well, the name of the plant is Piper methysticum. It's a type of a pepper plant and just grows three or four feet tall. But the plant takes at least four years to mature, and after that, they'll dig it up and dry the roots. Sometimes the stems, but the most potent part is the roots. So the roots are dried, they're cleaned, you know, all the dirt is scraped off and then it's pounded into a powder. So nowadays this may be done by machine, but traditionally there's a, it's done in a hollowed-out log and a big heavy stick or iron rod. And the powder is put into a cloth, then strained through water, and the juice is squeezed out of the powder. And that's all the preparation it takes. It's not fermented. It's not aged in any way. That's it.

WAND: [01:26:09] And then you drink that. You drink the water that has been forced through the dried roots.

SZTUK: [01:26:20] Right. It'd be like making tea.

WAND: [01:26:23] Right, right.

SZTUK: [01:26:23] Except that it's not brewed with hot water. It's squeezed, you know, the juice is squeezed out of the powder by dipping your cloth and water and then giving it a good, hard squeeze.

WAND: [01:26:36] Right. And then everyone eats, drinks the.

SZTUK: [01:26:40] Everybody drinks.

WAND: [01:26:41] Drinks the kava, served to them in a common coconut shell.

SZTUK: [01:26:45] Right, called a *bilu*.

WAND: [01:26:46] A *bilu*.

SZTUK: [01:26:47] Right.

WAND: [01:26:48] All right, so before I end this brief conversation, let me ask you one more question. Early in your interview, you talked about the three men that you that you met on the public bus going home one evening, and those three men invited you to spend some time with them. And that became quite a moving turning point in your Peace Corps experience. Tell us the name again, please, of those three men and what distinguished each of them.

SZTUK: [01:27:25] OK. All right. So first there was Paula. He's the Fijian guy. And although he's responsible for introducing me to the rest of these guys in the community, he really wasn't around much after that. He was from the same village as the folks that were renting the flat, Navolau. The Japanese guy, his name was Suzuki, and he was actually. The story I got was that he was riding his bicycle around the world and he had stopped in

Fiji. Probably met Paula the same way I did, spent a few days with him. And then he took off again. And Clarkie. Clarkie was the part European guy. Again, he, Clarkie was in and out of the group for a while. He didn't actually live there in the community. He was a friend of these people from the village. But interestingly enough, it turns out that he is the first cousin of my wife.

WAND: [01:28:34] OK. So he's distantly related.

SZTUK: [01:28:38] He's distantly related. Well, not that distantly. And he probably doesn't remember that story. But when I was back in June, I was relating that to his sister. So I'm sure she's told him about it. I'm not sure if he remembers or not.

WAND: [01:28:53] Does he still live in Fiji?

SZTUK: [01:28:55] Yeah, he still lives there. I didn't get a chance to see him, but I did see his sister and I told her that Clarkie was one of the guys responsible for me meeting up with his cousin and.

WAND: [01:29:07] And you having such a rich experience in Fiji as a Peace Corps volunteer.

SZTUK: [01:29:12] That started there.

WAND: [01:29:13] OK, Jay. Thank you so much for this additional information.

SZTUK: [01:29:17] All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]