

Genesis Castellon Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Genesis Castellon served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin from 2014 to 2016 as a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) teacher.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Genesis Castellon

June 8, 2019
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:04] Today is June 8th, 2019, and this is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia from 1966 to 1968, and today I'm interviewing Genesis Castellon, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin from 2014 to 2016, and she was in teaching English as a foreign language program. So welcome, Genesis.

CASTELLON: Thank you.

GANZGLASS: Let me ask you, why did you decide to join the Peace Corps?

CASTELLON: [00:00:42] I wanted to do something quintessentially American. So my family, I'm a first generation immigrant here. My parents, both of them, were born in Nicaragua, immigrated to the States, and with time, my mother became a U.S. citizen, but like that took, it was about 2008,

it took my entire childhood, most of like hers, because she would she actually immigrated when she was a teenager, that kind of thing.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:10] So you were born here?

CASTELLON: [00:01:11] I was born I was born here in California, actually. But growing up, we grew up very much in like our culture or Nicaragua, like speaking. My first language was Spanish, that kind of thing. And so I realized how much within that culture I was. But that was also very it's like it's still in American culture. I'm still an American. Any time I went back to Nicaragua, like it didn't matter that I look like everyone there. Everyone knew automatically from the jeans I wore, the way I walked or anything like that, that I was an American. So I was always a very strange, like straddling two worlds kind of dynamic. And so I did undergrad and I was going through that sort of moment in undergrad, about to graduate and thinking like, I don't know what I want to do afterwards. I just want to do something that matters. And I want to do something where I know I'm going in there and representing the country that I've grown up in, the way I see myself, I guess. And it was like Peace Corps, just kind of like pretty much did both of those things. And I signed up and it seemed like a great idea at the time.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:20] Well, good. So where did you go to college? And when you said you grew up in California, where?

CASTELLON: [00:02:25] Until I was born in California, but we ended up moving to Florida when I was a kid. So when I was like eight-ish, maybe seven years old, that kind of thing. So I, I really grew up, what I remember is Florida and I went to school in Florida. I went to Florida Southern College, this really tiny college in Lakeland, Florida.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:45] And were you a minority in that college?

CASTELLON: [00:02:48] I was the definition of a minority in that very

GANZGLASS: [00:02:51] So mostly white college.

CASTELLON: [00:02:52] It was mostly white college, absolutely. It was a Methodist college too which I was like, I don't even know what that means. I'm getting myself into that one. But I was it's always been I think it's it's weird growing up at least the way I grew up or that very much straddling the two worlds, because I was also like one of the smart kids. I'm very lucky my mother left like California when we were when we were kids because we were growing up in the hood, like we were not like it's very hard to live in Southern and like L.A., that kind of thing, without living in the hood if you're not rich. So, like, she left anything. It was like that kind of thing moved us to central Florida where we had opportunity to have a solid education with. I went to school with that were like B, C schools like anything. My high school was fantastic. And so I got to grow up and really learn and my English became perfect and things like that. But I was also like the one, which is amazing because it's Florida surrounded like, you know, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Haitians that are there. I was still like one of two Hispanics in my honors class. There were maybe three like blacks and maybe like five Asians. And we were like and that I think of like a class of 30 and that we officially made up like that. We were like the people of color until it was always it was always I was always like a rare kind of person. And then I threw myself into a school where I was like even like it was even like that dynamic was worse. And I was an English literature major in undergrad, so it was even worse. So I just kept putting myself in situations where I'm like, I'm going to be like a person that kind of just stands out in terms of skin tone.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:25] So you're good with this? You're good with this?

CASTELLON: I am.

GANZGLASS: So we'll talk about that once you get to Benin.

CASTELLON: I was going to say.

GANZGLASS: I think that probably fits in there as well. So you were in college. How did you learn about Peace Corps?

CASTELLON: [00:04:41] Peace Corps? I think it's just that one random thing that everyone knows about or like hears about it from TV or from reading something, and no one actually knows what it means or what they do or what anyone does there. Everyone just like there's like a there's a Tom Hanks movie where do know he build wells or something? That kind of thing. No one actually knows. And I think the first time I truly. It was TV or I think it's like there's a boy meets world character, I think that's a TV show, too, that joins the Peace Corps, but like magically gets to pick her country. It's only a three month assignment, that kind of thing of like off she goes like and I'm like, OK, that's like now I'm like, well, that's inaccurate. Then I was like, that seems cool.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:23] No, actually there is there is a program called Response.

CASTELLON: [00:05:25] Yes. I knew that.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:26] If you've been a volunteer, you can go for a short term assignment. If there's an emergency or something.

CASTELLON: [00:05:32] This is not how you set it up at all in this show. Like it was like it's one of those things where if you look back at the episode, you're like, you guys didn't even research Peace Corps, did you? Kind of thing. So it's just like it was also just like a quick take. So I remember like I think in my head, that might have been the first time I heard of, like, the concept of Peace Corps. And then just like with time again, it is one of those things that, like everyone just like hears about, but no one knows what they do. It was in undergrad where I sort of like the idea, just like click like I'm going to do Peace Corps. And like, I just decided that, like, I was like, that's what I want to do. It sounds cool. And then I decided to Google things and find out more. And I talked to like a recruiter and that kind of thing. And that's how I actually like I'm

like, well, I actually went in knowing what I was getting into as opposed to being like, do do do, just going to Peace Corps.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:16] So what did your mother think about this?

CASTELLON: [00:06:18] She was adamantly against all of it. She spent two years trying to convince me to go just adamantly against all of it because

GANZGLASS: Why?

CASTELLON: She couldn't understand why I wanted to leave her there.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:31] Are you an only child?

CASTELLON: [00:06:32] No she's has, I'm one of six. Yeah. So she can understand any of her kids want to leave it right thing. But she couldn't understand why I wanted to leave the country then she couldn't understand when once I got accepted many things it was she was like, I don't understand why you're just not going to go to Nicaragua. You can just live in your grandma's house. And I'm like, well, see, they literally don't do that. There's rules against it. And she's like, well, just lie and say, you're from Mexico and then they'll stick you there. I'm Spanish speaking. Admittedly, when I signed up for Peace Corps, my first language, like I was like, I am super like I can read, write, speak Spanish. There's no way I'm not going to send me to a Spanish speaking country. But I also then told them that I'd taken like a French course in high school and then like another one, like undergrad did not prepare. My French was atrocious.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:19] But if you speak Spanish it's

CASTELLON: [00:07:21] It's it was much easier to learn that kind of thing. So I liked it. That was like technically took that. And so they sent me to a French speaking country. They're like, you're going to learn. But like it was it was fun to explain to my mom. She was just like just I was like,

actually, there's rules. They won't send you a country where you have family and she's like them. I just say, your family's from Mexico, then they'll send you there. And I'm like, I still still don't think that's how and I still don't think that's how it's going to work. And she's like, why do you want she just couldn't understand no matter what way she's like, I don't understand why you want to leave.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:48] Also, she escaped poverty, so why are you going back?

CASTELLON: [00:07:51] Really putting myself back in that situation just like I don't like it? And I'm like, yeah, she was against it adamantly. She spent all I promise, all two years, like especially the first three months of training was really hard to she was like, if you don't like it, just come back. And I'm like, OK, I don't like it, but you're not helping.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:06] And your siblings were good with it?

CASTELLON: [00:08:08] They were like, that seems fine. And then like but like in the very well off, when we found out where I was going, it was very much like South Africa high like cool. Like what are you going to bring back? You're not going to like, marry an African guy out there. And I was like, you guys are the best. So like for I'm in the middle. So for the older ones are just like this is a weird thing you're going to do for the little ones. It was like a what you got to do what like you're going to, you know, like go like to like African like that kind of thing, just like they don't really understand the concept for how long. That's how long you're going to leave. So it was fun. It was with your family.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:41] And your friends have a big deal with this?

CASTELLON: [00:08:42] Super proud like.

GANZGLASS: [00:08:44] So did anybody else do it?

CASTELLON: [00:08:46] You know, not not a single person from now later on after like while I was in service or after service, I have a couple of people from my undergrad that have been like, I'm actually considering it or I've applied. You want to tell me about I don't know if I'm going to get in that kind of thing. One person from my high school there is a good friend was like wanted to know more and applied and actually didn't get accepted to the country like this, like the program she wanted kind of thing. So she decided not to go through with it. But like I think maybe those like offered to I got one person from my undergrad that I know for sure. I actually ended up going to South Africa after I came back like she left in 2016.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:25] And inspired by you, probably.

CASTELLON: [00:09:27] Well, apparently she liked me stories. Yeah. But it's been like so it's like those couple of people, but at the top of my head. But that's everyone like I know like other people do. Like other ones, like AmeriCorps, Teach for America.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:38] But so I'm jumping ahead. We'll go back. But did you go back and talk at your college about your Peace Corps service? Is that what what happened, that you gave a speech? Or these are just friends.

CASTELLON: [00:09:51] Oh, no. These are just friends like they had me on Facebook or something, so that kind of thing. So I did not I did not go back to my college and talk about Peace Corps. There's like the recruiter for it's in central Florida isn't like the Peace Corps committee. It's not that big. They're just like. Not as many people either go back or stay, including me, because I'm living in D.C. now. So the recruiter and stuff like when I moved back home after Peace Corps definitely was like, would you want to talk like U.S. efforts like that? So I did.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:17] OK, so you did that.

CASTELLON: [00:10:18] Yeah, but not at my undergrad. This is like we're friends from undergrad. She was a year younger than me. So she like the one that I ended up going to South Africa. She just was like like following my pulse or anything like that. And it was just like, I want to know more. I want to talk about this. This this sounds like something I would love to do. She actually ended up doing it, an education program down in South Africa. And she actually coming back.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:43] Oh, great. Ok, so you applied to take a long time to get in.

CASTELLON: [00:10:46] Yeah, well, I don't I've heard worse stories. I thought it was a long time, but I've heard more stories. I applied and like I followed that, like after doing my research, I followed this quintessential role I played in like June, July of the summer before my last year of undergrad. And I had my interview almost like immediately like I had made to do before I started undergrad. Again, I think about August. And then they're like, OK, cool, let you know. And then it was dead.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:13] Well, they also probably knew that you had a year.

CASTELLON: [00:11:16] Exactly. So there's no reason to hang up on me kind of thing because it was very clear that I had a graduate or anything like that. But it was dead silence. Then in like November and December, I started getting panicky because, like, I had no Plan B because I was like my plan. I was like, I'm going to graduate from undergrad and I'm just going to go like, this is like that was my whole plan. So I started getting a little panicky in November, December. And I shot like I sent an email to the recruiter. The one who interviewed me is very nice man and that kind of thing. And then, like, he was like, I'll find out more and more about law. But that was it. Like, we can't tell you anymore. Like your name is somewhere on the thing. Like we know that. Like we've like. I recommended you for a certain program. Your name is somewhere in the list. That's all I know right now. And it wasn't until February that. And there's also, like I remember cause I like post offices. So it wasn't until February that I got my, like, official like email

that says you've been invited to Benin you to Benin for 2014. You leave. We left in June and that was it. I was like, I'm in great shape. Like I like to be in, in the program, that kind of thing. I was like, OK, cool it.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:27] Did you know where Benin was?

CASTELLON: [00:12:28] I had no idea. I Googled. I had absolutely no idea like doing it. If I, if somebody would have told me, I would be like, oh no, I'm not none of these things. But I Googled it immediately. Like I remember like reading, reading the acceptance, reading that email and then immediately getting on Google and finding out as much as I could. And then like after actually after I like went around like my apartment, like cheering and being like, I got it, I got it. And my roommate was also there and she was like, that's amazing. They'll calm down. Where I don't know. Both of us were like, I don't know where that is. I never heard of this country. So I was went and then I called my mom and she was like, where? I'm sorry, West Africa. Absolutely. No, you're not going. There's just no way you're doing that. I was like, oh, I'm doing it like this. It's too late now, like I'm in now. So I immediately said, yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:15] Ok, good. So where did you meet other folks? Did you didn't you didn't have any training by 2014. There was no training in country was there?

CASTELLON: No.

GANZGLASS: No, You just met somewhere. Where did where did you all meet up?

CASTELLON: [00:13:32] To like leave?

GANZGLASS: Yeah.

CASTELLON: [00:13:35] Pittsburgh.

GANZGLASS: Pittsburgh.

CASTELLON: [00:13:37] So no, Philadelphia. It was, it was Philadelphia. So like it was June. I could tell you I'm actually thinking about how my anniversary I think it was like June 22nd, June is between June 20th and 24th. It's one of those like on like they just were like, cool, like that's your living date. So make it to Philly. And then we have like a day of training in Philly. And then the next day they stuck us on a bus to New York. We got to JFK left. But it was this one day of training where they're like, guys, this is Peace Corps. You're going to fill out these forms. Give us like your here's your passport, here's your new Peace Corps passport, that kind of thing. It was like that like this is your little adventure of a lifetime. I remember like, the there's so many random icebreakers, they try to do to get us like because there was fifty four. We were actually

GANZGLASS: [00:14:27] I was about to ask. Fifty four of you?

CASTELLON: [00:14:28] Fifty four of us. Yeah. So it's very small. We also all it's four programs at that time. It had been, it's changed since.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:37] What were the four programs?

CASTELLON: [00:14:38] So it was TEFL, community economic development. So CED. Then there's a rural community health, RCH, and environmental action, EA. And our TEFL program was the biggest with I think sixteen of us. So what was the biggest sixteen followed by RCH which had maybe fourteen and then. The others had about 12 to 14. Yeah, so.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:08] So given the whole racial discussion we talked about before, what was the makeup of this group of fifty four?

CASTELLON: White women.

GANZGLASS: White women?

CASTELLON: [00:15:15] It was mostly white women, as it usually is for Peace Corps. Now, I think we had I was one of three Hispanics. Yes. So it was me. I was one of three. I was one of three Latinx. There were there were there were quite a few. There were quite a few black Americans at the top of my head. There might have been five, that kind of thing. One Asian and one Native American.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:47] So that's that's a mix.

CASTELLON: [00:15:48] Yeah. It was good mix. It was going to mix. It still felt like very small and that kind of thing. And as much going off to being much harder on the black Americans than pretty much the rest of us.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:02] But why was it harder for them?

CASTELLON: [00:16:05] Um, no one believed that they were Americans or if they weren't like they were the way we were like the way like and also I became white like I was. I have white privilege for the first time in my life. What a rollercoaster. But I like the like the rest of us became white and in the ways that we were treated like special are like all these other things, either they weren't or like they were treated less special because like like what do you like, like what do you hear. That kind of thing. It was it was different. I was in fact I'm not black American, but I can tell you, like, my friends had a different experience in terms of that. Yeah. But that definitely still mostly white women. There were, I think of the guys, I think they were like, if I count, maybe there was maybe 12. They know how to be more. I think it was something it was a it was like a like in the teens. No, guys, not for the total for fifty four. It was it was weird.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:03] And they probably were more in agriculture or not?

CASTELLON: [00:17:07] Yeah. Like four of them were agriculture. Four of them I think we were taught for them where agriculture for them were TEFL.

Two of them were CED. maybe two. They was twelve. Yeah. And then I think two of them were RCH.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:22] Ok, so you got on the plane in New York and you flew off to Benin and now I will show you my ignorance. What's the capital Benin? I don't know.

CASTELLON: [00:17:33] So the official capital is Porto-Novo. The economic capital is Cotonou. So we landed in Cotonou and took a bus up to Porto-Novo, but it's only an hour away. And we were there.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:47] And you were there. So you got off the plane. And then what happened? You drove up to Cotonou.

CASTELLON: [00:17:51] We drove up to Porto-Novo and then they just like then they were like here the people you're sleeping with tonight. Here's this hotel. We stayed in one hotel for one night kind of thing. I learned like, here's some pizza, go to sleep. And I was like, oh, like, oh gosh, it's hot, dude. It's like June. It's June. It's West Africa. And they were like, it's kind of hot in here. Oh no. And slept under mosquito net does it. Like the first night it was just like here's some pizza, you're starving. It was also really, really bad pizza. It was also cold. And I was like, when did you think the flight was going to get here? When did you buy this? I don't actually remember eating any of it because I was like, this is it good? This is a fun. There's also just like a lot of like a little bit of confusion of like I'm like it's like that moment of like, well, there's fifty new kids and there's only certain people who are in charge right now. And we're like, I don't know what you want for me. Here's a person you're sleeping with. Go hang out. I just went to sleep.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:49] You did, which is amazing.

CASTELLON: [00:18:52] Wasn't that I was tired. I don't sleep. So that's the next thing. I was exhausted. I don't sleep in public transportation. I like be in the news, but we really are good. But I don't sleep well. And the

transportation. So that entire flight from New York to Belgium, Belgium, to Benin. I didn't sleep. So I thought about it. I bothered so many people around me because I was like, well, I'm just going to watch TV. I'm like a weirdo like that. So I was exhausted and I just fell asleep. I had no problems, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:19] Good. So the next morning you woke up.

CASTELLON: [00:19:22] We woke up, we were we were in Porto. And they took us to what they call Songhai, which is another hotel. But it's also like a really famous place in Benin, just in terms of like agriculture stuff. They're a very famous farm and they own several farms around the country. And they do like a lot for environmental development within the country. And so they it was it's technically also a hotel. They partnered with Peace Corps for a couple of years. Really, that's just like where we were going to stay for like the first essential like almost like a couple of days before they stuck us with host families. So we were there and did like. Courses and trainings for I think it was two days. It was also like crash courses and like some of you don't know any French, this is how you're going to greet your host families. Say you like like, Ok, like if you need water, the water, the word for water is like, what are the basic ones you're going to need to survive until the next day when we can give you more French. So it was like crash courses and like, here's the safety and security person. Here's the here's some French. Here's like your doctor. Here's the shots you're going to need. Some of you still need shots. Let's do it. Like with some medications. Who has a medication for that kind of thing? It was just like two, about two days after crash courses in this hotel, just like, OK, these are this is like new media information you need. We are going to stick with those families very soon, get like get used to get. It was really weird. It's like get to know each other. This is wonderful. You're no longer going to know any of these people because they the way they do and have been in is once you start with a whole family, they separate out the groups.

CASTELLON: [00:21:04] So TEFL, we we stayed in Porto-Novo, but everyone else, like EA ended up in a separate town. And because the training, the training was different for everybody. So EA ends up in Missérété, like CED was in Alesho and RCH was somewhere else. Essentially because all of us had training obviously. So it's just like, cool, get to know each other really quickly. Still and you're going to leave soon. Crash courses, a lot of it.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:36] Ok, so then you were assigned to a family.

CASTELLON: Yes.

GANZGLASS: Talk a little bit about your host family.

CASTELLON: [00:21:42] I did not have the best host family experience. I think for for us especially, it was very like such a like a 50/50 shot. Either you had the best host family in the world or you didn't. And I, and I truly like them, I appreciate them. But so my first encounter was with the mom. Who like ,the mama, mama came to pick me up and she like they're like and this is Genesis and I'm like, hello. And she just like immediately in French. And I understood some French words. Again, I've taken some French. She was like, why are you giving me a girl? Couldn't fathom. And here's fun facts about my host family. So like, I was like questioning a little bit of Peace Corps Benin at this point. My host family had had volunteers repeatedly for years. Like I was like this seventh maybe. And they were all men. They were every single one of them was a white man, some tall, some short, but every single one of like had been like a white man. And it's also because there she has three sons between the ages of like I think the oldest was twenty nine maybe. And then the youngest was about 21. And so it was twenty, twenty nine I think like twenty six, twenty one, so much so same age and especially like with like sort of like she was is this was a woman who has a husband, has three sons, has been given male volunteers consistently until me. So she was like, and I actually genuinely understood the reason, it was like she was is a girl. I really get that

now, like knowing that at first I was like, oh, like, I swear I'm nice, oh, that'll be great. It's cool.

CASTELLON: [00:23:26] And obviously, like very at this point, very stilted friendship. Like I get I can say bonjour that I could say the basics, but like my friend was like I was beginner, like I definitely needed to know a lot more. So I was like, oh no, this is going to be rough. Only one of the sons was living in the family home. So family our family structure at this point was also that's the next thing. I'm like Peace Corps family home structure was essentially very much like a lot of homes there. It was a concrete structure, a box. There was what is essentially the living room, which is a long rectangle, and then two bedrooms, which is like two squares where how you divide up that long rectangle. So like you walk in into the living room and there there's two bedrooms. I actually needed to have my own bedroom because that's how it works when you sign up. And then the backyard yard was just like like a back patio that where she cooked, had all the food and things like that. And also in the corner was the bathroom to take a shower and then latrines in the other corner. And that's how that host family was set up. The shower was just a bucket shower. We had we had water, that kind of things. Like I was one of the ones that was getting like crash courses and what to do. I remember, like, the first night, the next day we had to go to training and everyone was like, oh yeah, I have electricity, running water. And I'm like, who are you people you don't like? You guys are going to get the worst assignment. But I was like one of the few that actually had electricity.

GANZGLASS: You didn't have electricity?

CASTELLON: We had electricity. That was we did one hundred percent and it was it's a capital if you didn't have electricity, like, there's just no way right there.

CASTELLON: [00:25:04] Sure, some people didn't. But like most of us, especially if you're going to host volunteer, everyone had electricity, just some of

them also had toilets and running water. Oh, a lot of them did, actually. But I was not well, once we had it wasn't a problem for me in the end. But the bigger problems to sort of almost the relationship I ended up developing with the mom and then with the brothers, the brothers then just saw a small like white American female and wanted to date me. I more than once, one of the brothers. So like I said, one of them lived with them at the beginning. The two of them ended up moving back in. All three of them had to sleep in the living room because I was sleeping in their room. They didn't enjoy that. But at some point all three of them lived there at the same time. One of the brothers consistently tried to see me naked in the shower because, like, the way the shower was set up was I was like essentially like a metal door, which has like a top complete open hole at bottom, complete open hole. So, like, I was like, OK, Peace Corps, the first time this is funny, the fifth time, I'm done with this, like, oh, we had to like I had to talk to Peace Corps about this because it's trying to make me uncomfortable, that kind of thing. And they're like, ok, we'll talk to the mother. And what ended up happening was like they I guess their version of talking to I just wanted that to stop their version of talking to it was like they forced her to make him move out for my duration. And I'm like, she really is not going to like me anymore. Right. She really didn't like it. So I. Never got along with my mother and I don't entirely, but this also a very strong, wonderful woman. She was a teacher at the primary school. Her husband was a chemistry teacher. He was also mostly a belligerent drunk who beat her. So that was rough and sad. So I also, just like she is a strong woman, raised three men, that kind of thing, just didn't know what to do with me just now. The truth is, she did not know what to do with me. And her sons kind of made me uncomfortable. But then I left.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:04] So how long how long were you there?

CASTELLON: [00:27:06] Three months, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:09] So you made it for three months straight?

CASTELLON: [00:27:10] The three months, the only time I generally considered quitting Peace Corps was during, and I feel like I don't know if all of us do. The only time I generally considered like leaving was during training. I was like, I can't, like, do something about everyone, depending on who I talk to among my friends. Like, they they're like their whole families are amazing. I actually remember one of my closest friends, his name is Zack Rosen, and he was almost like, ah like down the street. He was one of them. He was the volunteer. That was close to me in terms of like where we live, like he was like down the street and his whole family loved me. Like the mom, of the host mom was a gynecologist with a doctor like has two daughters. I loved spending time with them. And the weird thing is and I was like, why don't we switch us? Because my host family loved him. They loved when we came over and hung out at, like, on our porch. So they loved and they couldn't like the brothers couldn't stop talking to my husband. They couldn't stop, like, fawning over him and that kind of thing. And then, like, his family loved me just because he had very, very bad French and he couldn't get the accent down, still can't to this day. So he couldn't understand him. And so I was like, I picked up French like this. Like, again, I had Spanish, I picked up French. Like within a week. I was I was like communicating. And so, like, when I would go over would also be to help because, like, I had to do a lot of translating. He didn't appreciate that. It's not one. I'm like, this is what we need to do. But it's also really like we could actually communicate with me. So like they were very, very nice host family. But I remember there's a moment. It's actually like, why didn't they just switch us? Like, what was the what were we thinking here?

CASTELLON: [00:28:43] Have we just been switched? I would have had I know like it would have been I think it would have your time. But the only time I considered quitting during training. But I think all of us do because it's just like I miss my mom. She did not help. She was constantly she was constantly being like, just come back. I had this thought, like, I agree. That's just like the worst. Just come back. But I didn't I stayed because

I was like, no, you've got to survive. You're going to survive. Like, this is like everyone said, it's like you just have to survive training after that, being on your own, like living in your living in your village, in your town, whatever, like and I was like, OK, that's got to be true. I just didn't get along with my family.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:15] Ok, so was the rest of the training, OK? The ESL training? The technical training? The French training?

CASTELLON: [00:29:24] So French training got off to a great start. So I was in the beginning of the beginners like generally. So there's French beginners, French intermediate and then advanced. I was at the beginning and they should have been and I ended up moving up to like intermediate and they like made me switch groups because they're like Yeah you don't belong here anymore, that kind of thing. And I was like, darn it, those were my friends back. But I got their French very quickly. Then the actual the rest of the trainings, we don't do the way the program works there. They essentially really focus on language the first like month and a half as they should, especially if the rest of us don't know any French like they advanced because we're like, okay, this is getting kind of boring. But like the first month and a half, that's pretty. It's really the focus. It's every so often we'll have a health training and another and a secure safety and security training. They'll take other things that make us see doctors, that kind of thing. But it's really like almost eight hours Monday through Friday, a French. And you just get it and you'll get it. And you'll get it and you'll get it. Then it's not after we do two weeks at site. So you about a little bit over half your time there, you find out where your site is going to be and then they send you there for two weeks. Oh, and then you're in village and like another it's a separate host family. For me it was my vice, like Licensors was a vice principal. The vice principal told me he was hosting me for two weeks. And then you just got out. You just got to learn. You've got to learn. You got to learn your village or your town or whatever. And you just got to get used to it because I to live for two years.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:56] And where were you? Where were you?

CASTELLON: [00:30:57] I was in Kouande. So that's actually two in a northern part of Benin, to the north west specifically. So that's in the department of the Atakora, which I love. And the commune is Kouande itself. And I was in the commune head, so I was in I like I call it village because like we were in the Bruce, like we were out there. But it was very, it was, it was a town. It was it's very large. There was two sojes, there was two middle school, high school. So and I was in the main one, I was in Soje One. But like so I had to this is in the summer vacation. So when we were there for two weeks, they were around the time they're taking them, they were getting their exams back for the back and be busy and things like that. So it's just like there's like something's going on in school, but not much. So it's just like a lot of like kind of laying around and me like walking around and checking out of the northwest part of Benin is where the mountains are. So like like going up a hill or two or anything like that, just trying to get the feel of land is what you're supposed to do for two weeks. You're also supposed to start learning local language. So I had a local language tutor at that point. I did not learn the local language.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:11] What was the local language?

CASTELLON: [00:32:12] The local language is Bariba, and it's a tonal language and that's why I was like I learned that I'm like, I'm not meant to do this because I do not hear the difference. When you hear when you say do do do I hear do, which is either shoo chicken or something else. And I'm like, I don't know what you want for me. They had the best time. I can to this day. I can I can do it. I was able to learn greeting. I learned to the numbers and certain words for the market kind of thing where like if, um, when I, when I needed tomatoes and anything, that kind of thing, I was able to hear those words. And that's that was the extent.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:48] But did people speak French otherwise?

CASTELLON: [00:32:49] It was a big enough town where most people speak, spoke French. And then I was at the school and my job was to be at the school teaching English. Right. So every teacher at the school spoke French and French very well. The principal, the the servian general, everyone spoke French. The only people that I ever needed Bariba for were the market ladies were the food vendors and technically the king. He was a riot. I met him the first time, actually windows to that side. They had me meet the king.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:20] So how how big is this place?

CASTELLON: [00:33:22] Um, I could give you a population about a thousand. Five thousand. And I'm under five thousand. About maybe two, maybe two or three thousand.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:34] And who is this king?

CASTELLON: [00:33:36] So the reason I have a king here, the next thing is the itself. It's a whole it's a tribe. So we call it the Bariba are the people as well as language. And they have more than one king technically. But every separate village or town has its own king. And so Kouande had a king of the Bariba for the people of Kouande, and he's just looking out in his king place in his palace.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:06] What did he, what was his role?

CASTELLON: [00:34:08] To be the king.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:10] Does he make decisions?

CASTELLON: [00:34:12] Not officially. There's a mayor. There's like a whole an actual political thing. It was really it's almost all the queen of England. We're like, really? You're the face and you're cool. And people go to you for some disputes, especially like local like. But he stole my chicken or that kind of like local dispute. Like, he'll you can make like

that kind of decisions within among the people. But really it's just a figurehead. And he doesn't really have to and he doesn't have a job because he is a very he was a very old man is like in the 70s when I was there. Yeah. And he had a lot of children and a lot of wives just about like it's not even just about like it's a whole prostrate, like you have to get down on the floor again. Your veins is like a polite, like curtsy or something. No, it's your posture, you get down on the floor, that kind of thing. And he was like, I approve. Go on. They gave me a name. I had a this is this at the same time, they gave me a fun, they gave me a name and the part of my name was the next thing. I was like, man, you guys, there's I wasn't the only volunteer that was assigned to Kouande. There's two of us. So I was the volunteer. And then I had a meet and it was in our S.H. volunteer. Her name was Laura Prell and she is actually she's a couple of years older than me. And so we both got village names at this point. And she got the name of Carnegie, which in Bariba means like princess and I got Bonna, which means the other one, typically means a second. And I was like, cool, guys, great. I see what we're doing here. I was also the younger one too. So it made sense, she was older and I was younger.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:54] So that meant princess? Her name was princess?

CASTELLON: [00:35:57] Her name is her name is wepins and it's Princess. Yeah. And I was like the second one and I'm like the I didn't appreciate that, but he named us like the king, the king. So like once that next stuck and that was those are our village names. Almost no one called me unless they wanted to laugh and make fun of me.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:15] So they called you by your name?

CASTELLON: [00:36:16] I yeah, I was called. So the Genesis is obviously is a word. So there's a translation. So at first most people actually couldn't say Genesis. There's something about the sis that they're like and I don't like it like they had it the hardest times. So then I just learned my name in French. It was Genèse and that's how I introduced myself. And then

they would all be like like the Beeb, like the Bible. And I'd be like, exactly like them. They're like, you must be Christian. Good God bless you. And I'm like, I worked there. It was like my village was really like half half Catholic, half Muslim. So like with with like the Christians, it's great. But the Muslims are like cool. Sounds cool. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:51] Well, for them Genesis is the same thing, right?

CASTELLON: [00:36:55] It is only in Aramaic and I don't know that, I don't know Arabic but I should learn it.

GANZGLASS: But the concept it is the same?

CASTELLON: Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:03] Ok, so you, you were there for two weeks?

CASTELLON: [00:37:05] Yes. And then it was after our two weeks and

GANZGLASS: [00:37:08] Then you go back to training?

CASTELLON: [00:37:09] We go back to training, and that's when we do it's like another attack, like they're like, cool, your French is either good enough or it's not. You'll keep learning of it with time. Now it's time to teach you how to be a teacher. Now, I came straight out of undergrad and in undergrad I was an English literature major. I was not like teaching in anything, but I was like the reason they got me there is like I was a tutor there. Plus I was also like, do you speak English? You're going to be fine. If you're joining Peace Corps here and you don't have any other experience, we're going to take you on the program. But I was tutor and constantly for like do from high school all throughout college. So like I knew, I knew, like, what it's like to go lesson plans and that kind of thing. So I felt pretty comfortable about it. But that's what they did. And then spent the last month of training. So it's about yeah, they spent the last month of training, teaching us how to be

teachers in the ways that they want us to be. Teachers do is very specific to not just teaching English as a foreign language, teaching English as a foreign language within this school system. And like what lessons like what are the what are the kids supposed to learn from you such that everyone else is actually learning that from their own English teachers. So your kid's not going to be the weird one, learning new things, that kind of thing. So it's a very specific they gave us the like the like the textbooks or whatever, like this is what they're supposed to be learning throughout the quarter, that kind of thing. And here you go. And these are going to be your vocabulary words and that kind of thing. So we had all that. They gave us the materials and then like, cool. And this is how you teach a reading class in a writing class, in a class and how you it's about getting kids to participate and not about just like getting them to make things and things like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:40] Were you teaching to the baccalaureate exam?

CASTELLON: [00:38:44] The BAC and the the. So yes. But we the way they set up our program is that we were only supposed to be teaching the and going captain, which is the rough equivalent of sixth, seventh and eighth. The next the next year with the ninth grade is when they would take the BAC. So we're all teaching the same material to that exam. And then some of us have to go to have a little bit of fun and ended up teaching the 10th, 11th, 12th grades, that kind of thing. But it wasn't a part of our official curriculum. We were only supposed to be teaching the youngest.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:18] Ok, so you went back. You got the the TEFL training.

CASTELLON: [00:39:23] And I swore in.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:24] And you swore in. Then you went back to the village. Where did you live in the village? In the town, it's not a village.

CASTELLON: [00:39:28] Yeah, I lived almost in the beginning. The beginning, going towards the center. It was weird the way this town is set up. There was, as you enter it, like as you're going in we are, gosh darn, you our village. The town is like at the foot of this like huge lake and of the Atakora mountain range, the like hills and that kind of thing. So we're just like on the perfect's perfectly situated. So you kind of have to go in like on a lake on a tier roug road around these like mountains and you're in and the first and you pass a bunch of houses, there's a couple of neighborhoods and then you hit a fork in the road and the town does this like it goes out and it does exactly that. The fork in the road and then at the end of it up here just kind of does a circle and that's the end. And then you hit another road and you keep going on to the next set of villages. I lived on that island. I they're not gonna understand what I'm doing here, by the way. I recognize that. But I lived on the island in the middle of that almost fork in the road. The school was about like at most and I timed it once. It was like a seven minute walk from where I lived. I lived in it gorgeous. You know, I was saying before, like in stodge, in training, I was like, if you guys are in the rest of you are getting the nice things, you're going to have the roughest times. I lived in a great house. I had electricity and did not have running water. Did I learn I learned to love a book about it's the greatest thing ever. Huge. I did have electricity as much as one would get it in generally in one day wasn't like the most like constant electricity. There were certain times of the year where you're just like, cool, I'm just not going to have it ever. So it's fine. And that was during, like, the hot season when you needed it? When I needed it the most, I didn't have it. There was certain times of the year. It was just like nobody has it, that kind of thing. But quantity had electricity. I had electricity. I didn't have any water. I lived. I had my house was huge.

CASTELLON: [00:41:29] It was like weirdly large. I also have like a one like a weird front porch and then a back porch and in a garage for my motor that I didn't have. I had all the things. I had two bedrooms. It was a main bedroom, and then the smaller bedroom had a living room. My living room was large enough to like fit like so many people at a living room

and like a dining room and then like a separate kitchen area. And then I had quarters for my maids outside, too. And I was like, well, I don't have those either. I'm like, this is just too much space from what you be. But and then my the only bad thing about this, and I still like to say I'm like this is this is the worst. Was mileage, Green was at the back. I lived in a concession with several other families technically where they put me in a concession. Yeah, I guess like a neighborhood, like there was like there's like five houses. There's technically five, like, concrete blocks, houses here. And we're all blocked off by our own, like, concrete wall. All right. So we all live technically together. And at the end of it, I lived at the beginning at the front of that concrete wall like that was mine. It was also the biggest one there. Everybody else had the tiny ones and the latrine was at the back like it was I was in the front left corner. The latrine was in the back right corner.

CASTELLON: [00:42:50] And on rough days I did it rough times, but like, it was great. I had I had an outdoor shower, which is in fact fantastic. I think I technically had like a little it was an indoor shower, but it scared me because there was always like noises, like a thing scratching. So that door stayed shut for two years. I never opened it. It was at the end of my service when I was moving out that one of my friends came over to help kind of thing that I like. You certainly didn't open this for two years. I'm like, there's goats in there. I don't know what's in there. Let's not open this shit. When it was like there's a couple of things and they're not likely to open that again. But like, I never used it. I was all about the outdoor outdoor shower, which is great and a nice outdoor shower. But my bucket in that kind of thing on my front porch.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:35] Did you have you said you had enough room for your servants, but you did you have servants?

CASTELLON: [00:43:41] Well, I mean, no, no. Like nobody lived with me. I did one hundred percent become that volunteer that was just like getting water. So I said I didn't have running water. So one of the ways to go was getting water from a well, obviously we had a well we had a well

among the families or there is the one I had pump water system, but the pump was like five kilometers away and I was like not carrying this bidone on my head. I one hundred percent talked to my vice principal who was like, cool to a girl. And I ended up finding to this day, I promise it was one of my best friend's villages, this wonderful human being. She was also she was also deaf. So she didn't have a lot. There's people essentially she became the one that took care of me and took care of the other volunteer. She we paid her to we paid her to do the laundry. I paid her to get water from the well for me and to get water from the pump for me. And sometimes she just was like just this was the last time like didn't actually say this out loud. It was just very much like the look in her eyes was like, was the last time you slept here. And she sweet for me. She'd come about once a week to do my laundry. So she was the closest thing I had to what would be a servant. She was wonderful.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:55] Is that what you did to other people in town as well or what? How does a deaf person live in the town?

CASTELLON: [00:45:00] She was before we gave her money to do these things, she was just taking care of, like her family, just like took care of. She didn't do anything then with it because we started giving her money and the family could afford to do things with the money. We they we talked to a local tailor, Taylor, I'm going to say to you a local tailor, and we meet her and we paid for her petition. So, yeah, she ended up becoming a seamstress after now. Yeah. She just wants interest. And people like the way the way the communication works kind of with her just they'll draw out what they want and she'll make it for them. And she's fantastic at it.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:38] Did you read lips at all?

CASTELLON: [00:45:41] No. So she had no her version of communication was the language the family and her came up with together. And they took me a little bit to learn it. But it's things like she she we had a set schedule

like her family told her, OK, you're going to come to my house Wednesdays at noon. But that's it like that no matter what, like Wednesday at noon, I had to be in my want to let her and kind of thing. She went to the in-laws house, the other volunteer Tuesdays at like five, like it was like that was a set schedule every day, like every single time for two years, like that's what we had. But there were times where like if I needed her more often, anything like that where like like to communicate with her, I'd like to tell her the time I realized she used it by the sun. So she's like noon was just like we pointed straight up like this is it. And then like sometimes it's like well like do you want it tomorrow or the next day? It was pure. Like the family and her growing up just came up with their own version of with their own sign language. And then I just had to learn it and I did. And that's how we learned to communicate even more. A lot of the times it was a lot of me just like doing random distributions. And she left a lot of her just being like, you're a silly person kind of thing. She's just like the best and wonderful. And she was older and she's older than me by couple years. She was about at that point, she was about twenty six before that. Again, like she the family just like took care of her, you know, she can always take care of herself.

CASTELLON: [00:47:09] The reaction was great. I also know that she continued, so we were both Laura and I were replaced by a volunteer, like a new volunteer came in like not from my school, technically the other school, but I was technically least I'm bitter about this. But we also had both of them continue to do the employment. We told her exactly how much we paid like war. And I had decided like like we never talk to each other about how much we paid her. As it turned out, it was like paying her slightly more than Morella's. But that also just made sense. Laura had running water, so I had no problem with like she only really used you to wash her clothes kind of thing. But, like, I didn't have to go out of her way to pick up, like, water to get water from, well, like the extra steps to wash my clothes, like dragging water from the wall, that kind of thing she didn't need to do. Or so it turns out, like I was paying her more and I was like we had never talked about this, but I was just like,

this makes sense. It was very, very much appropriate and it was great. But we told the volunteers, instead of replacing us like, this is our system, you don't have to do that. You can wash your clothes or you can continue to help her. We paid out her apprenticeship like at the end of our service. Like that was our gift to her. We like she had about this. She only started our second year and she had a couple more years. So we just like gave enough money to the we gave enough money to the tailor to pay out the apprenticeship.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:32] And that was a traditional way they did it?

CASTELLON: [00:48:35] Yep, so we just wanted her in that manner.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:37] So you know, she finished it now?

CASTELLON: She's finished.

GANZGLASS: How do you know that?

CASTELLON: [00:48:42] Well, we say I've seen contact with people much. Yeah, so am I. With my vice principal, with my best, with my counterpart, like my teachers assistant. He's like he was he was my best friend at the end. And so, like, there's just certain people that I stayed in contact with just like know her and are just like, oh yeah, she's doing great, that kind of thing. And also the volunteers are least me. And they did end up like sort of like continue to use her. And apparently they were more volunteers who've even come since then, obviously, and continue to sort of like that's just really making extra money. And I'm like, that's genius. So that's great. I am in no way going to stop that fund and encourage it.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:18] That's great. So talk a little bit about your schoolwork.

CASTELLON: [00:49:23] Um, oh, the school was fantastic. I was so I taught my first year. I taught two classes of sixth grade and one class at fifth with no

one class of seventh grade. I said fifth because it's sinkin. So it's about two classes in sixth grade and one class of seventh grade by myself. So we had to have three classes by ourselves and these kids. All right I had in each of the classes, my smallest class might have been made up of about 60 students. My largest class was made up of something like if I counted, if I remember like that first year eighty something and then like the other one fell somewhere in between. So I had one class like 80, almost like one of seventy one class of and there's a lot of names to learn and I did not learn them all in and they try to me they are what, what a class like they're all fantastic. I had they tried essentially the vice principal like I generally tried really hard to sort of put me in like the classes of like the top like the two top classes for those for the sixth grade and like the top class for the for the seventh grade. So like they were already very smart. There's not actually much kids that like we're also illiterate. I had there were a lot of kids that were generally handed an exam that just like had X's like where their name is supposed to be or like throughout the entire thing. And that's when I realized, oh, you're like No one. You have not learned to read or write yet enough to know that the answer is not X for everything, including your name.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:54] So did the kids in your school, in your classes speak any English when you started?

CASTELLON: [00:51:02] Oh, no, no, no, no, no. There were. We were. That's the next thing. We were far enough. We were in the northwest, so we weren't there. We didn't have like a lot of Nigerians. So there are certain like people there's certain volunteers, especially women were like they had like a couple like several Nigerians or even Ghanaians where like in classes who spoke English fluently and were just like, I don't know what you're making this, go through this. And like also just spoke French. I do not have that. Not a single person in my class spoke English. Some of them didn't speak French. And so you just kind of got through that. There are several kids in class that only spoke, Bariba, and it didn't matter. So we just had to get through it and try to

teach these kids English. It was always it was sometimes almost a futile effort where I was like, maybe I should like. Like, I just want to also give you something that's actually like more helpful, and I know it's helpful, but it's just like maybe some of you should just be learning more French and trying to get through that kind of thing or just learning to read and write. So there's a couple of times I had a couple of students that would actually come to my home and we learned the alphabet like French alphabet and then like eventually like and I'm like, OK, cool. And that this is the English off about the same thing. And they say in a different way. So like that kind of thing I had so but we had I had three classes on my own. Supposed to teach two other classes with a co-teacher. So at the same time. So in that way the program is also about teaching the students. It's also about teaching the teachers. Right. So I had two classes with two separate school teachers. In the beginning, I only had one teacher and then I had to pick a second one. And then at the end, like a couple of months in, I would start helping with the like, being alongside, teaching his class. Then we also had two once a week. We had to participate in like the teacher meetings. So every one every Wednesday at 10 a.m., like from ten to noon, there was no classes because that was like the teacher meetings, like the all the departments got together. So the English department gets together and we have like a meeting about like and this is how you like again, it goes back to into pedagogy, like teaching each other and talking about like what we're doing in classes, how we can get better. That kind of thing was fantastic. It's actually that was one of my favorite times in the school because it felt like the most productive it was about. They asked me so many questions of just like, how do you say monkey No.8 one more time monkey like monkey.

CASTELLON: [00:53:22] And I just like things like that. Like we would have the most productive conversations there of like anything from, like gender equality to how to teach a writing class and how to teach them, how to teach them how to read and things like that. So it was one of my favorite times. So we also had to do that. So technically it's all volunteer was doing over like 20 hours of school like work and that

plus like lesson planning for your own classes. Then we also had to have a club or several if you wanted to. I started and it was and it's it's to it's to my consternation because I was like, I'm surprised. I felt like I it was like my lesser thing. But it's the one that they made us do, like an English club. But it was such a weird it's such a weird dynamic where, like the really the ones who wanted to be there the most were the kids from like my cousins and I were like the classes that I wasn't in because they're like it's like, no, it's like the way a lot like the way you're like, we want to know what she does. So a lot of young kids, but also a lot of kids in terminal in the 12th grade and they want to take their block that year. And they're just like, I just need help with English, but they're too advanced. So it was like really hard to sort of like get engaged these two groups in like activities that, like, they both wanted to participate in. It was great in the end, like we did, we planned at the end of the year like a play all sorts of crazy fun stuff, everything. But I also and Tuesday, actually, the English club continues on without me. And they actually just had a very successful like, um, over a month, oh, maybe over a month and a half ago. Think it was in April a very successful what they called day of English. And like they hosted a day of English at the school for the entire school. And I'm just so proud because I was like they sent me my my my friends and me, like videos and pictures. And I'm like, oh, my God, they look cute. They have T-shirts that say my name because now they call it since I left. It's called the Genesis English Club.

CASTELLON: [00:55:15] And I'm like, well, that's fun. I want a T-shirt, but it's cool things like. So we also I had an English club. We were there was a volunteer before me who was a said volunteer. Like I technically replaced a business volunteer and he had started a business club and I was supposed to keep it going. I don't know anything about business. And so what I did instead was be like, cool, I will help you in whatever manner I can. I can't teach things because I don't feel comfortable. But there was another teacher who, in fact was there, like an economics teacher who ended up doing that until we also ran a business club. And then I also ran a girl soccer league. And that one that took up

most of my time because I started three separate teams my first year. I got a team in my school, I had a team and in the village of Tampa and then a team in the village of Oroukayo, and they were just close enough where essentially the way I made it work was when they're all specifically the girls. And the first like thirty minutes was supposed to be some sort of girls empowerment thing that I did with them. And I would do it with one team every Friday and then jump to the next team and then jump to the next team with a lot of traveling around. And then the rest of it was like there was an actual soccer coach that would then teach them and get them to play soccer.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:34] So you were not the soccer coach?

CASTELLON: [00:56:36] I in no way was I am not I do not play soccer. I bad, bad at sports. I fall on my face and there is like obviously like in terms of like to get the girls like super into. Motivated, there are a couple times where I'd be on the field and did fall on my face and they laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed and I was like, OK, this is hilarious because it actually is very funny because I'm very, very bad. But I was in no way the soccer coach as not meant to be when I was all about the I was like in it for the girls and part of it. And I was like, and I got a soccer coach for each of them and it was great.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:09] Good.

CASTELLON: [00:57:10] And that was official. I think that at the top, my head, everything I is I'm sure there was other things, but those are the main things.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:16] So what did you do in your spare time?

CASTELLON: [00:57:19] I read a lot. Drank, I'm not going to lie to you, a lot of Coca-Cola and a lot of beers and mostly read even more. I read through all the Game of Thrones books, everything, all them in Peace Corps. That's when I finally came through and read through all the Harry

Potter books. You know, Lord of the Rings read pretty much everything you can think of.

GANZGLASS: [00:57:39] You got all of those

CASTELLON: [00:57:41] The Natitingou workstation. So there

GANZGLASS: What is that?

CASTELLON: [00:57:46] Benin is apparently few among the Peace Corps countries that has we used to have apparently they've shut them down since we called the workstation, which is there certain in the biggest cities in certain areas because it's almost impossible. I had told you I lived in the Northwest. I was about a 14 hour bus ride from the capital. It was not like it's just not possible for me to do things like when we wanted to fill out a grant to get Internet. There's just no way we were going to have that kind of situation. So what they did is in Natitingou, which is the biggest city in the Atakora, they made an American workstation. This place was the one place that we could go to to have electricity constantly because they had also a backup generator, it was fantastic. Running water. You wanted to like if you wanted to take a real shower, a toilet even better, and Wi-Fi like the like. And there was Internet. It was also the city where that had the ATM for me to get money, it had the banks. So to write a check

GANZGLASS: [00:58:56] So how far was that from you?

CASETLLON: [00:58:58] It was about two hours.

GANZGLASS: By bus.

CASTELLON: [00:59:02] No, by by motto or taxi. Yeah, it was two hours by motto or taxi because the busses won't go that way. And I had to any time I needed money, any time I needed pretty much just to get away. We go to Natitingou and all the volunteers in the Atakora region and there

were plenty of us. They actually stuck a lot of us that year there. And to this day, my best friends, we were we are like the we like the Nati family kind of thing, like the like were the original ATC group. But we were all like, that's where like once a month all of us knew exactly when we needed to get money. That's what everyone could converge on Nati and we'd have a whole week in there, that kind of thing. So also like my spare time was I would I would sometimes go to I was I would get out of college and go to the city and hang out with friends and hang out with the Americans and hang out with European friends. And we ended up because there's a lot of like European expats that were like up in the Atakora and they lived in Natie. Getting paid so much money to live up there.

GANZGLASS: [01:00:05] To do what?

CASTELLON: [01:00:07] Depended on depending on which country they were from. The Belgian one of the Belgian NGOs had to be out there when the German ones there was French one. They were just like worked in eat in like environmental sectors, that kind of thing, because also that's where Atakora is, where the Park Pendjari is. So like the bigger there's two wildlife parks in in Benin, but there's Park du W, which is up in the northeast, which is bordered with Niger and it's a much smaller park. Park Pendjari was in the Atakora bordering Togo and Burkina Faso, mostly Burkina. And yeah, it was huge. And so because of that

GANZGLASS: What kind of animals were there?

CASTELLON: [01:00:55] They had lions, they had elephants, gazelles, they had everything except for like a, so giraffes are not meant to. Giraffes are not from the West Africa. There are no giraffes, but they had hippos, they had all sorts of birds that I could not name kind of thing pretty much that I got to go on safari and see a lion mama like took a doll down. And then for her little cartoons like children behind her, it was fantastic. It was very cool. It's the coolest thing ever. Bunch of elephants, that kind of thing. Very good. Yeah. The elephants every so

often would leave in, like you hear stories of like how they got across like a little bit of a mountain range and like now they had to be like slowly but surely, like forced back into the park because they were destroying something.

GANZGLASS: [01:01:40] But it wasn't near you?

CASTELLON: [01:01:42] No, we were and this was like now this was much further north, like. I was technically within the opera, I was in the southern almost southeastern part of it like this, like all of it is the north west. I was like the southeast corner almost so like Pendjari much.

GANZGLASS: [01:01:58] So you didn't have any wild animals?

CASTELLON: [01:02:00] No, no, no, no, no. Camels came by a resort, and that was it.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:04] So it's dry there.

CASTELLON: [01:02:05] Yes, very dry. So the northern part of the nation, like Benin, is on the ocean. So like this, it's a weird look. I wonder if the culture is also like along the lines of the climate where like there's a point where you hit almost like a halfway point where anything south of that is humid, like constantly and nothing. You feel like that ocean breeze, that kind of humidity, though, and then you get north and it's very, very dry climate. And it's also because of how we're close, we're creeping in on the Sahara. So we also you're also getting the Sahara winds and things like that. So like the Sahara also just decided to climb climate up there. But it's very dry.

GANZGLASS: [01:02:47] That's why you have camels. Great. So your Peace Corps service ended. Did you fly home or did you travel after that?

CASTELLON: [01:02:57] I was originally going to travel, but I it's like things going on in my family and I need to be home immediately. So I just flew straight home.

GANZGLASS: [01:03:04] Yeah. So what happened when you got home?

CASTELLON: [01:03:08] I cried a lot. I cried a lot before I left. I cried leaving. I cried leaving for like that official last time or I was in the tent, I was in the car holding everything, holding all my stuff. And like the guy driving was just like, seriously, you don't have to cry anymore. And I was like, I can't control anything. And then I got it under control. And then I got on the airplane and sobbed. I got on the airplane from Benin and we flew from Benin to France and was sobbing the whole time. I was very lucky. I went out with them. I went out with another volunteer. Her name was Claire. And she we were on the same flight. We specifically picked the same flight together, like we sat next to each other and we just cried together all the way through Dulles. And then from Dulles, I went down to Florida and I was picked up at the airport, not by a member of my family, actually, because I was like, you know what I'm going to need? Like, I just need one night. It's picked up by, like, my best friend from high school and she's just like what you need. And I was like, I'm going to need a couple shots of tequila right now. Like, I don't know what to do with myself, like I like. But I was also I'm very weird. I don't like idle time. I don't believe in that. As is like I immediately joined Peace Corps after undergrad. Like that was I had no plan B, but that was my plan. I was doing job interviews in Peace Corps and I got like I did a couple of Skype interviews and a couple of phone interviews. And there were two places like in Florida, in Orlando that were like, OK, the minute you get back, like cool, set up a physical building, like the second the second round of interviews, like a physical like in-person interview. And that's also one reason I had to be back immediately. I flew in, if I remember correctly, it was something ridiculous. Like I flew in and touched down like on a Thursday night.

CASTELLON: [01:04:53] I had an interview scheduled on Tuesday. Well, I'm like I had to close for the interview on Saturday. I'm a ridiculous person. I got the job. That interview that was actually the I ended up I ended up coming back and working for a and a nonprofit that focused on volunteerism and and getting people to volunteer and connecting them to volunteer opportunities. And so that's what I did. I was a program as a program manager for volunteer for like a volunteer group thing. And I got that job, that job that I went into the interview on Tuesday. Like within that week, she was like, I got an email that was like, we love you, we like this, please come work for us. And I was technically I'd set up another interview for another position that I was more interested in. But this job was like in Orlando. It was like the perfect place in terms of just like things going on with my family. So I was like, no, this is like. This is where I'm staying, and I started working like. Two or three weeks later, I was working within the month of getting back because I got back like September 2nd, I was working by September 24th.

GANZGLASS: [01:06:00] Wow.

CASTELLON: [01:06:01] Yeah, we're taking it seriously.

GANZGLASS: [01:06:02] And working on volunteerism. Did you bring your Peace Corps experience?

CASTELLON: [01:06:07] I did. People really liked it. They wanted to talk about that. It was a lot of fun.

GANZGLASS: [01:06:12] Good. So have you stayed involved with the Peace Corps since then?

CASTELLON: [01:06:17] And some not so much with small ways, like in terms of like all of my friends or my friends. And we're in constant communication, like I have like five different WhatsApp with, like, at least three of my friends up, just like it's just like a one new person, that kind of thing. Then there's when I was in Orlando, there was the RPCV Orlando

group. And like they do, small get togethers and happy hours are like, do you want to talk to somebody else about joining Peace Corps? That kind of thing I've done. I've done it just some of that since I moved to D.C. D.C. is just so Peace Corps heavy that everywhere I go, I feel like if you throw a rock at someone there, they were in the Peace Corps somewhere. They just were. And then it's just like there is just like a lot less of an incentive to try to talk about Peace Corps because everyone here knows it, as opposed to like Orlando, where they're like, wait, like that's something we consider doing when I was younger and I bet I can't do it anymore. And I'm like, you can. There was one of my favorite volunteers joined the Peace Corps when she was in her 60s. And like with our group, she was fantastic and she loved it. So there's just no reason. Like, don't tell me. Like, once you retired, you can join Peace Corps, you can do it. Maybe you can end up in Morocco sometimes. I was like, since I moved to D.C., it's a lot less involvement, more of just like I'm on the Washington, D.C. advocacy group kind of thing and I get the newsletter and sometimes I'm like happy hour and things like that.

GANZGLASS: [01:07:43] So if you think back about Peace Corps, was it a good thing to do for your life?

CASTELLON: [01:07:48] It was a great thing to do. It was in jest and not in terms of it taught. I don't even know how to say the words. It taught me who I was in ways that I did not know. It made me admit, like some things about myself, that I was like, this isn't the best thing or things that but also the greatest things it introduced me to that among the greatest people I will ever know and my best friends, some of whom I'm lucky enough to live here in D.C. with and who I couldn't even I generally there's like one of my what I consider like my best friend from Peace Corps currently lives in L.A. We don't go a day without talking on WhatsApp, Facebook plus Snapchat. You know, like it's like there's we have 12 different modes of conversation. We don't go without speaking to each other. And we've been out since 2016. And that's going to continue. So introduce me to my best friends of my life. And it taught me who I was and it also

taught me what I didn't want to do. I loved I really went into it also like thinking like maybe like international work or international law. And it can be something I really get into. I like also like I knew I didn't want to be a teacher ever in my life because I don't have the patience for children I really don't like for like that kind of thing. And it was true. Like, it taught me that that was true. Like before I thought I didn't want to be a teacher. Then I was a teacher for two years and I was like, man, I really, really am not to be a teacher.

CASTELLON: [01:09:13] I love to. But like, I loved it in all the ways or I was just like the small things frustrated me too much. And all I wanted to do was like and it made me cry like I blamed myself when my kids feel like one hundred percent. And I was like, this isn't love. I like what better way is. But I realize I'm too like invested in that kind of thing where I was just like, you know what this is I'm not meant for this. And also taught me that was great. It was it wasn't a thing I needed to learn. I already knew it. But there was definitely concrete that I don't know. It's. I can look back and know that when I left, it was the perfect time to leave because I was happy everything worked. I we did our summer camps, like teaching my girls club, the clubs, the English clubs, everything about it. I left with friends within village outside of it, like people in Nati, people. I just it wasn't about peace for me. It was about living in me and love being a part of that community. And that community holds my heart in ways that I can't even explain.

GANZGLASS: [01:10:12] What impact do you think you had on my community or did you have an impact?

CASTELLON: [01:10:17] Probably at most a very small one. I don't believe that the way that community shaped me is not the way I shape them at all like that. All right. I know to this day they have an English club. Then they call it Genesis English Club, so they haven't forgotten my name. So that's nice. But that's honestly that's them. Be like where on the girls team still goes. Like they still have a girl soccer team every single every single year. So those days my English Jane I don't think was the

best. So my, my kids hopefully know English, but no, I would say that the way I impacted them was like just getting to know me. And if they liked me being my friend and like having conversations with them and just hanging out.

GANZGLASS: [01:11:01] Do you think it changed their attitudes towards the US at all?

CASTELLON: [01:11:05] And so probably. And also just like kind of weird ways, so we were also there right before the 2016 election, so there were a lot of things that were going on during that election that they're like, but I'm like, are you guys for real, man? Who's this man? And I was like, look, y'all like, if I'm here, I'm not voting for him, that kind of thing. And we were also there for their election, which was also very different. So it was a lot I had the wonderful opportunity to speak to them about, like both of our like the way our presidential elections were going, the way they were obviously could not give an opinion on what who I wanted, who I who I would vote for, anything they asked me all of the time. But like, we got to have, like, legitimately open discussions about what it meant. Get the first female main party candidate was like that was big in terms of like I thought the my biggest impact there would hopefully be the gender equality talks that we got to have on a constant basis and how important I wanted like this community to understand that girls education is and like how I was like I get sent because they don't have to pay for girls to go to school up until the ninth grade. And then after that they do. And it's like I just wanted them to I just wanted them to believe in their girls. And I'm like, they are.

GANZGLASS: [01:12:30] Did the boys have to pay as well?

CASTELLON: [01:12:31] Boys had to pay for everything except primary school, so they had to be middle school and everything. And the crazy thing is that you're like, wow. But they still they're still more boys in school because parents want to send the boys to school like they're the ones I like. Right. They're the ones that need that. They're going to get help,

the family and that kind of thing. So parents constantly send the boys to school and never sent the girls to school for many reasons. And so I just wanted this community to appreciate their girls and appreciate and just to understand how important it is for girls to get an education for the mothers and the sisters and the future wives. And everyone's daughters to be treated in that manner and to get the possibility of an education. That's what I wanted to be. My biggest impact. I don't know if it was I'd like to believe it was a big impact.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:17] But did you ever talk about being Hispanic among the community?

CASTELLON: [01:13:21] Yeah, because, like, nobody really understood that I wasn't white. So every so often it bothered me. It depended on the mood I was in. Mostly I just kind of took it was like I'm a white girl. But we were at the very beginning. We were there for the FIFA World Cup. It was 2014 FIFA World Cup, and that was in Brazil. And so especially during host family time and a little bit afterwards.

GANZGLASS: [01:13:41] You look like all those people.

CASTELLON: [01:13:43] I was like, OK, well, like they're like, OK, so is it Mexico next? I swear to you, somebody told me that Mexico is next to France. And I was like, where do you think France's I don't like we're having a different conversation. But I was like, no, like maybe like all those people that you see on TV, like when we talk about and kissing on the radio and blah, blah, and all these things like Argentina, those are like all Latinx, some Hispanic. Those are my people and that's what I look like. And there are different people than just white America, which is what you watch, what they just like if you picture the United States of America for at least what I mean, you they they just picture a white person in general in a rich white person. And I was like, I'm different and I look different. And at the end of it, everyone got multiple, got that and saw it and understood it. I just said most people just didn't know I had a weird name and a weird last name. They ask you to say it. And I

was like, they're like they could they could learn to date. You can choose to take Spanish or German fun fact at past the ninth grade level. So you had to take another language. You had to choose between Spanish or German. So there was actually two Spanish teachers at the school and I talked to them in Spanish as like whenever they saw me and as often as we could, because I they were like the ones where I was like, Yeah. And they'd be like and I was like, my family's from Nicaragua and they're like Nicaragua.

CASTELLON: [01:15:03] And then I was like, oh my God, yes. Like that. Only people these two teachers whole time I was all my in my entire service. The only people who knew when you got I was like, that's kind of cool. But like yes. Or there's some small moments where, like, there is a wonderful opportunity to be like, remember that one time you guys, we watch the FIFA World Cup together, like that was in Brazil, like, that's big. And then just depending on how frustrated it go with being called a white person, like, I just be like, you know, in America, I am not this like no one no one sees me as a white person kind of thing. And they're just like, but like you said, white. And I'm like, I see your point. I'm like, I like it. But it just wasn't something where I wasn't I there's so much of me that was like my identity is also is a female. Like I wanted my girls, I wanted my students and my girls and everyone to see me as a single capable adult female. And I wanted that to be my identity so much more because there's so many volunteers. And and I think in a day that it's. Depends on you, it depends on what you need and who like made up fiancées or anything like that, so people wouldn't want to be harassed, I was like, nope, I'm going to be single and I'm going to I'm going to I'm going to be out here. And I don't like her me all you want, but I'm going to be this representation. Like, I need these girls to see that you don't need to act like you can't have a baby. I'm not saying you can't have a baby. You can't get married. I just want you to see it's possible for another route which and yes, I look different and things like that. But it's still like there's still a representation of that.

GANZGLASS: [01:16:36] So my last question, why did you want to do this interview?

CASTELLON: [01:16:40] It seemed cool. I don't know. I think we constantly have even a little bit. It's like living in D.C. There's always an opportunity to talk about Peace Corps, but there's rarely you really have an opportunity to full out and and tell your story and let people know about your story and people. And there's so many people there like, ah, Peace Corps, like I thought about doing that. So maybe six months or they just don't understand what it is. Right. So there's something about having the opportunity to tell it full out to have this conversation and also just, I don't know, digest my own service. I'm still pretty new here. It's only twenty nineteen. It's only been three years. I look back and it's always like there's small things wrong. Even just telling you the story. I'm like I remember it. I'm like oh like that did happen. Or anything like that where like I forgot, like I was like going to when we are going through the list of all the things like I worked at the school, I was like, oh, I forgot. I also did the business club. So it's just I just thought it would be kind of cool and to be able to talk about it.

GANZGLASS: [01:17:44] Good. It was a good interview.

CASTELLON: Thanks.

GANZGLASS: So thank you.

CASTELLON: [01:17:49] Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]