

Posh Corps Podcast Ep. 19: Love Beyond Borders

By Alan Toth

Transcript

Siobhan: You're listening to the Posh Corps Podcast.

Making a romantic work is hard. Throw in a different culture, language, and it can be nearly impossible. On this episode of Posh Corps, two couples tell their stories of how they made it work.

Siobhan: I'm Siobhan Neela-Stock and I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Mozambique, a country in Africa that borders the Indian Ocean. Although I did not become romantically involved with someone from Mozambique, I noticed that quite a few volunteers in my group did and a lot of them have maintained these relationships even after they moved back to the U.S. I wondered, with so much against them, how they did it? At times, I had a lot of trouble connecting with people in Mozambique. So, how do you even begin to carve out a life with someone who is so different from yourself?

So I set out to explore these stories from my own corner of the world in Chicago. While I did not speak to anyone in my Peace Corps group for this episode, as they don't live in Chicago, I was lucky to find two returned Peace Corps volunteers who had married people from their host countries.

We'll sit down in a minute so Jackie, you wanted another sandwich. I'm gonna finish all of this, yeah? Okay. Okay.

Jackie and Sejake Matsela met in Lesotho, a small country that is completely surrounded by South Africa. Today they live together in the Tri-Taylor neighborhood in Chicago. They tease each other lovingly about their eating habits, among many things.

Jackie: Babe, you've got something in your...

Sejake: In the beard?

Jackie: You got it. Nope. Yep. Fish kind of... No, you brought it back.

Sejake: Oh, well.

Jackie: Let me help you.

Sejake: Oh, well.

Siobhan: Jackie joined the Peace Corps in 2008. She's from downstate Illinois, from a small town called Monticello.

Jackie: I'm from a town of, like, 5,000 people, very white, rural America I would say.

Siobhan: She has two younger siblings, and her parents still live in Monticello. Her dad was completely against her going into the Peace Corps.

Jackie did not know much about Lesotho before she went.

Jackie: Where I was in Morija, my site, which I did not pick, by the way, I kind of just got sloppy seconds. Two other volunteers really wanted to go in the mountains, and I didn't care. So, I was kinda like "Put me where ever." And I ended up Morija, which is a really important place because of Lesotho history. You may have to help me with some dates.

Siobhan: Here's Sejake now with the 4-1-1 on his hometown of Morija.

Sejake: It's a historical town. First French missionaries in the country arrived there in 1833 and after the formation of that nation, which is completely surrounded by South Africa, the priests then came as a way to, you know, there were wars going around in that area, so they came in as peace makers. So they settled in Morija. Well, its history is such that we became known for its publishing, printing, and those are industries that are still very much in operation in Lesotho. There's where I was born.

I ran into Jackie by chance. At that point I was living in Cape Town, but while living in Cape Town my mom fell ill and she was dying, so I had to come back home. I was coming from a walk. There's a small museum in my town and the curator, he's actually an American, we had just had one of the long conversations that we normally have when I'm at home, and I was saying, "I think I cannot sustain being in Morija. Lack of internet, and so on." So he says, "Yeah, well, you can use our facilities."

Anyway, I was walking down kind of a small side street and Peace Corps volunteers, before I left Morija, they used to get free Newsweeks, and I was back in Morija, so I had to struggle for the internet. So I walk down that street. There's white lady, who certainly by the size of her luggage, it was very clear that this was a Peace Corps volunteer. I greeted her, I said, "Do you have Newsweeks?"

Jackie: I had to unfortunately tell him that Newsweek magazines, since I arrived, were stopped by Peace Corps due to budget cuts. I was coming back from the capital with groceries, so I had a giant backpack on, and we were literally right outside my gate, so I felt pretty safe. I'd already had a couple of experiences where I was like, "Oh gosh, I have to be really cautious." I'd gotten really used to being curt with gentlemen and just saying, you know, "lumela," just saying hello, keeping my eyes down and not really trying to encourage anything.

So when he stopped me I was like, "Oh, my god. Here we go again." You said, "Hey, we should go for a beer sometime." And that really freaked me out. I just felt like it was a little forward, and-

Sejake: Really?

Jackie: I was a little overwhelmed by that idea. I was like, "Oh no!" In my head. But it did put a little, "Hmm" maybe a tiny 2% question mark about who you were and what is your story.

Siobhan: But Sejake says this was not the first time he had seen Jackie.

Sejake: I think second day I'd arrived in Morija, I was in the museum. There's this researcher, she is from Gabon, so it's me and the archivist, and the Gabonese woman. We are looking through the window. So there's a road that passes in front of the museum. All of a sudden there's this white lady driving a wheel barrow with a giant gas tank. We are looking there and making fun of her, like, "Look at that!" They said, "Oh, we've never seen this happen before." And then I said, "Yeah, I'm gonna marry her." In a mocking way, because she was not there, right? I think later that's why we connected there. She's the girl with the wheel barrow.

Jackie: At that time, especially, I was one of the only white, young females around, and it was like, "I'm gonna frickin' show that I don't need anyone, I can do this crap on my own." So yeah, I got my gas tank, I probably had someone help me unconnect it, but...'cause I could never do it!

Siobhan: Jackie came by the museum's office to see Sejake, as they had agreed to meet there.

Sejake: Probably I was with this other friend of mine, young guy, who I used to play chess with. Guess who comes walking out? There's Jackie. Well, first of all maybe I might have even forgotten her name.

Jackie: Maybe?

Sejake: I don't know what was happening, but I felt like she was being too forward. I dunno. So I tried to avoid her.

Jackie: There's a lot of avoiding that happens in the future of this story.

Sejake: Yeah. Well, this young guys says, "Hmm, I think she likes you."

Jackie: In front of me, and obviously I didn't get it.

Sejake: Yeah. I kind of, like... Absolute no, no, no.

Siobhan: After their first meeting at the museum, things got more serious for Jackie.

Jackie: We ended up having this long conversation about monogamy. Lesotho at that time was the third-highest HIV/AIDS rate in the world. It kind of really came up organically just talking about how important it is to, basically, have one partner. Coming from a really small town, I grew up going to a Christian school and the multiple concurrent partner thing was still kind of, like, "How does this all work? And why?"

Siobhan: Polygamy is a common practice in some parts of southern Africa. During my time in the Peace Corps, I heard about men who had multiple wives or girlfriends at the same time, so that's what she's talking about.

Jackie: That's the conversation where I was like, we have very similar values. He was not just some random guy, like there are many that randomly will propose to you and say they love you. So that was really the conversation that was the main turning point for me, where I was really like, "Hmm, maybe this is something to pursue."

Sejake: Oh my word!

Siobhan: Sejake had another take on that conversation.

Sejake: It was a "wrong, wrong, wrong."

Jackie: What do you mean back then? I wanna run the other way?

Sejake: It was...yeah. I'll be honest, it was just not the most stable part of my life. I was hoping to get back to Cape Town, because mom hasn't died here, to continue with my life there. Now I was staying at home and dealing with my mom's situation. So time moves on, and my mom dies. So I'm on a minibus taxi coming from Maseru.

Siobhan: Maseru is the capital of Lesotho.

Sejake: She was sitting at the front.

Jackie: You purposefully got in the back after seeing me sitting me in the front seat.

Sejake: Yes. I tried to hide at the back. She is telling on me!

Jackie: It's true!

Sejake: That evening, after obviously my mom has passed, she sends me a text. "Oh, I'm sorry. I heard about your mother, and unfortunately we are leaving tomorrow for Kruger" and I think that would have been the weekend, when my mom was being buried.

Two weeks later I am mourning my mother, I'm at a coffee shop. Guess who comes along in tow with her Peace Corps volunteers? I was really a real mess. She comes, talks to me, and then I moved.

Jackie: He hid from me, again!

Sejake: Yeah. I wasn't avoiding her because I didn't like her, but the space I'm in is a really bad space for her. She comes back to Morija, and I don't know how we got in contact. Then we had a conversation. Then I said, "I normally take walks up the mountain. I can go up with you sometime. We can take a walk together." And I was trying to be friendly. And then we did. We were falling for each other.

Siobhan: Before Jackie met Sejake she admits she was unhappy in Morija. She wasn't really connecting with her community, and she was living alone for the first time in her life.

Jackie: It was just a really hard time in my service, and I'd even at one point gone into the ABCD office just crying, like "I can't do this!" I wanted to switch sites and I wanted to switch jobs.

He just helped open up a huge part of Morija culture and life that I had unfortunately not been able to access, which was really important to me being able to stay.

Siobhan: But Jackie's time was quickly coming to a close.

Sejake: When I felt that there was something happening, I hated the fact that after getting to know someone immediately in a couple of months they'll be gone. I could have left, but honestly, Cape Town fell out of memory at that point. Then I stayed. She got me to stay in Lesotho. I'm falling in love with this person, but how is all of this gonna happen? I don't wanna go to America. She wanted, at that point, to actually stay in Lesotho. I started teaching at a small university in Lesotho, and thinking "Okay, she says she's staying. Let me station myself in Lesotho. Let me just make it comfortable for her." Because I mean, if I went back to Cape town, to Johannesburg, there was gonna be a totally different thing about her immigration there.

Siobhan: None of Jackie's attempts to stay in Lesotho worked. She returned to the US after her service ended, and had to leave Sejake behind.

Sejake: So she was in America now, all of a sudden. I was in Lesotho. We were talking literally every day on the phone. That was very assuring in my case.

Siobhan: Jackie returned to Lesotho in December of 2012 to get married to Sejake.

Jackie: I had brought a dress from the U.S. that I'd purchased. Ironically, Sejake wore my dad's suit that my dad got married to my mom in. The funny thing about the day that we got married... So, we did a civil ceremony, and they don't really do it in front of a judge per se, but they do it kind of last minute. You kinda have to sign up on the day, and then with all of our complications, like, we were running around that morning. It was kind of a very last-minute thing to make it all happen.

Siobhan: They made it through the chaos and finally got married. Then it was time for Sejake to come to the U.S.

Jackie: Since my family was not able to visit Lesotho while I was volunteer, he was this unknown figure. It was challenging for them, and especially for my father, and he was 100% against us. My father is an only child, and his mother is the matriarch of my family. She even wrote me a formal letter saying, "We as a family do not believe in this and you should not do this."

Sejake: Your grandmother?

Jackie: Yeah. You knew this, right? I probably have it somewhere. I just felt like they couldn't be saying that to me without having met them. It was kind of a weird situation that they weren't able to meet him before we got married. However, he did visit in 2013 before immigrating here, to just kind of ensure that this was a place that he could potentially live, and during that trip in 2013 my dad refused to meet him. My father, who had never flown... It all just had to do with the fear of the unknown, and he also had a prior relationship before meeting my mother and that woman had had a bi-racial child, and we're talking the late 70's in central Illinois. He kind of had seen what that child had gone through.

Siobhan: Jackie's father eventually got over his refusal to meet Sejake.

Jackie: Guess who now, who loves Sejake the most?

Siobhan: Your father?

Jackie: My father. My father loves you so much. He definitely loves you more than me.

Sejake: Well, we are certainly the best of friends with him. We go back every month. We go to Monticello to spend a few days, see them, and then come back. I make it a point that we go there. I make it a point because I feel that it's comfortable, it's how they have made me feel. If it weren't for that, I would say to Jackie, "We need to find a place somewhere in South Africa to move back to." Because otherwise I think America would be a painful place to be.

I do have family here, that's for sure.

Jackie: In conclusion, I guess what this long conversation has unearthed is that we have a lot to learn from one another, and you never know when you're gonna walk down the street and randomly find someone you will eventually marry.

Sejake: I think that's true. If I were to marry again, who would I marry? Jackie.

Siobhan: Laurissa Monse lives in Humboldt Park with her husband Julio and their two young daughters. Laurissa laughs easily, and she wears her brown hair in a ponytail.

Julio is a bit more reserved, but he opens up the more we talk. He flashes a wide smile whenever he talks about his kids.

Oh, and a fair warning, at times you'll hear them playing games, crying, and doing what kids do.

Laurissa: Lanea, she's almost two-and-a-half. You wanna say hi? Hi? Nope.

Then the youngest, she's 8 months, is Jalena.

Siobhan: Like so many couples with young children, it's hectic. It's dark outside and the kids are hungry. Laurissa and Julio take turns holding each child on their laps and feeding them.

When I excuse myself to go to the bathroom, I spot a Cheerio on the floor from what I assume was that morning's breakfast.

Laurissa was a Peace Corps volunteer from 2011 until 2013. She served in Massinga in southern Mozambique. Here's Julio describing what Massinga is like.

Julio: Massinga's a small village. Doesn't have a lot of educated people.

Siobhan: Here's Laurissa with her impressions of Massinga.

Laurissa: Massinga was big in area-size, but Julio's right in the sense that it's a small-town community feel. Everybody knows each other, talks to and about each other, which is difficult to deal with.

Siobhan: But she says that even though the gossip got to her sometimes, Massinga had most things she needed.

Laurissa: There were a couple of restaurants that we could go to. There was a beach a short drive away.

Siobhan: Laurissa was an education volunteer, and Julio worked in the same school as she did. When she first saw him, he didn't catch her attention, but this quickly changed.

Laurissa: I met all the teachers at my school, but...I dunno if you can remember, but it's a little overwhelming right at first. Julio remembered me a little better than I remembered him.

Siobhan: There was a month-long break in-between the first time Laurissa met Julio and when school started up gain. Then, one day, she invited him over to her house.

Laurissa: He came over to my house and brought his laptop and we watched a Lil Wayne documentary. I realized then that we had similar interests. I said, "oh, you know, I kinda like this fella. I wanna get to know him better."

Julio: I would help her a lot at the school with whatever she wanted help with. I started to get interest with her. I'm like, "Eh, she should be the right woman for me."

Siobhan: The two continued to see each other, despite language barriers. The official language in Mozambique is Portuguese, though there are many other languages spoken, like Xitswa, which, besides Portuguese, was the language spoken in Julio's home when he was growing up.

Laurissa: We would talk in the little Portuguese that I knew and the little English that he knew, and made it work.

Julio: I would help her in Portuguese and she would help me with my English.

Siobhan: There weren't too many things to do on a date in Massinga, but that didn't stop Laurissa and Julio.

Laurissa: We would go out to dinner or just get some drinks.

Julio: We started to travel a lot to Yamba and Mashish cause they had more stuff to do there.

Laurissa: Yeah, hang out with his friends.

Siobhan: The two got along really well, but like any couple it took some time for them to get to know each other.

Julio: I say something, she's mad, or she cries. Ugh, I didn't say nothing wrong, I just said the truth!

Siobhan: With time, they got to know each other and moved through the barriers that had once challenged them, but it was hard for one of them to say the "I word" in the beginning.

Julio: She likes me, she wouldn't say, "I love you."

Siobhan: Eventually, Laurissa was able to say she loved him, and even said it in Julio's first language, Xitswa.

Laurissa: (speaking foreign language)

Siobhan: What does that mean?

Laurissa: "I love you."

Siobhan: It's often not one moment when you realize you wanna spend the rest of your life with someone, but a series of moments, and they can fly by. Julio and Laurissa were lucky enough to realize when this happened.

Laurissa: When we were talking in my room at my house and I realized that I had been more open and honest with him than I had with anybody prior. I think my initial thought without going into the relationship was "Well, whatever, you can like me, you can not like me. At the end of the day I'm going back to the states, so if you don't like me, I'm out of here." But he did like me, and I did like him, and I said, "Wow, you know, I'm sharing everything with him. It's not turning him away and I like what he's saying in response and I can see this really working out long-term."

Julio: I also said that she was the person that was supposed to stay with me, because I had tried a couple of relationships and had real bad moments. Actually, I started to have girlfriends because I had a job, and she didn't want nothing from me. She just wanted me.

Siobhan: Then, of course, came meeting the parents. Julio's parents both worked in the education system, and he has four brothers and one sister. His parents were not too happy that he was dating Laurissa at first.

Julio: They were like, "Uh, she gonna leave you, she gonna go back and you'll gonna stay by yourself. You better find a wife for you, a real girl that's gonna stay with you." I was like, "No you guys can't judge things like that. She wants me."

Siobhan: Laurissa had butterflies the first time she met Julio's family.

Laurissa: I was nervous. My Portuguese was not that good.

Siobhan: Laurissa says the women in Julio's family are strongly opinionated, but she was determined to impress them.

Laurissa: I remember Julio telling me that his dad was impressed with American helping cleaning dishes and trying to cook.

Julio: I mean you did impress them a lot because you did things that even people from there, like girls usually don't do, like help in the house.

Siobhan: Laurissa's family had mixed reactions when they first heard about Julio.

Laurissa: Some people were fully supportive and some people said, "Well, right, isn't that why you went to Africa? To find yourself a husband?" Which started an argument, but after some time, and they realized that we were serious, they kind of were a little more sympathetic.

Siobhan: The day before Laurissa left Mozambique, Julio proposed to her, but first he asked her

father's permission.

Laurissa: We're both, I would say, pretty simple people in general, not too romantic or anything, but were in love, we knew we wanted to get married and spend the rest of our lives together. My dad was interested in visiting, so I said, "Well, you know, I got this guy that I like here, you know? What do you think about meeting him and his family?"

So he came and we actually went on a trip, all three of us together, a road trip to Victoria Falls, so they got to know each other.

Siobhan: Like the first time when Laurissa met Julio's family, Julio was sweating bullets when he asked Laurissa's father for permission to marry her.

Julio: It was so difficult for me to go and say, "Hey can I marry your daughter?" I had to think ten times of "How am I gonna start this? What am I gonna say?" He was about to check in and I went running, "Hey, Mr. Steve, stop, stop, stop. Can I marry your daughter?" He's like, "Yes, of course."

Siobhan: Shortly after, Laurissa had to leave for the U.S., and the couple had to figure out what the next steps were to try to be together.

Julio: I stayed there for some time, because I was still working on my paperwork and my visa, so once I finished it I stopped working, I said goodbye to my family. My family didn't want me to come here.

Siobhan: Once Julio got to the U.S., they got married, twice, in fact. The first time was in a court house.

Laurissa: It was just us. My immediate family, my grandma. I actually would recommend anybody to do, because there's a lot less pressure. You're in it just for you two, and that seems to be what you should be in it for. Then the following year, in December, we had the party. We invited his family, the rest of our extended family, friends, had it at the church, and then had the reception at a hotel where we could enjoy the night away, and we did have a good time.

Julio: We had so much fun. We had the playlist that had all the music that we listened to in my car when we were dating.

Siobhan: It wasn't easy for Julio when he came to the U.S. He had to adjust to the culture, get used to speaking English every day, and find a job. That was one of the hardest parts for him.

Julio: I mean, I wasn't legal to work at that time, but I wanted to do something. Parted doing part-time at a restaurant. When I became legal, we moved to live here at Humboldt Park.

Siobhan: Then one day, Julio was in a grocery store. He saw that someone was looking for a house cleaner on a flyer when he left the store.

Julio: I spent a lot of time there, like, a year? I had this federal program, so I learned about shipping and receiving, and that's what I'm doing now.

Siobhan: This isn't Julio's dream job. One day he would like to invest in Mozambique. He talked

about plans to bring tourism to his hometown Massinga.

Emilio, Julio's brother, was visiting his brother and sister-in-law for a few months in Chicago, when I visited the couple. It's his first time in the U.S. and he's seen the couple's relationship grow from their first years in Mozambique to living together in the states.

Emilio: I realized that she was a good person, and most importantly, she was in love with my brother.

Siobhan: Although Emilio misses his brother, he sees he is happy here with his family.

Emilio: He's got his life here, so there is no reason for him to go back.

Siobhan: Of course Julio still misses things about Mozambique.

Julio: Family, weather, and being by the coast.

Siobhan: The couple doesn't see themselves staying in Chicago long-term, but when or where they'll move is still up in the air, and probably a long time away. For now, they are just working on teaching their children English and Portuguese.

So there you have it. It wasn't easy, but both couples made it work. I'm not sure I could have done it, but they made it through, even with the stern letters from gramma, and cultural misunderstandings. After all, there aren't really any borders when it comes to love.