

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program
Fulbright Stories Project

JOSEPH VITONE

*Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is October 25, 2025 this is an interview on Fulbright fellowship. Can you state, state your name and just spell out your last name and first name? Please.

VITONE: My Name is Joseph Vitone, spelling on the first name, J, O, S, E, P, H, last name, V, as in Victor, I, T, O, N, E.

Q: Perfect, all right. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?

VITONE: I grew up in Akron, Ohio, which is a bit south of Lake Erie. I went to high school at Archbishop High School in Akron. I did undergraduate work at what was then called the Portland School of Arts in Portland Maine and I did graduate work at Rochester Institute of Technology, which is, as it sounds like, in Rochester, New York.

Q: Perfect, and can you tell me a little bit about your exposure to study abroad, international affairs? How did that start? How did you get interested in going forward and applying for Fulbright?

VITONE: I had applied for National Endowment for the Art fellowship that was administered by, I believe it was called Mid-American Arts Alliance, and I was awarded that. And connected to that, people nationally who had won those locally administered NEAs were invited to submit proposals for conducting residencies at binational cultural centers. And I submitted for that, and I was invited to come and teach a workshop, to give a lecture and to work on a photography project by the University of Costa Rica, by the binational Cultural Center in San Jose.

After that—just trying to keep it brief here—but connected with that, I developed a desire to return to Costa Rica to work. I came back for an exhibition that was sponsored and made contacts with people at the university in the design department, also the administrators there at the museum, at the Binational Cultural Center, and indicated that I really would like to come there and teach at University of Costa Rica

and do a documentary photography project—would they write me letters? So through that, I was awarded a Fulbright scholarship, senior scholarship, I guess they call it the core program.

So I ended up in 2001 conducting a Fulbright scholarship at University of Costa Rica in San Jose, and taught a class in documentary photography. We did a project in documentary photography. They made a nice publication and gave us an exhibition. And my own work there was a teaching research grant. My own work was based around photography—documentary photography project, centering around small scale family based agriculture in the countryside.

Some years after that, I was a specialist, a Fulbright specialist, in the region of Apulia in Italy, which is in southern Italy where my family is from. I'm Italian as well as American and I put together an image bank for the group called "Puglia Promozione," which is as it sounds like, Puglia promotion. They promote Puglia (Apulia), all things Puglia, and also a center—a colleague that is a researcher for National Center for Research in Italy, based in Bari. And that image bank was based on the photography that I had done in Italy, in that region, same focus as in Costa Rica, small scale family based agriculture and life in the countryside.

I also currently serve on the Board of Directors of the Fulbright Association, Austin chapter. I review student proposals for Fulbright. This is connected. With St. Edwards University, and also with University of Texas Austin, and I've been a peer reviewer for the core program for Fulbright. Also, which is where that's the first vetting of people applying, in my case, fine art photography.

Q: Can we talk a little bit about how you got into photography, and a little bit of reasons behind interest in photography, and what are you trying to achieve with that profession? When you're photographing?

VITONE: Photography, I got into that when I was a teenager. I liked it a lot, and I kept doing it, and decided to do undergraduate study for it. And currently my work, you'd best describe it as a long-form, documentary work, fine art. Documentary Fine Art would be a term applied to it. And the main bodies of work for which I'm known are a set of portraits titled "Family Records," and those were begun in 1998 based in and around Akron, Ohio, members of my family, extended family, and members of my wife's family.

And for the past years, since about 2017 I've also been working extensively during the summers. I teach. I'm on an academic calendar. I've been working in the region of Puglia. So there I had, within the past couple years, a major exhibition in the city of Bari, which is a major port city on the Adriatic and they, the region, published a book, like a sort of extended catalog.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about what you learned during the Fulbright fellowship, meaning your time in Fulbright Fellowship, and what you learned about the world?

And what did you learn about, you know your country, but also other countries and cultures?

VITONE: Well, I have traveled a good amount before the Fulbright, and I think it's good never to stop learning. I don't particularly compartmentalize it because I happen to be participating in a grant or doing a residency, it all folds together. But I think it's just a real gift to have that time, to work, to be abroad, to get to know people, because I am not functioning—I would teach at a university, and I've lectured at universities in Bari in Italy also, and as I said, taught in Costa Rica, University of Costa Rica, but my own work, my photography, deals with, I guess you could call them "regular people," people who are not academics, but people who are these beautiful, hard-working souls. So you learn about you learn about people, you learn about work, you learn about value systems.

I think being able to travel makes you a more educated person, makes you a more open person, a more tolerant person. It's really difficult to dislike and fully hate someone or anything when you know their story and we have so much international tension. I've done a lot of study abroad, also led classes in multiple countries and study abroad, and I've done a whole lot of photography in Asia and Southeast Asia also. But I remember one comment on the work that I've done on the streets in China, people in the United States would look during an exhibition and say, and pretty much, quote, unquote, "well, they look just like us. They're just like us." That commonality, I think, is significant, you know, because it's easy to make someone "the other" and not care as much about them as yourself or the people immediately around you, and it becomes a lot harder to do that when you know people, when you understand their story, when you understand their background, you care about them too. It's a real thing: if everybody's happy, everybody's happy.

Q: So how do you think your Fulbright experience contributed to making America safer, stronger and more prosperous? How do you think that it contributed to America's national security goals and interests?

VITONE: I think projecting the presence of U.S. citizens into other countries ideally shares what I consider a strong value system that—we are global leaders. We do care about other countries. And I have, kind of, I have mixed sentiments, because I mean literally, I'm Italian. I'm an Italian citizen, so I'm very attached to the European Union also, and I care about what happens to the European Union. But when you go on a Fulbright, you're an ambassador for the U.S. And I much like the idea of going back to what I said a couple of minutes ago, sharing that American sensibility, relating just by being there by force of personality, one version, one small version of the American experience.

So as you hear _____, there's a Latin saying, as you're telling somebody something, you pick something up. Also that Latin saying, "Docendo discimus," (by teaching, we learn) like, as I teach, I learn. So as you're talking to people, showing people, teaching people, you're bringing back a lot from them, also. Particularly when you're in an

area, in a rural area, that the folks a lot of times are isolated, like connected with Fulbright. Also, I've had exhibitions and lectured in Hungary, multiple places because I've lectured on my work, and not to make a whole list, but in Japan, Thailand, and France, in Italy, in Vietnam. And people, unfailingly, people say, "I never knew the U.S. was like that." And this is reflecting back on the Family Records pictures based around Akron, because the folks, they're blue collar, I'm blue collar. I mean, Akron, Ohio, was the center: Goodyear, Goodrich, Firestone. My grandmother didn't speak English. She spoke Italian dialect. She didn't even speak normal Italian. My grandfather worked in the rubber factories. And when you come over to another country, you learn their ways. But it's, again, I think it's—a great thing to have that ability to see what others are doing.

Q: So what would be your advice to someone who's interested in Fulbright and applying for Fulbright?

VITONE: I'd say have a solid knowledge of the place that you want to go. Because, as I mentioned earlier, I have vetted proposals for the core program, and some people write and say that they really would like to spend some time abroad and go to this country without any particular focus as to what they do. And the best way, I believe, to get a Fulbright is to already have contacts with people and to have, of course, an invitation from a university to have sponsors that you can work with at a university to have an achievable plan that can be completed within a time. If you're going to be there for like a specialist grant for six weeks. A core program could be four months, six months, one year. And I don't mean going studying, but doing a research program or research and teaching, but to know where you're going to know what you want to do, and have it be achievable in the time period, and then having something in place, at the very least, a plan as to how you're going to share that experience after you get back to the U.S.

In fact, that's essentially a checklist of what someone who reviews a grant proposal is looking for, that they've got support there, that they've got some knowledge. If you can get granular to some extent, like "I need a car, so I am going to buy a car and then sell it in eight months." Or, "I know how much a rental car costs, and I'm going to rent a car," it makes it obvious to the reviewers that you have some knowledge of what you want to do.

Q: Anything else to add?

VITONE: I think it's a great program. I much appreciate the fact that it is funded. It's, I think—I don't know how many U.S. programs are dually funded; we put in money and then the host country puts in money. So it's a heck of a lot of bang for your buck that US taxpayers get out of it, and ideally, when we go over there, we're showing a lot of good. I mean a personality is a big deal. Like, if somebody is cold, if they don't want to share, that's not a good person to do a grant. If someone is a real Chatty Cathy, and they like to talk people up, and they are quick to smile, and they want to engage with the local folks on multiple levels that they can share when they get back

and bring things back and get things while they're there. That's a great thing. So I'm a big fan of the program.

End of interview