

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

DONALD MOOERS

*Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar
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INTERVIEW

Q: All right, today is May 8th, 2025. And this is Fran Leskovar from ADST [Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training]. Can you say your name for the record and please spell it out?

MOOERS: Hi, I'm Donald Mooers, and my last name is spelled M-O-O-E-R-S, first name Donald D-O-N-A-L-D.

Q: Perfect. All right, can you tell them a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up?

MOOERS: I grew up here in the D.C. (District of Columbia) area. I'm the product of two Capitol Hill veterans who met working for a U.S. Senator, fell in love, quickly got married, and I was produced nine months later after the honeymoon. I grew up in the D.C. area, went to college in North Carolina, Peace Corps volunteer, a Fulbrighter after law school, and I spent the first part of my career in international development and diplomacy, and as my kids are growing up without me as I was around the world, I switched to law, and I practice immigration law.

Q: Perfect. Can you tell me a little bit about your international experience? Why did you choose to go into the international law business?

MOOERS: You know, the world for me is fascinating. And I grew up with a belief in my household that to whom much is given, much is expected in return. And I never wanted for anything. I traveled when I was a kid to South America, and saw a lot of poverty. I studied international relations in college at Duke. And the Peace Corps was something that was in the background for a long time, and that's what ignited it. I ended up, in my career, ninety-six countries I worked in, 125 countries I traveled in. I worked with prime ministers and kings and presidents as well as farmers in the field. And it was one of the greatest twenty years that anybody could ever spend.

Q: And can you tell me a little bit briefly about your Peace Corps experience?

MOOERS: I was in Sierra Leone. I was an ag extension agent. I helped, I think they added up about 1,500 farmers. I got some kind of success because there was a study done afterwards. I think we, through me and my counterparts, were able to improve production of cassava, sweet potato, and upland rice by about 300%. But half the kids die before they reach the age of five, which was just an emotional roller coaster at the same time. Kids died in my arms, I didn't get oral rehydration treatment for them in time. Other kids revived and lived. It was a time where I entered at twenty-two as, I like to say, as a boy. I left, twenty-four, they crowned me chief. I was the first chief outsider ever, but I left as a man three bouts of malaria later. But it's something that I wanted to continue on with. And my Fulbright grant, Fulbright fellowship was certainly a big part of that.

Q: How did you find out about the Fulbright fellowship? How did you apply? When did you apply? Why did you apply?

MOOERS: Well, I was here at GW [George Washington University] law school, just down the street. And I guess I stood out like a sore thumb because the Peace Corps was between my first and second years of law school. And when I returned, going through culture shock and on, I realized that I really needed to take classes with professors who cared, and I got to know professors. And one of those professors came up to me and said, "Don, you know, with your background and your interests, Fulbright is something that you should really think about." This is a professor who wanted to go on a Fulbright but couldn't because he had a child with disability issues. GW, it turns out, had not had a successful Fulbright candidate for many years. So I went through the process, figured out that a wonderful mentor is a professor, and wanted to go to a country in Africa that was successful. Sierra Leone was a country that was falling apart. I picked two countries, Botswana, that was doing very well, and a country in the middle of the Indian Ocean that was politically part of Africa, Mauritius. And I settled on Mauritius. I wanted to see how the different communities there solved their issues informally as well as formally. I won the prize, won the raffle, and I left just after sitting for the bar exam.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your Fulbright experience, like day-to-day interactions? How did that go?

MOOERS: I was welcomed with open arms there. I was with members of the Supreme Court at least once or twice a week. Judges and barristers at lower level, solicitors around the country. I worked with leaders from every community, the Indian community, the Muslim community, the Chinese community, the Creole community, the white community, the Francophone communities, in trying to understand how they find ways to resolve their issues. How do they do it within their groups to avoid the formal legal system, and how do they do it within the formal legal system? It's a fascinating place. It's half in French and half in English. Same lawyers, same judges. Just which law was either French-based or English-based. And it's just a fascinating place, one of the most diverse countries in the world, with one of the most vibrant democracies in the world.

Q: So, what would you do in your free time during your Fulbright experience? Did you volunteer? What was your community?

MOOERS: Well, I got the reception that the embassy put on for me with leaders within the legal community and some of the diplomatic community. I got recruited to play for a basketball team in the first division of the Mauritius basketball league. The coach, who had just come back from coaching in Connecticut on an exchange program, said, "I need a tall guy to block up the middle, play basketball." I said, "yeah, I played all four years at Duke. Not on the team, but after class, before dinner. Every day for four years I played basketball." So I helped this team go from the bottom of the first division to the top. And then I learned how to scuba dive. There was a movie that was produced there that one of my colleagues, one of my friends, was the recruiter of extras, and so I was in. I played a very big part in probably the stupidest movie that's ever been produced. And I did some volunteer work and English teaching. A lot of it was I was this exuberant American, and that's how I was known, and spreading good things and understanding how this country worked.

Q: Great, so how did your Fulbright experience make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous?

MOOERS: After my Fulbright, I came back, I worked on Capitol Hill doing foreign affairs for a congressman from Maine. Then I was recruited to go head up an organization throughout Africa, an organization called VOCA [Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance]. I ran the Farm-to-Farmer program. And then that took me then to Central Europe, where I set up the first U.S. efforts of any kind in Poland, and then each of the Baltic republics, and then Belarus, and Russia, Ukraine, Armenia. And what I learned in my Fulbright experience, in terms of, how do you work within these diverse communities, while building a unified central vision, but especially in terms of understanding these various communities, and how they resolve issues, how they see themselves, how do they stand up, I use my Fulbright experience every single day in my work. And my work was key, I think, together with all the others who then came out after me in every field known to mankind, to really help lead the transformation of Poland and the Baltics to strong, vibrant democracies, as they are today. Market economy, good friends of America. So stronger, safer. My Fulbright was all about that.

Q: And what is your hope for Fulbright?

MOOERS: Fulbright's got to continue. I mean, Fulbright is one of the bright stars that we have in terms of building a world where we are interdependent, where we're understanding. I had a chance to get to know Senator Fulbright in the years before he passed, and he would talk about his vision, his vision of these people who had done different things in their countries. And the more intertwined we are, the more we understand one another, the more that we see the similarities among ourselves and not the differences. It's the greatest opportunity to continue world peace that we have. And I ascribe certainly to everything that the Senator stood for in that. And it was an honor to hear it directly from him. And I feel a responsibility to carry it on today and on to tomorrow.

Q: All right. Anything else you have?

MOOERS: I don't. I think this is a lot in a short period of time. Thanks. You're a wonderful questioner.

Q: Thanks. All right.

End of interview