

## **Posh Corps Podcast Ep. 14: Advocate**

**By Alan Toth**

### **Transcript**

Narration:

In 2009 a Peace Corp volunteer named Kate Puzey was murdered in Benin. On February 9, 2009 Kate sent her country director an email describing the alleged sexual misconduct by a local teacher named Constant Bio. Bio taught at Kate's school and he was regularly hired by Peace Corps in Benin to facilitate volunteer trainings. In her email, Kate explained to the Peace Corp Benin country director that Bio had been raping young girls in her village. She thought that the country director should know about the behavior because she was worried that Bio's association with Peace Corps Benin would tarnish the reputation of Peace Corps in her community.

Kate's email reads, "Please believe me, I'm not someone who likes to create problems, but this has been weighing heavily on me. I've loved my time as a volunteer and it's important to me that Peace Corps remain a respected organization in the eyes of our host country. This man is not someone I want representing Peace Corps to the Beninese community."

Because of the information that Kate Puzey provided to the country director in Benin, Constant Bio was informed that he would not be hired by Peace Corps in the future. At that time, volunteers had no whistle blower protections. According to a Peace Corps Office of Inspector General report the information was not kept confidential. Kate received a followup phone call from another Peace Corps employee about the matter. Apparently the information was known to many employees at the Peace Corps office in Benin.

One employee at the Peace Corps office was Aurelien Bio who went by the name Jacques. Jacques Bio was an associate director for Peace Corps Benin and the brother Constant Bio. On March 12, 2009 Kate Puzey was found dead on the porch outside her home. Her throat had been cut. Beninese authorities arrested Constant Bio, his brother Jacques Bio and a Nigerian man from Kate's village. There was never a trial and the men are still in custody.

Peace Corps headquarters contacted Kate Puzey's parents and informed them that Kate had died, but Peace Corps refused to provide them with any details or explanation. Lois and Harry Puzey were forced to piece together the circumstances of Kate's death by reading her emails and speaking with volunteers. Four months after Kate's murder, Peace Corps simply stopped communicating with the Puzseys.

In an affidavit sent to congress, Lois Puzey wrote, "After so much heavy grieving and feeling betrayed, we finally decided to stop being victimized hoping, in vain, for support from the Peace Corps. As a family, we developed an action plan to discover what really happened to Kate and assure that justice was done on her behalf."

The Puzey family created a project called Kate's Voice designed to raise awareness about Kate's murder and force Peace Corps to make reforms. The Puzey family was advocating for whistle blower protections for volunteers, increased quality standards from Peace Corps management and better support for volunteer victims and their families.

As the Puzey family was building the Kate's Voice project, another advocacy group was being organized by returned Peace Corps volunteers. The founders of a group called First Response Action were advocating for a stronger Peace Corps response for volunteer victims of physical and sexual violence. The two groups were advocating for many of the same reforms and they decided to work together to push for a legislative solution.

One of the founders of First Response Action was Casey Frazee.

Casey Frazee: I was a Peace Corps volunteer in South Africa in 2009 and I was unfortunately assaulted while I was serving as volunteer. I found that there were many other people who'd been raped or assaulted and weren't getting the services they needed. At the time that I was assaulted, there was no policy for how Peace Corps should respond to survivors of sexual violence, and it felt like we were just too far along in recorded history to not have policies like that.

Narration: Lois Puzey and several members of First Response Action testified about their experiences and their concerns regarding Peace Corps before the House Foreign Relations Committee on May 11, 2011.

Lois Puzey: Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, ranking member Berman and committee members, my name is Lois Puzey, and I'm here today on behalf of my daughter Kate Puzey who was murdered March 12, 2009 while serving with the Peace Corps in the West African nation of Benin and to urge congress ...

First Response Speaker 1: Shortly after I arrived, our supervisor, the Nepali Peace Corps program director told female volunteers he expected sex in exchange for providing us with our living supplement checks.

First Response Speaker 2: A Nigerian man held me down, ripped off my shorts and underwear and raped me. No one gave me the opportunity to make a formal statement or to speak with law enforcement. I was soon put on an international flight to Washington DC alone.

First Response Speaker 3: The Peace Corps also required me to meet with a counselor who made me write down everything I had done wrong for this to occur. As examples, she suggested that I had been out after 5PM, I hadn't screamed and that I didn't fight back. Rather than feeling safe and supported, I felt belittled and blamed.

Congressperson Ros Lehtinen: Thank you very much to all of you for your brave testimony. Your testimony will change the way that business is being done in the Peace Corps.

Narration: Following their testimony, Kate Puzezy's family and the members of First Response Action worked with members of congress to draft the Kate Puzezy Volunteer Protection Act.

Casey Frazee:: We worked with a network of legislators, and we're very lucky that 2011 is the year that we had a congressional hearing on this issue in May. By November I'm happy to say that President Obama was signing this legislation into law.

Narration: The Kate Puzezy Act mandates, among other things, that Peace Corps volunteers be extended whistle blower protections and that Peace Corps adopt new policies and procedures in the way that they respond to sexual assaults of volunteers. One of the mandates of the Kate Puzezy Act required that Peace Corps create and Office of Victim Advocacy within the agency. In 2011, Peace Corps director Aaron Williams hired Kellie Greene to be the first director of the Peace Corps Office of Victim Advocacy.

Kellie Greene: I remember when I first met with Director Williams. He was talking about the intense scrutiny that the agency was receiving from the media and from congress at the time. Every time you picked up a newspaper or you were online there was something about the Peace Corps and sexual assault. He was very committed to wanting to create change within the agency so that the agency could be responsive to the volunteers who needed that assistance, and then also to the families of fallen volunteers. He was committed to making the change necessary.

I never anticipated falling in love with the volunteers, or falling in love with the Peace Corps. I'm not a returned volunteer. I haven't served in the Peace Corps. I don't have what it takes to be a Peace Corps volunteer, the sacrifices, the commitment, but I woke up every day energized to go to work to make Peace Corps better for the Peace Corps volunteers so that they can continue their work and so that those that have been victimized who choose to want to continue their service are able to do that.

Narration: Peace Corps management was quick to publicly embrace the Kate Puzezy Act. Peace Corps director Aaron Williams also testified before the House Foreign Relations Committee. He acknowledged problems with the way Peace Corps treated victims, and he vowed to make changes.

Aaron Williams: Unfortunately, the Peace Corps has not always lived up to its commitment. The brave women who have come forward have shown us that the Peace Corps has not always been sufficiently responsive, compassionate or sensitive to victims of crime and their families.

Narration: But not everyone in Peace Corps management agreed that there was a problem.

Kellie Greene: The agency was resistant to a victim advocate, and it was mostly because it was the first time, that I'm aware of, in the agency's history that volunteers

actually had a position that had a voice for them that they could call with their complaints, they could call with their concerns and they had a position that would actually then share those concerns with other staff and hold the staff accountable for that. I was met with resistance and hostility from some offices and some positions.

One example is, there was a volunteer that had been the victim of a very horrific physical assault. It not only traumatized him, but it traumatized his community. It traumatized the other volunteers and it traumatized the staff. He very much wanted to go back to service for his close of service conference, for his COS conference. It had never been done before. There was a lot of resistance from the regional director, regional directors from other regions because it was like, "If she gets to do this in this region she's going to want to do it in my region." In the end, Direct Williams supported it, and so I was able to have that volunteer go back.

Going back with him to his community and seeing the reaction on the little kids' faces, on the men in his village, the women from his village, just these full body embraces because many of them thought he had died. They didn't know what had happened to him. Peace Corps hadn't been keeping them informed. It was really remarkable to see the connection that he had made in his community. I saw the healing that took place. You have to heal those communities. For Peace Corps not to do that, I feel, just goes against what the Peace Corps stands for, peace and friendship.

Narration: One of the main complaints of Peace Corps staff regarding the Kate Puzey Act was something called restricted reporting. Restricted reporting ensures that personally identifying information of a volunteer victim of sexual assault is shared with only a few authorized individuals within Peace Corps. Kellie Greene believed that country directors should not be privy to restricted information.

Kellie Greene: What we did at the Peace Corps was we made the decision that country directors wouldn't be informed of sexual assault, and the volunteers chose restricted reporting. That created a huge conflict among regions, among country directors and big backlash towards me and my office because, how dare I come into the agency and say that country directors aren't going to be informed of a sexual assault. Their responsible for the safety and security of volunteers. I get that, but you also have to understand country directors are, in a sense, the boss of the volunteers. Somebody may be hesitant to tell their boss that they've been sexually assaulted. One, because hey may feel like they're going to be blamed for it or their service may be terminated, but there's also the country directors that would go too far. They would withhold projects from a volunteer because they would see that volunteer as damaged, so it becomes discrimination in a sense.

Narration: In 2012 a confidential Peace Corps document was written. It included compiled comments from Peace Corps staff members regarding the Kate Puzey Act. The

document was obtained by the House Foreign Relations Committee and was provided to members of the press. Regarding sexual assaults of volunteers, one staff member says, "If the incident involved risky behavior, I'm not saying it's the victim's fault, but if we can't use it as a learning moment and then we put them, the volunteer, back into a village without addressing those issues, alcohol abuse and multiple relationships, that's not okay. If we're taking the Kate Puzey Act seriously, then we need to be able to address the behavior of the volunteer."

Another staff comment says, "We're tripping over ourselves in order to not blame the victim. There is a relationship between drinking and sexual assault." The confidential document contains hundreds of quotes from Peace Corps staff members. The compiled comments make it clear that many Peace Corps staff members didn't believe that there was a problem with the way in which volunteer victims were being treated.

Interviewer: The Peace Corps staff at that time thought that they were doing a really great job with the volunteers and with the victims?

Kellie Greene: Right. They still do. This was May of 2011, and they didn't understand why these volunteers were saying they received a bad response, that the volunteers that were speaking out through First Response Action, they were very hostile towards any volunteer that would come forward and say that they received anything short of a good response from the agency. If anything was done wrong, there was something wrong with the volunteer, that the volunteer caused it to happen or the volunteer perceived the staff reaction or response in a negative way, and that's not really what happened. They were very dismissive of the volunteers concerns.

Narration: This conflict between the beliefs of agency staff and the requirements of the Kate Puzey Act may have been partially responsible for a loss of professional decorum at Peace Corps headquarters.

Kellie Greene: It just becomes this really difficult environment for anybody to do any type of work in. There were also times when the Office of Health Services wouldn't notify the victim advocates that a volunteer was medivacing here to DC, so we weren't able to meet them at the airport to pick them up, or we would learn halfway through the medivac that a volunteer had actually been medivaced, and we had been trying for two or three weeks to contact them to give them updates on their case. We weren't able to reach them because they were right here in DC, but the Office of Health Services didn't notify the Office of Victim Advocacy. There were clear instances of sabotage from different offices to other offices.

Narration: Kellie's interpretation of the backstabbing at Peace Corps headquarters is verified by another confidential Peace Corps document. By 2014, Director Aaron Williams had resigned, and Carrie Hessler-Radelet was named Acting Director of the Peace Corps. Hessler-Radelet engaged expert consultants Kate

Raftery, Lee Lacy and Jen Markowitz to perform an internal management consultation of key offices providing response to sexual assault victims.

Their report describes a deep resentment and mistrust within office of Peace Corps headquarters. They describe Peace Corps headquarters as having mismanaged the implementation of the Kate Puzey act which led to a dysfunctional work environment and a loss of professional decorum at Peace Corps headquarters.

In a references to the manner in which Peace Corps implemented the reforms mandated in the Kate Puzey Act, the consultants wrong, "These efforts did not result in a perception or reality of institutional growth, but rather degenerated into power plays and lack of professional etiquette. We heard of staff rolling their eyes and turning their backs on each other in meetings or leaving meetings altogether. This behavior was tolerated, and has continued resulting in staff refusing to be in meetings with other staff undermining colleagues in person and behind their backs."

Peace Corps director Carrie Hessler-Radelet must have appreciated the opinions of these consultants, because she hired two of them to senior position within her own office. Kate Raftery and Lee Lacy were hired as senior program team leads within the office of the director. According to Kellie Greene, these teams leads are now used as a buffer between director Hessler-Radelet and the rest of Peace Corps senior management.

Kellie Greene: The way that I see the team lead position in Peace Corps is they are the decision makers. They coordinate the meetings that are taking place. In the Kate Puzey Act it states that the Office of Victim Advocacy, the director is to report to the director of the agency. I rarely met with her. I had to rely on other senior advisors to relay my information to her, and trust that they would relay it in a way that was victim centered, or explain why I was taking the position I was taking on certain circumstances.

Narration: By 2015 Kellie Greene was getting frustrated with what she viewed as a lack of commitment from Peace Corps to uphold the spirit of the Kate Puzey Act. Some country directors were still blaming volunteers for sexual assaults. The experience of Danae Smith illustrates how Peace Corps country directors were still able to effectively sidestep the Kate Puzey act as late as 2015. Danae Smith was a Peace Corps volunteer who served in the Dominican Republic. She was placed in a community called Los Mosquitos. Los Mosquitos is not a traditional village. It consists of small clusters of houses. Each cluster separated and spread out for miles along a single dirt road. Danae's house was a ten minute walk from her nearest neighbor. The isolation of her site caused problems for Danae almost immediately.

Danae Smith: What happened was I was traveling back to my site and there was only one guy left who had taken up to my site because it was a long trip and it was a guy that I didn't know well. I was like, "It's that or I'm stuck out here." I went with

him, and we got out of the pueblo, and we're in the mountains and there's nobody around. He then started to touch me inappropriately as he was driving. He had one hand on the motorcycle and then one hand, he was reaching out and started touching my legs. He was like, "You know, any moto guy could do whatever he wanted to you out here and no one would hear you if you screamed for help."

Fortunately nothing more happened. Anyways, I called my APCD the next day. I said this happened, I was really concerned about it. I don't feel safe. She said, "Well he's not from your site, right?" I said, "No." I said, "I'm not so concerned about this specific man, but coming back I'm more concerned about being really isolated and that something like that could happen." She said, "You can't request a site change because you think you're too isolated." That was the end of that.

**Narration:** In early 2015, several months after the incident with the moto driver, Danae was attacked by two strangers on the road.

**Danae Smith:** I was walking to the school. I remember these two guys that I didn't know were on a motorcycle and they had gone down, and then I saw them come back up as I was walking. I thought that was strange, but I thought maybe they were lost or something. Then the guy pulled out a machete and was like, "Give me your backpack," because I had been carrying a backpack with books and I had some money in there and my phone and things, so I gave them my backpack. He took the backpack and went off the road into the forest. Then the other guy, he was like, "Go follow him." Then I did.

It wasn't until I got in front of him that I felt really like something was off. I felt like they were going to hurt me and that was when I started to yell and scream. The guy behind me ran up and grabbed me and threw me on the floor. I still kept screaming and hitting him. They weren't expecting me to fight back. Pretty much as soon as that happened the other guy went through my backpack and started getting valuables that he wanted. He found money and he found my phone and that's what he took. After he got the stuff out he was like, "All right, let's go," and they started the motorcycle and left.

**Narration:** Danae had been injured in the attack. A local community member took her to a nearby town where she was able to call Peace Corps for help. Danae was picked up by the Peace Corps Safety and Security officer who drove her to the Peace Corps office in Santo Domingo. Danae was treated by the Peace Corps medical officer. She was also contacted by Jamie Friedman an associate victim advocate who worked under the supervision of Kellie Greene. Danae told Friedman about the attack and that she wanted a site change. Friedman was supposed to be representing Danae's interests and advocating for her rights throughout the process of Danae's case. Several days after the attack, Danae was called in for a meeting with the Peace Corps Dominican Republic country director Mary Latka.

Danae Smith: I remember I had a meeting with the country director. The first thing she said to me was, "We're sending you home." This was the first time I had talked to her since this incident had happened. She basically gave me a list of reasons as to why they're sending me home. One of them was, "We don't think you can take care of yourself," just a completely offensive list.

Narration: The following is an excerpt from the memo Danae received from her country director.

"This memo is to inform you that I am giving you interrupted service. Because your reported robbery occurred in your community, Peace Corps has determined that it is not safe for you to return to your current site. Because of a number of factors including challenges you have had integrating into site, maintaining your own well being and questions about your commitment to complying with Peace Corps DR policies, Peace Corps DR does not have an appropriate site available to you."

Danae Smith: Then she was basically like, "It's already done. You can't change it. I've got your ticket" I remember the security officer said that it had happened because I was walking in my site and that I shouldn't have been walking in my site. She said that I needed to prevent it from happening. She said the way that I would prevent it from happening would be by using public transportation which was not available in my site which isn't saying much, also makes me think that the research they put into my site wasn't necessarily well done because to get on public transportation I had to walk an hour to the next community.

Narration: Danae spoke again with associate victim advocate Jamie Friedman after meeting with her country director. Friedman told Danae about meetings which were held to discuss the case.

Danae Smith: She was saying that my country staff wanted to send me home and that she told the other representatives that I didn't want to go back to site, I just wanted to have a site change. Then my country director gave a list of reasons why I shouldn't have a site change which was in the memo. She said that I broke rules with [inaudible 00:23:10]. That I had issues integrating. They were essentially saying that I was just putting myself in danger and that I was this liability.

Narration: Danae's description of her conversation with associate victim's advocate Jamie Friedman made it seem as though Friedman was easily persuaded by the statements of the country director regarding Danae's behavior. According to Kellie Greene, this willingness by Friedman to go along with management and not fight too hard for the volunteer victims gave Peace Corps senior management ideas. Kellie believes that Peace Corps management decided to force her out of her position in order to replace her with someone more agreeable to management's point of view. In this way, Peace Corps could technically comply with the Kate Puzey Act without the need to make meaningful changes in the way that management dealt with volunteers.



Kellie Greene: Essentially what it was is that the agency got tired of me pushing for reform. Because the office was fully staffed, there were two other advocates there, they're junior advocates, in my absence when I would be travelling they would be in meetings, and so they would not be as vocal about changes or challenge decisions that were being made because they were junior. That was not their role. The agency just felt that they could have them, they could still have victim advocates, but the thorn in their side, that's what they were getting rid of.

Narration: On April 29 Kellie Greene received a memorandum indicating that Kellie was no longer managing the Office of Victim Advocacy. The next day Peace Corps Chief of Staff Laura Chambers sent an email to all Peace Corps staff members informing them that associate victim advocate Jamie Friedman would be managing and supervising the Office of Victim Advocacy. Kellie Greene was moved out of her office. On October 5, 2015 Kellie received a memorandum titled Proposed Removal. The memo indicated that Kellie Greene was to be removed from employment with Peace Corps. She was charged with misconduct.

From the memo, "Over an extended period of time on or between March 1, 2014 and April 5, 2015 you created a negative work atmosphere through bullying, harsh communication, isolation of staff and fear of retaliation. You micromanaged your subordinate employees in OVA through frequent and demanding communications including emails in the evening and late night hours."

Kellie Greene: My staff alleges that I was inappropriate in working with them, that I would email them in the middle of the night about cases, that I would call them in the middle of the night about cases. It's true. I sent emails in the middle of the night. I picked up the phone and I would call people in the middle of the night because that's when I was being contacted about a sexual assault or a physical assault on a volunteer. Yes I was going to respond to the volunteers, and so I did do that. I'm guilty, guilty as charged of doing my job in the middle of the night.

Narration: The memorandum details a long list of personal interactions with Peace Corps staff. It also mentions numerous occasions in which Kellie Greene acted in a dismissive and unprofessional manner in her interactions with fellow staff members. The author of the memorandum noted that Kellie Greene received high ratings in her annual performance reviews, but nevertheless opted to proceed with the removal.

"Your misconduct is particularly odious and reprehensible because you used your Director of Victim Advocacy position to victimize and abuse your own employees."

Perhaps Kellie Greene did behave in an unprofessional manner. According to the internal management consultation, everyone in senior Peace Corps

management was behaving unprofessionally. If Kellie Greene was behaving in an unprofessional manner, she was certainly not alone. Kellie engaged a lawyer who contested the proposed removal. Peace Corps responded on November 9 by dropping the proposed removal, and instead suspending Kellie for a hundred and twenty days without pay. On November 30 CBS This Morning broke the story about Kellie Greene's suspension. Several news outlets followed up. Peace Corps again changed course. This time they offered Kellie Greene a new job.

Kellie Greene: Now I've been reassigned. I'm in the Office of Staff Learning and Development. My new title is Staff Development and Training Specialist with a full five year tour. I don't understand how you were moving to fire me and now I have a full five year tour. It makes no sense to me.

Narration: Kellie Greene was offered a position in the Office of Staff Learning and Development. According to Peace Corps documents, the purpose of this office is to promote a culture of learning and professional development for Peace Corps staff. In her proposed removal memo, Kellie Greene's behavior towards staff was described as, "Odious and reprehensible." If Peace Corps management truly believed this assessment, then offering Kellie Greene a position in an office responsible for developing staff effectiveness is curious to say the least.

Kellie Greene: It's really important for me that people know that I love the Peace Corps, and I love Peace Corps volunteers. I want people to know that Peace Corps' failing some of its members. In the whole scheme of how many volunteers there are and returned volunteers, it's a small number of those that feel that they haven't gotten support, but they're significant. Just because they're small numbers doesn't mean that they're irrelevant. They're concerns are real and the Peace Corps should be supporting them. We should doing something. It's embarrassing as somebody who works for the Peace Corps. I'm still employed by the Peace Corps. It's embarrassing allows people to still feel hurt.

Narration: Kellie believes that she was targeted by Peace Corps management because she prioritized the best interests of the volunteers above the best interest of agency staff. Internal Peace Corps documents provide some evidence to support this claim.

In the confidential document which compiles staff comments, one comment reads, "The victim advocate is advocating for individual volunteer victims, but the victim advocate is also right at the center of the agency's policy making on sexual assault. It ends up creating somewhat of an organizational conflict. Where the victim advocate is involved in policy making the victim advocate should have the best interests of the agency in mind, but at the same time the victim advocate is advocating on behalf of volunteers even though the victims' best interests may not coincide with the agency's best interests."

Peace Corps Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet discussed this story with the

producers of this podcast, but she refused to make any comments for the record. A Peace Corps spokesperson sent an email response claiming that Peace Corps was prohibited by law from commenting on a personnel matter.