

SALT Episode 3

Show notes:

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Undercurrents: Season 3: Episode 3: ""

CHRISTEN: Do we wanna answer question 17, which is like "What would you share with someone who's (Ken - Oh.) thinking about doing SALT?"

KEN: I mean, isn't that kinda the-everything here, [chuckle] in a way-

CHRISTEN: Yeah okay, yeah, yeah, yeah, you're right. [laugh]

VO: Welcome to a unique episode of Undercurrents. For this special episode I sit down for a conversation with Christen Kong, Undercurrents producer, world-traveller, and just an all-round all-star. We share stories and reflect on a shared experience that each of us had separately, nearly 20 years apart. We're talking taxi driver bodyguards, singing in the workplace, joining the army, and more.

This episode is about the SALT program.

SALT, which stands for Serving and Learning Together, is an iconic MCC program that is celebrating its 40th birthday this year. SALT sends young adults from North America to volunteer with MCC partners around the world for 11 months in jobs ranging from school teacher, policy analyst to health program administrator and much more.

Undercurrents is brought to you, as always, by Kindred Credit Union. Kindred's purpose is cooperative banking that connects values and faith with finances, inspiring peaceful, just, and prosperous communities. Through programs and community engagement Kindred empowers young people to be changemakers in their local communities.

[music break]

KEN: Rolling. Um, so Christen. [pause] (Christen- [laugh]) Here we are. Here we are in person for the first time doing Undercurrents in person together.

CHRISTEN: Yeah, that's right.

[music break]

KEN: I'm Ken Ogasawara, host of Undercurrents. And, I went on the SALT program, Serving and Learning Together, in 2001, 2002. And I went to rural Uganda as a primary school teacher.

CHRISTEN: So, my name is Christen Kong, and I assist and support Ken in many different ways for the Undercurrents podcast. And I went on the SALT program, actually, I believe 2019 to 2020 in South Africa.

[music break]

Uh, so this assignment I worked for an organization called Sinomlando Centre and in Zulu that means 'we have a history'. And so, this organization was really born out of actually psycho-social practices of storytelling for those living with trauma.

KEN: Hm, interesting. That sounds like real work. (Christen- Yeah. [laugh]) Were you qualified for this work?

CHRISTEN: I was not qualified for this work, not at all. Yeah, I didn't know what to expect., but you know what, this workplace actually inspired me to do the work that I do now so I'm very thankful for that.

KEN: Are you one of these types that when you're going into something you prepare for it, you do research? You're sort of like, okay, what am I getting myself into? What is this?

CHRISTEN: Yeah, you know, that's a good question. I feel like when people travel, they go to the libraries, they get all those travel books, we have Google now, but I actually felt the opposite. I didn't do that much research other than my plane ticket there. I felt like it was my family and friends that did most of the research to me. Then they relayed information, maybe accurate, maybe false, who knows? But I wanted to go in with not too many expectations, and just really going in with everything as a surprise and just taking it in as it is, because I think books and Google maybe have different perceptions about these places than when you actually go there.

KEN: That's a really, really good point. To me the very definition of culture shock is the difference between what you expect and what the reality is. But yeah there was not, I also had very little expectations, and therefore whatever happened, I was like, oh, this is happening. I'll just say, "Yes," to a lot of things and roll with it. And that was sort of my motto for the year, was just to say, "Yes".

[music break]

CHRISTEN: What were ways that you made friends, and how did you bond with your host family?

KEN: My friends were made through my host family, so this woman named Dorcas Mutabazi was my host mom. She was amazing; she had four biological children but she had another like ten kids living with her, orphans that she was just helping to raise. And some of them, you know, late teens, sometimes even early twenties. So those guys were my first friends. And then slowly as we go out into the community people would get to know me and that was the other thing too is I made a lot of friends through the children. Maybe not close friends but I felt known and felt-

CHRISTEN: Acknowledged by the community?

KEN: Yeah, like 'oh that's Teacher Ken'. (Christen- Yeah.) And then it was because the kids would be like 'oh that's' and they're pointing at me and telling their parents. And so then I didn't feel so awkward in this situation. I'm walking down the street, everyone is looking at me like 'who's this guy'. Once I saw my

kids out there, my students, it felt something like safer, kinda more like 'okay the kids are looking out for me' kinda thing. (Christen- Yeah.) What about you?

CHRISTEN: So, I bonded with my host family through being in the kitchen a lot.

[music break]

They had this small stool and I remember the first time I entered the house, I was so disoriented, super jet lagged and didn't know what to do. It was about dinner time, and I just sat on the stool. I think they didn't know what to do with me either, so I just sat there and observed them. At the time too, I was living with one of my host brothers. I also had three sisters, but only my host brother was home, Josh. And he was kind of peeking at me from the corners of the house and I would just sit there on this stool

[music break]

Later, the kitchen became a place where Josh and I bonded together. We learned how to make grilled cheese together.

KEN: How old was Josh at the time?

CHRISTEN: Josh at the time I believe was nine or ten. (Ken- Okay.) Yeah. Now he's almost graduated highschool. (Ken- Wow.) Yeah.

KEN: Wait, how's that-that's only like three years ago.

CHRISTEN: Yeah so, oh maybe he was-okay fine, maybe he was thirteen then.

KEN: Okay fine. [chuckle]

CHRISTEN: Yeah, yeah, thirteen. [laugh]

KEN: I know that you have a clip as well. Another way that you bonded with your host brother, Josh, you made this little radio show?

CHRISTEN: Yeah.

KEN: Tell us about this.

CHRISTEN: For sure. After Josh and I became good friends, sometimes we would take Saturdays to do chores together. One of our chores was washing the car, because it was very dusty. We started this little radio show called Christen and Josh FM. We would just speak about different topics that we wanted. We would blast the music in the car to incorporate the music, but I remember our first episode was about wheels and we just spoke about wheels.

[from recording]

JOSH: Josh!

CHRISTEN: And Christen!

JOSH & CHRISTEN: FM!

JOSH: First topic for today is going to be...

CHRISTEN: Wheels!

[car music is turned up, Christen laughs, music fades]

[SFX/Josh and Christen's voices in the background]

CHRISTEN: It was also one way that I got to know him. He was a very shy person, as in myself, and so I think this radio show really gave a platform to both of us to just ask each other questions without feeling too awkward.

KEN: Speaking of awkward, we're definitely going to play that.

CHRISTEN: [laugh] Yeah, oh gosh.

[from recording]

CHRISTEN: And that's all for today!

JOSH: Enjoy the music.

CHRISTEN: Bye!

[music increase and then fades]

KEN: What was a pivotal moment in your faith while you were in your host country? Yeah I could answer this one. This pivotal moment for me didn't actually, I don't think it really hit me until actually years later.

[music break]

Godwin, who I mentioned as one of my host brothers, who I think is actually technically my host mom's nephew and he's also a teacher, really smart guy, went to one of the best high schools in Uganda, and was really on track to have a great career. Which is a big deal, education in Uganda is a big deal, and then by the time-at the time that I had arrived in Kanungu and he was living with his aunt, he was sort of stalled. He didn't feel like he was living up to his potential. He was teaching at this tiny little school. The pay was not consistent and I think, honestly, with my SALT allowance, which was \$62 US a month or something, was more than what the teachers were making. So, he was feeling a little lost, "What am I doing here?" and at one point I remember him saying, "I'm thinking of joining the army."

[music break]

Uganda then and still is ruled by a former soldier. The army was one way to make a good living, and so he was considering it. And I was like, as a naïve, 19 year old Mennonite, I was like, "How can you even

consider that, Godwin? Don't join the army. You could get yourself killed and you could," so I said like, "Have faith. Have faith in God." And he laughed. He laughed. He laughed at me and he said, "But is that safe? Is that safe?"

CHRISTEN: That's a good question.

KEN: And I sort of said, "Of course it is," just my naïve, really with limited experience in my life and in my faith, "Of course, it's the safest place you can be, Godwin. Just trust God." But years later, I'm thinking back on that, he asked a really good question. That's a real question that I was not prepared to really think about, which was - it's easy for me to say. I'm not living here forever. I'm getting an allowance, and at the end of my one year, I'm going to fly back to my wealthy, middle-class life in this developed country where I don't have to worry about joining the army to make a living.

CHRISTEN: In the end, what did Godwin do?

KEN: He didn't join the army. He stuck with the schooling, but the challenges have not really gone away as far as finding fulfilment in his career. He got a post in the government, but still nothing's paying well. He doubled down on education, got a few more degrees, really was trying to jump through all the hoops, but it's still not a great employment situation for him. And that question still remains. In some ways it haunts me.

CHRISTEN: What was your mode of transportation and what was the experience like?

KEN: My primary mode of transportation was just walking. That was the main thing. Our family didn't have a car. In fact, most folks in my little community did not have their own car. For the most part, the only vehicles we saw were those little pickup trucks and these vehicles were just loaded with stuff, people, livestock (Christen- Everything.) supplies. Yeah. How about you? What was your mode of transportation?

CHRISTEN: Similar name. So they did call it taxis, but they're also mini buses. But it was like hitchhiking. You would walk to the side of the road, and to catch a taxi, one of these mini buses, you would stick your hand out with your thumb up and when they saw you, they would come, drive by, pick you up, open the door. It was also almost like those spy movies, when the door opens and you just jump right in.

[music break]

But I think the biggest thing, though, that was fearful for me was also to get off at your stop, you have to yell the name of the street. And I was just too embarrassed, with no confidence or self-esteem, to call out all these South African names, so I would actually just stay on the mini bus until somebody else called the next stop. And so I also did a lot of walking back to my workplace, but after a while they adopted me. Actually, one time I was standing on the side of the road and my host dad, Papa Zulu, came by and was like, "Oh, Christen. I'm going to the church, just hop in." And the mini bus people came and they're like, "Don't go into this man's car. He's dangerous. Don't go into this man's car." I was like, "No, he's my dad. He's my dad." Of course, I don't look like my dad there. So then he came out of the car and

had to like negotiate, you know, do some sort of mediation, negotiation. Then, in the end, they let me go in his car, (Ken- That's hilarious.) but I felt very protected by the mini bus people after a while.

KEN: Wow. That's amazing. (Christen- I know.) So they really got to know you.

[music break]

CHRISTEN: So I think one thing I learned about myself was actually at my workplace. When I first started, I needed to be on top of things. My manager pulled me aside and said, "Christen, you're too on top of things. You're meeting too many deadlines. You need to chill out."

[music break]

After she told me that I, yeah, then in the morning, started drinking Rooibos tea with my group mates. I was also the peach lady, so every lunch hour I would go and get peaches and we would all sit together sharing peaches. That actually created such a beautiful, intimate work environment and I had such good relationships with my coworkers, despite all the deadlines maybe passing us. And so I think that's one thing, I don't know, maybe about myself, is to take things a little bit lighter.

[woman singing]

CHRISTEN: Yeah it is like a radio. [laughter] You turn it and she sings a new song.

[laughter]

[singing in the background]

KEN: Didn't you also say that your coworkers would just burst into spontaneous song?

CHRISTEN: Yeah so it was a very small workplace. We didn't have our own desk or anything. We had a conference table with chairs all around, and we would do our own work. Often, my coworkers would start humming, and another coworker started humming, and then another coworker just took the spotlight and started singing. Our office just became a choir space, and that was a surprising thing. I loved it. I wish more people sang here in workplaces.

[singing continues]

KEN: Do we want to talk about volunteerism and like that kind of thing?

CHRISTEN: Yeah we totally can.

KEN: Um, how? To.

CHRISTEN: I think we can start off by saying that yeah I had this kind of fantasy and also vision, I do have to say, about the SALT program. Being in another country is such a huge thing for a young person, but also learning different things in school, because I did international development. A lot of international development students love travelling the world, love going to all these places through different

volunteer programs, but as I read many articles and literature, I became actually more, not sceptical, but more critical about these programs, because what is the good that we are actually wanting to do in these countries was the question that kept going through my mind. Thinking about short-term mission trips and churches doing these two week volunteer programs, what kind of impact are we actually doing in these communities, or is it the impact actually on us as a person? Maybe the conversation is around impact and also sustainability of the work that we do.

KEN: Right. I have also, since doing SALT and having grown up in a church that has done a lot of, you know, with youth groups and things, there's a lot of short term mission trips and things like that. So SALT is a good 11 months, or so. That is a good chunk of time to build real relationships. I think for myself, I've gone back to Uganda twice since my SALT year so there's been basically a continued relationship, which I felt good about. That it wasn't a one off-thing that I went there and I found myself, and took a bunch of selfies, and then came back. The way MCC works is all about relationships and partnerships. I feel good about the fact that regardless of whether or not that SALTER is staying long term, MCCs relationship with the partners is long term and that work continues. I think in many ways, a lot of relationships do continue there too.

[music break]

Let's get down to-here's a good nitty gritty question, a very practical one as well, practical. What was the best thing that you packed on your SALT trip?

CHRISTEN: I can answer actually what I should have packed on my SALT trip. [laugh] is actually a mini photo album of Canada and my family. People often ask you about your country, your family, what's it like. Being in Canada for most of my life, we don't get those questions because we live here. I wish I brought a mini photo album to just show what Canada, or what my Canada, was like. It would've given a sense where I was coming from as a person.

KEN: Okay Christen, what did it feel like to be a newcomer in a different country?

CHRISTEN: I think because I'm not a newcomer in Canada, in Toronto, this was my first time truly being in a new country without my family and friends. I think there were two things that come to mind. I kind of mentioned it before, but the loneliness at the beginning of coming to a new country was very different.

[music break]

Yeah, I found myself in bed at night alone a lot of the times wondering, who do I hang out with? Do I know anyone here? And it really brought me back to kindergarten. Just those very beginnings of your first day of school, not knowing who your friends are and really needing to put yourself out there. But I have to say though, being part of a church family that provides that almost instant community, even if you don't know them, but you know that you share God with someone, and that was almost enough to feel fine. Then the second one is that because I am a Chinese women in a context where there wasn't a lot of Chinese people in my city, that was very different. I felt like a foreigner, a newcomer. People were

very verbal about how I was different, and even shouted on the street. When I was walking to work they would say, "Oh, look, there's a Chinese person."

KEN: Right. We're both Asians in a place where Asians are very few and far between. In Uganda, it was interesting. I mean, the occasional person would say, "China," but most of the time I'd get the word *mzungu*, which is, I think, a Swahili word for just basically foreigner. It basically means, it's usually colloquially referred to, as just white person. That was the very public and immediate identifying of that. In the city, you'd get a lot of kids waving, and then the hand would invert to palms out, give me something. The economic power dynamic is immediately felt. Yeah, that was something that I was not quite prepared for, because I was not in a position of power as I went. I was just a young, 19 year old kid who was not in any kind of leadership or personal responsibility or anything so I'm not used to being this person that people look to for help, or for money, or whatever. It was very, very, I don't know, I guess, awkward at the time.

CHRISTEN: And disorienting, because you don't see yourself as that privileged person until you're in a context where other people tell you that you're a privileged person.

KEN: And you have to face up to it because the reality is, okay, I'm 19. I don't have anything in the bank account, but if I ask my church, I could have hundreds of dollars in an instant. Just say, "Hey, I want to fundraise for this." I have access to that. No, there's definitely power imbalance that I had to wrestle with and treat seriously.

[music break]

Christen you'd mentioned that, this, just us talking here is an opportunity to debrief in a deeper way than you otherwise have had. I have the same experience in some ways, because you get back from this year of just so much has happened, so much has changed. You've learned so much, you've seen so much. You run into people at church or whatever, or on the street. They're like, "How was it?" I don't know, how can you even answer that? They're interested, but it's like...

CHRISTEN: How interested?

KEN: How interested? Right. Do you want to sit down and talk for two hours? How do we deal with the comeback and the come down from this trip?

CHRISTEN: And this is for anyone who has gone on missions, or travelled, or lived in different places, even if you describe your experiences, people don't really know how that made you feel, or what that was like. I think it's really hard to share experiences and yeah, that doubt of, do people actually want to know the things that I have to say? I think to myself, maybe people only want to know the good things, but I also experienced maybe difficult things, challenging things, sad things. Do they want to know that too?

[music break]

KEN: I get, there is a sort of loneliness coming back too. 'Cause you feel alone in your experience.

CHRISTEN: Mhm, yeah, loneliness kind of bookends the beginning and end of these a little bit.

KEN: Yeah, well, what did you do? How did you-

CHRISTEN: When I came back, I actually took a mini trip to Nova Scotia to decompress my thoughts, to debrief with myself, to reflect before coming home. But I felt like I was lost again. When I came home, I didn't know what to do. I think the abundance that we have here is overwhelming when you come back from places that may not have this. And so I almost felt, I don't know if it was guilt or shame, but knowing that every time I accessed something I knew that some of my friends didn't have access to this and that kind of felt bad. And still now I don't even know how to navigate those feelings. And even keeping in contact with them through the pandemic, knowing that yeah we got vaccines way before some of many other countries that SALTERs are in. What do you do in those situations? How do you converse with your friends knowing that you have these privileges or access to these things?

KEN: Right. [silence] Have we made a nice little arc? Have we landed the plane a little bit? Like now we've sort of debriefed the coming home experience? So one way that we could maybe wrap this up, I mean I feel like more and more lately, people who are going with a different, with more knowledge, with more intentionality, with more competency, with more work and life experience. They're maybe-you may be tempted to sort of treat it as a resume booster or a professional development sort of thing but at its roots the SALT program is really about building relationships and looking to learn, looking to challenge yourself, looking to be humbled and to meet a lot of great people and to see new and amazing things. Yeah, any last words Christen?

CHRISTEN: No, I think you said it all. Expect the unexpected.

[music break]

VO: *This was just a part of a much longer conversation that Christen and I had but if you have any more questions about the SALT program, or know someone who is interested, go to mcco.ca/SALT. The application process starts in January of every year and the SALT year usually runs from August to August. Thanks to Christen for not only helping to produce and edit this episode, but in sharing your own story this time as well! Sound mix by Francois Goudreault, original music and theme song by Brian MacMillan, and artwork by Jesse Bergen. Thanks as always to our friends at Kindred Credit Union for sponsoring Undercurrents. And thank you for listening. Stay tuned for our next episode coming out in October where we learn how a cup of soup can change the world.*