

Emails Received from the Peace Corps Fiji Country Director Regarding My Wrongful Termination

April 23, 2017

Dear Ricky,

It has come to my attention that you are maintaining personal web sites and blogs that are soliciting money for photograph, writing and video assignments here in Fiji. As you should be aware, this is in direct violation of Peace Corps policy and code of ethics and constitutes a very serious matter that we will need to address. Here are the sites that have been identified:

<http://www.rickykresslein.com/>

<https://500px.com/>

Here are the policies that are of concern in relation to this:

Code of Ethics/Personal Financial Gain [MS 204]

Peace Corps Volunteers may not take advantage of a situation in Fiji or use their Peace Corps status for personal financial gain. This means that Volunteers shall not:

1. Purchase or acquire real estate, bonds, shares or stocks of commercial concerns headquartered in Fiji, or which conduct a substantial portion of their business in that country;
2. Engage in any business or activity for profit or personal financial gain or undertake any gainful employment; or
3. Sell or dispose of personal property at prices producing profits, including those which might result from import privileges deriving from the status of Peace Corps Volunteer.

As outlined in the *Code of Ethics for Volunteers*, Trainees/Volunteers may not accept payment for their services except from the Peace Corps or engage in any activity for personal financial gain within the host country. In cases where payment cannot be avoided, the Trainee/Volunteer must report receipt of such payment to the Country Director and must donate the proceeds to a worthwhile institution or organization in the host country [MS 204]. Violation of these provisions may be grounds for Administrative Separation from Peace Corps.

Publication Policies

Consistent with Peace Corps' policy regarding publications, Volunteers may not accept payment for anything they write or photograph that appears on the internet. Articles, manuals, teaching materials, and other work-related products developed in connection with Peace Corps service and/or financed by Peace Corps funds are considered part of the public domain and may not be copyrighted or used for personal gain. Volunteers should be advised that posting materials to the internet which they have not authored or created may violate U.S., host country, or other applicable copyright laws. This rule also pertains to publications produced while on leave, even if the Volunteer is out of the country.

As a first step, I would like to hear your response to this and any explanation that you may have. I must also ask you to be forthright in disclosing any earnings that you have made from these activities during your service. We can then talk about any actions that are possible to remediate the situation.

I want to impress upon you that this is very serious, as such activities threaten to undermine the integrity of our mission and Peace Corps' standing in Fiji.

Best regards,

Dennis...

Dennis McMahon

Country Director

Peace Corps, Fiji

Phone: +679 777 0900

April 28, 2017 (delay due to being away at Camp Glow when Dennis' email was sent)

Hi Dennis,

I will address these two websites in the order you listed them.

First, in regards to <http://www.rickykresslein.com>, I have made three videos for resorts/AirBnBs in Fiji. Never have I solicited funds. As I have told each of the businesses (2 resorts and 1 AirBnB) that have agreed to have me make videos for them, I am doing this to build a portfolio, and therefore giving them the videos 100% free of charge, as I am aware that I am unable to generate any extra income here in Fiji while serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

On this page of my website which you linked to, the text states, "Destination resorts, luxury hotels, and intimate AirBnBs cater to the most elegant travelers. In a world of busyness, it is our superb video production that can capture their volatile attention." I purposely did not say anything about money, as I am not charging anything.

The three places I have made videos for are:

Daku Resort
Korovesi Sunshine Villas
Taveuni Palms

Feel free to contact them to corroborate.

As per the second, <https://500px.com/>, this is a website similar to Instagram where photographers can post photos, like other photographer's photos, and follow their fellow photographers. This website does allow photographers to sell copies of their photos, however I have turned off all monetization on my personal photos. I have never made any money from my photos.

As for the other one you mentioned, my writing, I am not sure what you might be referring to, and have never made money from my writing while serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer.

In all, I have not made any money (\$0.00), except for my living stipend from Peace Corps, while serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Fiji.

Thank you,

Ricky

April 30, 2017

Hi Dennis,

After our phone call I understand the severity of this situation. I was doing these video productions as a hobby, and to build my portfolio. I see now that trying to do this during my service is both contrary to my own service and my aims as a volunteer in my community, as well as to the Peace Corps' mission in country. I truly believe in Peace Corps as an organization, and I'm distraught to think that I could have undermined the very values that have come to mean so much to me during my almost three years of service in Fiji. I now also understand that to someone else who stumbles across this page, especially knowing that I am a Peace Corps Volunteer, it would absolutely convey the wrong message. I had truly not thought of this and I was only thinking of trying to build my skill in a recently acquired hobby. I had initially thought that as long as I was not making money, it was okay. It was wrong of me to not consider the perception regarding the sites. I sincerely apologize for this particular oversight and for this situation in general.

As for the images, it is true that they had been available for purchase before. Again, I had no idea that images could not be sold and so I turned the monetization off as soon as you let me know it was a violation. I hope you can take my word that I have never sold or made any money from any photographs or videos.

I am absolutely willing to take down any offending sites as soon as is necessary. The only reason I have not taken them down yet is because I do not want to seem like I am hiding something. These sites and my interest in video production has amounted to such a fraction of my time during my service. When I reflect back, I think about all the time spent in my village, learning to speak the language, completing a SPA grant during my first year, changing primary positions to teach Healthy Living and English literacy, and about the SPA grant my village and I are currently in the process of completing. It is very upsetting to me that these sites, which mean so little in comparison to what my service has meant to me, could have such negative consequences, both for me as an individual, and for anyone viewing these and thus misconstruing the purpose of Peace Corps. It is difficult for me to articulate how sorry and regretful I am, but I hope that my agreement in removing the sites as quickly as you will allow speaks to my sincerity in this case. I truly misunderstood the policy and I am exceedingly sorry for how my actions may impact Peace Corps. I would like to work together to rectify this situation as soon as possible.

Thank you,
Ricky Kresslein

May 1, 2017

Hi Ricky,

Thank you for your response to my inquiry. So, if I'm understanding you correctly, you feel confident that you have not violated any Peace Corps policies. Is that correct? I want you to understand that I'm actually trying to find a way to salvage your service, but if this is your position I may not have much other option.

While it may be true that you have not received payment for those videos, the content of the page presents you as a production company, and suggests availability for work. So, part of the concern here is regarding perception. It sends a very confusing message to anyone who knows that you are a Peace Corps volunteer, when they see that you are spending your time, developing a portfolio of videos for luxury resorts. This sort of activity in support of private enterprises (paid or not) is contrary to the intentions that were set in the Government's invitation for Peace Corps to serve here, and has the potential to undermine our mandate in this country.

Additionally, you mentioned that you disabled the monetization of the personal photographs, but this function was still active until last week, and anyone could have purchased photographs up until that point. Can you verify if that is the case?

In any event, I will be talking to the Peace Corps attorney in DC about this tomorrow, as there is definite concern about how this reflects on Peace Corps and our standing here in Fiji as a service organization. So if there is anything more you would like me to know about how you view this situation, please let me know.

Otherwise, I will call you during the day tomorrow to discuss any further action that may be needed. I look forward to hearing from you, and I'm hoping that we can resolve this favorably.

Best regards,

Dennis...

May 8, 2017

Hi Dennis,

I just received the below response from Taveuni Palms stating they would take down the video. I did not stay there when I made this video, so there is nothing to pay back. As I told you on the phone, Connor Mackenzie was staying there with his family and they invited us over to swim in the pool. I just made the video in my own time while I was there for the day and gave it to them to put on their website.

I am still waiting for the other two places to reply.

Thank you,

Ricky Kresslein

May 9, 2017

Thanks for the update Ricky. Sorry for the slow reply on my end.

I was just made aware that the letter I sent you actually needs to be approved by the general counsel (lawyers) at headquarters, and there may be some modifications to my original draft. So hold on a bit on taking any further action, and I should get the final version to you in the next day or so. Then when you get it, perhaps we can have a phone conversation to discuss the provisions more.

Stay tuned.

Dennis...

May 11, 2017

Hi Ricky,

Please see attached the revised Corrective Action Plan. I hadn't realized that this was supposed to be reviewed by the general counsel in DC before being issued.

It has now been reviewed and there are some modifications to the provisions. So please read this carefully and return the agreement to me as soon as possible. Also, I'd like to have a call with you to discuss once you've had a chance to read it. Let me know, and we will set up a time for that chat.

Best regards,

Dennis...

May 11, 2017

Hi Dennis,

I would very much like to discuss this new agreement with you as some of the wording has changed it significantly. As we are on consolidation, I am available at any time.

Thank you,

Ricky

May 12, 2017

Hello,

First, I want to say how grateful I am for all of the opportunities Peace Corps has provided me. My time here will stand out above all others in my life.

With that said, I cannot sign the attached CAP document as I disagree with the statements made within. Therefore, I am forced to resign from Peace Corps service early.

Thank you for everything.

Ricky Kresslein

May 13, 2017

Hi Ricky,

I'm sorry to hear that, but I support your choice. I've informed the admin team and they will be in touch with you regarding travel arrangements.

For now, please return to site and begin your packing.

Regards,

Dennis...