

Trainer Travels Long Road to Healdsburg

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Trainer Peter Sheridan works with client Kitty Angell. (Photo by: Elliott E. Harris)

the regimen led them both to the same career. Brian, an actor who lives in New York, is also a personal trainer.

“An accomplished ice hockey player, he tried walking onto his college team at the Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, but quickly realized he was out of his league and traded in his skates for the club sport of Ultimate Frisbee.

While in college, he spent his summers in New England—Connecticut, Martha’s Vineyard and Boston — each time heading out with next to nothing and no plan and figuring it out as he went along. This self-reliant, can-do spirit coupled with a growing wanderlust would inform Sheridan’s life for much of what was to follow. Ten Spanish credits short of graduating from Ohio U, offered him a choice: return to college for another semester or study abroad in Ecuador. He jumped at the chance to traand spent his time in Ecuador spending long weekends exploring the countryside with fellow students. He fell for the local terrain, especially the mountains.

“We had an instructor who thankfully understood that the best way to learn the language was to immerse yourself in the local culture,” says Sheridan. “He let us travel all over the place. It was truly, truly amazing. I fell in love with the Andes.”

After graduation, he went west and stopped in Boulder, Colorado, in part because the Rockies reminded him of his time in South America. Sheridan was still kind of searching for something to do with his life, barely getting by on what he could earn tending bar and working as a landscaper. And then he saw a classified add for the Peace Corps. Sheridan likes to joke that he was the only person who joined the Peace Corps for the money but that’s pretty much what happened.

“They were telling me I could live and travel abroad and get paid for it,” he says. “I was doing the math in my head — \$200 a month for 27 months – and it was a lot more than I could save up in two years doing what I was doing. I was in.”

Like all Peace Corps volunteers, Sheridan went through training, including three months in Honduras learning the culture, the people and the language and what was expected of him. When it came time to send him off to assignment, though, he got what he asked for – to be sent somewhere remote. As it turns out, “remote” was putting it lightly. Sheridan was assigned to a Garifuna village on the north east coast of Honduras that was a full day’s walk from any place even approximating the modern world. He would spend the next two years living in a mud hut village with no running water, no electricity and, as it turns out, almost no one who spoke Spanish.

“It was like being dropped onto an alien planet where you have almost no way to communicate and where almost no one had ever seen anyone who looked like you,” he says. “The little kids in the village had never seen a white man. They would come to the door of my hut and just stare at me.”

Sheridan managed to make it work, through the hard work, the heat, the three meals a day of rice and beans, the bugs and strange animals and even built his own workout equipment, using concrete blocks for weights and a tree branch he fixed over his doorway for pull-ups.

Then he got sick. Very sick. He did not know it at the time, but he had come down with malaria and dengue fever at the same time. He tried to stick it out but after several days of hallucinations, he knew he needed to get help. He somehow made the walk to the nearest town, then the next day rode the most uncomfortable, fever-ridden 6-hour bus ride of his life to the airport-equipped town of LaCeiba. But when he arrived and he called the Peace Corps nurses in the Honduran capital city of Tegucigalpa to inform them he was going to get on the next plane to travel there, they told him to get himself to the nearest hospital instead. After he checked himself in, he finally understood the seriousness of his condition.

“I remember feeling the I.V. fluid go up my arm and when it crossed the midline of my body, I took a deep breath – like I was a dead man coming back to life,” he says. “The Peace Corps nurse knew – had I gotten on the plane, I might not have made it to Tegucigalpa alive.”

Sheridan spent five days recovering at the small-town hospital and then several weeks in Tegucigalpa, under the care of the Peace Corps nurses. They wanted to send him back to the states but he was determined to stay on and finish out his stint – he still had a year remaining. In the Peace Corps, he says, it’s a point of pride to serve out your whole assignment. If you end up being sent home—“Med-Evac’d out” to Washington, D.C.— chances are you will not get to go back. Sheridan convinced the nurses to let him stay, and a few weeks later, he returned to the village and got back to work. When he finally got back to the states, though, he found modern society so jarring he began to experience panic attacks doing the most simple tasks, like going into the supermarket. He made plans to get back off the grid, plotting a trip south to Santiago.

“I just thought to myself ‘I have to get the hell out of here,’” he says. “I just couldn’t adjust to the world I found myself in.”

But he never got further than San Francisco, where he had stopped to visit some Peace Corps friends.

“The Peace Corps experience is one of those things you can’t really truly understand unless you have been there,” he says. “I had trouble explaining it to people. But they had been there, too.”

After a year working as a teacher/naturalist for a program that introduced city kids to the great outdoors, he was still looking for a career. That’s when he saw that sign along the highway.

“It was a neon sign that just said ‘Personal Training,’” says Sheridan, who pulled off the road, walked into the small studio gym and started peppering the owner with questions. “I couldn’t believe you could make a living doing what I loved to do. I was really like a little kid in a candy store.”

Sheridan found a certification program and eventually landed a job working at a club in Santa Rosa. In 1999, he set up his own place in the living room of his rental on Mill Creek Road. That business, which he grew by word of mouth mostly, eventually became his current studio, which is in a small retail center on Center Street. And, after prompting from a local veterinarian, Sheridan is starting a new business in the area of Canine Massage Therapy. Along the way he met and married his wife, Lacy – a full-time nurse who helps out at the studio and is a spinning and yoga instructor there – and has found some measure of peace in the busy modern world. Though he often thinks about the places he has gone and how it has informed his life.

“It sounds trite but you realize how little you need to really be happy,” he says. “You learn how to live with yourself and that is a gift.”

Like most people Peter Sheridan spent a good part of his youth searching for himself, but his was a journey that took him practically to the end of the world and back.

He has landed, contently, in Healdsburg, where he has built a strong local following at his Healdsburg Pilates & Personal Fitness studio and offers training that focuses on the whole person, from nutrition to proper technique to how to stand up straight.

It is built on the solid foundation of man who came to his career in his early 30s, after spending time figuring out where his place is in the world.

“I really want to show people how to be aware of their own body,” he says. “If you can get a better awareness of how you move through space, you’ll be able to make really important adjustments. Not only to stand straighter but to correct faulty postural patterns in movement and exercise that may eventually cause pain and injury. And you’ll feel better about yourself.”

Over 6-foot, dark-haired and fit, Sheridan looks typecast for his career choice, but he pretty much found it by chance, literally on the side of a highway. Born and raised in Cleveland, Sheridan and his younger brother Brian discovered working out watching the movie Rocky. They put together a homemade gym in their basement and while the movie may have faded in their memory and they no longer drink raw eggs like star Sylvester Stallone famously does in the 1978 Academy Award winning film,