



PETER ALVAREZ INTERVIEW  
*JIM: THE JAMES FOLEY STORY*  
LIFE STORIES

**Peter Alvarez, Student of Jim**  
**February 14, 2015**  
**Interviewed by Brian Oakes**  
**Total Running Time: 19 minutes and 22 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

BRIAN OAKES:

So, okay- so let's, let's- essentially what, what I'm hoping is just to kind of give the essence of your essay.

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PETER ALVAREZ:

Okay.

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BRIAN OAKES: Because there's just a great story. Kind of take us back from- the Upper Bound experience, when you met Jim.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Peter Alvarez  
Student of Jim

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PETER ALVAREZ:



So it was the summer 2000, and, you know, it was this residential summer program Upper Bound at UMass Amherst. So they would take kids from Boston, and we would go two hours away, we would stay in dorms, we'd do all that stuff. And then, you know, I got my schedule, had Mr. Foley on it. And when I go in to class, Jim was also one of the first- because in Upper Bound, they also just tell you your teacher's first name, so you know that and, you know, it's a little more- or less- you know, it's not as formal. I think we called him Mr. Foley now that I think about it, but we knew his name was Jim. Like, that's what the- that's what the other counselors would call him. The teachers would call him Jim. And so that's why my essay, I'm like, "Jim Foley," and on TV, it was like "James Foley." There was like this big separation to me, like, until I realized it, with that email. But going back there, we- I went into his class, he taught social studies. So as a social studies teacher, he kind of did a lot with current events, and he kind of did a lot with like, what our views were in our own community.

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It wasn't necessarily like this whole, like, social studies history. We would learn some history, but it was more about current events. How can you affect things? How can you affect your own community? It wasn't, you know, this whole like- I don't know, I saw it more as like a group problem resolution kind of class, rather than like a sit down and take notes, and the class was kind of structured that way. I go in—he was one of my first young like male white teachers as well—and the room would be structured so that we would be in a circle. So I was like- you know, everyone's facing each other. And when I first saw him, I'm like, wow, he's, he's a really young guy, and he looked- you know, in my head it was like a California guy. He had longer hair at that point,



so like to me, I was like- he looks like a California, like, surfer kind of dude. And, you know, I, I loved the class, and I ended up with an A in that class.

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And one of the first things in Upper Bound- one of the things that they do is- we do study halls. And so as a teacher, you have to go in, and go into the dorms while they're doing study hall, even if you- you know, you would help the student with any homework that they had for any class. So I had shown him an essay that I wrote for another teacher. And so he's reading it, looking at it, and that was the moment where he says to me—this wasn't even for his class specifically—he says to me, "Do you know Junot Díaz?" And like, in all honesty, I just drew a blank. I'm like, "Who's Junot Díaz? Is, like, that a kid in the program? I don't know who that is." And he's like, "Man," he's like, "You really need to read up on him. He's a Dominican American writer, and I think you would like- you would really like his writing. And so you should definitely look it up. His name is- Drown-" He was like, selling me the book. He's like, you know, "It's short stories. You would really like it." He's like, "I love these stories. Like, I think you would really relate to it."

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And the next day, he comes and he's like, "Hey, I just- you know, I have a copy of the book, and I want you to have it. Like, I want you to have the book." And I was like, "Oh, thank you." So in- in essence, it was like him knowing that I wasn't going to go and buy the book, but it also was this idea, like- it was that good kind of—I was a teacher before—so like that good pressure that you put on a student: you give them something now, it's like, "Now, I got to read it." So when he gave me the book—he's a teacher I had a good relationship with, I love this class—like I got to read this book, like, at least start it. And let me tell you, when I first started reading the book, it was- I was like, "Wow." Like it



was speaking Spanish, and they were Dominican, and it was familiar. And it was, it was stories that I had seen and I knew, and someone like me. And I had never experienced that before, and to see it in print and in writing, and to have Jim, someone who, in my mind- we didn't have as much in common. You know what I mean?

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In my mind, we didn't- we, we were from very different worlds. And to have him have read that book, it almost, to me, was like, "Wow, a lot of people must be reading this book and these stories." And these stories are like me and like, they like it, and he wants to share it with me. This is important. And like, it almost makes you feel like like, "Who I am is important too," you know, on some level. And I literally- I write the word "devoured" because I devoured that book. I, I read it from cover to cover, and I couldn't stop talking about it. I was telling my friends, I'm like, "Yeah, you got to read this book. It's great." You know, it was- and as a high schooler, like, I never felt that kind of like, passion for any book before like that. I just didn't feel it. And, you know, it just- In that essay, it's titled like, "The Book That Changed..." It really- the reason that the book changed my life—it almost was something that made me like, love to read and love to write more, and made it feel like I had a voice. That my voice was important to things, and that it was it was something that, you know, that people wanted to hear, and it was experiences that people could relate to even if they weren't the same culture. Because, I mean, it's a story, it's storytelling. And I-

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I'm just so grateful that he gave me that book. And it made me recognize and know and get to know my favorite author, and from there I got to, you know, read all of Junot Díaz's books. And I got to give that book, and I got to give it to



other students, and I got to give it to people that I mentored. Just like- it was like a gift that kept on giving. You know, it was that moment, and it wasn't even a moment in class. And that's the thing, like, as a teacher, most or some of your biggest moments with students might be elsewhere. It's not necessarily what you taught them in the classroom. Could be that one on one, it could be a combo, it could be a pep talk. And that's what that was. It was this book that just kept giving and giving and giving. And then Terri Slater, when she'd sent me that email and- I mean, when I saw on TV what happened—I was like, really interested, because I'm into world affairs and politics generally—I was just like, man, like, this is crazy, like, you know...

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But it was a, it was a different thing, because these things have happened and I've seen them on TV and- you know, it's been something that I'm- you know, you feel for it, and you- but this time I was like, looking at it and I'm like, "Why..." You know, that he's talking with that- like, I'm hearing his voice, I'm hearing- and then I see his parents on TV, and the way that they're describing him, and the way that they- I was just like, this person seems familiar, but it was one of those things that I just couldn't put my finger on. I couldn't put my finger on it, because they're saying James Foley, they're saying "journalists." When I knew, when I knew Jim Foley, he was not a journalist. He was, you know, doing creative writing and that kind of writing. He wasn't trying to be globetrotting, and, you know, going into hot spots all over the world. That's not- it was kind of one of those things that like, it was so far from my mind that it's something that he would have been doing, that I didn't even think twice about it.

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And the minute I saw that email from Terri Slater, that just- it was- the subject line was "Jim Foley," and she was like, "I'm not sure if you had him, but I- you know, he was an Upper Bound teacher." She's like, "I think you did. And I just- you know, I wanted to let you know." And I was like- and the first thing that I said in the email back to her was about the book- or like, you know, I was just like, "Of course I knew him. I can't believe that." Like, I'm like, "That was-" I was like, "Wow, Mr. Foley-" Like, I can't- it was something that I was like, so surprised, but it was- it made everything else make sense, in a way. Like when I- Like how familiar I saw him. Because I just brushed it off like, he's, he's a reporter, of course he looks familiar, I watch the news. Like that, that makes sense. But yeah, it was, it was, it was an interesting experience. And in that email chain, Terri Slater says to me, "Well, I'll check out, I'll check out Junot Díaz."

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And then we went to lunch a few weeks after that, and, you know, we're having the conversation, and the conversation gets to Jim, and, you know, she gets very teary eyed when she talks about him, and- you know, it was, it was interesting because she, she like, she like, as a team, like she was his boss. She ran the program. And like, you know, when she talks about him, she gets all teary eyed, and she's like, she like, loves her educators, like the people that she puts to educate the students. And she's getting teary eyed and she's, you know, talking about him and about the memorial, like, you know, thinking about going and stuff like that. And I was like, "Well, let me know. I'll go with you." And then she's like, "And, you know," and she looks at me and she's like, "You know what? Like, guess what I- you know, guess what book I just read." And I was like, "What?" And she's like, "Drown by Junot Díaz." And it was like one of those full circle things.



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It was like, you know, now Terri Slater read this book based on me telling her, like, you know, this was a book that he gave me. And it just like- and it's my favorite author and it's my favorite book. And, you know, it just kind of made everything seem like- how interconnected we all are, how important moments are, how important it is to mentor through book giving, how important it is to just try and make someone's life better, or shed light, or give them a voice, or- I don't know, when, when you think of those things and, you know, having been a teacher and, you know, Jim was a teacher, it's one of those things that you don't even realize, like... It's a thankless job sometimes. And sometimes, you see a student- you may lose students. They may end up dropping out, or you may just never hear from them again. Like Jim and I, Jim and I- he never heard from me again after that summer. And lo and behold, like my favorite book in the- and so many other people now, their favorite book, you know, came through him. Like I was just like, you know, someone who facilitated that from him. And then, you know, then Stephanie went and facilitated that. And then Terri is going to facilitate- my students go and they take the book.

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It was, it was something when you think about those ripples, it's, it's such a thing of a teacher, but also a mentor, or a reporter, or even a lawyer that does a pro-bono—All these different things, like no matter what, where you're at, like these things that you can do for someone, or like, you know, to make—like I said—make someone's life better or, you know, give them a voice, or make them feel relatable, make them feel like you are having a connection, that can go so much further than you even realize, and that you'll ever know. You know, if the tragedy didn't even happen, it may have come



that- you know, Jim may have never even known, like that that's my favorite book to this day, and that I've given it to people and that it's gotten passed on. You know, that's almost the sadder part about it. Like, you know, you don't- you got to realize that, you know, if you can, try and reach out and tell someone like, you know, "This is important, this is something." You know, find them.

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BRIAN OAKES:

Did you see something in your writing that he, like, made that connection, like reference? Do you think that there was?

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PETER ALVAREZ:

I mean, when I think about the way I wrote, and the way I still may write to this day when I write something like, you know, a narrative or something like it throughout college, it's, probably honesty. Like, I'll write about topics in my life that I think some people would keep more, you know, private, and that's kind of like when I read Drown. That was kind of part of like why I loved it. It was kind of like, so there. And it was, you know, the stories were- like, it was like something that- you know, even though the author- it was like fictional short stories, but based on his life. I think that was my- my writing style wasn't necessarily fiction, it was more narrative of my own life.

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But I think that's where he saw the connection, like just this willingness to go there, and this willingness to share something that's probably more personal, or tell a story that's not necessarily told often. And that was- my essay was,





was about that. It was, it was about- my dad had been in prison, and like, you know, he was, he was in prison that whole summer, but he was in prison since I was in seventh grade, going on until I was about 25, 26. So, you know, when you have those kinds of things, I think like that- in, in the essay, it was like, my grandmother's in there and she's cooking and like Spanish is spoken. It was a lot of different things in that story that- you know, the way I did the dialog—that must have been it. Because he was like, "You just-" The way he said it was like, "You need to read this. You need to know who Junot Díaz is." It was like, there was no, there was like, no, like- "You just have to." Like, it was like, "You have to read it. There's no way you can't."

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BRIAN OAKES:

So you and Jim almost, like, kind of had little parallel paths. Was that coincidence or did you kind of-

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PETER ALVAREZ:

It's coincidence, but it's coincidence with the, with the caveat of the ripple effect. And that's what I talked about in the essay. You know, I enjoyed his class. I thought it was awesome. I thought- I loved the way he taught. And, you know, he was one of many teachers along the way, you know, that, that I enjoyed because I was in- I had the privilege of being in the Upper Bound program and they give us amazing teachers. But, you know, that was one thing that, for me, I was like, this is an amazing teacher. And when I think back on it, at that time, I didn't know what Teach for America was. I knew he was a young teacher. I knew that he had taught, you know, in Arizona. I didn't



know, like what TFA was or anything like that, but I knew- that was what I knew. He was a young teacher, and he taught, like, right out of school, and, you know, he was teaching us that summer, and he was a grad student.

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And then, you know, doing TFA, you know, working for Upper Bound, having teachers like Jim, and having like, you know, and the whole entire program, that experience in the summer for someone who came from the neighborhood I came from, being able to go and kind of like, get that escape in the summer, and people be like, "You're going to summer school. Like, what are you doing?" It was that. It was like being able to have these teachers that were different than the teachers I had at school. By and large, I've had some good teachers in my high school, but most of them weren't great and they weren't like that. So being able to have that escape and do that, and go to Upper Bound, and then, my wanting to be a teacher, like kind of- being a teacher full time also let me be a Upper Bound teacher. So, after when I did Teach for America and I applied to it and got into it, it was a lot of those like, group- like the way you would do the group work and make it, you know, connected to the students, and this and that, and then I was like, I want to do Upper Bound, of course. Like, I would love to be a teacher for my upper- for Upper Bound students, and like, you know, be that- be one of those teachers for them, like I had so many.

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And that was the thing. In Upper Bound, you had amazing, amazing teachers, and- you know, giving out books like Jim did, and doing projects, and teaching them things you never knew before- and about yourself, but just about the world, and just- including math, whatever. And it just kind of influenced you to want to give back there, and wanting to give back as a teacher in TFA. I



don't know. It was, it's, it's coincidental. But I, I think it's coincidental, but at the same time, I think that there is a lot of things that affect those decisions along the way, and having awesome teachers, to take an interest in you, and, you know, have those moments with you, definitely encourages you at some point to want to have those moments and do those things with people like yourself.

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I think that that's something that I think that's what brought me to be a teacher for for a while. Like, you know, having great teachers, having great instructors, and wanting to be that for someone else. Wanting to have moments with my students, wanting to have that pep talk, wanting to have that mentorship, wanting to have that lesson—whatever it was—you know, with with my students later on. But that was one of the things that- I wrote that in the essay, was, you know, without knowing- you know, I didn't know he was a TFA alum. I didn't know that, like, I didn't know what Teach for America was. So then when I saw- and then I saw on the One Day magazine, like going back, like they had done that whole essay on him. You know, Teach for America, and then Upper Bound—I taught- I'm like, I taught Upper Bound—and then the giving away of the book, the very same book that he gave me.

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You know, it was- when you put those things together, it was just- it's, it's coincidental, but also, I think, like, you know, a lot of things bring you to where you are, and that was probably definitely one of the things that brought me there. You know, just having that experience in the summer with great teachers, and, you know, getting that book that I ended up loving, from the author—that's my favorite author—you know, and going on from there.

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UNKNOWN:

Who is Stephanie Gonzalez, and how did she know that it was Jimmy's book?

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PETER ALVAREZ:

So Stephanie Gonzalez was one of the students in the summertime. I was a counselor, during the summer. Like, it's called the preceptor. And in that summer, I gave her the book, went- you know, she had the book forever, until about September, where she sent it back to me. I had posted online. Like, "Man, I just found out and-" Not that I just found- "I just realized that the journalist that, you know, I saw, like, on TV that was killed- I just realized that that was my teacher that gave me my favorite book." And like so many people commented on that, just- thing, like, you know, people are like, "Wow, that's crazy. Like, he gave you your favorite book," and, you know. And then Stephanie read it, and she was like, "Oh, I got-" And so then, she posted- because at the end of the essays- like what her exact post was, was, you know, "I found out that this book belonged to James Foley, the, you know, the journalist who was tragically killed. You know, and it was given to me by a mentor, Peter Alvarez. Thank you for the book. I'm sending it your way."

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And then she sent it to me. So that was how she found out that it was, it was Jim's book, and that's why she sent it back to me, because she saw that I had posted it. It was something- I wasn't even going to ask her for it back. It was almost like- and then the fact that she was like, "I'm sending it back to you." I was happy she did. But it was- that was how she found out it was Jim's book.



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