

Norma Wilder Benavides Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Norma Wilder Benavides
Interviewer: Elizabeth Hodes
Date of Interview: April 26, 2003
Location of Interview: Santa Barbara, California
Length: 46 pages

Biographical Note

Norma Wilder Benavides served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala from 1963 to 1965 on a community development project.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed October 14, 2003, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. This interview is in the public domain.

Copyright

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be "used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research." If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excesses of "fair use," that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve violation of copyright law. The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form. Direct your questions concerning copyright to the reference staff.

Technical Note

This transcript was created by Sonix software from the MP3 audio recording of the interview. The resulting text file was lightly edited and reformatted according to a standard template.

Suggested Citation

Norma Wilder Benavides, recorded interview by Elizabeth Hodes, April 26, 2003, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

DISCLAIMER

This transcript was generated automatically by Sonix software from the audio recording. The accuracy of the transcript cannot be guaranteed. Only the original audio recording constitutes the official record of this interview and should be used along with the transcript. If researchers have any concerns about accuracy or would like to recommend corrections, they are encouraged to contact the library reference staff.

Oral History Interview

with

Norma Wilder Benavides

April 26, 2003
Santa Barbara, California

By Elizabeth Hodes

Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

HODES: [00:00:01] Today is Saturday, the 26th of April, 2003. And I am Elizabeth Hodes, and I am interviewing Norma Benavides, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in?

BENAVIDES: [00:00:19] Guatemala.

HODES: [00:00:19] Guatemala. And your job description in Guatemala was?

BENAVIDES: [00:00:24] Community development.

HODES: [00:00:26] And what month and year did you arrive there in Guatemala?

BENAVIDES: [00:00:31] Oh, let's see. It must have been January of 1964.

HODES: [00:00:39] And you stayed until when?

BENAVIDES: [00:00:40] August of '65.

HODES: [00:00:47] What's your current address, Norma?

BENAVIDES: [00:00:50] I live in Santa Barbara. My current address is [address] in Santa Barbara.

HODES: [00:00:59] Well, and you've been in Santa Barbara for how long now?

BENAVIDES: [00:01:03] About 15 years.

HODES: [00:01:04] What have you been doing in Santa Barbara?

BENAVIDES: [00:01:06] Well, let's see. I moved back from being 12 years overseas, and so I was ready to come back to the United States and wanted to live near my mother and my sister. Had no job. My husband had no job. We decided we would bring our three children here and make it work. So we did. We had all sorts of part time jobs, and then we started a business together of a language institute, and that took off unexpectedly.

HODES: [00:01:40] Was that somehow related to your Peace Corps experience?

BENAVIDES: [00:01:45] In a way, I was, I graduated from college and high school majoring in Spanish, and even my husband and my Peace Corps and almost everything I've done since that time has been related to the language, knowing Spanish. So I'd have to say reversed. I knew when I went into the Peace Corps I wanted to go to a Spanish speaking country, and that's what happened. And a lot of things I've done in my life since Peace Corps have been because of Peace Corps or the same type of work.

HODES: [00:02:25] Well, we've kind of jumped right into it. But you said you wanted to go to a Spanish speaking country. But what made you interested in Peace Corps?

BENAVIDES: [00:02:34] I had the idea before my sister did, and she was two years ahead of me in school, three years older. And I don't even remember what was the trigger, except that we had been brought up to be interested in the world. Our parents had traveled extensively for their age group. In fact, they wanted to be in the Peace Corps too, which I found out later was a very unusual thing. We thought we'd be a Peace Corps family because that was early sixties, early Peace Corps, and most parents just weren't into that kind of thing. So I think it was just the environment I grew up in, and it was my idea to do this. But my sister graduated from college before I did. So when she graduated, she decided to do it and I couldn't wait to join her. So that's what happened. She went on to Africa and then I graduated. I didn't graduate. I actually quit after my junior year.

BENAVIDES: [00:03:37] I went to a college in Wisconsin, Beloit College, for two years, and then I decided to spend the whole year at the University of Madrid in Spain. And that was her first year in Africa, and that was 1962 when the Bay of Pigs happened. And my father was in China, in Taiwan for the United Nations, and my mother was in Tennessee. And it was a very tense time. And we were on four different continents, four people in the family. So having gotten a letter from every Sunday, it seemed like I got a letter from my sister from Africa to Spain. And my mother's telegramming us that if anybody moves to anybody else, she's coming to one of us rather than us coming home. It was just the right thing to do. I didn't want to go back to school. The world was too exciting. I wanted to go solve all the problems.

HODES: [00:04:37] Sounds like your whole family was involved internationally all of your life.

BENAVIDES: [00:04:42] Yes. Yes, my mother especially, although my father had traveled in Russia in the thirties and my mother did too separately before they married. So they were both very interested in. My father had lived in a farm in Denmark where the professors and the students grew their own vegetables and, you know, like a kind of some kind of a cooperative school. And my mother took students from college, from

her college, to Europe, and they were very, very ahead of the times and they influenced us. So we grew up with that kind of environment, attitude.

HODES: [00:05:25] So if they were, they must have been a very strong influence. But I wonder, were you also in any way just influenced by President Kennedy and his announcement of the program?

BENAVIDES: [00:05:37] Of course. And we were Kennedy's kids back in 1962 in training. In fact, he died while we were in training. It was a very, very emotional time because we had been considered Kennedy's kids. And then all of a sudden we were in the line for lunch and we'd just finished the language, a morning of language. And there were several Central American teachers in the line with us, and they announced it and we all started crying and they were crying. These men were crying as much as we were, and about an hour later we were all in a daze, having not been able to eat. And I remember a telegram came and they said, stop everything. And everybody just seemed to go out into the gardens next to where we had this cafeteria. And people were just kind of walking in a daze and sitting alone and trying to fathom what was going on.

BENAVIDES: [00:06:36] And another telegram came about an hour later. And someone stood on the porch and said, this is the new telegram. For heaven's sakes, don't stop. You're Kennedy's kids, go out into the world and do what you were supposed to do. It gave me chills just to.

HODES: [00:06:52] Oh, that must have been very affecting.

BENAVIDES: [00:06:54] It was just very, very profound. Yeah.

HODES: [00:06:58] I'm sure.

BENAVIDES: [00:06:58] And we were, we were just totally doubly motivated, but it was a hard time.

HODES: [00:07:03] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [00:07:04] Yeah, it's a really hard time. So I'll never forget it. I mean, it was just one of the memorable moments of my life, although it was a tragedy. And Barbara said later that she was in a little African village.

HODES: [00:07:21] Barbara's your sister?

BENAVIDES: [00:07:21] Barbara's my sister. And everyone there knew exactly who it was. The whole world knew President Kennedy. And I was even historically surprised later, many years later, I met Hubert Humphrey, and no one gives him the credit because it was his idea. It was President Kennedy's opportunity to put it in place but it was actually Hubert Humphrey's idea. And I used to, I worked for the governor of Wisconsin, and he came through and we had a nice little conversation about that.

HODES: [00:07:54] Did you?

BENAVIDES: [00:07:54] And he said he didn't need the credit, that he was just glad that it had happened. So that was another memorable experience for me because, you know, he was really the one that had thought, you know, well, it took both of them. It took the idea and it took the person to implement it so.

HODES: [00:08:11] Do you remember any details about that visit? Was he surprised that you were talking to him about the Peace Corps?

BENAVIDES: [00:08:17] Well, yes, because I was a clerk. I started out with the governor as a clerk, I moved up to be an administrative assistant. But when he saw me, I was in the back room with the files and he was going down some back stairs. And so he was quite surprised that I had any knowledge of that at all. And we had, I went down the stairs with him, so we had time to talk about it. So I think he was as pleased as I was.

HODES: [00:08:44] Hmm. Well, it sounds to me as if you, just even the training was a big event for you.

BENAVIDES: [00:08:55] The training was wonderful, even with this tragedy that happened in the middle of it. We had first been told that we were going to train in Puerto Rico. And all of us had been sent tickets to New York. We were going to meet in New York and then fly to Puerto Rico. And I left on the plane and I got to New York and I got to the hotel where I was supposed to be, and they were like eight or ten other people. And it turned out that they had sent telegrams to everyone not to come, that there was an epidemic of influenza on the island where we were going to be training, and they had canceled our training for a month. Well, there were eight or ten of us in New York already. The others had gotten the telegram in time not to come. We had four wonderful days there before we went back to our homes to wait for the next ticket to the next place. And so that was the beginning that started us all off.

HODES: [00:09:56] Knowing that this was not going to be this smooth.

BENAVIDES: [00:10:00] No.

HODES: [00:10:01] Organized.

BENAVIDES: [00:10:01] No.

HODES: [00:10:02] Thing that.

BENAVIDES: [00:10:03] Not at all. So then we, you know, and there was a bit of a disappointment for those who hadn't come. And we that had gotten there had a wonderful time and got to know each other and saw the city. Went back to our homes and then regrouped a month later in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

HODES: [00:10:19] Is that where you ended up training?

BENAVIDES: [00:10:21] And that's where we did our training.

HODES: [00:10:24] Do you have any idea why they chose Las Cruces?

BENAVIDES: [00:10:28] I really don't know what, you know, this is way back in 1960. This is in the very beginning. So I, probably that was Spanish speaking country, I don't know, or that was a university that was willing to take on a project like that. We lived in what looked like, felt like a Holiday Inn. It was really a dormitory on the campus, but they were suites and it just seemed like, I felt like I was living in a Holiday Inn and it was quite different from where I was back in the South because the weather was different. And we had a wonderful time there. The main politics on campus were if the guys could wear their big ten gallon hats in the cafeteria. We had better things to do, and we had a wonderful time. The instructors were wonderful. We did all sorts of rope climbing and rappelling and, you know, all the physical things that they had us do to train us to be ready to go.

HODES: [00:11:24] Why did they, why did they feel you needed the physical training?

BENAVIDES: [00:11:27] Because way back in the beginning, we were doing pushups and we just felt like if we were going to pass this rigorous physical thing that, everyone talked about how rigorous it was, and you might not get through it if you didn't get in shape. So for some reason, they got the New Mexico state troopers who, or rescue team I guess it was, to help us do some of that kind of work. And we loved it. We figured if we got, what was the term? There was a term that we used. If we got? Selected out, is what.

HODES: [00:12:01] Deselected?

BENAVIDES: [00:12:02] Deselected or whatever the term was. Yeah, I guess it was deselected. That we would just stay there and join the rescue team and do that rappelling because we all loved it so much. And I was one of these people that couldn't ever watch someone do something first, that's when I would get afraid. I had to go first, not because I was a me-first person. I just had to have the first experience because I would chicken out. And so this was a little more than I had bargained for. So I, they had put this rope from one cliff to the other. And there were these state troopers on either side holding this rope. And when you

look down, there was an ambulance like 300 feet below. And so they put this harness around my waist and then they put that over the rope. And I was supposed to slide from one side to the other. Only when I got to the middle, I stopped because of my weight. And so they're all yelling at me, you know, to pull myself over.

BENAVIDES: [00:12:59] And I finally was able to do that. But it was a big struggle and but I was glad I'd gone first. And after that they tightened the rope and everybody else just slid right across. So that was, but it was, it was really exhilarating. And I was glad I had done that and did that several times and got myself into a lot of pickles by volunteering. But I was so motivated and I knew myself, that if I watched somebody else struggle, I'd have a hard time. So.

HODES: [00:13:30] Well, so you had physical fitness training.

BENAVIDES: [00:13:33] Oh, yes.

HODES: [00:13:34] What other kind of training?

BENAVIDES: [00:13:35] Oh, well, the other physical fitness thing I remember before we change the theme, I was in the swimming pool. We were fully clothed, and they tied our hands and feet and threw us in the deep end of a swimming pool. So then they taught us, and I still use it to this day, where you swallow the air into your lungs and use it as a buoyant. And we all lay right on top of the water, all with these heavy clothes and our hands and feet immovable. So it was just great. It was wonderful training. Scary as could be.

HODES: [00:14:12] What year is this again?

BENAVIDES: [00:14:13] This is, um, well we were in Guatemala '63 to '65. So that had been the fall of '62 ['63] when Kennedy died.

HODES: [00:14:22] Yeah. Yeah. Cause you said that it was right in the middle of your training.

BENAVIDES: [00:14:25] And then we had all sorts of classes. We had classes from 7:00 in the morning to 10:00 at night. Four hours of language. And I already spoke Spanish. And I was with one other girl who was a Chicana, who was also fluent in Spanish. And two of us were the main, you know, we were the highest class. And then all the others were, you know, depending on how much they've had. So we had a lot of fun with the native speakers who were hired to do the language, and then we had all sorts of other classes. And on the weekend, on Sunday, we would go down to El Paso and cross over into, um, Mexico, not Tijuana. What's the other one in?

HODES: [00:15:06] Oh, right across the river? Laredo?

BENAVIDES: [00:15:10] No. Oh gosh, how could I forget that? We'd go to the bullfights, we'd send Sargent Shriver postcards telling him we were having a wonderful time. Oh, why can't I say the name? Anyway.

HODES: [00:15:23] Sounds like your group was very spirited.

BENAVIDES: [00:15:26] Very spirited. There were 65 of us. There were eight married couples. There was a woman who was 65 years old, and I was the youngest. I was 20. So every night, off to the bars. I could go, but I had to sit.

HODES: [00:15:40] You were the baby.

BENAVIDES: [00:15:41] I had to sit at a separate table and they took turns babysitting me and I always got razzed to death for that. And then I turned 21 in Guatemala and it was just not, you know, it wasn't even fun because it didn't make any difference.

HODES: [00:15:56] Not there, I'm sure.

BENAVIDES: [00:15:58] But I remember the razzing. Yeah. It was a lot of very, very social. A lot of really neat people. Really neat people. And yeah.

HODES: [00:16:08] You mentioned that you, um, you had language instructors there. Were they Guatemalans?

BENAVIDES: [00:16:14] They were Central Americans. I don't remember there were any Guatemalans, but I just remember how impressed I was when the tragedy happened and Kennedy was shot, that they were as emotional and as upset as any of us. And that was just the beginning of understanding that the world knew and loved this man. And there was Barbara in Africa and all these people in these little villages knew exactly what was going on.

HODES: [00:16:40] Right. Did your family write to you at all about the reaction to Kennedy's death, or did you write them? I wonder, with an event like that.

BENAVIDES: [00:16:53] Well, I was in training when that happened. So then I, you know, our training was like September to the 1st of December, middle of December, and then we went home for two weeks for Christmas. So all of that was, um.

HODES: [00:17:08] I'm just wondering if that had, if that changed their feelings about your going into the Peace Corps? Maybe made it stronger, maybe gave them some reservations?

BENAVIDES: [00:17:19] Well, you know, when I say that we were going to be a Peace Corps family, the reason we turned out not to be wasn't because of that. It was because my mother and father went to have their physicals and my father found out he had leukemia, and he probably would not have found that out with a regular checkup. But the one for Peace Corps was so intense and thorough that they found that. So we were always grateful, not for the information. We didn't like what we found out, but he probably wouldn't have found it out and he might have had a different experience. He was able to live five years well and then about five months in pain before he died. So that was another big piece, you know, that we weren't going to be this Peace Corps family, and they weren't going to have an experience like we were having. But

they were always thrilled, of course, that we were having that, both of us, and totally different. Totally different experiences.

HODES: [00:18:13] You mentioned that Barbara was writing you a lot.

BENAVIDES: [00:18:16] Right.

HODES: [00:18:17] Once you were in Guatemala, were you writing back to your family?

BENAVIDES: [00:18:20] Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes. And I remember, in fact, I have a letter. I don't know where, I have them somewhere. I haven't read them for years. But I remember feeling so, um, vulnerable because there was so much poverty that we lived around. And my mother wrote, I mostly remember her writing me than me writing her because she would, in every letter she'd say, whatever you're doing, you eat well, you take care of yourself because you're doing for them more than they've ever had in that neighborhood. And, you know, you can't, or it's not productive for you to suffer what they're going through. Instead, put your energy into trying to help them raise their standard of living. So and things like that that were just wonderful, very helpful because I'm very empathic. Those kind of things bother me a lot, when people are hungry. So that was hard to live with and I had to get used to that. So her letters were very inspiring. I remember that.

HODES: [00:19:26] So you did your training in New Mexico. And then you had the two weeks, you said, before you left the country, before you left the United States.

BENAVIDES: [00:19:35] Then we met in Miami and they really went out and played all night. And I stayed home and washed my hair because I knew if I got caught, I wouldn't be able to go because I wasn't old enough.

HODES: [00:19:46] So those are memories of your last night before you left?

BENAVIDES: [00:19:49] Yes, right.

HODES: [00:19:49] You were at home, washing your hair.

BENAVIDES: [00:19:50] Right. And then and everybody else is out having a good time. But then, see, we got on the plane and went to Guatemala the next day and that became a non-issue.

HODES: [00:19:59] So what were your first impressions? Do you have any memories of arriving in Guatemala?

BENAVIDES: [00:20:03] Oh, yes, we were community development. We were CARE volunteers. In the early stages, they used some of the already existing American, um, not businesses, but organizations that were already established. And Guatemala I and Guatemala II were both Grange projects. So that meant they were all males, they were cattle, they were up in the country, out in the country, you know, dealing with farmers and their cattle. And so when our community development project came, they associated us with CARE. Actually, our bosses were CARE people, they were employees of CARE. And we went to the CARE office for meetings or our checks or whatever. And we really liked that. We thought that was really cool, that we could be CARE volunteers.

BENAVIDES: [00:20:55] And in the CARE office there was a Rolodex next to a great big barrel, and in the barrel were just hundreds of seeds of all different kinds in the little envelopes they come in. And so if you took a bunch of seeds to make a garden, you went through the Rolodex. It was by state, and you went to your state and you got the name of somebody who'd given a donation to CARE, and then you wrote them as a Peace Corps volunteer and thanked them and told them about the vegetable garden that you were using their money that had gone for seeds for the children in such and such a place. And it was, you know, to thank people for their donations and give it a, you know, a home town homegrown flavor of what this was doing, that it was actually being done in the foreign country. So we used to love to do that. We thought that was great.

HODES: [00:21:42] Where were you actually posted?

BENAVIDES: [00:21:43] I was actually posted. They put four of us, four women and four men, in the city [Guatemala City]. Everybody else was by couple, one male, one female in the villages. But four of us, eight of us, decided to stay in the city and we went to the social work school. And then the four women lived in a barrio on one side of town and the four men lived in the barrio on the other side of town. And we each had a host national social work student assigned to us, and they found each of us a house. So we had this little house in this barrio and one of the girls was actually the person, she had that barrio. And then I had the one next to hers, and another one had one further down one way and the other one had one.

BENAVIDES: [00:22:36] So we each had our area that was exclusively ours to do community development using the CARE products. So the idea was to do vegetable gardens and hot lunch programs and using all of the CARE products. What we didn't know was, like in the United States, a school has all the children from the neighborhood, but there you can go to any school you want to. So they became totally separate projects. The school I worked in had children from all over the place. There was no cohesiveness of a neighborhood. Then I had my neighborhood, so it didn't work exactly the way they'd envisioned it because that's just not the system. As were, a lot of things weren't the system.

HODES: [00:23:18] I imagine, yes. What were some of the things?

BENAVIDES: [00:23:20] I remember so clear the first day they drove us down the street to go to our house and there was a plaza that was just dirt. It was, you know, and at the back was a church. And then there was this washing center where all the women were washing and there were only two clotheslines. And then they had all of these clothes out on this dirt. I thought, well, the first thing we're going to do is have some kind of fundraiser to get some more clotheslines because these people obviously need clotheslines. And it didn't take long to find out they didn't want any, that they liked putting these clothes on the dirt. That they filled the cloth of the clothes with as much soap as they could put

in it, that it would stand. And then they put them out to cake in the sun. And that's the way they thought cleanliness came about.

BENAVIDES: [00:24:13] And then they would rinse them and hang them up later on the clotheslines, and there were plenty of clotheslines. And the wealthy people did the same thing, only they put theirs on their bushes in the backyard rather than in the dirt, which they didn't have because they had beautiful gardens. So that was one of many things I had to learn about, seeing things in a different way. And we each, um, as I said, had a social work student that we worked with, which I thought was very wise.

HODES: [00:24:47] How was, were you mentoring the student or was the student mentoring you or what?

BENAVIDES: [00:24:50] I think the student was to orient us. You know, we were foreigners coming in and we were working together. We were learning how to do social work as a team. It wasn't exactly in Guatemala the way it was in El Salvador. I really liked the, what I heard from the volunteers in El Salvador because they were always matched with someone. But the point was when they left, that person stayed in their place.

HODES: [00:25:15] Ah.

BENAVIDES: [00:25:15] So that there was a continuation. That didn't happen for us, but at any rate, it was well done in the way that they were social work students learning to do social work. And one of the things that happened as a result of that is in that particular culture, the social work students were from an upper class and they were not allowed to go into these barrios alone. So in the case of my roommate who lived, I mean, that worked right in the barrio where we lived, her social work, her social worker came out with her brother every week for the Betterment Committee meeting, and he would stay with us in the house and talk. He was a veterinarian student and he would, you know, there were three of us at home and his sister and the other

volunteer would go off to the Betterment Committee meeting. And so after a while, he and I became a couple.

BENAVIDES: [00:26:13] And that was interesting because I had a Guatemalan boyfriend the entire two years that I was there and was engaged twice to him much later. And he came to the States and got a master's degree in veterinarian medicine and went back and became the dean, I think he still is the dean, of the veterinarian school in the University of San Carlos in Guatemala. And happened to be, when Mike Marzolla went to Guatemala years later.

HODES: [00:26:43] Mike's another volunteer in this area?

BENAVIDES: [00:26:44] Mike's another volunteer. And this person, who was my boyfriend, is now the dean of the veterinarian school, was his Peace Corps boss that he was assigned to work with. So Mike and I have lots of fun discussing Dr. Aguilera, who for me was just Mario. But, you know, and there are not, this is probably not the only situation like this if people, you know.

HODES: [00:27:11] Do you think that this romance with the Guatemalan veterinary student, who you said was upper class, significantly colored your experience in Guatemala?

BENAVIDES: [00:27:24] Well, yes, I think it really did. I got to be a part of his family that whole time. So I think in some ways I got to know the culture in ways that other volunteers didn't. And I ended up marrying a Latin American, not him, but another one. So I think probably it did really color my experience.

HODES: [00:27:50] Was that fairly common among your group?

BENAVIDES: [00:27:53] No, very uncommon.

HODES: [00:27:55] Really?

BENAVIDES: [00:27:55] Uh huh. And we had a lot of fun. Our house was like the social place. We had one of the four of us was a gourmet cook and we were all, we had a group of about ten or 12 of us that were very close. But even though not just with them, but when any other volunteers came into the city, they always came to our house. And we had Peace Corps parties and we invited our friends or the neighbors we knew. And so, um, but I don't think very many of the other volunteers had romances.

HODES: [00:28:28] What about within the group of volunteers?

BENAVIDES: [00:28:29] Within the group there were several, yes.

HODES: [00:28:32] Anyone get married from your group?

BENAVIDES: [00:28:33] I think.

HODES: [00:28:34] With one another?

BENAVIDES: [00:28:34] Yes, I think, I can think of two. And they were already eight couples and three had babies there while we were there. So that was always very exciting too.

HODES: [00:28:46] Three had babies while you were there? They didn't send them home when they had babies then?

BENAVIDES: [00:28:48] No, no, no. But we had very strict rules and we were never allowed to go back to the United States or anything like that.

HODES: [00:28:55] Oh.

BENAVIDES: [00:28:56] I know they do now, but that seems very strange. We had very strict rules, but they did allow that. In fact, one of the women, um, she had a group of women in her village, they were all Indian women. And they kept telling her about all these myths, you know, the whole time she was pregnant. And she kept doing exactly what they told her not to, like stare at the full moon and all these things that were going to

make her have a baby that wasn't normal. And finally she decided if she went into the city, because they did mandate them to go into the city hospital. They couldn't have a baby, you know, in their own village. She thought, well, these women are not going to believe that the baby I bring back is the baby that I had. So she arranged to have all these women come in on a bus and come into the hospital and watch her birth. I don't remember the details because I didn't know her that well, but I thought that was going to an extreme of a wonderful way to educate, you know?

HODES: [00:29:46] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [00:29:48] And later these people, I mean, the baby, I don't remember exactly. She probably was a year old. And the mother and father, the volunteers, went on a two week vacation and left her with the Indians. And she came, when they came back, she was so loved by all this village that when they finally left the Peace Corps and went back to the United States with their baby, they said she had a terrible adjustment because now she only had one mother and father and she'd had like 30 of each. And so she really had an adjustment. But those are the memorable things.

HODES: [00:30:21] Oh, I'm sure.

BENAVIDES: [00:30:23] Was your, were there other groups in Guatemala at the same time as your group was there?

BENAVIDES: [00:30:27] There was I and II. And of course.

HODES: [00:30:29] They were still there?

BENAVIDES: [00:30:30] They were still there. I'm not sure how much we overlapped, and I don't even remember Guatemala IV. I think they came in as we were getting ready to go. But I don't have any sense of them or what their project was.

HODES: [00:30:47] But it sounds like, I imagine, as you said, you the eight of you were in the city.

BENAVIDES: [00:30:52] Right.

HODES: [00:30:52] And if everyone else was out in the countryside.

BENAVIDES: [00:30:54] Right.

HODES: [00:30:55] But they would come in for visits or for Peace Corps business or just?

BENAVIDES: [00:30:59] Yeah, for whatever. You know, they might come in to get seeds and equipment or they might come in to, um, for a medical reason, or they might, we all might be called in for a meeting or something. The CARE, um, we were CARE volunteers probably a year. And then there was a major change and they sent a regular Peace Corps director. [tape break]

HODES: [00:31:28] Think about the changeover in the administration from CARE to the regular Peace Corps director?

BENAVIDES: [00:31:33] I have no sense of why that happened. I mean, the CARE volunteers, the CARE bosses were wonderful. I think it was just policy and that they didn't need these entities to help us anymore. I'm not sure what, but I remember that we gave this man such a hard time. We didn't like him. The productivity went way down for about a month. We were all just depressed. And then we got our spark back and things kept going. But it was new and it was different. And we missed the other, uh, we missed our bosses. And we'd become very good friends. And, you know, when you have an idea like that, you know, that we're going to do something to help these people. It's such a vague thing that you put more, um, confidence in the people you're with. And I think that's what happened, because we were so, we were so invested in Kenny and Tony. And then they told us that Kenny and Tony were no longer our bosses and this other person we didn't know. I mean, it just, I think that was why it was so difficult.

BENAVIDES: [00:32:35] But we were still resilient and we picked up and moved on. And what we were doing was very interesting, too. I mean, we were doing. I was doing hot lunch programs in the schools, and I was teaching English, something they didn't like. But we got so much cooperation from the people, you know, they'd come with these. They worked in places, you know, as menial workers, and then some piece of equipment would come from the States and have all these instructions in English, and they'd ask us to help them translate that, because that would get them kudos at work. And, you know, and sometimes this had really good repercussions, like the man that was head of the Betterment Committee meeting where my friend, my one of my roommates and my boyfriend's sister went, was a coach of a basketball team, a girls basketball team. And I was very tall and I played basketball in college and high school. And so he came and asked me if I would play on his, it's a semi, it was a semiprofessional team.

BENAVIDES: [00:33:35] So I went to talk to the bosses and of course they didn't think that was a very good idea at first. But then it turned out to be a great idea because it gave us some, you know, coverage. They had left us in the city. They wanted us to do public relations so people would find out what Peace Corps was. Nobody knew because the Grange guys were way out in the boondocks. So then they decided that was good because I would get my picture in the paper because they never had a male basketball team, basketball game, without the female before, because that's what attracted me. And so I became the famous tall gringo that did the hoop shot, because all I had to do is hold my hand in the air with the ball. And these little short Guatemalan gals couldn't even reach, you know, so and I was used to half court because they were full court. So I really had to get myself in shape in that tropical heat.

HODES: [00:34:31] So the physical fitness training came in handy.

BENAVIDES: [00:34:33] And I actually flew all over the country to these fairs where they had these, oh my goodness. That was a whole other, I mean, a

source of adventure, because we would go with the little soccer teams, or it was soccer players, it was basketball, but it was all different kinds of things. So they always took the semiprofessional basketball female team. And I can remember being one of these old, old little airplane. Not little airplane, but small like an army plane, with just no seats except like a bench down one side, both sides that folded out. And we would be on one side and the men, they were mostly small Indian men, on the other side. And one day one of them kicked the thing under and they all fell down, and it made the airplane was so low that the wing went into the trees, you know, and I thought that was the end of me.

BENAVIDES: [00:35:30] And then we would come down in these cornfields. There was no, there were no airport strips to land in. It was just and it bumped along. And I remember going up in the, in the Petén is the northern part of Guatemala. And we came to this army base and that's where we were going to play this game. And then they were going to have this big basketball game with the Army and versus the group that we brought, the team that we brought with us. And, um, so we had several hours before we had to go, and they took us to this house and the house was on a road, OK? And every, I think like two city blocks, there was a house just like the one they took us to. And this was a road in the winter and it was a stream of water. It was a, it was a river in the rainy season. Well, there's just hot and, you know, there's just wet and dry, the seasons, and actually wet is the winter. So in the winter, it's a river. In the summer, it's a road.

BENAVIDES: [00:36:30] And the man that lived in the house with his wife and his children, his entire life's work was to cut down the jungle that had grown overnight in the area from his house to halfway to the next house on the other side, which is probably, you know, two blocks long. It was just incredible. And we went into their house and their entire house, their entire living room, had been upholstered with two snake skins. They'd stretch the snakeskin from the bottom to the middle, and then another from the middle to the top. And it went around three sides. It was the scariest thing I've ever felt in my life, that there were snakes that big. And we had gone to the zoo when we first got to Guatemala and seeing the barba amarilla, which is the biggest, most

dangerous snake that they had in that country. And so we knew these things existed, but it was something else to see this stretch skin being used as wallpaper. It was just.

HODES: [00:37:29] Impressive.

BENAVIDES: [00:37:29] So then we got back to the game. So we started the game and one of the women on the team that we were playing against was an what we call Amazon, a rather large woman. And she threw the ball at me and it just buckled my middle finger or my, I guess it was the second finger. Anyway, the bone just shot right up and out, right there in front of everybody. I was in this tremendous pain and this man jumped out of the audience and came over and he took it and he just ripped it right back into place. Well, I had no idea what he was doing. It turned out he was a medic and he knew what he was doing. He knew he had to get that back in the joint immediately, or it would be really, really hard to be in the jungle and have no medical help. So that was the excitement. I mean, that was a pretty exciting day between the snakes. Well, first the bumpy ride and hitting the trees with the wing of the airplane and then the snakes and then the accident during the game. So it just seemed like things like that happened.

HODES: [00:38:35] That's a hard one to match. But you had other experiences like that?

BENAVIDES: [00:38:38] Oh yeah. There were. There were probably, I remember when we first got there, we stayed in the Plaza Hotel. And what I want to do this summer after we have this reunion is to organize another one to go to Costa Rica and have people stop in Guatemala on the way down or on the way back so they can go and visit their sites. Or maybe all of us meet Guatemala and stay in the Plaza Hotel because that was another source of great fun. And I can remember in the very beginning they divided us up in groups. We stayed there maybe three or four days, and then they divided us up in groups and just sent us to certain, different places in the country. And we took a plane and went all the way up to the northwestern part of, um, in the mountains of Guatemala. And we met some volunteers at the office who said, oh,

you can stay in our house. We've just come down from there. We have to be here for whatever. The key is in a such and such a place and help yourself. So we did.

BENAVIDES: [00:39:35] We got there and they told us to look for the priests. There were two Franciscan American priests there. And then we went and bought all sorts of vegetables and meat to make a stew and food. And we got to their house and we found the key and we got in there and we couldn't get the matches to light. We were so high up that it was forever. It took forever to make a fire to get the stew.

HODES: [00:39:57] Altitude?

BENAVIDES: [00:39:57] Yeah, the altitude was so high. And so I remember when we finally ate that stew, it was the most delicious stew I've ever met, I've ever had. And then that night, we just decided the only thing we could do, we were freezing, was to use. When the sun went down, it got cold. So we all decided to sleep together in the one bed. We put all the beds together to make one bed, and just use the body heat. And I always tell a story about how the Playboy Bunny girls saved my life because I'd wake up in the night and they were all guys that lived there, like six guys that lived there. They had all these nude Playboy pictures all over the room, and I'd wake up in the night and see them and think, oh, they've got to be freezing. And that gave me enough. You know, I could go back to sleep because somebody else was colder than I was. So when I finally saw them again, I said, oh, those Playboy nudes saved my life.

BENAVIDES: [00:40:50] And then we went up. They took, the priest took us up in the mountains that night, these two Indian men came and we climbed. They had huge legs. It was. And we climbed up along the stream, went up to their village, much higher up in the mountains, and had a lovely meal and met these nice people, very quiet on the mountain side. And then we went to the little church service and the men sat in the front and on the side, the women sat on the other side and we sat in the back. And when we came out, you couldn't see a thing. It was totally black. There was no moon, there was no light. There was no resource

for light. And we had to go back down the mountain to the Peace Corps guy's house, and we did. But it was just unbelievable. That enormous experience of not being able to switch on a light and having to feel our way all the way down this mountain.

BENAVIDES: [00:41:50] I mean, it was hours. It wasn't just nearby. It was quite an experience. And all of these things, of course, built character because we had to do them. There was no way of sitting down and moping about anything.

HODES: [00:42:05] Did anybody leave your program because of health problems or because they couldn't deal with the conditions or the kinds of experiences that you were having?

BENAVIDES: [00:42:17] Only, only one that I can think of left before we ended. I think one girl got pregnant and went home and came back and married the guy. And I don't know what happened to that. My roommate, the gourmet cook, had some, um, what would I call? I guess I'd call them mental problems. I think it got, a lot of it got to her after a while and she left early, but I think she was the only one. There were several things. I mean, one, I remember a helicopter had to go and get one gal who'd, I think she'd had a panic attack of some sort, but she. Anyway, she needed to be rescued from where she was. And we had all had to have our wisdom teeth out. That was one of the.

HODES: [00:43:02] I remember the rules in training.

BENAVIDES: [00:43:05] And I think that saved a lot of helicopter rescues. But then we had the three babies. But I, I think everybody made it. I know some people, um. One fella stayed and didn't go home and decided to stay there and make his life there. And I don't know what happened to him. Um, I'm not sure. I think only one of the, and there was over 60 of us. I think there were 63 or 65 of us. And the oldest woman had been down in Peru in the mountains with her husband, who was an engineer. She knew exactly what she was doing. She was just wonderful. And she was the oldest. And then I was the youngest. So there was everything,

everybody in between. But yeah, they did pretty well. Even with this dip that we took with this new boss, it worked out.

HODES: [00:44:00] What do you think that might have been part of it? Do you think it was the training? Do you think it was just the way they selected good people for the program that?

BENAVIDES: [00:44:12] You know, I really don't know. It's going to be so interesting for me this summer. I mean, I realize how important this is and I don't even know why I haven't done this. I've had contact with some of these people. In fact, I did a project in Costa Rica where I had a lot of them sent me boxes and boxes of clothes. I was working with refugees from Nicaragua and El Salvador.

HODES: [00:44:37] This was after the Peace Corps?

BENAVIDES: [00:44:37] This was many years after, but I knew these are the kinds of people who would do that. And they did. I think that, yeah, I think they're just basically fine people that really wanted to do, make a difference. And one of the gals in my Peace Corps group became the president of the City Council of New York. One of the guys in our group became President Carter's appointment secretary. So. Those are the probably two. Yes, I mean, they were the two outstanding ones, but boy, the others weren't far behind.

HODES: [00:45:13] Yeah, well, your own background that you described sounded to me to be ideal training.

BENAVIDES: [00:45:19] Yeah, so. But they didn't have. I mean, a lot of them didn't have the support from their families that I had. I really appreciated that later when I realized how little support.

HODES: [00:45:30] Really?

BENAVIDES: [00:45:30] I mean, some of these parents were angry at them for doing this.

HODES: [00:45:34] Was that something that you talked about a lot among yourself? How your family felt?

BENAVIDES: [00:45:38] You know, I don't think I even realized it until I got on the airplane to go home with, there were three of us. One of my roommates and this gal who'd been up in, the one who became the president of the City Council of New York, wonderful gal. She's now with the United Nations over in UNESCO in Geneva and is a good friend of Hillary Clinton's and could very well be a political leader, female political leaders in our, in our time. And her father was just, he met us at the airport in Miami. And he was just furious that she had wasted two years and was very unsupportive.

HODES: [00:46:19] Wasting two years?

BENAVIDES: [00:46:21] Yes. Yes. That's when it began to hit me of how much I had, it had come naturally, you know. And they took me, they took me without graduating from college. OK, why?

HODES: [00:46:35] Unusual.

BENAVIDES: [00:46:35] Very unusual. And it was for one reason only. And that was my sister was already in the Peace Corps and I had the same references, the same background, you know what I'm saying? And by that time, they had discovered maybe not use just straight A students, maybe B students that had a little more socialization. I don't know if they'd had problems with that, but that's how it was told to me, that they were looking for a little bit of diversity. And I seemed to, I had that language, you see, I already had the language, and I think that was a really important thing. Although this is another, um, important point, because this was way in the beginning. You didn't say, you know, I'm not going unless I have this comfort or that comfort. But I had a bottom line and that was a running and flushing toilet. And I just boldly said, I want to go to a Spanish speaking country, but I have to have a flushing toilet. And so I was picked to be in the group, the four women that stayed in the city that had a little house with three little bedrooms and a flushing toilet bathroom.

BENAVIDES: [00:47:33] Although everyone in the neighborhood every morning at 7 a.m. heard the gringa scream. Because I, when I hit that cold water for the shower, which had no hot water. I, the only way I could hit that cold water in the morning was screaming. And so the whole neighborhood would say, oh, la gringa! Because they knew it was me taking a shower. But I got my flushing toilet and that was, that was very important.

HODES: [00:48:00] So that's why you were in the city, not because of the age, perhaps?

BENAVIDES: [00:48:06] No.

HODES: [00:48:06] Your being underage.

BENAVIDES: [00:48:08] No, no, no.

HODES: [00:48:09] And they wanted to make sure you weren't out in the country?

BENAVIDES: [00:48:10] No, because I did everything else everybody else did. I mean, I went across that rope. I gained my fame with that rope crossing. They just teased me because when we were in the bars in the town, they had to babysit me. But no, I held my own the rest of the way.

HODES: [00:48:27] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [00:48:27] So and they looked up to me because of the language, you know, so I could help them with language. So yeah. So it worked out. Yeah, it was a great group and I just have to wonder. It's just going to be such an exciting reunion after all this time, 40, 40 years.

HODES: [00:48:44] I was going to say, I'll have to interview you after.

BENAVIDES: [00:48:44] Yeah, well.

HODES: [00:48:45] Or you take some interviewing.

BENAVIDES: [00:48:47] Well, what I was thinking, I'm going to be doing this now. By the time I get there in August, I'll be either wanting to do, you know, and listening to all the things that they remember that I don't remember, or having them get excited about doing that with their associations wherever they're living. So I'm hoping that this is going to be a real important part of it, just bringing back all those memories.

HODES: [00:49:11] So you mentioned that when you left Guatemala, the, uh, that's when some of the people who came home were met with?

BENAVIDES: [00:49:26] Resistance.

HODES: [00:49:27] Resistance or negativity by their families.

BENAVIDES: [00:49:29] Well, the one, the one did. And they weren't all like that. But that was when I began to appreciate the support that I had had, my mother's letter, just getting there in the first place. Just my background, you know, my international parents. That was unusual.

HODES: [00:49:44] So I asked you what it felt, what you remembered about arriving in the country. What did it feel like the first few weeks or months when you had come back to the United States after your experiences?

BENAVIDES: [00:49:54] Let me tell you something happened before I got back, because it's important, I think. Um, let me see if I can pull this name out of the hat. By then, um, there was somebody else who was head of the Peace Corps by the time we came home and, oh, I can't remember this name, he used to. I'm not going to say. I have to think about his name. But anyway, he was the head of Latin America and he was in Guatemala when we left, and he put us on the plane, my roommate Mary and this other gal and I, and he said, OK, I want you to go home because your job is just begun. Here we are, exhausted, two years, leaving finally. And he says, your job has just begun. And we kind of

looked at him and he said, and be sure when you give speeches about the Peace Corps, you tell them that it costs.

BENAVIDES: [00:50:52] Let's see if I can get this right. It costs \$12,000 a year to keep a Peace Corps volunteer in the field for two years, and it costs \$109,000 to kill one Viet Cong, because we were right in the middle of the sixties, right? And that was what, that was our. So we get on this plane, drained, with this new challenge. And we get an electric storm over Cuba flying from Guatemala to Miami. It was a regular plane, but we were so sure we were going down. It was a scary, I have never been in an airplane that flopped around in the sky like this plane did. We were fit to be tied. So then to get to Miami and then have this man be so rude, you know. It was another one of those intense days. There seem to have been several that are memorable.

BENAVIDES: [00:51:49] And then, because I had. Well, I don't know why. I just, to me, it was just going to be easier since I hadn't finished college. It was going to be easier to go home, go back to the college that I'd started in, bring all of my Peace Corps training credits and my University of Madrid. I mean, I had to piece this all together. It was, it would have been smart just to go on to a university. But I hadn't graduated and I didn't want to transfer. It just seemed. So I went back to this little town in Wisconsin and I decided, OK, bottom line, I'm not living in a dorm. So I got an apartment off campus in the home of a friend of my mother's, and she rented me a room in her apartment. And then one of the Spanish professors lived upstairs, it was a female, and we became fast friends.

BENAVIDES: [00:52:37] And in the department at that time was a new native speaker from Peru. And he was there with his wife and two children, and he was the liaison on campus for Peace Corps. So I went to the dean and I told him about my experience in Peace Corps and that I was back. You know, they never, you never have an undergraduate. You know, a Peace Corps volunteer graduates, goes off to Peace Corps, and then goes on to the university or goes out into the work world. They never had a Peace Corps volunteer return to an undergraduate campus. So he sent me over to, there were two people

on campus, um, two professors. The other was a political science professor. And he said, oh, you want an application to join the Peace Corps? I said, no, I've just returned from the Peace Corps. He says, and you're all in one piece? I said.

BENAVIDES: [00:53:27] So then the other person and I spent the whole year talking to students and telling them about Peace Corps and signing them up. And this is this professor that was from Peru that was in the Spanish department with my friend who lived upstairs and who eventually became my husband after he divorced his wife many years later. So who would have known that at that point? So it was an easy way to finish there and have all these credits come back and have enough credit to graduate. And then I went right from Wisconsin to California to teach high school, Spanish in a high school outside of Los Angeles. And the man that was the head of the school district was a very accomplished man who had been chosen to go to Malawi, in Africa, to some educational conference. And he wanted to know what it was like to go there and travel there.

BENAVIDES: [00:54:27] And so my sister Barbara was at USC and she ended up telling him about her experience in Malawi, and he ended up hiring both of us in his school district to teach Spanish and emerging world nations. And so we spent two wonderful years there under his, you know, helping these, this middle class, small bedroom community learn about the world. And we brought the world to them between.

HODES: [00:54:59] This was in a suburb of LA?

BENAVIDES: [00:55:01] Yeah, in Temple City, California. Yeah. And that was many years later. But it was all because of Peace Corps and bumping into this man in a funny way. And you know how those things happened.

HODES: [00:55:13] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [00:55:13] So the influences.

HODES: [00:55:14] It's funny Peace Corps was kind of a thread all through your life.

BENAVIDES: [00:55:16] Oh, yes. Oh, yes, definitely. In fact, you know, when I think about it a little bit, I think of what I did in Guatemala, but I lived in Costa Rica for 12 years later, married with children.

HODES: [00:55:33] This was long after?

BENAVIDES: [00:55:35] Long after. I mean, the 12, it was like. I've lived here in Santa Barbara 15 years. The 12 years before that, I lived in Costa Rica and my children were born there. But I did a project there that was much more productive in terms of helping, that I could feel like I was helping. I did a huge refugee project there that I named the Central American Refugee Project. And I just felt like, OK, I've done it once as a volunteer, I know how to do this. And it just came. It was just like the back of my hand, and I was able to create this huge, helpful situation only because I'd done it before.

HODES: [00:56:12] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [00:56:13] So I really felt good after that because I could measure better. I was more mature, I was older, I was, you know, doing it from the ground up. I could measure it better. I learned so much. I remember getting off the airplane, going back to what happened when I went home. I got off the airplane and my mother and father looked at me and I said, I have experienced everything but marriage and death. And they always reminded me of that. It had been so eventful that that was my, you know, putting it into one comment that would have them know where I was coming from when I got off the plane.

HODES: [00:56:53] Peace Corps was like a dress rehearsal for the rest of your life.

BENAVIDES: [00:56:55] Yeah. Yeah, I would definitely say that that would be. And I've always said I didn't want to be the person I would have been if I

hadn't, you know, I had been in a sorority. Well, there's nothing wrong with sororities, but I mean, that was kind of my level to say.

HODES: [00:57:13] So would it be fair to say that it really changed your life?

BENAVIDES: [00:57:15] Oh, yes. Oh, yes, definitely. Definitely.

HODES: [00:57:20] Yeah. In a way that you're pleased with?

BENAVIDES: [00:57:23] Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah. So, and the Peace Corps and the Spanish one. The Spanish came before the Peace Corps, but it all flows together. Yeah. They all dovetail. Yeah. So.

HODES: [00:57:39] All right. So you've done so many things.

BENAVIDES: [00:57:43] Well.

HODES: [00:57:44] What are your activities in Santa Barbara? How have they related to your Peace Corps experience?

BENAVIDES: [00:57:51] Well, first of all, um, I think, you know, so between Peace Corps and Santa Barbara, see, I married this Peruvian and we went off to live in South America, first taking students from the college that he was teaching in. And then later we went and lived in Costa Rica for 12 years, not just two, but 12. My children were born there and I did all sorts of things. And then we decided to come back here and we didn't have any jobs. We just wanted to be in Santa Barbara because my mother, my whole family lived here. So we came here and started a language institute which is still in existence. And then, um, so that was 15 years ago. So ten years ago I divorced him and he bought out my half of the business. And I had already known when I came back here I wanted to be a therapist.

BENAVIDES: [00:58:44] So I went to school at Pacifica Graduate Institute with money that my mother left me because she died a year after we got back. And I became a therapist and I knew that I would be a bilingual therapist and that's what I wanted to do. And I've had a wonderful

career in the last 15 years. I spent five and a half years at juvenile probation services as an aftercare bilingual counselor with all the gang kids in Santa Barbara. And then I finally burned out. That's a pretty heavy load. And I was five years before that at the Santa Barbara Counseling Center and did many different internships and finally got licensed in 1999. And then in 2000, I picked up, took my youngest daughter, and we went to Costa Rica for, well, I was going to go for four months, but she got homesick, so we came back after two. But I hadn't been there nine years and I had been unhappy there part of the time. But it was mostly the marriage, it wasn't the place, and I needed to go back and make peace with the place.

BENAVIDES: [00:59:50] And I, many times living in Costa Rica, stopped in Guatemala. But I'd always had babies and it's just a transfer from one place to the other. And I've never gone back there and had my Peace Corps experience, even though I've been through it several times. And so I still want to do that.

HODES: [01:00:05] You say you've been through it. You mean kind of just stopping in transit?

BENAVIDES: [01:00:08] Yes. Changing planes. All the planes meet there.

HODES: [01:00:11] Have you had contact at all with people, even if you haven't been in the country?

BENAVIDES: [01:00:15] My Peace, I consider Mary, who's in San Diego, my Peace Corps roommate. And when I, they didn't even know that Mary. They couldn't, the ones that contacted me didn't know where she was. And I've always kept in contact with her. They didn't even know she was married. They didn't know she was in San Diego. And so she's going to be in Chicago and I'm going to fly there and we're going to drive from Chicago to this, to this reunion. But they were, the ones that were that are doing the reunion, were very excited to find some of the people that they've lost. So we're not very organized. I know that there's a Guatemala group, but there are all the different.

HODES: [01:00:50] Every different group.

BENAVIDES: [01:00:52] Groups. And I need to join that. I mean, I want to hear about that and I'll learn all about that this summer. And I never had anything to do with Peace Corps in Costa Rica. There was a huge Peace Corps training there. But I somehow, you know, I was up on the mountain and my, with my little children, just in another world except for the project that we did. And it's still there. It's really lovely for me. I go to Costa Rica and the house and the farm that we lived on was called a finca ranch or farm, Finca Dona Norma after me. And then on the other mountain across the valley, there's another Finca Dona Norma, which is the refugees. They didn't know how to thank us for helping them, so they named it after me. So I had these two Finca Dona Normas in Costa Rica and I always love to go there and see how they're doing.

HODES: [01:01:45] Are they're still there?

BENAVIDES: [01:01:47] They're still there. They're still there. And my whole idea was a very self-help project was to help build these houses and then they would eventually go back to El Salvador when they could, sell the house and the land and be able to have money to go back and redo a new life in El Salvador. And a Costa Rican family could buy their little house and their little piece of land. But what's happened is their children have all married into Costa Rica. And so none of them, very few of them I think, I don't think any of them have gone back now that I think about it. So, but that's a whole other story. But very Peace Corps. Very Peace Corps. Yeah.

HODES: [01:02:30] So you didn't bring Peace Corps back to America so much. I mean, your experience back to America so much as you brought them to American transit and then took them over to Costa Rica.

BENAVIDES: [01:02:41] But, you know, I do, I speak Spanish all day long and my clients are all Latinos.

HODES: [01:02:50] Right.

BENAVIDES: [01:02:50] Monolingual, except for the teens. I have two teen groups and they're in English, but we go back and forth. And so I feel like I'm still there. [tape break]

HODES: [01:03:04] This is tape two of two tapes. Norma Benavides being interviewed by Elizabeth Hodes on April 26, 2003. And while I was changing the tape, you were reminded of something that you thought was an interesting experience.

BENAVIDES: [01:03:25] Yes, it has to do with the politics in Guatemala. We had been praised many times while we were there because we would work with an organization. I think it was called NCAP. Everything was Central America and Panama, so everything ended in C-A-P. I don't know why Panama was separated. But anyway, there was, one was a nutrition institute and we were always getting a lot of praise for the different projects. We did a wonderful inoculation project with some doctors and, but by the end of the two years that we were in service in Guatemala, there had become the politics of the Peace Corps volunteer knowing a lot about the neighborhood that they were working in. And our final reports were put under lock and key, which I thought was very interesting because the Peace Corps by then was worried that these would get into the wrong hands.

BENAVIDES: [01:04:25] And that if there was anything that the powers that be didn't like about the names of the people that we mentioned, that we were, who we were working with, um, you know, something negative might happen to them. I mean, it's, I mean, I stood on top of my house on the corrugated tin roof twice, watching an insurrection about to happen from the army base coming into the city to try and take over the presidency. And that, uh, there was a real serious side to what we were doing there. I remember coming out of my house onto this dirt road and seeing a military car going by, and these young Indian boys had been conscripted into the military with these big, long guns. You know, just pointed right at me. And I can remember saying, point it down, you may go over a rock and shoot me without wanting to.

BENAVIDES: [01:05:28] I mean, there were just, there were a lot of things that were very serious. We also worked with the zone mayor, which is a whole other experience I haven't even mentioned. We worked this zone mayor, who was one of many, and he worked for the mayor of the city, of Guatemala City. And so we used to go to all sorts of social things because of that contact. And they loved having Peace Corps volunteers and they were always helping us with our projects and we always went out socially afterward and they'd all carry guns and they all put their guns in my purse, you know. And I think now as a mother, how I could have ever, you know, gotten into that mentality that it was all right just to load these guns and that was just kind of what they did. And the guns sat in my purse all evening until they all got them back on their way out.

BENAVIDES: [01:06:22] I mean, it was like the Wild West. It had several elements of that kind of seriousness or guns or danger. That was part of just the everyday experience of being a Peace Corps volunteer for us.

HODES: [01:06:38] I know that in some countries and in some years there were there were accusations or rumors and things that Peace Corps volunteers were actually working for the CIA or things like that. Did you run into any of those kinds of things?

BENAVIDES: [01:06:49] You know, the only situation I ran into was my boyfriend's father, who was a doctor, very, you know, he was head of the hospital. And at a family party, he said, OK, Norma, tell us about the politics, you know, not about Peace Corps, about politics. And I at that age, I was 20. What did I know about politics? And I know I disappointed him royally that I couldn't, I mean, I knew what my parents believed and I knew some, I mean, I had, you know, I had three years of college. It wasn't that I was ignorant, but to the level that he was expecting me to know about the politics in the States and that kind of thing, I wasn't. But for the most part, I didn't have any trouble. I mean, we did a lot of public relations and so we met a lot of the people of different authorities in the country and ministries. And we could pretty much hold our own in that. But it was usually in the context of our Peace Corps.

BENAVIDES: [01:07:56] I can remember a funny experience, just going to get my physical for the Peace Corps when I first got accepted. I know that's jumping back, but I'm remembering it now. Had to do with the military in the United States because they didn't know where to send me for a physical. They were sending people to the nearest military place, and that was Knoxville. I lived in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. I had to go 25 miles to Knoxville. And I remember going in in the summer in my little summer dress and my heels and sitting down with all of these guys who'd been drafted into the Army, slouched in these chairs. And this man said, what branch are you joining, girl? And I said, oh, well, there's this new organization called the Peace Corps. Well, these guys, they stripped them and sent them through, and they didn't know what to do with me. So they had to send me to a doctor someplace else in the town for my checkup. It was, it was just an amusing, um, culturally very different experience. So that was something that happened even in the United States.

BENAVIDES: [01:09:04] But the politics in Guatemala, going back to my first statement. I don't know all of the reasons for it, but I know the Peace Corps was protecting us or trying to protect the people that we worked with, because we were writing in our final report just what we were doing. And somehow that could have had a negative effect, depending on who was who, the powers to be were. So I felt good that they were doing that and I hope no one ever had any problem because of anything that we wrote. But I think maybe that's when it was starting to begin to have some negative thinking. In the beginning it wasn't like that. People really didn't know what it was.

BENAVIDES: [01:09:46] And I remember later being at the University of Tennessee, because my mother worked as an assistant to the director of foreign students, and we were all at the foreign student house one night watching some kind of, uh, it was a Peace Corps movie about their projects in India. And there were many Indians there, and they all said, that's what those guys were doing there? We thought they were just tourists, American tourists that were going through India. And we never really understood that they were actually in something called Peace

Corps, that they were there to try and help us. So, you know, it was just interesting to have some of these experiences with people that, you know, like me later on. It made sense. So.

HODES: [01:10:33] Yeah. You've alluded a few times to the Peace Corps administration. You mentioned the director. You talked about how the Peace Corps took your final reports. The administration made a decision about locking them up and so on.

BENAVIDES: [01:10:47] Right.

HODES: [01:10:47] Was there a lot of interaction between the volunteers and the staff, or was there much staff at that, in those days?

BENAVIDES: [01:10:53] There were. There. I think the staff wasn't more than maybe four people that I remember. First, it was the CARE staff. You know, Kenny and Tony were CARE administrators and their secretary had a romance with one of, with one of them. That was with one of them. And but like Kenny and his wife were there, and we went to their house for dinners a lot. We were in the city, for one thing, and we were very social. It was a very social group.

HODES: [01:11:32] Did they give you much guidance in terms of what you did or were you pretty independent and could do what you wanted to do?

BENAVIDES: [01:11:37] You know, I think it was pretty programed through the social work school that we would live in these certain areas and we were working these specific projects. I mean, we did community development, we did the nutrition project, we did the inoculation project. That was another fun thing, this.

HODES: [01:11:54] You didn't mention that.

BENAVIDES: [01:11:55] No, I didn't.

HODES: [01:11:56] Tell me something about that.

BENAVIDES: [01:11:57] Yeah, there was a doctor, there was a doctor who said, I don't remember how we met him, but his name was Julio Paredes. Dr. Julio Paredes. And he said, you're what? You're volunteers? You can help me. I have to do all these inoculation programs. So he put white, these white medical gowns on us, and had us start learning to give shots into apples and oranges. And then we did this huge inoculation project. And so because we had these areas of town that we knew the people. We could do the door-to-door kind of organization. So in our whole huge area where all of us were, we decided one of the things that we were going to do because of him, he was from the Ministry of Health, right? And so he had all these thousands of leaflets. So the man who was the head of the zone, the zone alcalde, the mayor of the zone, and I went out to the airport.

BENAVIDES: [01:13:00] We met this little pilot with his little airplane and they had taken all of these leaflets and just thrown them in the back seat. And it was my job to throw them out the window. So I climb in behind the pilot. Here I am again, the one that's going to volunteer to do it, right? So I climb in. I'm sitting up on top of the, of all of these things. I take my shoes off and stick them over to the side and I'm all ready to go. And we go up over my neighborhood and I'm throwing these leaflets out, you know, and the people are down below. He's going like this. Well, I threw my shoe out the window is what happened. So when we came back to the airport, they're having this huge thing with the mayor of the city and the zone mayors and the Peace Corps volunteers. And I have to get up to give my speech with one shoe on and one shoe off. And they teased me from the top brass down, that the gringa had only one shoe because she had thrown a shoe out the window.

BENAVIDES: [01:13:55] So the next day it was all over the radio. The next day I had this whole pile of shoes in front of my house that people thought they had found my shoe. But it was that kind of thing that we helped get this attention for very important kinds of projects.

BENAVIDES: [01:14:16] And the other thing I did, I was a director of a huge center that had been a French, um, four French nuns had run this social center for years in the community that I worked in. And they were very

old, they were all alcoholic. And the moment came when whoever they worked for decided they needed to go home. And so they put me in charge of the center.

HODES: [01:14:47] When you say they, who?

BENAVIDES: [01:14:48] The powers that be. And that was the, actually it was the priest. It was the priest in the community. Each had its own name. And I don't remember mine, but he was head of that. Well, he was head of the whole thing, but he particularly was head of the area that I was in.

HODES: [01:15:03] But he knew you because you were in the community?

BENAVIDES: [01:15:05] Yes. Yes. And so, um, and because it had been a Catholic entity, he wanted to keep track of me, you know, so I had to deal with him. But we did all sorts of projects because it had a gymnasium and it was pretty rustic, but it, but it had some. And it was a food distribution place so we could do the CARE distribution. It had a library. I mean, we were able to do a lot of things that we wouldn't have been able to do because we had the physical plan to do it in. So I really enjoyed that. We did a lot of good projects there.

HODES: [01:15:39] Was that all of your roommates and you involved in that?

BENAVIDES: [01:15:43] My roommates weren't so involved in that because it was in my area. We each had our own and they had wonderful projects going in theirs. We did a lot of hot lunch, or um, you know. In Guatemala, 50 percent of the children die between the ages of one and four because of malnutrition, or at least that's the way it was in the sixties. So part of our CARE thing was to have these milk programs. Yeah. And the Inca people taught us how to make, um. We did everything we could to that powdered milk to make it palatable, you know, with cocoa or cinnamon or whatever. And then they had these nutrition, these donuts that had all this nutritional fiber and just all kinds of things that we did. And so we had all these different programs for pregnant and lactating mothers and then the children trying to give them. So the mother has another baby on her breast. And then the one to four year olds don't get any

because dad gets the most food and then whoever can help shine shoes or do something to bring money into the family.

BENAVIDES: [01:16:46] And so that was that was a real specific thing that we focused on as well as the hot lunch programs in the schools and the school gardens. So that was the bulk of our project. The rest were like English classes and, oh, I don't know, we had different. And the social center, but we did a lot of things together in the social center that brought in all of the communities. But they, I actually was the only one doing that. Another thing we did, we met a Dutch psychiatrist, and this man had a romance with one of my roommates, OK? And it was interesting because he would fly to Mexico City every Friday night and had these very wealthy clients all weekend, and then he would come back to Guatemala all week and work with poor people. He was the most amazing person. He taught us a lot.

BENAVIDES: [01:17:37] And so he had this little clinic in the bottom. We lived at the top of where the Guatemalan earth opens up from an earthquake and then it stays open. And then people, the poor people, build their little chanties in these chanty towns all the way down in these crevices, you know. And we lived up at the top, it was still poor, but it wasn't as poor as these people there. And he had his clinic in the bottom. And so he said, OK, today you're going to see a dead baby. You all need some reality. You're Americans. You're so unrealistic. You just live in the ideal and the fantasy world, and you really need to have a bout with reality. And so we had to deal with that and watch a baby die of malnutrition. And we did everything we could to help him because he was just wonderful.

BENAVIDES: [01:18:23] And the aid people, the AID people, you know, one hour I'd be with a Dutch doctor in the clinic, you know, helping him. And the next hour I was in the AID conference room and they're picking our brains, you know, and I would say, we'd have to say things like, why do the schools have these long? What's the neon light that you import from the United States? Why can't we just have regular lights? But why do we need to go.

HODES: [01:18:47] Fluorescent light bulbs.

BENAVIDES: [01:18:48] The fluorescent light, why do we have to go to this extreme? You know, because most of the schools in Guatemala at that point only had three sides. It was made out of thatched roof. And the side that was open for light was the side that the rain didn't come in on. You don't need neon fluorescent lights, you know? And they would pick our brains because we were working down at the bottom level. I mean, we could really see what was, how to make the bridge the gap. And so that was always very interesting to me, you know, just how we would just go from one role to the other and just in and out of these different cultural worlds. And we would try and take the Guatemalans with us so that the people in those worlds would begin to recognize their faces through us. You know, that maybe when we left that they would still have the, some a little bit of clout to get what they needed after we were gone. And so we did a lot of that. We were really aware of that. Not sure why but.

HODES: [01:19:45] It's a question of continuity.

BENAVIDES: [01:19:48] Yes, yeah, I think we were always.

HODES: [01:19:49] Do you think there was continuity?

BENAVIDES: [01:19:50] I think it could have been better.

HODES: [01:19:52] A residue of your program after you left.

BENAVIDES: [01:19:58] You know, I would, I would have to say that I really don't know. I've had other, another friend that had a cooperative, and he went back. And the cooperative, of course, had long gone. And he felt so dismal about that. But then he became, he went back to school and got a master's degree and became head of or worked for the Inter-American Bank. His entire life was influenced by his Peace Corps experience, starting with that cooperative and worked on lots of cooperatives in lots of countries. And, um, you know, we've all just kind

of expanded from those small experiences into something, something bigger, something influential. Yeah. So as I say, it's hard to measure.

BENAVIDES: [01:20:47] I remember also saying to my parents or to everybody, I got so much more out of it than I ever put into it, you know? And I remember, and I was interested to see that the other day in something that Barbara had. The first reason for the Peace Corps is to go out. And how is this? There are three precepts.

HODES: [01:21:10] To provide technical assistance.

BENAVIDES: [01:21:11] Right.

HODES: [01:21:12] To help promote better understanding of Americans by the people in the host country.

BENAVIDES: [01:21:17] Right.

HODES: [01:21:17] And to help promote better understanding of them by.

BENAVIDES: [01:21:20] Coming back, right.

HODES: [01:21:23] Bringing the world back home.

BENAVIDES: [01:21:24] And when I came, yeah. When I came home, I just felt like I had gotten so much more out of it than I had ever put into it. So that when I did the second project in Costa Rica, I felt fine. I felt like, OK, now I've given as much as I've gotten. So that had that kind of satisfaction to it.

HODES: [01:21:45] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [01:21:46] And yet when I go back and look at all the things we did, we did so much, but it was hard to measure.

HODES: [01:21:52] Yeah. It seems to me you had a very full two year experience.

BENAVIDES: [01:21:57] Very full. Very, very full. And so many different dynamics, I mean. Um. I remember a very funny thing that happened. A very famous choral group from the United States came to present a program in Guatemala. And somehow we not only met them, but we invited them to our house to a party, and we put on this huge party for these people, a very well-known choral group. And I'll never forget it, because we had, we had a front door and then we had another front door that was out the door of one of the bedrooms on the same street. And I remember the director of the choral society came in with his mistress and all of his choral group after this wonderful performance downtown in some beautiful theater.

BENAVIDES: [01:22:59] And just as his wife came to meet him, to surprise him, and how she got to my house, I don't know, from the airport. She walks in this door and they're pushing the mistress out the door in my barrio. And I know, it's just one of those classic things that just seemed to be one of the kinds of things that didn't happen often but it did.

BENAVIDES: [01:23:24] And when things got really, really slow and we really got homesick, I remember getting up on Sunday, because there were there were two flights on Sunday, Pan Am flights on Sunday. Get up. Whoever is depressed, we got on a dress. We dressed up with heels and a dress and we took the bus, it must have been four busses, to get to the airport. And we would go and we would watch the planes come in and leave. And somehow that set us up that there is another world out there, you know? And we didn't have contact with it, but we watched the people come, get off the plane, and then get back on and fly away. And that was important too, on a lazy Sunday when there was nothing going on.

HODES: [01:24:14] How do you think it would have been different for you if you had, instead of being with the group in the city, been sent out alone or just with one other person out into the countryside?

BENAVIDES: [01:24:26] Well, I think it would have been a totally different experience just by what we heard from them in different ways. First of all, the little

village is, the limit is the end of the city. You're just in this village. You're from this village. You only work in this village and you don't work in any of the others. So whatever you do is just there. Whereas being in the city, you're, you may have your one spot, but then you have to work over here and then you go over here and that's the whole thing. And then you're lost in the hugeness of the capital. So it's hard to measure sometimes. It was a totally different experience. And then we were doing public relations work. That was something we always had in the back of our mind.

HODES: [01:25:16] You were working with all different levels within the country.

BENAVIDES: [01:25:19] Right, yes. We dealt with some of the big organizations from other countries, especially the United States. We dealt with the mayor and the zone mayor. I mean, there were all sorts of things going on. We used to get movies. I remember the mayor of the zone and we'd go into this place and we put up and people would come from everywhere to see a movie. And we would get the movie projector from the German embassy and we'd get the movies from the American embassy and we get all these different people to help us just bring people together. It didn't matter if we were doing an inoculation program or what, or it's just for fun, just for entertainment, just for education. There is educational. But we were always dealing at many, many, many levels. And there was one male and one female put in each of the villages. And I just think it would have been a totally different experience.

HODES: [01:26:15] When they came, did you ever talk about the differences in your experiences?

BENAVIDES: [01:26:18] Always. Oh, always, always. And one of the differences that, something that made a difference is that the guys that didn't drink had a harder time than the guys that drank. Because they would go to the cantinas and that's where a lot of the projects would start to have fruition. You know, they, the idea started there and then they would create it later. And the guys who didn't drink didn't have that social contact. Um, things like that that made a difference sometimes. But I

was very happy to be in the city. I think it probably worked out best that way. My roommates were all older. They all had different problems that I didn't have. So that was interesting to see. But for the most, I don't know, I just have no idea what. I didn't live that other experience, um, so.

HODES: [01:27:17] Well looking back, is there anything that we haven't covered that you wanted, that occurred to you while we were talking?

BENAVIDES: [01:27:25] Well, I think it just underscores how much it's been an influence in my life.

HODES: [01:27:30] It sounds to me as if it's a very big influence.

BENAVIDES: [01:27:32] Yeah, yeah.

HODES: [01:27:35] That you came away with that Peace Corps experience and it's colored your life in many ways.

BENAVIDES: [01:27:42] Many ways. Yeah. And I will forever be grateful because I feel like I've had a very productive life. And yet it's changed enormously. It's gone from one, you know, I worked as a social worker. I worked for the governor of Wisconsin. I worked as a teacher for 25 years. I taught English and Spanish in seven different countries. And then at the age of 45, I became a therapist. So but it's always been in with, um, you know, in that kind of Peace Corps context. And even today, you know, I spend my whole week with the lore, that I really believe that what I'm doing, working with the silent community of Santa Barbara, is really important. So.

BENAVIDES: [01:28:37] And I would have to say this, too, as a therapist, when I sit down with a Latino, there's something about how present oriented they are, which I experienced for all those years that I was in South America. It's like they give me a gift before I give them any gift or help, and I feel it and I don't feel that way with an Anglo client. So there's something about Latin America. I lived 17 years, almost a third of my life, there. That has real meaning for me. That's been a place that I fit

into in my own way. So it wasn't just they sent me to this country that means nothing to me. It really is a part of me. And I carry it wherever I go. So I'm grateful that I could expand and appreciate my own culture, but also am able to go into another one and find comfort there as well. So.

HODES: [01:29:43] I think that makes a nice way to end this interview. It's been a pleasure.

BENAVIDES: [01:29:48] It sounds like an ending.

HODES: [01:29:50] Yeah.

BENAVIDES: [01:29:50] Yeah. It feels like an ending.

[END OF INTERVIEW]