

Gale Gibson Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Gale Gibson served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from 1962 to 1964 in a physical education program (Colombia IV).

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Gale Gibson

August 31, 2016
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:02] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia, Somalia IV, from 1966 to 1968, and I'm interviewing Gale Gibson, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from 1962 to 1964. He was part of Colombia IV, English and physical education program. So let me ask you my first question, why did you join the Peace Corps?

GIBSON: [00:00:32] I joined the Peace Corps because I think I was looking for a little bit of adventure and at the same time I wanted to do something that was good. So the Peace Corps sort of fit both of those requirements of mine, and I was not employed. I had just graduated from college, so it worked out very well.

GANZGLASS: [00:00:53] And how did you find out about the Peace Corps?

GIBSON: [00:00:56] I had read about it in the newspaper and my brother actually gave me the application and I sent it in. So and then very shortly thereafter, I heard from the Peace Corps.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:13] And they offered you Colombia?

GIBSON: [00:01:15] They offered me Colombia. I was kind of surprised. I was hoping I would get Latin America because I'd studied Spanish in college. And what they offered was the physical education portion of the group, which I also liked because at the. I was coming out of college where I'd been involved in sports and, of course, I'd been involved in sports in high school as well. So I thought it was a pretty good mix.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:44] Great. So what did your friends and your family say about you taking off for two years?

GIBSON: [00:01:52] My mother was delighted. She was a strong supporter of John Kennedy, and he was, you know, it was his effort, identified with him. So she liked it. And of course, at the time, there was a great enthusiasm for the Peace Corps, with just lots of nice newspaper articles about all the good young people that are going into the Peace Corps and how brave they were and what wonderful things they were going to do. So it was.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:25] So it was good.

GIBSON: [00:02:26] It was good.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:27] And where was your training?

GIBSON: [00:02:29] I was trained in El Paso, Texas, at what was then the University of Texas Western, which later became University of Texas El Paso. The training lasted roughly three months, and for me, it was helpful in a couple of respects. One was I had grown up in Virginia and went to a small men's college in Virginia, so I was sent on with this group, which was a much more diverse group of people than I was

accustomed to. And I enjoyed that very much so the Texas Western experience was a good one. In retrospect, the folks there, I don't think, really knew what we were going to face in Peace Corps. So there was a sense of their sort of struggling around trying to find out what we should be doing and what we should be learning.

GIBSON: [00:03:38] In the end, I think the Spanish portion of training was pretty good. Unfortunately, I don't think we were immersed enough because even though I'd had Spanish in college and I had three months of it in Texas, when I got to Colombia, I still found it very hard to utter things out in Spanish and understand what was going on. And I say that mindful that the Colombians speak good Spanish. They enunciate all their syllables and speak more or less a formal Spanish. So it, nevertheless, I spent about a year and or not, maybe not a year, but at least six months once I was on the job, sort of wandering around, speaking half English, half Spanish, and it took a while to get over that.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:34] Well, I think language instruction has gotten a lot better in this country since the sixties.

GIBSON: [00:04:40] Yes, I think that's true. I hope so.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:42] I hope so as well. So you were in El Paso and then you flew. Did you fly directly from there to Bogota? How was that?

GIBSON: [00:04:54] Thanks Evelyn, you reminded me of something. Actually, our group, the phys ed portion of this overall group, and we were pretty well mixed together. You know, we had classes with the English people and all that, but the phys ed folks had their own little core curriculum that they did. Well, we had heard that other groups were getting Outward Bound in Puerto Rico. And so we sort of grouped, the phys ed guys, sort of grouped together and asked that we be, strongly asked, that we be allowed to go to the camps they had in Puerto Rico, which was, uh, it turned out to be nice.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:40] So they let you go.

GIBSON: [00:05:42] They did it. They changed us. So we all got together in New York and they sent us on to Puerto Rico, and we had two weeks of hiking around in the jungle and eating snails boiled in cans and, you know, stuff like that, sort of survival kind of thing. And it was there that I learned my more useful things. I learned how to do survival swimming, which was good. And you know, we did rope climbing and rappelling off of dams and that kind of stuff, and I think we all enjoyed it. It was a little bit abbreviated. Most of the guys that went through that got longer sessions like, you know, a month. But we got two weeks and then we went on to Bogota.

GIBSON: [00:06:33] In Bogota, we were together for about a week, two weeks, and it was during that period that, you know, they decided where each of us would go. Again, that was, we learned mostly stuff about Colombia, which was good because of course, we knew little. And that was another opportunity to pick up a feeling for what the country was like. Eventually, they started moving us around and I got sent with another volunteer, David Banki, to Manizales, where we were reported to the university because all of our group was initially intended to go to universities. As it worked out, many did not. They did other things.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:33] University for physical education, to train phys ed teachers or to provide training or what was it?

GIBSON: [00:07:42] If it only been that specific. We were sent there and without a lot of instruction on what we were to find. And so I report it to the one person in there on the university staff. This is the University of Caldas that had responsibility for sports program. And his job, he was a good fellow, but his job seemed to be, you know, scheduling people for soccer games and putting up the table tennis, which they like to play, and chess games. There really wasn't anything there for me to do. I suppose a more ambitious and smarter, more experienced person would have figured it all out and organized a physical education program there. But I wasn't. I wasn't able to do it. And my colleague David Banki then got called off to another location, which did have a pretty good sports program. So he, who had been a swimmer as well as a basketball player, was able to coach swimming and basketball.

GIBSON: [00:09:10] I was left there, but I have made contact with the track league for the department. Colombia is organized by departments, which are similar to states. And so I worked for the Department of Caldas's track team, which was a delight because the other fellow that was there was Marco Tulio Castro. Just a wonderful guy, and we got along fine and kind of divided up duties, and so I had never done any of what they called the weight events, throwing the discus, the javelin, and the shot-put. But I soon learned and, you know, read books and we were able to get that established and. Except for the javelin, I was always afraid to get that throwing around. So but it was a good experience, and I can't say enough good things about the wonderful person Marco Tulio. And we would travel a bit. But most of it was right there in Manizales. We traveled to other locations in Colombia that were in the department, and sort of as a side thing, the department then broke up. It became three. What was once the Department of Caldas became three states, if you will, and we had actually done worked in all three of those places.

GIBSON: [00:11:02] Eventually, Marco, I think, in part because of his experience with the Peace Corps, because one of the things that our group ended up doing was getting two or three of us together and holding seminars on specific athletic kind of things. You know, interval training, weight training, physical education programs for kids. And we would go around and do these little seminars and then give out certificates. As it turned out, I think that helped Marco because he had from us a couple of the certificates and he went on to his next job, but was which was at the University Tecnológica de Pereira, and I think that helped him actually get his job. I hope it helped some other people as well. But my time was spent at first, mainly track and field, and I should say I consistently did that after about the sixth month.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:11] And these, who were the kids? Were those college level kids or?

GIBSON: [00:12:15] They were whoever walked in. Some of them were with the university, yes, but many of them are just guys that worked at the. In

Manizales, the coffee business is the big business, but they didn't manufacture textiles. And a couple of guys or more than a couple were employees there and they were regular, you know, participants in track every afternoon. They'd come and do their laps and all that.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:52] Was this through a gym or they just, there was a track and people just showed up?

GIBSON: [00:12:56] There was a track and things were fairly well announced in the local newspaper what we were doing. So there was a track which is still there and people had to come and they had assigned schedules and we would give them their kind of agenda, what they were supposed to be doing. There were some other people, but mostly employees, as opposed to university students. When the university games, kind of a national thing in Colombia, came up, then we'd get a few more kids from the university that wanted to get ready and wanted to participate. But that was kind of it.

GIBSON: [00:13:43] Then I'd never played basketball, but during the downtime, I would play pickup basketball with my colleagues, Irv Dubinsky, among them as a matter of fact, and a number of others as well. David Banki was quite a good basketball player. Anyway, at the end of this, I kind of picked up a lot of basketball, and by reading it, I would go learn a little bit about it and ended up coaching a couple of teams, including a little cycle, going around and having a phys ed session, which involved basketball usually or some other game, but for elementary school kids, which is a lot of fun. The schools were a sort of a unit. They weren't big and spread out elementary schools, and these are public elementary schools, so they had only a limited space for athletics. But that was the patio and inside of the school. So it was the open Spanish style with a patio inside and two basketball. And so the girls, they liked it too. They just loved running through there and playing.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:11] So you had mostly guys? But also girls?

GIBSON: [00:15:14] Yes. And I had a bunch of girls too. But I never coached the like departmental girls team or anything like that. I did coach the boys

high school team, but it was mostly. And in that sense, playing basketball also resulted in kind of a funny experience. A couple of guys who were community development guys were good basketball players and I played on the municipal police team. Kind of an odd combination, but we did win the municipal championship, which is so we got our pictures in the paper and we were all delighted with that. To this day, I keep in contact with one of the other guys that played on it. He wasn't a policeman either, but we had, I think we had two policemen and the rest of the team were all these nondescript, including these three gringos.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:17] So, well, people who could play right?

GIBSON: [00:16:19] Yeah, that's right.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:21] And you won. That's great. So you mentioned you stayed in touch with one of them. Did you meet other people who you were coaching, that you stayed in touch with?

GIBSON: [00:16:31] Yes. Oh yes, I did. The track folks have all kind of died off, sadly. And so I don't have any real contact with any of them. But I do with other people and it's been strange. As I say, you know, I used to go out in practice and in Colombia, there weren't good, in Manizales at least, there weren't good places to change clothes. So I would, you know, wear my shorts under my pants and then set them aside and then go play or instruct or whatever it was. Well, on one occasion, I lost, somebody stole my pants, so it was very awkward. I had to go to a local nunnery in my shorts and call a taxi. Men just did not at the time, walk around in shorts. Now it's quite different.

GIBSON: [00:17:40] In fact, I was thinking I've been back several times because of Elonia, my wife, a Colombian. And you know, now girls all wear jeans and none of them wore jeans at that time. The only girls who wore jeans were the two or three Peace Corps girls that were in town. They would wear jeans. But now it's hard to find a woman wearing a dress. So it was really sort of a cultural thing. People would stare at the girl in their jeans, but that's all changed. There's some other little point I

was going to make there about that. Oh, so I lost my pants, and then 40 years, 45 years later, I guess, I'm in Bogota and I'm meeting some of Elonia's relatives and one of them says to me, well, I was there the day you lost your pants. So a memorable event in some ways.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:41] So talk a little bit about your wife. How did you meet her and her family? I know her mother's a well-known artist.

GIBSON: [00:18:49] Yes, thanks. I was rooming initially with an American who was in the binational center and teaching English.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:02] Which is what?

GIBSON: [00:19:03] It was called the Colombo Americano. And he was gregarious guy from New York, and he liked to have parties and have a good time. So we would. He invited his class to come to have a party and Ello was in the class. That was kind of BYOB, bring your own bottle kind of thing we said, although we supplied a lot of rum and aguardiente and beer and Coke ourselves. But that was. And so they would come. And in Colombia, they do enjoy dancing. They do enjoy parties. So they came. And there was about 60 people there in our little apartment, all dancing the cumbia. And it was great fun and that's how I met Ello. She loved to dance and loves to dance, I should add, to this day.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:06] Did you get married there or what was the courtship like as an American?

GIBSON: [00:20:08] Well, it was very sedate, you know, very, people don't do. At the time, you know, people were very conservative and they were always suspicious of Americans because they'd seen all the American movies. So it was not a real exciting sort of thing, but it was nice. And you know, we'd go out and go to movies and that kind of thing, often with other girlfriends or with her sister and, you know, sort of chaperoned. I never felt like I was really chaperoned, but there was.

GANZGLASS: [00:20:58] Somebody was there.

GIBSON: [00:20:59] Somebody was kind of around. Not much trouble you could get into anyway. We got engaged at the end of my stay and I went home, and now these are the old days, and got a job. And then I went back and got married in Manizales. So that was sort of the sequence of events.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:24] And talk a little bit about her family.

GIBSON: [00:21:27] Her father was a schoolteacher and in fact, I had met him on my rounds. I would go to these different elementary schools and he was. He taught school and her mother was a stay at home mom. That's the term used these days. But in those times in Manizales it was unusual for a woman to be working. Ello had a very good job. She was a secretary in the *comite de cafeteros*, which in Manizales was a big deal because they were the big industry in Manizales. So she had a good job. But and a lot of girls were at the time moving into jobs in the banking industry and some with the coffee industry, which are the big things. The other big activity in Manizales is it's a university town. So there are always a lot of young people there. It was a, for me, the experience was a good one. Picture this. I was young, 22 or 23, sort of self-centered and the Colombians were really very nice to me on the whole. I would add that for my job it was sort of competitive. We wanted to have the best team. We wanted to have this and that, and we wanted to be the best.

GIBSON: [00:23:06] But the whole experience of kind of being Peace Corps and then meeting Colombians, that would invariably the first thing, although you saw them yesterday, they would still ask you about everybody in your family and how they were doing. And make sure you said good morning and all of those niceties, which I find have been helpful throughout my life. Sort of slow you down and, you know, don't come charging in with all this, let's do this and that today. You've got to go through this sort of protocol or ritual. How are you today? How is your father and mother? How are your friends? And at first I thought, this is crazy. Why am I doing this? But eventually I got over that and got into the swing of things a little bit. And then when I came back here,

returned to start working in the States, I missed it. It was kind of like an introduction to every day.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:13] So what did you do when you came back?

GIBSON: [00:24:17] I worked for the United States Employment Service for the District of Columbia, but I was actually a federal employee later on that broke off and became a separate unit at the Department of Labor. And I remained there for 44 years, 43 years, something like that. I worked first with youth programs because I don't know if you're familiar with the Neighborhood Youth Corps, but that was an activity that was going on at the time. Poor youth were given jobs in the public sector mostly or the nonprofit, and I kind of graduated to that. I went into another thing. We were trying to get poor people to take on new careers and we would subsidize them in jobs inside the health industry, in hospitals, for instance. And eventually, I ended up in a really good area for me, at least. It was the Senior Community Service Employment Program, which was, which is a program for folks that are 55 and over, and they would do community service jobs.

GIBSON: [00:25:39] So people are working in libraries and public hospitals and police departments just anywhere where there's a, you know, public service kind of a job. It was really a good thing. You had to be low income or you have to be low income. And I enjoyed that. It was writing a lot of policy, but I also did, uh, you know, contract work with it. It was all. We were kind of independent there in the Department of Labor. We have a lot of training programs. For instance, Bob Colombo worked in that area, but my area was independent and was funded out of the Older Americans Act. So it's kind of an oddball that permitted a lot of, you know, learning a lot of different things and doing different things. You wrote regs as well as going out to visit projects to make sure they were following the regs. And it worked out very nicely.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:43] We should talk about this offline, but I got my job at the U.S. Department of Labor through the D.C. Employment Agency that had been federalized. And my second job at DOL was in Neighborhood

Youth Corps. So who knows? Maybe we knew you, knew each other then.

GIBSON: [00:27:06] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:07] Well, who knew?

GIBSON: [00:27:08] Let's see. I was probably over there working in new careers or Pep or one of those, do you recall those?

GANZGLASS: [00:27:17] I don't know. But anyway, similar afterwards. Let's just.

GIBSON: [00:27:21] I would add only that I was drawn to those jobs, I think, because of the Peace Corps experience. If I hadn't gone into Peace Corps and gotten a sense of humanity and people and the way people react, I think I would have gone in quite a different direction.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:41] So you sought out that job when you came back.

GIBSON: [00:27:44] I think I did. I wanted that kind of a job. I didn't want a job selling insurance or going to graduate school, so just interested in seeing what I could do to help out, you know, and I was interested in other people that needed help.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:58] So just to go back to Peace Corps for a while, can you talk a little bit about what Manizales was like in the sixties? It seems like it was a pretty big town.

GIBSON: [00:28:09] Yes, it was a fairly big town. They thought of, and to this day, think of themselves as, you know, kind of a culturally nice town because they had these universities, they were the capital yet of a department, and they had, you know, formal theaters, music groups, sort of culturally nice things. And it was, of course, the seat of the Catholic Church there too as well. So Manizales is located about seven to eight thousand feet high in the Andes. It had a climate which some might love. It was a little too rainy for me, and to this day, I think it's a little too rainy, it'd get the rain off the Pacific. But it tended to be

beautiful in the Andes. Cold at times, especially when it rained and at night too. But really a rather nice place. We didn't have the tropical heat that you would have on the coast of Colombia or in the Pacific rainforest.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:30] So you weren't out in the boonies.

GIBSON: [00:29:33] We weren't out in the boonies. That's correct. And any time we wanted to, we could go to a Chinese restaurant. At the time, it's much better now. There was the Chinese restaurant and then there were Colombian restaurants. That was about it. There was not an Italian restaurant in town, alas.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:56] How was their Chinese restaurant?

GIBSON: [00:29:59] I never go, but it was a Chinese restaurant, and it became kind of the meeting place for all the Peace Corps volunteers in the area. I'm surprised Herb didn't mention this, but we were a regular part of their business. And although.

GIBSON: [00:30:15] Run by Chinese or by Colombians?

GIBSON: [00:30:19] Uh, Chinese. Now I do believe there were some other restaurants in town of a Chinese orientation, but not really Chinese run, but there were at least two or three. And just this town of, I would say at the time, was one hundred and fifty thousand. It's now three hundred thousand. A lot of it has been driven by the violence in Colombia, which, you know, forced a lot of the small farmers off the field and into the larger urban area. And also because I think there's been a growth in university studies and other kinds of activities.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:03] And do you go back regularly?

GIBSON: [00:31:06] We do. Ello's mom is dying so she spent a lot of time there over the past three or four years. And of course, I'd go back to be with her, although I can't, don't feel like I can spend that all the time that she's spending there. She's back in Washington at the moment. But so

we have been back periodically and I've interestingly have bumped into people I knew, not sports connected. And in one instance, we actually went down to where the community action people had been, where one of my friends was a volunteer who has written very nicely about it in his college newsletter about his Peace Corps experience. This is recent. And we bumped into a number of people that remembered the Peace Corps people specifically with, uh, with great affection. So it was kind of nice to know that, you know, people appreciate and remember what happened. It's been difficult, though, for Colombia for the past 30 or 40 years because they've had some of this ongoing war in the rural areas mostly, which upset the country and our own children didn't get to go to Colombia as much as they probably would have had it been a peaceful place to go.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:49] But there's just been an agreement signed, right?

GIBSON: [00:32:52] Just an agreement, and that should help. The Colombians have a lot of misgivings about it. And cynicism as well, they might. But yes, it's been signed and I'm very hopeful.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:07] What are they cynical about? They don't trust the FARC?

GIBSON: [00:33:11] They don't trust the FARC, exactly. And the many of them have bitter memories of, you know, family captured, tortured, killed. I mean it's hard to get over that. So there's, plus there's been an experience with FARC has never been good. And I think it's probably because FARC isn't that well organized within itself. So they'll declare a cease fire. But the next thing you know, there's over here. It's a large country and over here in this other jungle area miles away, they are, you know, they've broken the cease fire and they kidnapped somebody. Stuff like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:53] So they really don't have the control.

GIBSON: [00:33:55] They don't have as much control as one would think. Plus, I guess the other thing that kind of bothers the Colombians. A lot of the

people that committed crimes apparently going to get off scot free, as they say. So we'll see how it works out.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:12] But maybe the violence will relent.

GIBSON: [00:34:14] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:15] That's part of reconciliation?

GIBSON: [00:34:17] Yes, part of the reconciliation. There's going to be a national plebiscite on the whole thing, whether the public agrees to it or not. I'm not sure how that's going to work yet.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:30] So you said in the sixties, the main economy was the university, coffee.

GIBSON: [00:34:39] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:40] Is that still the case?

GIBSON: [00:34:41] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:41] Or maybe you mentioned, and textiles I think you said?

GIBSON: [00:34:43] The textiles have gone pretty much. When I was there, there was a large Colombian factory, which now lays vacant, kind of in the center of.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:56] Textile factory?

GIBSON: [00:34:57] Textile factory. And then there was Arrow shirts, had a factory out at the end of town. Both of them are gone. And now they still make textile shirts, that kind of thing in Colombia, but I'm not sure where they're making it, they're not making it in Manizales.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:19] So what do people do?

GIBSON: [00:35:22] A lot of jobs are connected with the university. Insurance, I suppose. And the business side of coffee. They do assemble refrigerators there, which is a Colombian brand, and they do a lot of an export, make metal wheels for cars.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:51] So they've diversified. But coffee is still really important.

GIBSON: [00:35:57] Coffee is king in that area.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:00] Is that where Juan Valdez was invented?

GIBSON: [00:36:04] Yes. Yes. And Valdez is a common Colombian name. The original Juan Valdez was a Cuban, actually.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:13] There was actually a Juan Valdez?

GIBSON: [00:36:14] Well, the one they use for the advertisements, he and his mule. That was a Cuban. That was kind of a scandal.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:23] That's funny.

GIBSON: [00:36:30] One of my friends is in charge of the collection of data for the department, and I should have asked him, should have prepared myself. What are they doing in Manizales these days? All these jobs, but they're. I would say there's active commerce. The unemployment is high. There's a lot of unemployment that's never recorded because people just give up and don't look, but as it is here.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:05] Right.

GIBSON: [00:37:06] But it's even worse there, and you do see a lot of young, able bodied people looking for jobs. There's a great underemployment so that university graduates are, you know, working as in restaurants and places like that. Those are the people that come to the U.S. legally or illegally looking for an opportunity. Oftentimes, they really are good people. It's just there's just nothing to do. And even in the larger cities

in Colombia, which have absorbed a lot of people, there's a lot of unemployment.

GANZGLASS: [00:37:43] Maybe with peace, if there is peace, economic development.

GIBSON: [00:37:50] Yeah, I'm hopeful on the peace. I think it's a good opportunity if they make the most of it. It's not going to be perfect, they're going to have problems. But if they. And if they get peace, the economic opportunities will increase. One of the things I did in Colombia, sort of post. I'm interested in birds and the guy that was in charge of one of the local parks got me to teach children basically English so they could become guides, bird guides. And Colombia probably, Colombia has, I should say, the most species of birds. So I was. Ello and I both went up to the rainforest there where the, although it's a national kind of park, they still had grandfathered in farm families and we taught the kids English. It was fun. They were really good kids. After school, they'd come over and we'd teach them English and the boys would all get together and play soccer and the girls would talk to each other.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:09] So I'm assuming your Spanish is good. You've maintained it.

GIBSON: [00:39:14] I've maintained it. It's probably better than it was when I was a volunteer. But I'm not very good with languages I decided. But nevertheless, I have fun with it and I struggle along, refuse to give up.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:31] And people understand you?

GIBSON: [00:39:32] Yeah, they're very forgiving in that regard.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:37] That's good. So you've talked a lot about Peace Corps' impact on you, giving you confidence, giving you, you know, directing you to the job, clearly finding a wife.

GIBSON: [00:39:52] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:52] Or lifelong companion. So it's had a major impact on you as an individual.

GIBSON: [00:40:00] Yes.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:01] There are three goals to Peace Corps. One is to provide technical assistance where requested. Do you have any thoughts about your Peace Corps experience or overall, what Peace Corps did or didn't do for Colombia?

GIBSON: [00:40:17] Uh, my own experience, as I say, was a good one. Had we had training in slightly different areas, and it's nobody's fault because nobody knew, I think we would have been better off as a volunteer. If we'd have been kind of given the notion of looking broadly at your job, not worrying too much if people don't show up on time and accepting, you know, very limited circumstances where you had to work, I think that might have been helpful. But sometimes I'm a little concerned about Peace Corps being too, the current Peace Corps, just from what I've heard, being too protective of the volunteers. I certainly don't want any volunteer to get hurt or kidnapped or have anything bad happen to them, but it seems like they are very restricted in the way they go about things. The volunteers in Colombia now are assigned homes where to live, and they can't travel unless they tell somebody where they're going. It was quite different for us. I showed up in Manizales, my colleague and I showed up, and we had to find our own place and we didn't know, you know, where we're going to go. It was all. If we wanted to take a trip, we just went. I mean, it was really free, and I just wonder if the current Peace Corps volunteers aren't mothered a little too much. I guess I'd say something like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:16] Your comment about being better prepared. It seems like from my own experience and everybody else's I've interviewed, everybody kind of made the job for themselves in different ways.

GIBSON: [00:42:33] Yeah, I think that was my case too, and I figured it out that the university wasn't going to do anything soon, if ever, which isn't

quite true. I decided I'd better find something else to do. And so the fellow that was the university guy kind of realized that too, and he was the guy that ushered me into the, you know, track and field guys, with the track and field guys. And then from that, other things worked out. So yes, I had to adapt the way I did things. I don't think I ever dreamed that I'd be going around teaching basketball and physical education at elementary schools. But that's what I ended up, because we were, you know, sort of supposed to be going to universities to make powerful teams and all that stuff.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:33] Well, one thing leads to another.

GIBSON: [00:43:35] Yeah, right.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:36] So the second goal is to promote a better understanding of the U.S. Do you think, based on your experience, that Colombians view Americans differently? You said they were suspicious of Americans because they saw movies.

GIBSON: [00:43:55] Yeah, that's at one level. Yes, that's certainly the case. We were expected to be handsome like Paul Newman and beautiful and all that stuff. But no, I think there was an expectation. But I think it was, I think it is wonderful that a lot of Colombians that would never have heard or seen Americans or met them, you know, firsthand and got to work with them directly. And I think they appreciated that opportunity, and I like to talk about how they ask you many questions about the States and what kind of people we were and what is this and what was California like.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:51] Breaks down the stereotypes.

GIBSON: [00:44:53] Yeah, right.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:53] Not everybody looks or acts like they are in the movies.

GIBSON: [00:44:56] That's right, exactly. My own case, also I should mention that first I started out with my roommate from the binational center and

then Irv Dubinsky was a roommate for a while. Plus, the other guy that started out in Manizales but got moved to another location, Dave Banki. Finally that sort of little group dissolved because Irv went one way, Dave went one way, and Barry, he went another place. So there I was, and all that was left was one guy that was a medical student. So he and I then went and got ourselves lodged in another house, and I lived with medical students the last part in Colombia.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:49] Colombians?

GIBSON: [00:45:50] All Colombian.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:52] So that was great.

GIBSON: [00:45:52] Yeah, it was fun. They were nice guys. Good and bad memories, I guess. But they've since died. But one of the fellows really remembered because I took a serenade to Elonia in Colombia, and they still do it. You know, you take a serenade to your girlfriend and they sing these romantic songs outside, standing outside the house.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:25] So you take a serenade?

GIBSON: [00:46:27] You take a serenade.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:28] So the musicians are the serenade.

GIBSON: [00:46:31] That's it, right. I just paid them. I just paid. But they had great fun picking out the songs and getting the musicians. It was one of those fun experiences, which they remembered to this day. And they all claim, well, I picked that song and.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:48] That's why she fell for you, right?

GIBSON: [00:46:51] Right, right. Absolutely.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:53] And you got married in Colombia?

GIBSON: [00:46:56] I did.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:57] Did some of them come?

GIBSON: [00:46:58] They all scattered by that time, so not many of them. People that went to our wedding were nearly all her friends. Just a few of mine.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:08] Good. So the third goal of Peace Corps is to promote better understanding of other peoples by Americans. So think about that just in your life.

GIBSON: [00:47:23] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:25] You've been involved in [inaudible] and clearly, it made you more interested in working with low income populations. Have you stayed involved in international things?

GIBSON: [00:47:39] In a way, yes. I mean, because through Friends of Colombia, you know, we brought students up here. We've had these updates on Colombia.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:51] Talk a little bit about Friends of Colombia.

GIBSON: [00:47:54] Friends of Colombia is a 501c3 nonprofit that we organized with, especially Bob Colombo should take a bow. And Arlene Chaston, who I know has been wonderful as a president. But we've probably given over a quarter of a million dollars now to projects in Colombia. It's all volunteer kind of thing. We've also done some things besides giving to projects in Colombia that we selected and encouraged in many cases. We've also done things such as Bob, at one time, organized a group of people to come in and talk with the ambassador of Colombia at the time about changing the image of Colombia. And it was particularly doing the difficult drug days, changing the image of Colombia and getting better hearing in the states on Colombia and Colombian activities.

GIBSON: [00:49:04] And Arlene, during her reign, we've had several opportunities to work with the Colombian embassy. We organized a, I don't know if you'd call it a meeting, but at sort of the end of the worst part of the violence in Colombia, we got two hundred former volunteers and families to go to Cartagena, Colombia, and sort of demonstrate that it was safe. You know, it was a nice thing. So we all went to Cartagena and listened to Colombian officials and it was a good thing and a number of those folks have returned on their own. And it was a good example for other travel agencies that it can be safe. So and then we, for the. Colombia was on the Smithsonian list of countries that presented on the Mall.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:20] For the Folk Festival.

GIBSON: [00:50:21] Folk Festival, thanks. I couldn't get it out. But anyway, we helped them. We used our 501(c)(3) status to help them move money through to their contractors because they were not allowed to accept the money directly. So we helped them out there. Plus we provided a lot of people that, you know, man the exhibits, if you will.

GANZGLASS: [00:50:48] Oh, that's great. I didn't know that. That was quite a while ago, I guess?

GIBSON: [00:50:52] Yeah, it's been a while now. Like they even got, you know, Ello went. She was the translator for. The big business in Colombia these days are flowers. The flowers you buy at the Safeway, many about 75 percent, are from Colombia now. So as coffee begins to disappear as the only product of Colombia, they're growing lots of kinds of flowers. But anyway, she worked with a guy that was doing the flower exhibit and the ladies that were doing handicrafts.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:33] So she was their translator.

GIBSON: [00:51:35] She did the translator. I did not. I did take her there and bring her back and encourage her, but I did not.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:43] Well, there are lots of Spanish speakers, native Spanish speakers around.

GIBSON: [00:51:46] There are indeed.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:48] So this has been really interesting. Is there anything else you want to talk about? I'm out of questions.

GIBSON: [00:51:53] Oh, you are, OK.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:54] But feel free to, if I didn't ask a question that you want to talk about.

GIBSON: [00:52:01] I would say, and Evelyn you've already said it for me, Peace Corps is a big part of my life. It changed I think the person that I am today and I gained a great deal from it, much more than I ever put into it. And I think most of the people that I talked to feel about the same. It changed their life. Lots of them went into international activities, AID and State Department and those things, and it really was a key thing. I guess the one thing I didn't mention early on, that I kind of thought perhaps I should, and it was probably true of you, too. In those early years, we felt very close and very important to the U.S. government. I mean, after all, when I got selected, I got a nice little letter from John Kennedy and after I completed my first year, I got another letter saying, oh, the Peace Corps is one of the best things we've done, and it was really, really nice and gave you a good lift.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:08] I don't remember that. I'm a few years after you, so maybe they stopped doing that. But maybe I got it, I don't remember.

GIBSON: [00:53:16] We sure did. It was heady stuff.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:19] Yeah, it was good. OK, well, thank you.

GIBSON: [00:53:22] Thank you Evelyn. It was easier than I thought.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:26] Oh yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:28] This is part two to the Gale Gibson interview.

GIBSON: [00:53:32] After thought.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:33] After thought.

GIBSON: [00:53:34] After thought. One of the thing delightful things about my Peace Corps experience is I married Elonia. And since then we've had a steady train of nice Colombian visitors over the years, and they're always enthusiastic and very impressed with Washington. None of this blah, jeez, so what, kind of blasé stuff? They're delighted, and it's great fun having them. They're always just the best kind of guests. And it's gone on for this little visit for the lo these 50 years that we've been married. And it's really, I think both Ello and I have gotten a lot out of it, and I think the Colombians have too. Some of them have stayed for, you know, a week or two and visited Washington. They're always very impressed. And I think it's been a way for people who would never have had the opportunity to know Americans. They do it with us because although Ello is a Colombian, the rest of the family is pretty much your usual American and our neighbors and our friends. So it's been fun for them and friendships have developed even there. So I just wanted to throw that in as just another little side event.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:58] Yeah.

GIBSON: [00:54:59] There were a lot of Colombian-American marriages. In fact, there were, I think at one time somebody told me that there'd been at least two hundred.

GANZGLASS: [00:55:11] Of Peace Corps volunteers who married Colombians? Amazing.

GIBSON: [00:55:15] Yeah, but you've got to remember there were over 3,000 volunteers in Colombia. I mean, we got boys and girls and men and, you know, all kinds of combinations. But a few years back, I was talking to a university president and it turned out his sister had married

an American Peace Corps volunteer, and they live in Cleveland. But he remarked, gee, well, that's one good thing the Peace Corps did. That was a lot of stable marriages. And that's kind of true because the marriages I know of, and we just did our 50th anniversary, but I know three or four others that have done it. So it's kind of a nice little side effect of the Peace Corps, these long term marriages.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:10] Well, I think you think about it a lot more, right, when you actually have to move from one country to another. That's a different level of commitment than just meeting someone for a short time.

GIBSON: [00:56:24] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:25] Well, I'm glad it worked out.

GIBSON: [00:56:27] Right. Thanks. Of course, you're probably are getting up to 50 years of marriage too.

[END OF INTERVIEW]