

Sam Farr Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Samuel Sharon Farr
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Biographical Note

Samuel (Sam) Sharon Farr served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from February 1964 to February 1966 in an urban community development program.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Sam Farr

December 2, 2014
Washington, D.C.

By Patricia Wand

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

WAND: [00:00:01] December 2nd, 2014. This is Patricia Wand, and I am interviewing Sam Farr, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from 1964 to 1966 in an urban community development program. First, Congressman Farr, congratulations on being reelected for your 12th term as a representative to the U.S. Congress. This is a great achievement and we're very proud of you in the Peace Corps community and thank you for agreeing to meet with me today during this final, the final weeks of this session of Congress. I know this is a very busy time for you. Our focus today is on your experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia. The events that led you to the decision to serve in the Peace Corps. How you finally achieved your goal and the ways in which it has affected your life. First, why don't you tell your story as you have on so many occasions in your public persona and you've shared with many of us your experience in Peace Corps? It's a compelling story, and I'd like to give you the opportunity to record it with us today.

FARR: [00:01:27] Well, thank you very much, Pat. Thank you one for your service. It's a pleasure to be doing this interview with you because you and I met in Peace Corps training in 1963 and were training for Colombia and saw each other in Colombia and have remained close friends ever since. It's a wonderful opportunity to lend your professional expertise in doing this. Look, Peace Corps to me was, I was a young 22 year old. I wanted to see the world. My family was so supportive. My father hadn't traveled a lot, but just really appreciated the cultures of the world and really thought that exposure to his son, who wasn't a great student. What got me interested in Peace Corps. Every year in college, I tried to get a job that would be, you know, exciting and got access to. I have cousins that lived in Buenos Aires. I served when I was in the high school for the Quakers and Mennonites in a summer youth camp in Europe, which just opened up my eyes to foreign travel and foreign cultures.

FARR: [00:02:40] And I knew after that I just wanted to see the world. I travel. I was in the merchant marine for a summer traveling to the South Pacific, and then I got this job in Buenos Aires for my junior, between my junior and senior year of college, working in my cousin's Johnson wax factory in Buenos Aires, in Hurlingham, which was a British community. My cousin was American and, you know, her husband was a British Argentine, and he had the Johnson Wax franchise in Hurlingham. And that was a, you know, a cross-cultural experience that just changed my life. Graduating college, I sort of had the opportunity to either go to graduate school, go get a job, or join the military. And the fourth option was join the Peace Corps. I'd always thought doing exciting things like maybe flying a jet for the Navy would wet my eyes and wouldn't adapt to that. So Peace Corps was the first choice of a just an opportunity, and nobody had yet come back. So it was really feeling like a pioneer.

WAND: [00:03:49] How did you first become aware of Peace Corps?

FARR: [00:03:52] Um, I don't remember exactly hearing about it. I mean, President Kennedy was, you know, I watched his election and got very involved. My father was a delegate to the National Convention in Los Angeles that nominated him. He'd visited our family. I hadn't met him, but he visited my family trying to get my father's vote for that convention. And

so, yeah, we were very excited about his election and talked about it a lot and somewhere along the line heard about Peace Corps. I just remember being in college my senior year.

WAND: [00:04:24] And where was that?

FARR: [00:04:25] I went to school in Willamette University, which is in Salem, Oregon. It's an old Methodist, I mean, historical Methodist college, founded in 1843. I think it's the oldest university west of Mississippi, and it's had a, uh, small, liberal arts college. It's always had a great tradition of public service, in elective office and public service for government and for charities and NGOs. And so there was, you know, the atmosphere of the campus was pro Peace Corps, but I just knew I just needed to get away and see the world on my own. My father was a member of the California State Senate, a very prominent senator, a very prominent name. And I always felt growing up as the son of a senator that I was a, people kind of treated me like a kid with all these kinds of privileges and everything, and I wanted to be somewhere where my family name wouldn't mean a thing.

FARR: [00:05:30] And, you know, Peace Corps is certainly getting you out of the country to do that. It's amazing, though, how in retrospect now, how tied the political world is because I ended up before I left, my father got all these Colombians came to Sacramento and my father threw a big party for them, and after that they talked all about him. He was more famous in Colombia than I was, but. You know, joining the Peace Corps just was very exciting for me and my first program where I met you, I was deselected, which was the biggest shock of my life and a feeling of total failure and misery. And I just went home like, what the hell am I going to do in my life? And my mother was always upbeat. She said, well, you know, wonderful thing about America is when you don't like a decision, you can get it appealed. I said, what do you mean? Well, somebody in your training camp didn't like it. Maybe you can appeal to Washington, and once you show them that you're sincere and go learn Spanish at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, which was in my backyard, and I said, well, that's a great idea.

FARR: [00:06:40] And she said, show them you're really serious about it and appeal and see if you can get in. Exactly what I did. And I did appeal and I did get an invite to a second program, this time training in New York City at Columbia University, we lived in the International House. I met on the plane going to New York, Maureen Orth, who was in my program. And I remember getting on the plane and there was a cute gal and getting on the plane all alone, saying goodbye to her family and they're all wishing her best. And in the San Francisco airport and we were waiting in line to get on a plane, she said, are you going to Peace Corps? And I said, yeah, I'm going to Peace Corps. And she said, well, let's see if we can sit together. And by the time we were in New York, we were best of friends because we had a lot of mutual friends and ended up being assigned to the same city in Colombia and have been close friends ever since. So Peace Corps. But the experience of being in a rural community development was. The light isn't blinking anymore.

WAND: [00:07:44] Keep talking.

FARR: [00:07:45] You want to keep talking?

WAND: [00:07:46] Yeah.

FARR: [00:07:47] Okay. I mean, you know, we were so naive, we had no idea what cross-cultural living was all about. Certainly, nobody ever even talked about things like Third World and poverty. Peace Corps training was a lot about sensitivity training, which was kind of strange for a lot of us. Nobody really talked about that before. Community development, that was a strange word and trying to just, I mean, in essentially it's an empowerment training because you really learn about yourself and how to motivate people, how to listen to people. I think what the greatest aspect of Peace Corps was training the listening techniques of volunteers. You're in a foreign country, in a foreign language, and you have to listen carefully to understand it and then to really understand what they're saying and put it in context of where they're living and realize that even words that are easily translatable into English don't have the same meaning for the people who don't know how to read and write often cases and have learned these expressions through oral tradition.

FARR: [00:09:11] I found it just so enlightening to be able to have, to live in two worlds. To live in the present world with a wonderful background and education that our country had given us and our culture and feeling of safety and feeling of hope for the future. I remember getting in an argument in a bar with a guy one night, and he said, yeah, the difference between you and me is that you've got a passport that you can get out of this country and go back to your country and live in comfort. I'm forever in my poverty world, going to be stuck here, and I have to live with the problems that I'm living with. And you know, those wake up calls about what a privilege we have to be parachuted into a country and being able to live there and absorb the culture and be a part of it, but not having to deal with the difficulties of permanency. So, you know, a couple of days in the pension in Medellin and Maureen. It was very important.

FARR: [00:10:13] This is a remarkable just happening. Maureen and I were talking. She said, you know, when I was an undergraduate at a school called Lone Mountain in San Francisco, a Catholic girls women's school, that there was a Colombian girl and I think she's from this town, I have her telephone number. And called the telephone number and asked if the young daughter Gloria was there. They said no, but you know, that was the right number. And anyway, she ended up getting ahold of Gloria, and she said, well, I heard that you were coming somehow and let's get together. And she said, by the way, I'd like to introduce you to a friend named Alfonso, who was going back to California to finish his senior year at the University of Santa Clara, which is very near where I live in Carmel, California. And so Gloria and Alfonso meet Maureen and myself in a restaurant for lunch in Medellin. And from that moment all four of us were just connected at the hip. We just, I started dating Gloria and Maureen started dating Alfonso.

FARR: [00:11:22] They took us all with the privilege of just taking us all over Medellin, all over the community, introducing us to all kinds of people and just this passion for their country, for their people, for the cause of Peace Corps. They really loved the fact that Americans were going to go live in these barrios that they couldn't believe anybody would live in. Barrios without water and without lights and very hard to get to. Maureen lived on

one side of this big city of Medellin, about two million people, and I lived on the other side. I lived in a big barrio, and she lived in a very tiny little *verada*. And you know, then we had a central office where we'd meet, collect our mail and things like that. And there was a restaurant and several cafes and restaurants in town where Peace Corps volunteers there in town would eat there so you could come in contact with everybody else. What do we do? We, you know, we did just listen and worked with a thing called the *junta*, which was the sort of the neighborhood association. Ask them what their priorities were, what their felt needs were. And I was shocked because they wanted to build a soccer field.

FARR: [00:12:42] And I thought of all the issues in this barrio, no water, no lights. Poverty. To build a soccer field and you're asking gringo doesn't even know how to play soccer. I said, well, don't tell them you don't get to play soccer, just do, you know, they'll know, but just show the excitement about it. Yeah, that's what you were sent here for, to help them build a soccer field. What do we do? We go get a shovel and somebody got a shovel. Somebody had a pick. And I remember that organizing for this is the day we get together. How about Saturday? And people said fine. And they all showed up with all these frilly, simple pieces of tools and equipment, started digging, all excited. There was big boulders there. I mean, stuff that I can't even. You'd need dynamite and bulldozers to move those boulders. Oh no, no, no, no, Mr. Sam, you know, we can do this. Then they go get some wire and old inner tubes and they wrap them all up and they light this fire. They said, just let it burn all night. And it was smoke and, toxic smoke, I'm sure. And the next morning, they come and pour water on that rock, and it just splits into mucho pieces and you just realize, oh my god, that's Third World dynamite.

FARR: [00:14:01] And they were able to clean that field up. And it was just, you know, I felt very excited and they were all excited that I'd done something. I hadn't done anything. I just stood there and listened and kind of encouraged and helped. And I said, well, what's next? Let's do something. Oh, we got to build a school. You know, we didn't, we couldn't get any help from the city, so we had to. Peace Corps had a CINVA-Ram machine. Remember those? They're ones that you made clay bricks out of dirt bricks. All you need was a little tiny bit of cement and a bunch of dirt

and some water. And we made then one brick at a time, the old adobe brick, and it was a machine that pressurized them all and made them very compact, and you just let them dry in the sun. And when they were dry. And we made thousands of them, I mean, every day we had kids helping us and we, you know, we did have to do a lot of the work. We made it into a fun game and it took us months to get enough bricks, but we did other things in the meantime. But I remember. You know, I remember my experience in the barrio that just were kind of the first shock was I don't know if. I wanted to do this so badly, but I don't know if I can live in this house that has cockroaches in it.

FARR: [00:15:20] We don't have cockroaches in California. It had mice, rats crawling through the roof. It had, the walls didn't go all the way to the ceiling. So everything we were living in what we would kind of duplex type apartment or house. We had a spectacular view of all of Medellin, a million dollar view in this house that costs us I think four dollars a month to rent, which I split with my Peace Corps partner, Scottie Hutton. And you could hear every voice, every sound, of the family next door. There's just the two of us living in essentially a two room, two bedroom. We didn't have much of a bathroom, just an outdoor hole in the floor and a little sink outside, which was our bathroom. And we ended up after a year. I don't know why it took us, if we're so smart, why it took us a year to figure out if we could put a toilet on top of the hole and have a real toilet. That was a great, great invention. It took us a year to figure that out.

WAND: [00:16:28] Did you have warm water?

FARR: [00:16:30] No warm water, no.

WAND: [00:16:31] Did you ever have a warm shower?

FARR: [00:16:33] We ended up, no. You'd take those in the hotels when friends came or you go to somebody's house. But you know, Medellin's a nice, warm city of about 76 degrees year round. So it's springtime and the cold showers weren't that cold and the. Oh, we didn't even have water when we first got there. But the neighbors just said, don't worry, we'll take care of that. And one night in the middle of the night, it was a big, huge main

water line right outside our house that went into town and they just went and tapped into it. It was contraband water. And we had wonderful good water. It was even drinkable. The same thing they did with electricity. Of course, it wasn't much power by the time it reached our house, contraband electricity. Because we had a tape recorder, which I had to run on batteries because it would go so slow it couldn't record. The power and the light wouldn't go on very powerfully. But I mean, those are all things you just begin to live with and accept. And I remember first sort of wondering whether I could make it. And Peace Corps did a wise thing in recommending that the letter we write home, and those are the days of typewriters and carbon paper, that we keep a copy of the letter we write home, which is our first instance of our first, you know, feelings.

FARR: [00:17:50] And on your anniversary of being a year in a country, take out that letter and read it. And that was probably the best advice we ever had, because you found out how exaggerated everything was about how awful it was going to be. And then a year, after a year, I kept thinking, I could live here the rest of my life. I'm really ensconced. I love these people around me. I love my work and my barrio. I don't know why I was so fearful of that I couldn't survive. I mean, I had a lot of experiences. I think the first ones were realizing that without social programs, without sort of the welfare programs that we take for granted here in the United States, that when you're in poverty and in need, you go begging. When your baby dies because it's never got access to any health care because there was no place to go and no doctors and no affordability. And essentially you just, the baby died, got sick and died. And then you're responsible to bury that. Not you, the Peace Corps. But the father, parent, is responsible for burying that child in a proper Catholic service, and that takes money. And bringing that dead child in a blanket to your house in their arms and asking you for money to bury it.

FARR: [00:19:18] And we didn't make a lot of money. But boy, no matter what we made, you always had to contribute to that. But, you know, after a while, seeing several of those within a couple of weeks, realized death is much more common here is, of all ages, than it is in the United States. The other thing we had within a short time of being there in the barrio was that two men were shot out and were killed. And you know, in today's Peace

Corps, they'd probably take you out of that barrio in a quick minute before you can pay any attention to it. What I was fascinated about, I said, these must be awfully popular men. I mean, I'm new to the barrio. I said, it seems like there's hundreds, almost a thousand people lined up around the block to come see them and pay respects. And they said, no, that's not what they're doing. They don't even know who the dead people are. They just want to see where they were shot, want to see the bullet holes. And they had them laid out on the table. Of course, lots of people were paying respect, but the curiosity was, well, how did they get murdered? It was quite an interesting, uh, you know, first again, first experience in the culture of poverty.

FARR: [00:20:39] I think a humorous moment was, two things that I remember. One was going to the health collective, the care organization, which was our sponsor. Peace Corps didn't have any staffing yet in Medellin. The care center there was instructing people on new women pregnant and newborn moms, you know, mothers with newborn children, on health care advice, on nursing and so on. And a doctor asked if I wanted to say anything and that I should be introduced because I'm going to be living with them. And I remember getting up and saying that I was thinking, my Spanish isn't that good, and I said this to this women's health clinic. *Me llamo Sam Farr. My name is Sam Farr. Soy miembro del Cuerpo de Paz. I am a member of the Peace Corps. Estoy tan embarazada que no puedo hablar mejor español.* I'm so embarrassed, I thought I was saying, that I couldn't speak better Spanish. And the doctor afterwards, he says, well, you do need to learn some things about Spanish. Embarrassed doesn't mean what it means in English. It means you're pregnant. So I was telling them, they were, the women are all kind of chuckled a little bit, but not much because they're going to pay respect to this gringo, tall gringo who was there and it wasn't polite for them to be laughing. But I just told them that I was so pregnant that I couldn't speak Spanish.

FARR: [00:22:10] And then I remember another thing that Scottie and I used to do. We'd walk around in the barrio and Scottie was about six foot four or five, and nobody had ever seen anything like that. Called him the Gigante, the giant. And the kids were just lining up like Pied Piper behind him and follow us everywhere. So I grabbed the kids, um, you know, by the nose?

This little trick that my grandfather did, he grabbed your nose and put your finger between your two index fingers, yeah, your thumb, and say, you know, I've got your nose in my hand here. And I remember my grandfather doing that a lot and kind of curious, like you don't have my nose, would touch my nose and I still have it. But I did it with the kids and they just started laughing and I said, you know.

FARR: [00:22:58] Then the next day, there were more kids. The next day there were more kids. And I told Scottie, this is really cool, just this trick my grandfather told me, is that you can just make these kids, just look at how much pleasure they're getting out of it. And this is really cool. We ought to be doing it, tell all the other Peace Corps volunteers that they can do this trick that I learned from my grandfather. And one of the Colombians who was with us one day, he told me and he said, Sam, I don't think you want to be doing that. And I said, what is it? He says, what you're doing is equivalent to in the United States of giving him the finger. So they were getting a big kick out of this tall gringo running around, grabbing their noses and then giving them the finger. And they had to tell all their friends, come see this weird thing.

WAND: [00:23:40] Where do you want to explain that noise we just heard?

FARR: [00:23:43] That is that signaling that the Congress is going to go into session. It doesn't mean I have to leave. They're just going to start their early morning procedures and then start debating bills after that. We watch it all on TV right here in the office, so it's all well covered.

WAND: [00:24:01] So that was two humorous moments.

FARR: [00:24:05] Yeah, we had. I mean, I think you have to find humor in all this. Um. I mean, and what I learned later when I was started training Peace Corps volunteers, and what the experience taught me is that unfortunately it happened to me. I was really well placed in a big city like this because I liked to go to nice restaurants. I liked to go to the movies once in a while. I really enjoyed meeting Colombian, educated Colombian elites. And, you know, having intellectual debates, because certainly at the barrio level, you're not going to have that. And it was, I was well-suited to be in a big

city. But you know what? All the time, and I think maybe it's because of that first training program we went through, where I trained to be in rural Colombia. I always wished I'd had a barrio out in a little tiny village. And so on weekends, oftentimes I would visit volunteers in their other communities.

FARR: [00:25:07] You know, I don't think my experience is any much different than anybody else's. We had a lot of volunteers in Colombia in different roles, in educational television, we had architects, we had small business people working on co-ops. We'd meet at these restaurants downtown and talk, and once in a while we'd have social parties and became good friends with other volunteers. To this day, I still stay in contact with some of them. Howie Ellegant was one of them, who was an architect that Maureen and I met. Now he's helping Maureen a lot with her school. He's an architect in Chicago.

WAND: [00:25:43] What about the host country nationals? Were you assigned to work with any one Colombian overall, or were you really independent of guidance or teamwork with a particular community?

FARR: [00:26:05] Well, Medellin's a very sophisticated city, and they had a community development department called Acción, Departamento de Acción Comúnada, community action, which was organized and had a director. So we were assigned to work with that department. In fact, after about a year of working in the barrio, what I realized that there was no coordination between the municipal government and all the Peace Corps volunteers, so some of them got attention if those barrios were sort of, uh, energized and had made the right social contacts. It wasn't just done on merit. And I thought, you know, with these Peace Corps volunteers spread out in different barrios, at least we ought to be, at the city level they ought to be more responsive. Because now they've got some serious professional help at the local level and if we're trying to organize people to be prepared to give, to train them, to have them experiential learning, so to speak, of how to sustain themselves and in development and community development and public works development, then we ought to, the department ought to be better connected with Peace Corps. So I ended up talking myself into creating a job for myself in the Department of

Acción Comúnada. So I put on a coat and tie every day and went to work with all the other bureaucrats.

WAND: [00:27:30] And at what stage were you, in the two-year assignment? Was that in the second year.

FARR: [00:27:37] It was about the second year, yeah. And I remember it was, um, it was a time when my mother had. When I went into a Peace Corps training, actually, when I was in Albuquerque in that first training program, I got a call. She'd come to my college graduation and she told me, she said, you know, when you go into training, I'm going to go to the hospital and have an operation. And she said, but it's nothing for you to worry about. It's just sort of, you know, as you get older, women have to have operations. That's what she told me, and I didn't think anything of it. And my father called me in training and he said, your mother didn't want you to know but she had an operation. She was diagnosed with cancer and she had stomach cancer. But they removed most of her stomach and she's all right. She's going to be fine. And although it was a very tough operation but she'll be fine.

FARR: [00:28:28] So, you know, I went back and saw her after training, and certainly she was there when I came home and got me involved in going to the Monterey Institute of International Studies. So I, you know, and it was a blessing in disguise because I got to spend three months with my mother when she was in recuperation. It was the time when John F. Kennedy was shot. I remember driving to San Francisco where she had to go to get chemotherapy, and I mean, that weekend, I'll never forget that she and I. A very political woman, very savvy, and just glued to the television set that entire weekend in her motel room in San Francisco near the medical center. But anyway, so I get this call in my barrio and I call, I get a visit by.

WAND: [00:29:19] This is fast forward now. You're in Colombia, 1964 or '65.

FARR: [00:29:21] Fast forward and I'm in Colombia, I've been there about a year or thereabouts, '65, um, January of '65. The then Peace Corps staff came to my barrio with a ticket and my passport and said, you're on a plane,

next plane to Bogota, and Bogota to Los Angeles, and Los Angeles to Monterey. Your mother is deathly ill. And up until that time, I had no idea that she was going to be surviving. And I say, well, is she's still alive? And they said, we don't know. Your father called and asked you to get home as fast as possible. So I didn't know all the way going to San Francisco. I remember that trip just being so kind of a shock to me of how long it'd been since I've been in a big airport, in Bogota airport, and then getting out and seeing all the cars that early morning at Los Angeles airport and how everything telephones worked and everything was just so orderly and clean and functional. And it just, I was in real cultural shock and realizing, you know, all these cars. I used to know about cars. I don't know one make from another because it all changed and they were all different. And then, you know, not knowing about my mother. It was just this huge uncertainty and landing in Monterey and ending up in the hospital.

FARR: [00:30:45] And she was in a room and she just had a second wind and she really for two weeks, I was with her every night and actually she came home and then she said, you know, you've got to go back. Peace Corps called and said, you either return or take leave and you don't have another option. So she said, go back, I wanted you to join the Peace Corps. You were excited. You love your site in your barrio and the people and they, you know, they'd also met Alfonso. They invited him when he was at Santa Clara to come spend Thanksgiving with them, and then my father ended up taking Alphonso at every Rotary Club so he could tell about where Colombia was and what Peace Corps was doing. And nobody really knew much in those days. So there was this relationship that had been built. And so, you know, my mother said, you've got to return and my schedule was to go back on a Friday. And I left Friday morning and Sunday in my barrio, I was back in my barrio in Medellin.

WAND: [00:31:51] The second side of the first tape, Patricia Wand interviewing Sam Farr.

FARR: [00:31:59] So I remember, we'd had a telephone installed in our house, and so my father called and said, your mom died yesterday, the day after you left and, you know, don't come home. I'm going to come see you

when I can. He was in the state Senate, and it was dependent on the schedule of Sacramento, California state legislature.

WAND: [00:32:23] Speak up just a little bit.

FARR: [00:32:24] So the next, you know, and he didn't tell me when he was coming, he said he'd work it out. I don't know, several weeks later, I'm in my barrio. I'm reading Time magazine, which is what we all fought over the minute it came out and before the ink was dry, every volunteer was scooping it up. It was our connection to the real world. So I'm busy going from cover to cover in this Time magazine, and I hear banging on the door. There's kids always banging on our door and this voice was, *Senor Farr, quiero usaré su latrina*. I thought, well, that's kind of strange. This person speaks with an accent, and what's this strange word, *latrina*? So, you know, I didn't pay attention to it. And here again, *Senor Farr, quiero usaré su latrina*. So I finally go to the door to figure out, is there an elephant? And here's my dad standing there in my barrio. Now my barrio was hard for Peace Corps volunteers to find. How he ever found my house. He's standing there. Not only is there, he's there with a caytiel and a ruwana and a Colombian hat on. I just couldn't believe it.

FARR: [00:33:40] Well, Alfonso had called his parents and said, you know, the senator's coming to Medellin. Go pick him up and take him out to Sam's barrio. They knew where I lived and that's how they got him there. So he spent about a week with me in Medellin, and he just fell in love with it. And he said, I got to bring my daughters, your sisters back. I had two sisters, younger one a year younger and one seven years younger. The younger one was named Nancy. And that summer, this was in January, and that summer he brought them back to Medellin with. And Alphonso by then was out of college and he had taken them up to his *fincas* in Montería, in another state, another department. And as people do on the *fincas*, they go horseback riding and this is a big cattle ranch. I wasn't there because I'd gone to Peru for the summer to travel, and so I felt I couldn't just take time off and go up to Montería for the weekend.

FARR: [00:34:48] So I stayed behind and it was a Monday morning that my father called the office about someone coming out and said, your sister was fell

from a horse. It's very serious. We've gotten her to a hospital. They X-rayed her and told us that she was OK, that she just had probably a concussion and to come back and see her in the morning. And that was on a Sunday that it happened. And so he was calling Monday afternoon saying, can you get a neurosurgeon to come up here? She's going to have to have surgery. And I thought, wow. So I called the hospital and I'd met the director of it. And actually he was a neurosurgeon and he actually had been in that group that'd gone to California and met my dad. And I told the surgeon about the story and he said, why don't you meet me at the airport? We'll go on a plane, this charter plane and go there.

FARR: [00:35:49] And when we got to the airport, it was too dark for the plane to land because Montería didn't have any lights and didn't have any way for civilian aircraft or commercial aircraft to get in. But my father had also called the embassy in Bogota and had talked to the ambassador about getting a neurosurgeon lined up, and it took them most of the day to do it, but finally found one that could fly. And they got the Navy, the U.S. Navy, who was stationed in the embassy to loan them a Navy plane and the Navy was exempt from Colombian FAA rules so it could fly, and all they required was the airport light itself up at night. And so, as you know, in those small towns, they're usually just whole towns run by a generator. And those small towns usually have a radio station, so Montería, which is the capital of, um. I'm getting my names mixed up.

WAND: [00:37:01] Córdoba?

FARR: [00:37:03] Montería is the capital of Córdoba, and so they turned on the generator in the town and woke everybody up and asked the community if they would bring gasoline cans down to the runway so they could just blanket land. This was big excitement for the town. So everybody's like, oh what's happening here and showed up. And sure enough, the Navy plane landed an aircraft with the doctor and with his equipment and I don't know if he had a specialist with him, but.

WAND: [00:37:34] Was this the Monday night after the accident?

FARR: [00:37:36] This was the Monday night after the accident.

WAND: [00:37:39] And the accident had been on Sunday afternoon?

FARR: [00:37:40] Yeah, Sunday morning. So they operated and I got there about 4:00 in the morning and my surgeon joined the surgery and process. I guess they started about midnight. And the reports were everything was going well, so we were in and this hospital was full of people from the from the hacienda. And I think my cousins had joined us. They were in Medellin with us and my father had taken them. So he had his niece and nephew with him, and his two daughters, and then I joined him. And then outside the hospital, the entire city had just, or community had started a prayer vigil, wondering, you know, they didn't know who these gringos were in the hospital but must be pretty serious. Just a remarkable evening and night. It's tragic because the doctors came out about, it was really early, about 7:00 a.m. and just said, it's not, it's not. She's not going to make it. And Pat, I'll just tell you, that was the most sinking moment in my life. I've never. I just, you know, it's my fault.

FARR: [00:38:57] If I hadn't been here as a Peace Corps volunteer, they wouldn't have come. This wouldn't have happened if I had been here, you know, who knows. It's just all these ifs that you do all the time and then you hear about tragedies because they are accidents and you just think, all these ifs. If something, if that happens, then wouldn't be the tragedy, so. All we could do then was just the Navy plane with the embassy arranged that we could take her home. So we flew to Panama. They flew us to Panama City. I mean, I didn't have anything, I just had. I don't even have an ID. I might have had my little Colombian cedula, but you know. We didn't have passports because the Colombian office kept them.

FARR: [00:39:47] So the embassy arranged us to get into Panama and get us out of Panama. We got on a Pan American flight to Los Angeles and my father had the body cremated in Panama City and we flew home with the ashes and had a memorial service for Nancy. I think that the, you know, the profound thing that happened to me was coming back from that. I mean, we were just, you know, when mom dies six months before that and now Nancy, it's just. What's it worth? What's life worth? And then coming back and I just said, why am I coming back to this? And, you

know, I think all of us in the Peace Corps, there were times when you really got frustrated with what I call the culture of poverty and its lack of sensitivity. When people fell, there wasn't a rush to try to help them or care for people of disabilities or things like that. Just all the kind of negative things that just came up to me and I was sort of like, damn, damn, damn this, this Third World poverty. I just, you know, it's how I was going through this anger and then it just hit me. It was almost like a revelation to say, why did you join the Peace Corps in the first place? Didn't you want to come and fight this stuff? And the answer to that was, yeah.

FARR: [00:41:17] The shock is you just never thought it would apply to you. You never thought that not having access to health care would affect your own family. That not having access to emergency services would affect your own family. And it doesn't, what it shows you is it doesn't matter that you have money and you have a passport, you have credit cards, and you have connections and you can get yourself out of there. It doesn't help you a damn bit if, you know, if the services there aren't there on the spot. So you know what I said? In this thinking about this, about the land and coming back, is what are you going to do with your life? I said, you know what? This is what I'm doing. I'm going to work, whatever I do, I'm going to work to make sure that no child, no family has to suffer the pain and agony that I had just suffered with the loss of my sister.

FARR: [00:42:22] And in order to do that, you really have to build the institutions all over the world that will give people access to health care. That means you have to have facilities and you have to have skill sets and they have to be affordable. And the same thing, if you really want to work yourself out of poverty, you've got to have access to education, you've got to have schools that are available and in an area close enough for you to get there. And they have to be affordable. And the third thing you need is a safe place to sleep. If you have a safe place to sleep, if you have access to education, if you have access to health care, you got a chance. You got a chance. But without it, very slim, very slim, that you'll ever have to get to break out of it. So, you know what, that was a defining moment for me, and I realized, hey, there's a war on poverty now recognized in the United States, and I'm not a citizen of Columbia. I still can vote. I just, you know, I

couldn't be. I was registered voter. I was 21, that's how old you had to be in those days.

FARR: [00:43:28] I'm going to go back to my own country and start carrying on what I learned here in the Peace Corps about community development. And so you know what's interesting, because there's lots of other stories, but I think that basic moment of just changing my life's vision, my life's purpose, has never stopped. I mean, I got into politics so that I realize politics might be the greatest path to really invest in education, invest in access to health care, affordable health care, and to make sure that people have safe places to sleep at night, which also means affordable housing. So my Peace Corps work has never stopped, whether it was in local government or state legislature and now in Congress.

WAND: [00:44:21] You've demonstrated that in so many ways, Sam, and I'd like to have you talk about that a little bit more. But one of the things that I wanted to go back to, the question that comes to mind when you talked about the culture of poverty and the need for education and housing, safe secure housing and health care, you didn't mention nutrition and food. And that's an interesting, it's an interesting absence from your litany of important aspects of a good, solid life. Why is, do you think you don't? Why is it that you don't think of food in the context of what you were experiencing in Colombia?

FARR: [00:45:04] Well, it's interesting because obviously food is so essential to life, but I never found starvation as we've seen, you know, in famines in Africa and so on. In Colombia, Colombia is a very, it's probably got more varieties of fruits and vegetables than almost any country in the world, and it has the ecosystems to grow these things. So there was never sort of a lack of food. And I think the issue of nutrition is something we got more educated on. Remember, these weren't issues when I grew up because nobody had ever invented fast foods. Those were all invented while I was in the Peace Corps. The McDonald's and all those opened up for the first time in California through the '60s when I was in the Peace Corps service. So we were eating pretty healthy foods.

WAND: [00:45:56] And Colombians in your sphere?

FARR: [00:45:58] Colombians in Medellin was, you know, it's this city of eternal spring. I never felt, I mean, there were things that were frustrating. There were in parts of my barrio, didn't have any water and lights, but I didn't find people begging for food. I just I found the opposite. I found what upset me was that the people who had nothing would take food to the priest and leave it outside his door, you know, where'd be flies and others. They weren't, the church wasn't eating it. And but people felt that they had, whatever access they had, to have to give it to the church. So I don't think food, but you know, it's interesting. I've in my political world of representing another great abundance of agriculture, the Salinas Valley is in my district, we grow more produce, diverse produce than any other place in the world. And now I've really gotten into nutrition as being part of health care in America. If we're going to prevent all these costly caring, you know, particularly for diabetes and stuff like that that we can avoid through healthy diets, particularly with young children. So I've been very active in Congress on issues of availability, access to food, and then the proper kinds of food and nutrition.

WAND: [00:47:33] I'd like to talk a little bit about your post Peace Corps experience now. Have you maintained contact with any of the host country nationals with whom you worked?

FARR: [00:47:46] Yeah, I've had, um, sadly enough, not with those in the barrio. I did go back to the family that lived next door.

WAND: [00:47:55] So you've been back to the barrio?

FARR: [00:47:57] Yeah, they told me. Yeah, I went back for my honeymoon when Shary and I were married. I just said, you can't.

WAND: [00:48:03] What year was that?

FARR: [00:48:05] 1968. So it was several years after I'd left, but I'd also been back as a Peace Corps training officer when we had in-country training in Bogota. After the training program was over, I went back to my barrio. When I went back with my wife, stayed downtown in a hotel and then went

out to the barrio one or two days after I'd been in Medellin. The people in the barrio were all upset that I hadn't come there first thing. Well, how did you know I was in town? And they said, oh, there was a reporter at the airport when you got off the plane, he saw you and he remembered you for being here, and he went on the radio and said, you know, Mr. Sam's back and all of these things. Everybody knows that you're in town. This is a town of a million people, you know, and you know, everybody knows you're back.

WAND: [00:48:55] When was that?

FARR: [00:48:55] And you know, it's interesting, Pat, is that I remember people saying, well, where have you been? Like, they don't understand that, you know, I'd been back to the United States and been to law school and done all these, I had gotten married and all these things. There was just no, well, I'm just like, I'd been out of town. You know, you've been gone for a couple of years. But one of the things they told me, which was interesting, that the family lived next door, they'd moved to another affordable housing kind of a, you know, a barrio that was doing affordable housing for low income. They had to move because their neighbors were so mean to them when we left. We gave them a lot of our clothes and some of that, you know, we just had pots and pans, not anything fancy. But because we gave it to them, the neighbors said, we were, I mean, they had teenage daughters. They started saying teenage daughters had affairs with us. They had started all these rumors. They eventually threw rocks at the family. Just this kind of, you know, jealousy of something that I've never been able to figure out what, what, how that all builds. So the family just had to leave that barrio.

FARR: [00:50:17] The woman was a seamstress, and she made some clothes for us and stuff like that, and yeah, we paid her obviously. We helped, the kids helped cook our foods, cause we didn't know how to eat all these exotic things. We knew how to eat them, we didn't know how to prepare them, which is another cultural shock. You know, when you don't have anything that's processed and you're just eating raw, it's not so bad. But I remember our first, you must have experienced it too, when you went to that little stand in the barrio where you don't have any grocery stores and

you're looking at all this fruit and you think, what the heck is that? How do you eat it? Can you cook it? Can you peel it? If somebody's giving you a banana and never told you what to do with it. You'd look at this thing and think what the hell's that? What do you do with it? And you know, guanabana and papayas and all that stuff that, you know, weren't readily available in the United States. So and then a lot of the stews and everything you'd make, you know, the kids all knew how to make that stuff. So instead of us, here's our pots and pans and our kitchen, come make it.

WAND: [00:51:36] You know, Sam, I've got a couple of questions and then we'll bring our wonderful interview to a close. But you are, it seems to me, an example of a tremendously successful Peace Corps volunteer and someone who's carried out that line of service for decades. And yet somehow, in that first training period in the summer of 1963, you were told not to be a Peace Corps volunteer. You were deselected from that training. And I think this has been one of the conundrums for Peace Corps over the years, was trying to predict who was going to be successful and who wasn't. And I'd like to have you reflect just a little bit about that.

FARR: [00:52:24] Well, I've thought a lot about that because I never could figure out what I did in the Peace Corps. I mean, I did OK in training, I was probably pretty lackadaisical about studying Spanish. The summer before I'd worked in Argentina and I didn't learn Spanish and I got along with everybody. And I figured, well, when I hit the road in Colombia, I'll learn it. And so maybe that was the, they dinged me on that. On the other hand, I was in phenomenal shape and I loved competitive sports. And I remember excelling at everything we had to do physically in that training program, whether it was Outward Bound stuff.

WAND: [00:53:03] What kinds of things did we do in that training, physically?

FARR: [00:53:04] Well, we did some Outward Bound. We had to rappel off cliffs. We had to do drown proofing and I was a swimmer so, you know, I think, that whole how many? There were two groups there, but I think of the almost 100 volunteer trainees, I think I came out number one in the drown proofing and everything like that.

WAND: [00:53:28] And the survival hikes.

FARR: [00:53:30] And survival stuff, I was really good at that. So and I was.

WAND: [00:53:35] Rock climbing.

FARR: [00:53:36] All that. So I thought the only thing that I wasn't very good at was learning the language. That's what I went back to when I decided to appeal it. You think, well, maybe it's the language. They never tell you. And that was another problem, was in your deselection, they just don't tell you. It's sort of like, you know, we don't think you're mature enough to go to another country. Well, I'd already lived in other countries and had cross-cultural experiences, so I couldn't understand that. But you know what? I think that it was a big mistake for Peace Corps because, you know, and I know, we have friends who were deselected who would have made great volunteers. And that deselection just changed their lives, probably for the worse.

WAND: [00:54:21] Devastating.

FARR: [00:54:21] Devastating. People who had excelled in college and had done well in their lives. And all of a sudden, you can't go because some psychologist from Washington tells you that we know more about you than, you know, who never been to these countries, never lived in Third World cultures. But I think the best thing Peace Corps ever did was to do in-country training. And now Peace Corps takes you, if you're going to go to the Far East, then you probably end up in San Francisco or you know where you're going to end up. And gives you your shot, your passport, a couple of days in the hotel and seminars, and then on a plane you go, with all these brand new trainees off to this foreign country where you're going to live with a host country family and you're going to be intensively learning the language and you're going to be living it every day. What happens there is self-selection. People said, wow, I just, it's not what I thought it would be. And they leave. And isn't that a much better way to? And you find volunteers who are very shy and probably under this old system that we went through, where somebody in Washington deselected you, would have been be deselected, who end up just blossoming in the

Peace Corps. So I think that Peace Corps learned a lot and to my knowledge, I don't know whether they even use any kind of deselection anymore. The training process is.

WAND: [00:55:48] Winnows them out.

FARR: [00:55:50] Yeah.

WAND: [00:55:53] By their own will, let them experience it. I'm going to move us to another question. You talked about how the experience, the Peace Corps experience, impacted your work and your thinking after you got back home. How has it impacted your legislative work?

FARR: [00:56:09] Well, obviously very interested in foreign affairs, but more so in Latin America. I found in Congress that there's very little interest in the Americas, as there is in the press and as is there is in politics. I mean, our country is so, our history is so written and so scored and so taught about the European impact on the United States and our ancestors, all European. And yet, you know, from California, that's not true. Our ancestry is Hispanic. It was the Spaniards who discovered the West and settled it. California was settled by Spaniards and later they broke away, and when Mexico got its independence, became Mexicans and to this day. So I found that for what I am interested in is the hemisphere of the Americas.

FARR: [00:56:58] And so that's really shaped my politics here in Washington. And I think I've become a leader, particularly maybe one of the more foremost knowledgeable about Colombia. We've got a lot of problems since I've been in Congress with playing Colombia, the drug stuff. We had the Summit of Americas there last year. I got to go with president on Air Force One to the summit, because I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia. Also, because the president of Colombia, I knew as a young journalist when he was in Bogota.

WAND: [00:57:31] And who was that, Uribe?

FARR: [00:57:35] That's Santos.

WAND: [00:57:35] Santos.

FARR: [00:57:35] Juan Santos. Uribe was his predecessor. And Uribe, there's an interesting story there. You asked about the Peace Corps connection with Congress. When Uribe was running for president of Colombia, he came here to Washington, I'm sure, to check with the embassy and check with the State Department, so on, as a candidate, you want to be up and want everyone to know he was a candidate. And he made a visit to Congress and somebody said, well, yeah, go see Sam Farr, he lived in your country. So he came into my office and he sat down and said, I heard you were a Peace Corps volunteer. I said, yeah, I was in Medellin. I knew his family, he'd been in Medellin, not while I was there. He was mayor and then governor of the state.

FARR: [00:58:25] And he said, well, did you ever know that Peace Corps volunteer in Medellin, whose sister died in Montería? And I asked him, it was just shocking. I said, how do you know about that, you know? How do you know about one death in one town way back when? And he said, because my uncle performed the surgery on that girl. And he said we grew up in a family where they have family reunions, he would talk about the incredible emergency situation they came to, the harrowing flights and landing the airplane and surgery in the hospital. And so I said, you know, it's shocking. That's my sister. And he said to me, he later got elected to be president, and he said to me, he said, isn't this a small world where I'm running for president of the country and I'm sitting here in your office in the United States Congress and you're a member of Congress because of it. And you have this common connection with your sister's death, tragic death. So every time we met, you know, he was always telling everybody that. What a remarkable connection we have.

FARR: [00:59:38] Um, I think it repeats itself over and over again. I've got, you know, my friend Alfonso who I was so fond of, became almost like a brother. He was kidnapped by the FARC and murdered. I've got his picture right here on my wall here in. So I've never forgotten how meaningful he was to our family and to me personally. And since I've gone back to Colombia, they've asked me, I've got the Order of the Republic, which is this sash and big ribbon and given to me in the Colombian

Senate, and then they asked me if I wanted to say something. And you know, I was, I had a few of my, uh, congressional colleagues with me. But that was so fascinating. I just I said, I'm going to do the speech in Spanish.

FARR: [01:00:32] And I got up and addressed the Colombian Senate and just thanked them as politicians, as I would be thanking my ancestors who were politicians who created the Peace Corps, so that I could come here and work with them and their country and learn and brought, you know, I had I forgot how many volunteers they sent with hundreds of volunteers here who came in the sixties and who lived in every aspect of your country and who worked at all these different programs, who became themselves Colombians. And what I want to thank you for welcoming them and supporting them. And Peace Corps is coming back to Colombia, and I hope you'll do the same thing and I said, what a thrill it was for me to really learn about the culture of poverty in their country and how I've been able to help people in my own country as well as theirs. And how I, you know, as people in elected office, our duty is really to build a framework for the next generation, of access to health care and access to affordable housing and access to education. And I just I just told them what I've just said in this interview. And they gave me a standing ovation, and later they tell us that, you know, nobody ever gets a standing ovation in this place.

WAND: [01:01:52] When was that speech?

FARR: [01:01:55] I don't know, about five or six years ago. Well, let's see. My grandson was, he was, my daughter was pregnant with him when she came with me. So he's six years old. So six and a half years ago.

WAND: [01:02:11] Well, Sam, thank you. You have shared your story and told us about your culture shock in Colombia, the shock of losing two vital members of your family, how Peace Corps has impacted your life. Um, and if you have any more you'd like to add, any final thoughts?

FARR: [01:02:39] Well, I think Peace Corps is the greatest, uh, opening of the mind and thought that one can ever have. I think it is really having a cross-cultural experience. You and I haven't talked about it, but you've had many of them. I've had just this sort of Colombian one. You've had the Middle

East and others. And to me, it's, you know, that part of that American responsibility that I always say is that you're lucky to be born in America. You just you get this this title called citizen, but you don't have to do anything to be a citizen of America, and that's shameful. And yet there is sort of responsibilities. I think the responsibility is to vote and to give of something. Give of your time, give money, volunteer.

[END OF INTERVIEW]