

**William Stevenson Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** William Stevenson  
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**Date of Interview:** August 21, 2004  
**Location of Interview:** Grand Rapids, Michigan  
**Length:** 42 pages

**Biographical Note**

William (Sandy) Stevenson served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from 1963 to 1965 as an architect.

**Access**

Open.

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**Suggested Citation**

William Stevenson, recorded interview by Ernest Zaremba, August 21, 2004, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

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Oral History Interview

with

William Stevenson

August 21, 2004  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

By Ernest Zaremba

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

STEVENSON: [00:00:01] I can't remember which project number it was. I was an architect there from roughly basically 1964 and 1965. I was in training in 1963.

ZAREMBA: [00:00:12] Okay, let's start off going back to a year before you were in the Peace Corps. How did you decide? Why did you sign up?

STEVENSON: [00:00:19] I was at architecture school at Cornell, and Cornell is a five-year program, so I was in my fifth year and I'm trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I can't recall whether the 1963 was a good year for architects to get jobs or not, but I decided that Peace Corps really sounded like an exciting way to learn about the world and to see if I could give something back. But I think mostly it was the adventure that kind of got me excited. And at first, when I signed up, I signed up for a program in Nigeria, which had was supposed to have seven or eight architects. And we got partway through training at Columbia University

and the Nigerian government decided they didn't really need architects after all, they just wanted teachers. So there were seven of us and I stuck it out to the end of training, but I concluded that I was not a teacher. My wife is today, but I wasn't very good at it.

STEVENSON: [00:01:17] So they kind of threw me back in the mix and I went down to Washington to kind of see if there was another training program they could put me in. And that whole room with the Peace Corps where they were deciding where people went. I've heard sort of like the trading pit in the Chicago Mercantile Exchange where they were, you know, I've got somebody here, there's anybody have any openings in for an architect in South America. And it was like they were trading shares and assigning people to where they want to go. It was really kind of enlightening. Well, anyway, I came out with, I guess, an invitation or whatever, however they phrased it, to go into the training for architecture in Colombia. And went out to the University of New Mexico. And everyone knows where they were when Kennedy was shot. Well that's where I was, at the University of New Mexico Peace Corps training.

ZAREMBA: [00:02:10] Describe that moment. When did you first hear?

STEVENSON: [00:02:14] It was in the morning. I remember we were getting up, getting ready to go to training. In the Peace Corps, we always had to run a mile every morning at training before we started, at least out in Albuquerque. So we just got done with that. We're coming in to get breakfast and I can't remember the timing, but it was all over the news that Kennedy had been shot. And so everything kind of went on hold for the morning. And I can't remember all the time exactly when we heard he died. But we were in the student union area there at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

ZAREMBA: [00:02:45] I'm curious, going back a minute. Initially, you were in this program for Nigeria that turned out to be teachers. Then when you were accepted to this one with architects in Colombia, was there any hesitation or elation? What was your reaction?

STEVENSON: [00:03:00] Colombia sounded fine. Actually, I figured that I'd get to learn Spanish, which was a lot more useful in the United States than the languages in Nigeria. I can't remember what they're called, but they were three different languages there. And I think I came out with about four words at one point that I can remember. I can't remember any of them now. So I was excited about that.

ZAREMBA: [00:03:22] What was the reaction of your family and friends?

STEVENSON: [00:03:25] I think my parents, my father and stepfather said, well, I guess that's what you want to do, that's OK. Kind of stayed out. He didn't really give me much of an opinion one way or the other. I think he was just kind of thrilled that his son was out of college and the tuition bills had stopped. He was finally paying his own way. So I didn't get much reaction from that at all. I just was glad I had an assignment and some place to go, and it looked like it was going to move ahead.

ZAREMBA: [00:03:58] How large was your group?

STEVENSON: [00:04:01] I think that we were 60 or 70 people.

ZAREMBA: [00:04:04] What was the mix? There were seven architects?

STEVENSON: [00:04:06] No, no. There were seven architects in the Nigeria program. I can't recall how many architects, if any. I may have been the only architect that we had in the program. Most of it was community development types of folks that ended up being scattered all over Colombia. As I remember, about two-thirds of us ended up going there from the number that started.

ZAREMBA: [00:04:31] And what was a typical training day like? You mentioned starting off with.

STEVENSON: [00:04:34] We started off with a mile run around this track and then most of, I'd say two-thirds of the day was spent with Spanish, as I recall. They had classes with about 10 or 12 guys and gals in it and we were just. And you got four to six hours a day of Spanish so you could

learn the language. And I still know some of it. And then a series of classes on community development types of skills, and I remember the one that was how to how to buy horses. Evidently, a Peace Corps volunteers had a terrible track record of overpaying for horses and buying nags. And I never had to buy a horse when I was in the Peace Corps, but I guess some people did. And we had a poor track record, so they were trying to tell us how to recognize a good horse.

STEVENSON: [00:05:28] And we had to go, um. They had a series of sort of Outward Bound kinds of team building exercises. I remember taking a bareback riding thing out of New Mexico, out across someplace outside of Albuquerque. And I must have gotten the widest horse that they could possibly find. I didn't think I was, it was about four or five hours bareback on the horse and I was so sore, it just. And I didn't think I'd ever get my knees together for at least a couple of days. That was a painful experience. And we also, they took us out on an overnight trip and it got pretty cold, so we decided we would. We found this mineshaft that went down and we would climb down inside. It was pretty warm down inside it.

ZAREMBA: [00:06:22] Now how many were you?

STEVENSON: [00:06:23] It was about four of us, four or five of us. But the mine shaft went down about 60 or 80 feet, then just stopped. I don't know quite what happened to it, but I think we realized later the ladder going down there was not particularly, uh. It had rungs that were broken off, it was probably 70 or 80 years old. And we got down to the bottom and we're all sleeping down at the bottom, but every time the wind would blow, it would blow over the grains of sand off and they would go bop, bop, bop, and then come and land on you. Which means none of us really got a whole lot of sleep that way. So I was pretty glad to see the sun come up and we could get out of there. It actually never got to us, we had to look up and see the sky up above.

STEVENSON: [00:07:03] Um, but the thing I remember most about the training program, they took us up to Taos for, I don't know, a week or so. And we had a little hotel that we stayed at, it was right on the town square

in the center of Taos. And I think Taos was starting to become a ski capital, but it wasn't yet. This was in the wintertime. But they took us over to a town called Chama, which is west of Taos, and its claim to fame, one of its claims to fame, is that it has one of that narrow-gauge railroad that runs through it. It's something and Durango railroads. It has big steam engines.

STEVENSON: [00:07:42] But we were trying to build some community, it was a community. How do you build community relations with a town? So our idea was to play a basketball game with them. So we ended up playing a basketball game in their gym. A couple of our guys could play basketball, the rest of us were just pure amateurs. And we lost. We started out trying to win, and we realized that was probably not appropriate, so we probably ought to politically correct itself. I don't think it would have made a difference. I think the Chamans or how you pronounce that would have done us in anyway. That was the one thing I really remember about that part of whole trip, or that part of the training program.

ZAREMBA: [00:08:21] Was it mainly Hispanic in Chama?

STEVENSON: [00:08:23] It's mostly Native Americans, a lot of Native Americans. I think it's on the edge of one of the reservations, I can't recall. I haven't been, I've been back through there once about five or six years ago. To get from one part of Colorado to the other, the only way you can get there is to go down into New Mexico and Chama and come back up, which I guess is why the railroad went that way.

ZAREMBA: [00:08:44] Any particular friendships that formed in the training?

STEVENSON: [00:08:50] Well, the only one I've really, it actually wasn't from training, was Dominick Bresage, and I was best man at his wedding. There was one guy that actually dropped out of training that lives here in Grand Rapids that I met with once. I've never been able to keep that connection going.

ZAREMBA: [00:09:11] Now was the selection process an issue for yourself? Were you nervous about being selected out?

STEVENSON: [00:09:20] I think we're all nervous about that. I mean, it was probably like the selection Sunday for the NCAA tournament. You know, you kind of see it. Because if they called your name, that was bad news, as I recall. And I got that call when I was with the end of the Nigeria program because they concluded that being a school teacher was not one, that was not my calling. So I had to go down and didn't go. And obviously it was a huge disappointment, but I think in hindsight, they did me a real favor. I would not have done a very good job of teaching.

ZAREMBA: [00:09:57] So then after training, you went back home and?

STEVENSON: [00:10:00] Went back home and sort of waited for a call, which they never call. I started, graduated from college in June and started almost immediately in the Peace Corps training program at Barnard College in Columbia, in New York. And then about the first part of September, they concluded that I wasn't, that they didn't have any architects or architectural slots in Nigeria, and they were going to put me back in the hopper to get reselected. But I pretty much had an idea that, assuming that some program came up that had some reasonable opportunity for an architect, that I was going to get a chance. And that started training in, oh it was probably November or early December, and we finished up in February. Went to Colombia in, if I remember the dates correctly, in February, and that would be of '64.

ZAREMBA: [00:10:54] Now, how long were you in the training program for Nigeria would you say?

STEVENSON: [00:10:58] I would say two and a half months. It was right up to close to the end.

ZAREMBA: [00:11:01] What were some similarities or differences between those two training programs?

STEVENSON: [00:11:05] Well, first of all, it's a whole. They didn't really, you know, a lot of the folks in Nigeria were teaching English. That was primarily what they were doing. And they gave you a little smattering of Igbo and Yoruba and all the rest of the languages, but they didn't really try to teach you those languages. They're extremely difficult. They're tonal languages and have no relationship at all to anything we hear here in the United States. For Colombia, it was essential that you speak at least some Spanish or you were not going to be able to do anything. So that was probably the critical skill that they wanted to make sure you left with.

ZAREMBA: [00:11:40] Did you have the Outward Bound kind of thing in the Nigerian?

STEVENSON: [00:11:44] Yeah, not in Nigeria. We did it for Colombia. They had the rope courses and the other things that are. Actually, I went in the Army after I went in the Peace Corps and the Peace Corps training was physically more rigorous than the Army training.

ZAREMBA: [00:12:02] Say a little bit more about that.

STEVENSON: [00:12:03] Well, after I came back from Colombia, that was December of 1965, and I was 1A in the draft. And most folks thought that if you were in the Peace Corps that got you out of the Army and that is not true. It was just a deferment. And I was 25 years old, so I ended up enlisting for OCS. If I was going to be drafted, I wasn't going to do KP for the rest of my life. And then as it turned out, after I got in the Army, they got rid of KP. I thought that was one of the big reasons I decided I was going to go to Officer Candidate School was to get out of KP. But I went through basic training at Fort Leonard, where they went through Officer Candidate School in Fort Belvoir. Ended up spending a year in Vietnam and coming back.

ZAREMBA: [00:12:50] Well, back to how was the training more rigorous, you said, for the Peace Corps?



STEVENSON: [00:12:54] Because the Army didn't really give you that one mile run every morning. You didn't have a whole series of rigorous things. They didn't have, in fact, I had. By the time I got to the. The Army did put me through some of the Outward Bound stuff in the Officer Candidate School, but basic training is. Training in the Peace Corps was physically a little more rigorous than basic training in the Army. At least that's the way I remember it.

ZAREMBA: [00:13:18] Then when you went to Colombia, what's your first impression as you got off the plane?

STEVENSON: [00:13:22] We flew into Bogota and it was cold as I recall. I was surprised because it was kind of. Bogota, as I remember, was cloudy and damp. In fact, the weather was similar to Ithaca, New York, which I felt was odd. This was supposed to be near the equator. What's going on? But it was, we stayed there for a couple of days and then they shipped us out to the various parts of the country we're going to.

ZAREMBA: [00:13:48] Oh, so you didn't have in-country training for any span of time?

STEVENSON: [00:13:53] No, not that I remember. And I was assigned to be initially to a little small town outside of Cali called Pradera.

ZAREMBA: [00:14:01] About how far of a trip was that from Bogota?

STEVENSON: [00:14:03] Oh, we had to fly I think to Cali as I remember and then took a. Because Cali, that's a couple of mountain valleys away. And there were still in the mountains in the, when I was in Colombia, the bandits in the mountains were financed by Fidel. And so Colombia had been having a civil war since 1948, and they'd killed like 300,000 people in Colombia. And they'd finally come to a sort of a semi truce where they alternated the presidency between the liberals and conservatives. Every four years they would switch back regardless of what the vote was, they could switch back, because that was their way of keeping each other from shooting each other. Obviously, that's broken down on the simple thing. But so going up to the mountains wasn't always all

that safe, so people would tend to fly over and then take busses. And I can't recall how I got there. I had to go through another town I remember. And I can't remember if anybody met me at the airport or not and I got a ride, that I don't recall. But I worked initially with a couple of community development volunteers, Dominick Bresage, I was best man at his wedding, was one. And a guy named Steve Chestnut was the other. He was from Boston I think.

ZAREMBA: [00:15:28] Now you flew into this town and then you somehow got to your site. About how far from the major town?

STEVENSON: [00:15:36] Maybe 30 or 40 miles. My guess is that now Pradera is almost part of Cali, because Cali's grown. When I was there, was about three or four hundred thousand people and now it's two million. It's grown dramatically.

ZAREMBA: [00:15:49] And the town that you were assigned to, about how big was that?

STEVENSON: [00:15:52] Oh, that's maybe three or four thousand people, something like that. They had a town square, Catholic Church, movie theater, a couple of stores, marketplace. And then there's a series of houses. The agricultural elements as well.

ZAREMBA: [00:16:09] Now I'm trying to get a picture of the size that would be. Would that be about the size of Taos proper in a sense?

STEVENSON: [00:16:16] Well, probably physically, yes, my guess is that Taos may have had. Oh, maybe about the same size. I've never thought about that.

ZAREMBA: [00:16:24] And where did you live then when you were in?

STEVENSON: [00:16:26] We lived in a house that I shared with the other two Peace Corps volunteers.

ZAREMBA: [00:16:30] So there were the three of you in that area that were volunteers. Any other Americans or?

STEVENSON: [00:16:36] Well, there weren't any other Americans in Pradera that I remember. We had a cooperative volunteer. They were trained to go down and try and set up fishing and agricultural cooperatives among the Colombians so that they could sell their products and market their products. How do we get the campesinos to make some money out of this? And that guy's name was Steve Diplo, and he would come in, oh, about every other week. And the goal was to try and organize the farmers into a cooperative so that they could market their products more effectively, either agricultural products in Cali and the larger cities or handicraft products in the United States. And they got into some of these carved, uh, elements that they would bundle up together and arrange for an agent to ship it to the United States.

ZAREMBA: [00:17:39] Describe the house.

STEVENSON: [00:17:42] As I remember it was a single story, had three or four bedrooms, so you'd walk right into a main living area was kind of L-shaped as I remember. There was a courtyard in the back and the outhouse was out at the far end with, I seem to recall there was a shower in there. I don't remember the rest of it. I do remember that we must have had a colony of rats living in the attic because at night they would run across the ceiling. Now they may have sounded louder than they really were, I don't know. This could have been the mouse that roared, could have been small animals, but I think they were pretty big. Because one time we saw this tail hanging out of the gutter and the tail is about that long. I said, if that's how long the tail is, the rat's got to be huge. So needless to say, we never went up in the attic. That was, we just let them stay there. We were like, we were renting that house. I can't recall.

ZAREMBA: [00:18:40] Did you have any cats or anything to deal with the rats?

STEVENSON: [00:18:42] I don't think so. I don't recall sort of having any pets.

ZAREMBA: [00:18:45] And you had a shower in the outhouse. Did you have running water?

STEVENSON: [00:18:52] We had running water. But we had a saying in Pradera that I think if whatever happened. When it rained really hard, it would turn the water brown because it would be coming out of the mountains, so all the erosion was going to the water supply. And it would overwhelm the little generator they had in the town which was running off of water from the stream, and it would overrun it until the lights would go out. Well, they had a saying that if a cow pisses in the mountains, the water turns brown and the lights go out. It was not that quite that extreme, but electricity was a little bit of a mess, but both basically worked pretty closely.

ZAREMBA: [00:19:39] Was it typically like a particular time in the evening from 6:00 to 9:00 or any time of day you had electricity?

STEVENSON: [00:19:46] I don't remember it going off at particular times, it may have, I just don't remember. It was on most evenings, I know that.

ZAREMBA: [00:19:53] So you had electric lights?

STEVENSON: [00:19:55] Yes, we had electric lights.

ZAREMBA: [00:19:58] What kind of kitchen facilities were there? Wood stove or?

STEVENSON: [00:20:08] I'm trying to recall. I don't remember if it was wood fired or electric stove. I don't think it was gas.

ZAREMBA: [00:20:13] Now did you have somebody come in and cook and do laundry or how did you work that out?

STEVENSON: [00:20:19] I don't remember. I know we had, I suspect we had somebody come in and we had the laundry taken care of, but I think we did most of our own cooking. At least that's what I recall. Cooking, it obviously wasn't memorable enough for me to remember what that was. I think we also ate out a lot. There was always this, you know,

usually as a Peace Corps volunteer, you tended to get invited to a lot of people's homes for dinner. And then I think they also tried to every once in a while, or a lot of times, to play get the gringo. So let's see if we can serve some exotic Colombian thing to see if we see, you know, how well, how macho they are. Will they eat it? You know, you stirred the chicken soup and the feet would float past. Is that going to turn you off or are you going to go ahead with this? So it was. And maybe they did it inadvertently, but it was the truth. We sure all felt like they were playing get the gringo.

STEVENSON: [00:21:10] And I stayed in there about two to three months, and then they got a job for me with the Department of Public Works in Cali, where I was essentially their free architect, and they could put me on any project they wanted. I'd draw plans up for schools and this library, a library up in Tuluá, which is about 16 miles north of Cali.

ZAREMBA: [00:21:40] So now you were in this town with the three of you, the other two were community development did you say?

STEVENSON: [00:21:45] Community development.

ZAREMBA: [00:21:45] OK, and you were there for two or three months?

STEVENSON: [00:21:49] Pretty much as I remember.

ZAREMBA: [00:21:50] And there was no particular assignment then at that time.

STEVENSON: [00:21:53] I was just supporting their community development. The idea was, first of all, to help me get my language skills improved a little bit. Plus just getting to know how things worked in Colombia. And I don't think there was, they hadn't quite arranged for an opening yet. I may have been there longer than two or three months.

ZAREMBA: [00:22:09] And what kinds of projects might you've got involved with initially with these? Or were they still kind of getting their sea legs?

STEVENSON: [00:22:15] Well, they'd been there a while. They'd been there probably almost a year by the time I got there. They were one of the first Colombian groups to come in. So they've been there and maybe it was six months, I can't recall, but they'd been there long enough that they knew all the folks in town and.

ZAREMBA: [00:22:33] So they did a lot to help you get integrated into the community.

STEVENSON: [00:22:35] Yeah, so I got introduced to a lot of folks. But I do remember we did put on a, uh, that was right when the Beatles came in. They had a talent night at the local movie theater, and so we put on a talent show. Dominick plays, he was the only musician. He could play the accordion, and he had his accordion. So we put on his imitation of the Beatles numbers with mops on our heads. And I think we scared the Colombians. They thought that some banditos were coming and taking over the talent show. Steve Chestnut could play the guitar and I could shout, about my only talent. But that lasted about three or four months with a lot of runs up into the surrounding hills on jeeps.

ZAREMBA: [00:23:34] Was it like a rainforest area?

STEVENSON: [00:23:36] No, not really. It was, well, as you got more up into the mountains, it got to the bottom. The real rainforest was down near on the way to Buenaventura where it rains 300 inches a year. And if you don't put a light bulb in your closet, your shoes will turn green overnight. Just really it just rains every day.

ZAREMBA: [00:24:00] Now you were more up in the mountains. Was it a bit cooler?

STEVENSON: [00:24:03] Oh, Cali is in the Cauca River Valley, which is probably, you know, 2,000 feet or something like that. But it's only four degrees north of the equator, but it's 85 degrees all year round. Nice little breeze comes up at 4:30 in the afternoon. So you got done with whatever you're doing and go sit down at a sidewalk cafe and have a beer. We got to know a lot of guys from the Bank of London and Montreal and

we convinced them that Peace Corps guys didn't make any money, so they should pay for most of the beer and that worked out pretty well. And so we really had a, it's an almost climate.

ZAREMBA: [00:24:39] And now this was Cali, this wasn't your little village?

STEVENSON: [00:24:43] That was Cali, but you commuted back and forth, so we would go into Cali.

ZAREMBA: [00:24:46] How would you get back and forth to Cali?

STEVENSON: [00:24:49] You'd pay for one of the little busses that would come by. Or you find one of the fathers of one of your friends, or friends or people you're working with, who would drive in that day.

ZAREMBA: [00:25:01] And what were the busses, like vans or big ones with chickens?

STEVENSON: [00:25:04] Yeah, they had all the sorts of stuff and it was, I thought it was kind of humorous because Colombians always would fight to see who can get on the bus first. The bus would pull up and people were fighting their way on. But people would take their chickens on there. And I can't remember what it probably cost. 15 centavos or some? I think it was to ride the bus.

ZAREMBA: [00:25:31] Now, if they all fought to get on, I assume you ended up standing most of the time?

STEVENSON: [00:25:34] No, usually you could find a seat. There were, uh, I remember the busses, they just had long benches and you kind of got in from the side, sort of like one of those trams at Disneyworld or something like that.

ZAREMBA: [00:25:45] Open sides so you come in.

STEVENSON: [00:25:46] Yeah, you come in on the sides. And some of them where you walked in the door and walked down an aisle like a traditional bus.

I don't remember standing all that much. We did go to a sort of a town that was between Pradera and Cali. It was called Palmira if I remember correctly, where they had exchange students that these guys had gotten to know that were getting ready to go to the United States. So we'd go have lunch with the families of these kids that were getting sent up to Chillicothe, Ohio. I don't know why I remember that. Chillicothe was the name I remember. And so they wanted to make sure that their kids learned English. And so they would invite the Peace Corps volunteers so their sons could practice before they got to Chillicothe, Ohio.

STEVENSON: [00:26:38] And it was kind of like a triangle. There was a back road that went into straight from Pradera into Cali with the sugar cane fields, and then there was the main road that went to Palmira. So we took the bus, we went the main road to Palmira and then back into Cali. Or if you got a ride from somebody, you took this little two-lane road.

ZAREMBA: [00:26:57] What was it like, was it curvy driving up and down hills?

STEVENSON: [00:27:00] No, it was pretty flat. Cauca River Valley is pretty flat. It's all sugar cane. If you went off of the valley floor, then it got pretty hilly. But the mountains in Colombia, you know, they go from 12 to 15,000 feet and green right over the top. I think the tree line's at 15,000 feet.

ZAREMBA: [00:27:24] And was there a lot of traffic on the roads or just the busses?

STEVENSON: [00:27:28] Yeah, there was quite a bit of traffic. I don't remember the traffic that much.

ZAREMBA: [00:27:34] And what about the drivers and driving, any harrowing stories?

STEVENSON: [00:27:37] Oh, well, we have. One of the fathers, and it may have been Dominick's future father-in-law, I can't recall, took us to the cockfights one night and that was in the outskirts of Cali. So we went to the cockfights and all those betting's going on. I couldn't figure out how



they were betting. They'd put little money in these little rubber balls and split it up and throw it around. Somehow, if you caught the thing and there was a way of betting that you would put your money in the ball and threw it back and the bookie would take your money and write it all down. And it was all depending on, you know, until one of the roosters died. That was the. And I'm not sure whether cockfighting was legal in Colombia or not. Obviously, it's not legal here. But the ride home was, their sort of tradition is that the ride home was that you stopped at every bar on the way to get a shot of aguardiente, which was their licorice flavored liquor.

ZAREMBA: [00:28:38] It's really potent?

STEVENSON: [00:28:39] Well, it was like a cognac. Well, it was made out of sugar cane, and it obviously wasn't anywhere near as nice as cognac. And so we were stopping at one of them, and I think he was just blitzed and we were driving back and he was driving a jeep and we were driving on the wrong side of the road, going about 60 miles an hour. And there were these two headlights coming in front of us, and I was about ready to jump out of jeep. And two headlights came toward us and they happened to be two motorcycles and they split and then went around on each side. And I about had to clean off my shorts. Fortunately, I was probably a little bit wrong because I didn't, it didn't occur to me that we were really in danger until the last minute. I'll never forget that ride, but fortunately it turned out OK.

ZAREMBA: [00:29:26] Now from the little town, how did you get transferred to Cali?

STEVENSON: [00:29:30] I think that was always kind of been, the Peace Corps was trying to make that happen. They just didn't have the logistics arranged with the Department of Public Works. And so I can't remember the sequence of events. Because I lived for three or four months up in Tuluá, which is about an hour's drive north up the Cauca River Valley. The Cauca River runs across north to south.

ZAREMBA: [00:29:57] And this was different than the little town with the two community development volunteers. Now you moved someplace else?

STEVENSON: [00:30:01] Then I moved up to Tuluá, which was to work on this library project.

ZAREMBA: [00:30:08] How did you get involved with that?

STEVENSON: [00:30:13] I can't remember.

ZAREMBA: [00:30:14] Actually, no, you were the architect.

STEVENSON: [00:30:16] I can't remember if I went to the. I think what happened was I went to the Department of Public Works first and then they said, well, we've got this project with this architect, you know, up in Tuluá. There was this old building that was in the center of town that they'd gotten partway done, and I don't know if it was part of a hotel or something else. And then the project had been abandoned. So it was this thing was just sitting there and it was essentially was two brick walls and a concrete roof over the front and a couple of columns on the back. And they wanted to build an intermediate floor and put glass on each end and make it a library, because it was right on the town square. And so they sent me up there to get that project going, which I think was finally built, although it was built after I left.

ZAREMBA: [00:31:00] The town wanted that library?

STEVENSON: [00:31:02] Yeah, well, kind of. Excuse me, the state of Valle del Cauca. Because I have the sign that says my name on it, that was the sign they put on the public library.

ZAREMBA: [00:31:14] So you got a little plaque there with your name on it?

STEVENSON: [00:31:17] Well, that was the. Well, they had this building and I'm sure that as the local politicians were lobbying to the governor's office in Cali. Colombia's divided up into a series of states or provinces and the Cauca River Valley is one of them. Cali is the capital, but Tuluá was one of the cities. In fact Tuluá was where that American Airlines plane crashed on its way to Cali in the early '70s. It was coming into the

airport in Cali and lost power or whatever and crashed. But it was, hopefully it didn't knock out my library, but unfortunately that's less important and unfortunately for folks that were on the plane.

STEVENSON: [00:32:05] Um, but I lived up there for three or four months and worked on this project.

ZAREMBA: [00:32:10] Were you the only Peace Corps volunteer?

STEVENSON: [00:32:12] I was the only one in, in fact, there were a couple of other volunteers up there that were teaching English.

ZAREMBA: [00:32:19] And what were your living accommodations there?

STEVENSON: [00:32:21] I had an apartment. Just a one room apartment that I went out and built my own furniture for.

ZAREMBA: [00:32:28] Oh, tell that story.

STEVENSON: [00:32:30] I drew it up and went to the lumber yard and bought a bunch of wood. With hand tools, cut it up and made a bed and a series of tables and some other things. It was, I think it was on the second or third floor, third floor over the top of a bunch of shops. But it was, you know, it was austere, but okay. And the architect, his name was Carlos Potes, P-O-T-E-S. He was Colombian, but he'd studied architecture at the University of Miami in Miami, Florida. And his wife was an American. He'd met her in college and she was living, she'd gone back with him to Colombia. So he was. And they had three or four kids, but I was over their house a lot getting dinner and he was taking me around and showing me all the things to do. And his name is on that sign too. And that was probably the project that I'm really sure did get built. One of the challenges of being an architect is it always takes two or three years for your project. It takes you a year to design it, a year to build it. You're only there for 18 months. I was there for actually 22 months because I extended for a few months at the end. But things get built after you left, and I haven't been back since then.

ZAREMBA: [00:34:08] So they had a good work crew to get this done and no problems with bureaucracy to speak of then?

STEVENSON: [00:34:13] Not really that I recall. They, and there probably was, but they weren't telling me about them. I just do the drawings and they figured out how to get the, get everything built. It wasn't like here where we'd go out and watch construction, make sure they're doing it correctly. They had me off on another project by that time. Um, but I had to do everything in the metric system and in Spanish. So I, which, you know, I had my technical dictionary out there to, you know, what's this called? And the metric system is, once you get used to, isn't too tough. But I actually did it in both feet and inches and the metric system, because almost all of the building materials either were made in the United States, or a lot of them, or they were made with dies and tools that were made in the United States. So you'd have four meters of six inch pipe because the pipe, it all came from the United States. That's probably not true anymore, but it was certainly true back then.

ZAREMBA: [00:35:21] You know, this is still all in your first year there?

STEVENSON: [00:35:24] Yeah.

ZAREMBA: [00:35:25] Okay, so then after the library project, what's um?

STEVENSON: [00:35:28] When that started getting under construction then they moved me back and put me in the Department of Public Works in Cali. And I designed a couple of schools as I recall. I think I may have the plans someplace here. I haven't been able to find them.

ZAREMBA: [00:35:46] Now did you work with a number of architects in the public works department? Or were you it?

STEVENSON: [00:35:51] I was sort of their free architect. So if they had a job that, you know, that they needed an architect for, then I was the guy that could go out with them to go out to a community, look at the site, take some pictures, talk to folks to find out what they wanted. Draw up a sort of plan so that they could then figure out whether they could fit it in

the budget. And so I was, I could essentially give them a little political cover. I could go out and I could talk to the community. And so that the politicians say, well, see, we were responding to your request. You know, we've got the plans started. And it could have taken four or five years after that before there was anything, I have no idea. I think they did build a couple of things that I designed.

ZAREMBA: [00:36:36] Did they have other architects there in training?

STEVENSON: [00:36:38] They had a couple of other architects, but a lot of the projects were done by architects in private practice as opposed to working directly for the firm. Most of the other folks in the department I was in were engineers, I think. I don't recall another architect. Memory's getting kind of fuzzy. I remember we did everything in ink on linen paper, as opposed to the computers we use today.

ZAREMBA: [00:37:10] Was it a regular eight to five job?

STEVENSON: [00:37:12] Pretty much.

ZAREMBA: [00:37:14] And you have to dress in a suit?

STEVENSON: [00:37:17] No, it was mostly. Cali was, there were some a lot of, you know, the politicians are all dressed in suits. Everybody else dressed in a shirt similar to what you have on, or what I've got on. It was, uh, we didn't have to put on a coat and tie, at least not that I remember. I'm sure I had one because I had one for the wedding, but I don't remember anything else.

ZAREMBA: [00:37:43] Now how is it similar or different from working in an architect's office here in the States at the time, would you guess?

STEVENSON: [00:37:50] Oh, I think you have a lot more responsibility when you're a Peace Corps volunteer. I mean, you got, they just said, you know, it's a school, go design it. And you got a chance to do everything. I'd do the lighting plan, I'd do the structure, had to do everything else. And you just kind of keep your fingers crossed that you've made it strong

enough. But it was just a phenomenal opportunity to get a chance. You had to, you know, get to know clients, you had to keep them happy, had to work with my boss, who was the director of engineering. His last name was Soha, I remember. I think it was Henry. And he was the one that, you know, decided, you know, what kind of jobs he wanted me to work on and everything else. Looked over what I drew and said, no, we don't do it that way here, we do it this way.

STEVENSON: [00:38:44] But you just get a lot more opportunity and at least at that time, the Colombians, of course, thought Peace Corps volunteers were like gods. You were pretty, they treated you very special. They always got invited into their house. I understand a lot of volunteers had trouble when they came back to the United States because when they came back here, yeah, we're just Joe Schmo. What's so special about you? Well, if you're the only American in town, it's a huge deal. And I always remember you'd go into every bar and there was, at least at that time, there was always a picture of Jack Kennedy behind the bar. They had no clue who their own president was, but they knew who Kennedy was. And that's because the priests. He's Catholic, you know. And so they really promoted him. Most of the priests were all Spaniards.

ZAREMBA: [00:39:38] That's interesting, so it wasn't so much necessarily that Kennedy was the great visionary in the States, but because he was Catholic.

STEVENSON: [00:39:43] He's Catholic. They thought he, and they knew there was a connection with the Peace Corps. But the pictures of Kennedy were in the bars before we ever got there. There was no picture of the Colombian president. There was a picture of Jack Kennedy behind the bar. I'm not sure that's where he would have wanted all his pictures to be, but it was a. That was the real link in the community. It was obvious that he was extremely well received in South America.

ZAREMBA: [00:40:12] Now, you lived first with the two community development in a house, then you had the apartment by the library. Now when you moved.

STEVENSON: [00:40:21] Then I took over, there were a series of these business development or cooperative volunteers that were in Cali that we're working with a variety of different cooperative groups trying to develop things. And they had, one of the guys had an apartment in Cali that was, it was I think, a one bedroom apartment in this little, in the whole group of these are kind of built up on like. They're all white stucco and you walk up a couple steps. It's almost like in a, you know, you see them in the Greek pictures, you know, in the Olympics or an Italian hill town. Really kind of a neat little thing, have windows on the courtyard. And really, we're just kind of passing that off from one volunteer to the other so we didn't have to renegotiate our lease. And it was about a 10 block walk to my office, so it was really quite nice.

ZAREMBA: [00:41:18] And so you lived by yourself.

STEVENSON: [00:41:20] I lived by myself.

ZAREMBA: [00:41:22] Did you have somebody to help you to cook or do laundry?

STEVENSON: [00:41:25] Nah, I did that myself. Well, laundry, I gave that to somebody else to do, I don't remember. I don't remember going to a laundromat or anything like that, but I didn't have, there was no servants or anything like that. Of course, the people want me to, and I know the other volunteers in other parts of the world had them.

ZAREMBA: [00:41:46] Now you walk to work, did you have a bicycle too? Or was walking?

STEVENSON: [00:41:50] Primarily walking. I don't remember having, um, I know some guys had motor scooters and things like that, but I don't remember.

ZAREMBA: [00:42:03] What was it like walking through town? How would you describe that experience?

STEVENSON: [00:42:12] I remember you walked out of this little neighborhood and you got on this tree-lined street that was like a boulevard. And there

were all these sidewalk cafes on it and you walk along and you got to a little river tributary and right that was where the post office. It wasn't really the post office, it was the airmail post office run by the airline. Colombia's normal postal delivery system was, uh, suspect. If they sensed there was anything in your letter or package, it's probably got opened and something got taken out of it. But the air mail worked, that was done by the airline. And so everybody sending everything by air mail. And so you had to go down there and stand in line and check to see if you've gotten any mail. And that was right on the way.

STEVENSON: [00:43:00] You'd cross this little river and then you were into the town square and the building I worked in was on the town square. It was on the far side of the town square. It's the sort of traditional, you'd see there, like a Mexican town square with, you know, 10 or 15 big palm trees in the center of it. And there were all I'd say eight to nine story buildings around it. Pretty good size. Colombia's got, their cities are really quite well developed. There's the University of, uh, Universidad del Valle, which was I think founded by the Rockefellers in Cali, was the university that we had also some volunteers that taught at the university. Taught primarily English if I recall correctly. And so we would get together with that group periodically for the soccer games or the bullfights.

ZAREMBA: [00:43:59] Yeah, I was just thinking of that. You described your work a bit. How about your leisure time, what were some things?

STEVENSON: [00:44:03] I really got into watching soccer because they had professional soccer teams there and most of the, a lot of the really good players were from Argentina. The Colombians are rabid sports fans, especially for football or soccer. And they're just continually yelling the whole game, I don't know how they come out with any voice at all. But they had some really good players and it was a professional league, just like baseball or football is here in United States. Colombia probably had 10 or 15 teams. Every town had a team. In fact, Cali had two teams. Bogota probably had a couple, and I'm sure Medellin had a couple too.



ZAREMBA: [00:44:49] You say that brings back memories of me in my training. They taught us how to play soccer. Did you have that too?

STEVENSON: [00:44:54] Yeah. Back when I was in the Army, I came back from Vietnam and I was a tack officer at Officer Candidate School. I used soccer as a fitness thing in the Army.

ZAREMBA: [00:45:06] So did you play soccer in Colombia then?

STEVENSON: [00:45:09] Oh, a little bit, not very much. I mean, they could just run circles around me every day. Forget it, I was a post standing there and they were like. I could maybe slow them down a little bit but.

ZAREMBA: [00:45:19] So you'd occasionally do a game or something?

STEVENSON: [00:45:21] We'd occasionally get into a game. I do remember that the, I think it's in the summer that the Spanish, the really good Spanish bullfighters would come to South America. I think their season is in the winter or it's the other way around. I can't remember. It may have been in the winter because their seasons. But we had El Portales, who was the rock star of bullfighters in the early '60s.

ZAREMBA: [00:45:49] Was that your first bullfight?

STEVENSON: [00:45:50] Yeah.

ZAREMBA: [00:45:51] And what was that like?

STEVENSON: [00:45:55] I actually found it really interesting, I mean, it's a phenomenal pageant. I'm sure many people feel it's too bloody and everything else, but it was a phenomenal pageant. I did see one bull spared, which is really unusual. There's a great movie about a bull and a little boy that takes place in Mexico. Anyway. But we saw all of the really good bullfighters from Spain who come through Colombia sort of on their off season and they would stay for a couple of weeks. But bullfights were always packed. You've got to learn why the shade seats were really a lot better than sun seats because it gets pretty hot. We'd

always go and, you know, you fill the bag full of wine. We had a good time. Between that and the soccer matches, it was uh.

ZAREMBA: [00:46:50] Were they as rabid at the bullfights with, like the soccer where everybody's screaming all time?

STEVENSON: [00:46:55] Not quite as rabid. But they would really get into it if the bullfighter and the bull was aggressive and the bullfighter was really good. I mean, it's really a, you know, sort of ad hoc choreography the way they do those things. It's actually a beautiful way they do the passes. Like a ballet, a very dangerous ballet. I think we saw one guy get gored, although not that badly. The fight is definitely to the advantage of the matador. I mean, there's definitely. But it was, the Colombians really got into it. They'd get into that.

ZAREMBA: [00:47:37] Did you have any particular friends you'd go to these, either Peace Corps or Colombian?

STEVENSON: [00:47:41] Usually there were these guys from the Bank of London and Montreal that we got to know quite well. And there were some other Americans that, this one guy who was a mutual fund salesman ended up running into us at this bar where we'd have beer in the afternoon. And he would go around Colombia and he was trying to sell mutual fund, United States mutual funds. And he'd go into, part of Colombia has the Rio Atrato is one of the deepest rivers in the world and it runs through Colombia's Pacific jungle called the Chocó. They have these guys out there, it's right out of Lord Jim. They have these gold miners, American gold miners, that have a dredge out on this river parked in the middle of the jungle. I could see Humphrey Bogart step around the corner. And they're dredging for gold, and they run the generator on their boat. It not only runs their dredging operation, but it runs the electricity for a town.

STEVENSON: [00:48:43] And so this guy would go in there and try and sell them mutual funds. And he was selling, which I think was ultimately deemed to be corrupt, which is this fund of funds by some guy named Bernie Cornfeld of Switzerland that eventually, I think, either went to jail or

disappeared into the Bahamas or someplace like that. Well, he was selling funds for this guy and he was in there trying to sell him to these coal miners, American gold miners, excuse me, in the Chocó. And he said he would go into the bars there in this little town. And everybody has a machete and they'd get into fights and the guy would pull his machete and chop the other guy's arm off right there in the bar. Ugh! I never saw anything like that.

ZAREMBA: [00:49:24] Did you ever meet any of these gold miners coming to your town?

STEVENSON: [00:49:26] No, I never saw them. But these guys were total loners. Two American gold miners on a dredge up in the middle of some river in, it wasn't the Amazon, but it was the equivalent on the Pacific side. Middle of the jungle, you know, sitting on a boat, dredging up gold. So we'd meet that series of those kinds of folks, and it was a, I had a really good time. I hope I did enough good buildings I designed, but I think I got a lot more out of it than the Colombians did. I think a lot of people, of volunteers feel that way. They got more out of it than the host country's nationals.

ZAREMBA: [00:50:11] Any other anecdotes about either the leisure or travel or you mentioned the jungle in that area.

STEVENSON: [00:50:17] Well, we had one of these cooperative volunteers had a fishing cooperative he was trying to set up in Buenaventura, which is the town, it's about 60 or 60 miles or so west of Cali, right on the Pacific. And it's that part of Colombia that rains 300 inches a year. So it's raining all the time. And they had a fishing village that was out and a priest was down there, was trying to organize the fishermen into a cooperative so they could sell their fish and make some money. And so he brought in our volunteers to help him organize the fishermen. Or more importantly, he could organize the fishermen but help them organize the delivery system. How do you bring your fish in? How do you organize it? How do you sell it? Because they were, you know, they'd just come in with three fish and go into the market and try to sell it, as opposed to getting organized and having an approach.

STEVENSON: [00:51:11] So they brought me down there to help them go out and look at this fishing village to see what we could do to help improve their life out of it. And they were on this island about three miles out into the estuary outside the port of Buenaventura. It was an island that I think the top highest spot was six feet above the ocean. It was like a sandbar and all the houses were on stilts because the tide would go up and down. And one of the projects they wanted me to do was to put in a sewer system right there because they would just go out and use the beach as a bathroom and come back in, but the tide would come in and wash everything out. You know, I'm sure you could, there was a system you could come up with today that would deal with that issue, but I didn't know. I mean, I was architect, I wasn't a civil engineer. So my conclusion was that they developed an ecologically very friendly system and they should stick with it. I didn't have any better idea.

STEVENSON: [00:52:07] We did through AID get a generator for them that we brought out to this island and set it up so they could have electricity and lights in there. I have no idea whether we got any spare parts for them because it was a big diesel generator, so they had to load the diesel oil out there and it was a. But we had lights strung between all the little grass huts with the electric lights, and it at least worked for one night. But then we go out fishing with them a couple of times.

ZAREMBA: [00:52:41] With nets type of thing?

STEVENSON: [00:52:42] Nets, they did some nets. Some spearfishing. They had these little watches that they go out and they make them. The guy we went out with at one time and we asked him what he was going out for and he was going out for a fish or shark. We landed a small shark and got it in the boat, it's thrashing around. And we got one of our guys, he's got a machete and he's whacking away at the top of the shark and it's not making any difference at all. And finally, this Colombian guy comes up and he does like a judo chop in the right place. A machete wasn't such a. And then they, blood off on the side, and I think they kind of were, you know, they weren't, they did the real fishing when

they when the Peace Corps volunteers weren't around giving them, you know, distracting them from their work.

ZAREMBA: [00:53:33] Now was it a boat the size of a shrimp boat or an American fishing boat or?

STEVENSON: [00:53:37] Well, it was probably maybe 20, 25 feet long at the most.

ZAREMBA: [00:53:42] I assume motor powered?

STEVENSON: [00:53:44] They had an outboard motor on the back.

ZAREMBA: [00:53:49] How many of you would be in this boat?

STEVENSON: [00:53:51] We had four of us in the boat when we were going out. It was relatively small, as I remember, it had a little cabin on it.

ZAREMBA: [00:53:58] Was this out in the Pacific?

STEVENSON: [00:54:00] Most of what we were fishing with within the estuaries, in these islands off the point of Buenaventura. We weren't really out in the Pacific and it was relatively calm, excuse me, as I recall. We weren't out there with, you know, four- or six-foot swells going up and down. It was actually the most, I guess, most primitive part of life in Colombia because when we got into the cities of Colombia, it was really quite like going to Spain. I mean, it was really quite, very nice lifestyle. It was very southern, almost like being on the southern coast of Spain or something like that. But when you got out in the jungle and it's probably still true today, it's extremely different, like being in the Amazon River basin.

ZAREMBA: [00:54:50] Well, interesting variety of experiences, both work and leisure. I'm thinking of that sewer system for the island versus a library versus schools. Any other kinds of work projects that you were involved in?

STEVENSON: [00:55:06] I've been trying to remember when, after you called us. Those are the main ones that I remember. I'm sure I worked on a lot of other things and they brought me in on, you know, we'd go out and we'd look at stuff and make conclusions. A lot of times they kind of brought Peace Corps volunteers along because they could, you know, you were their, well, here's my architect. We served that role because it helped out their prestige. You also learn in Colombia that if you wear sunglasses, they always call you doctor, regardless of whether you have any medical background or academic training. So we always would wear sunglasses because that gets you extra respect. Most Americans, Peace Corps volunteers, they'd call doctor just as a respect thing, regardless of whether they deserved it. It's a gorgeous country, it's a shame that it's torn up today.

ZAREMBA: [00:56:00] Was there a drug issue back then?

STEVENSON: [00:56:01] This was all pre cocaine in Colombia. That all happened, I think, in the '70s when that got going. The bandits who up in the mountains were this vestige from the civil war that had been going on in Colombia. By the time we got there, this war was almost probably into its 20, 25 years. So there were young teenagers that have been born up in the mountains and knew nothing else. And Fidel was sending them money to try and disrupt the Colombian government. At least that's what I understood.

ZAREMBA: [00:56:39] If they're trying to disrupt, they might have a reaction to the Peace Corps. Did you get into any of that?

STEVENSON: [00:56:44] We're didn't get to it. Some of the college students, you know, were convinced we all CIA agents. That's what they would accuse us of being. You know, you can't argue against that. I mean, how are you going to prove you're not a CIA agent? You doth protest too much. So that was, a lot of the college students there were communists. So they were sort of sympathetic to the guys up in the mountains, but then Fidel ran out of money and they found a better source. I think originally the coca leaves came up from Peru and

Ecuador, and they processed them in Colombia and shipped them over. But now I guess they grow them in Colombia.

STEVENSON: [00:57:29] We made a couple of trips, made a trip down to Machu Picchu, to Cusco in Peru. There I saw that all the Indians have no teeth. They chew coca leaves. And to get the effect of the coca leaves, you have to chew it with a catalyst, which is limestone. They'd chew these stone tablets, and ultimately, it just grinds their teeth down. And, you know, so they'll smile at you and you can just see little, like they have little baby teeth there. That was a really interesting trip. We went to Lima, down to Cusco. And 12,000 feet is a long way in the air, I'm sucking wind. But that's where they have all of the houses and the buildings built out of these huge stones that were put together without mortar. And they somehow shaped the stones that they all stick together, just like that stone wall.

ZAREMBA: [00:58:28] That's up 12,000 feet?

STEVENSON: [00:58:29] Yeah.

ZAREMBA: [00:58:30] How did you get up there?

STEVENSON: [00:58:31] You flew, I mean, we flew to Cusco. Then you'd take a train to Machu Picchu, which is 14,000 feet. Going back to Cusco, took another train over to Lake Titicaca, which is between Peru and Bolivia. And you can take a boat that goes across, a night boat, you get in at six o'clock and get on the boat. Six in the morning it arrives on the Bolivian side. Then you'd take a bus down to the train. First, take the train down to the La Paz, but we got there and the boat guys were on strike, so we had to stay in a hotel. We would be inside for a night and then take the boat the next day cause they settled the strike, but by that time, a train had already left on the other side so we had to take a bus which broke down. And we had some other Peace Corps volunteers on the bus and they had their parents with them. The guy, fortunately, one of them, the father of one of the Peace Corps volunteers, was a mechanic in the United States so he could fix the bus. The rest of us were.

ZAREMBA: [00:59:38] You mentioned the buildings with the high tolerances.

STEVENSON: [00:59:42] Yeah, well, that's the, that was sort of a hallmark of a lot of Inca architecture, was their ability to. And I'm not sure how they did it, with water or sand or pools or whatever. The rocks don't appear that they chiseled away at them, but they figured out how to fit them all together. You know, with like maybe a 32nd of an inch between them all the way around. No mortar. It's just phenomenal. And of course, that's who, what was the guy that wrote that book *The Chariots of the Gods*?

ZAREMBA: [01:00:16] Von Daniken?

STEVENSON: [01:00:17] Yeah, whatever his name was. Of course, he was convinced they must have had help from outer space, which I thought was what an arrogant attitude. That was obviously one of the big advantages of being a Peace Corps volunteer, you got to get a good amount of vacation. Go see some part of the world you'd never have a chance to see.

ZAREMBA: [01:00:37] I remember you started out saying that part of joining was a sense of adventure. So you had, any other adventures that you went on? Whether it was soccer or bullfights or Machu Picchu.

STEVENSON: [01:00:50] Um. Just trying to.

ZAREMBA: [01:00:55] Two motorcycles coming at you.

STEVENSON: [01:00:56] Two motorcycles was a, um. I do recall one, we had a going away party for this guy that was the mutual fund salesman. He and his British wife were heading back to someplace, so we had this going away party for him and ended up in a. We had this American kid who was tagging along with us.

ZAREMBA: [01:01:20] He wasn't Peace Corps?



STEVENSON: [01:01:22] He wasn't Peace Corps, he was the son of a military guy or something. Anyway, he was belligerent, got drunk. The first time I've ever seen somebody try and hit another guy over the head with a beer bottle. It went kaboom and it just bounced right back and this kid was, didn't even faze him. Then he broke a chair and chairs got broken. All of a sudden in this bar we were in, all of the police come in. And the police all have Uzis or some machine guns, and we're all lined up against the wall. And I've just trying not to spill my drink. These are valuable things, I can't afford to let this get away. So we had to go down, we had to pay a fine, pay for the damage to the bar and do all this kind of stuff. And take one guy who got cut a little bit, get his ticket, taken to the hospital and get his stitches and stuff. It's a memorable evening. Everybody got sober in a hurry.

ZAREMBA: [01:02:21] You mentioned stitches. Now did you ever run into any health problems when you were there?

STEVENSON: [01:02:24] I had a little dysentery, which like everybody gets. I didn't have any other problems, at least not that I remember. And they gave you those pills and those worked reasonably well.

STEVENSON: [01:02:37] They took us horseback riding. My boss, the director of public works, took us up to this town called El Aguila, which means eagle in Spanish. And the only way to get there was on horseback, so we had to get a horse and that's also when I saw that he had a 38 special stuck in the waistband behind his back. Well, so they get this horse and I think they were playing get the gringo. They go, let's get this really lively horse. And it had an English saddle, which I didn't know, I'm used to the Westerner saddle. So I go up and I grab for the saddle horn and there's none there. I almost, I kind of went right over the top and on the other side. Got on the horse and I finally survived, made it up to the town. I'm not much of a horseman, but it was. If you saw that movie Romancing the Stone? I'm sure those pictures weren't taken in Colombia, but it was a village very similar to those kinds of things. I don't think there was any warlords there. It was just a poor mountain village with, uh, I can't remember what we were up there for. We were up there to look at some potential project, but I probably drew

something up afterwards. I thought the Peace Corps would be a phenomenal experience for me.

ZAREMBA: [01:03:45] So it fulfilled your hope for some adventures. And now at the end of your tour, what sense of achievement, failures, satisfaction, regrets?

STEVENSON: [01:03:59] Well, it's kind of, it was kind of. You're getting ready to leave, it's always a little bittersweet because, you know, you feel like you really haven't been there long enough to do what you wanted to do, but you're also ready to go home.

ZAREMBA: [01:04:11] Right.

STEVENSON: [01:04:11] So, you know, I stayed extra two months because we just from. I was normally supposed to have gotten out in like September, and I stayed on. I asked to extend on to December and I think was primarily to finish one of the plans for one of my projects. And since I figured, well, if I'm going to be 1A for the draft, I'd rather show up in December and spend Christmas at home, and then I'll worry about that later. So I stayed home for a couple of months. But by the time I got to December, I was ready to leave. It was about time to move on or do something else. But I think we, at least I felt that I wasn't there long enough to have the impact that I would have liked to have. I think I accomplished some things, but I don't know that I accomplished as much as I could have. I mean, I think if you were given the opportunity to do it over, so to speak, like do it today, with what I know today, I'd obviously get a lot more, I could accomplish a lot more. Maybe, maybe not.

ZAREMBA: [01:05:16] What kinds of after thoughts or what might you have changed in hindsight?

STEVENSON: [01:05:25] I think, you know, sort of had a little better understanding of what the objective is, you know, which was to try and help them. The objective in architecture is not to do plans, it's to help people figure out what they need and to help provide some visual documentation of what

their goal or their dream is. So it's a lot of collaborative working with folks, that I probably didn't have the language skills to do. But it's not just doing the plans. The plans are not as important as the collaborative effort. That's something I've learned later that looking back on it that I would have done it a bit differently. I think by and large, I think it all worked out really well.

STEVENSON: [01:06:10] I had sort of three phases to my two year career down there. I had both been out in a rural village, sort of intermediate town, and then a big city. And being in a big city, big city was relative. It was about four or five hundred thousand people. It wasn't being in New York or someplace like that. And Cali at least at that time, was a big city, but it was relatively clean. I do remember sitting there for some festival that they had fireworks looking out and they had this big slum called Circo or something like that, it was on the mountains. Just all mud shacks and stuff made out of tin cans and things like that, just thousands of people up on this hillside.

STEVENSON: [01:07:00] And every time it would rain, some of them would be washed down. Sort of like the houses around Hong Kong where they would have mudslides. But there is just a whole group of people in Colombia, that just weren't even a part of any economy, they were just left out altogether. I'm not sure we were responding to that at all. Maybe you couldn't do much for that. Maybe there were some nurses, there were some nurses there that were working in the hospital that may have been able to do something in the clinics. Certainly, I don't think the community development volunteers or the cooperatives or myself as an architect were having any impact on that sort of have-not population.

ZAREMBA: [01:07:40] And did some of those kind of mudslides happen while you were there?

STEVENSON: [01:07:43] I don't recall any, but they always had some disaster going on. And you'd read it in the paper. There were some problems. Of course, there was no plumbing there, there is no. So who knows what the disease, I'm sure was rampant. I don't know how many people

were out there, but it was a significant slum on the hillside going up into the mountains on the west side of Cali.

ZAREMBA: [01:08:12] How much of your project was sort of you defining as you went along? So we can get a sense of that.

STEVENSON: [01:08:19] A little bit. It was like, you know, going to work for the Department of Public Works and then I had to sit down and kind of figure out with the director, well, what do you want me to do? And between us, we'd come up with these projects. So there's a lot of them for Department of Public Works were ones that somebody had said, we'd like a school in our town. Well, I think what happened, really happened, was that the politicians go, we don't have any money for that, but we'll get somebody to draw it up. Well, none of the architecture or private practice want to draw it up because this town didn't have any money. Oh, well, we'll get the Peace Corps guy to draw it up. That at least got it on there, got it in the schedule, or got it in the system to say, well, here's a set of plans. This is the school we want. And it got it into their political system so they could only get funding. And I think a couple of schools actually got built. No idea where they are. Just got my plans.

STEVENSON: [01:09:22] When you come back, all of a sudden, you're not a big deal. At least in most of the towns, if you're the Peace Corps volunteer, you were a big deal. People sort of came out to see you. So if you asked somebody to come to a meeting, they'd do it.

ZAREMBA: [01:09:37] Speaking of coming back home, did you come straight back home or did you travel back?

STEVENSON: [01:09:43] No, I pretty much came back, straight back. I came through Miami because I recall I rented a car in Miami and drove back up to Chicago. I can't remember why I did it that way.

ZAREMBA: [01:09:56] Was there much of a culture shock when you came back?

STEVENSON: [01:09:58] I didn't have that. My guess is if you were living out in the sticks in some place. And most of the culture shock that I heard about was this all of a sudden, you're not very important anymore. Whereas if you were in a real small town and you were the Peace Corps volunteer, you know, the mayor knew who you were and would, you know, introduce you to folks and the priest would know who you were. And all the people in town would go, oh, there goes the Peace Corps volunteers. They'd know who they were. They may not know what we were trying to do, but we were sort of a celebrity. You come back, you're not, you know, you just disappear. I think that's where some people had trouble especially. We had a couple, one guy that was a basketball coach that was really successful with coaching some of the local high school teams down in Colombia. And he became a real celebrity because his teams would win a lot. Back here, he's probably in high school and got a job as a coach.

STEVENSON: [01:11:05] So, but I didn't have that much culture shock. I was more worried about the Army and.

ZAREMBA: [01:11:13] You were worried about. Did you have any hints when you were in Colombia that that might be an issue? You were getting letters from the draft board?

STEVENSON: [01:11:19] No, no. I was just 25 years old, I, you know, if I could extend for a whole year until I was 26, which was at that time the upper limit cut off where if you were over 26 and hadn't been drafted yet, you were. They had to draft everybody below 26 before they get to you. So this was before the lottery and all that stuff. So I got back and I had to report to the Selective Service, tell them I wasn't in the Peace Corps anymore. Oh, yeah, we're waiting for you. So that's when I enlisted in the Army, and the Army figured they had a PR bonanza with this Peace Corps volunteer. So they followed me through training with a photographer.

ZAREMBA: [01:12:04] Really? Interesting.

STEVENSON: [01:12:05] Someplace I have pictures. And they did this in Vietnam too, followed me around Vietnam. Every once in a while, this photographer would show up.

ZAREMBA: [01:12:13] And what was their particular aim with this?

STEVENSON: [01:12:14] Oh, it was just, you know, I think it was part of the PR. See, the Army guys, you know, come from all walks of life, you know, which one of those. We've got this person who's serving their country twice. You know, the Army, military is pretty good at the promoting the PR side of it. At least they were there.

ZAREMBA: [01:12:34] Now, an item here, they talk about evaluating your service in light of the three goals of the Peace Corps. The first one is providing technical assistance where requested. Spend a bit of time on that.

STEVENSON: [01:12:46] Well, I think that I did a pretty good job of that, I mean, I mean, obviously when you're right out of architecture school, you know how to draw and you know what buildings are supposed to look like, but you have no clue how they really go together. Architecture is an empirical profession. We learn by doing. You have to go out and you have to design things, you have to go out and watch a contractor build them, and you find out, gee, they can't build it the way I drew it. Because how are you going to put the form work around it? How are you going to do that? So I didn't know any of that. So probably a lot of the stuff I drew, then the contractor would take a lot of license of how to build it. So if you do it later and you've got actually some more talent, I suspect that an architect or someone with construction skills, that is essentially in their sixties and retiring is probably a better Peace Corps volunteer than some kid right out of school. You know, I just didn't know much at all. So for me, there was a huge opportunity just to begin to learn my profession.

ZAREMBA: [01:13:45] It was fascinating earlier you mentioned that about how you could come into all aspects of this project, the electricity and all that. And when you talk about drawing in the office, but then would you get to go and see, OK, I thought that this should go this way.

STEVENSON: [01:13:59] Well, the part of the challenge was that by the time I got the things drawn and they would put it in their political process to try and get funding to build it. I was probably out of the country by the time they got around to it. So I, you know, I did the plans. I have no idea whether that's really the way they did it. I mean, I was doing, you know, classrooms in the schools with, you know, these are all traditionally had two light bulbs up there in the ceiling. It didn't have any fluorescent tubes or anything else. It was pretty rudimentary and it was all built with concrete block and stucco on the sides and a couple of windows and probably some of the tile work that the air can come through, and you know, the outdoor corridor. It was pretty rudimentary. Can we take a break for a second?

ZAREMBA: [01:14:47] Sure.

ZAREMBA: [01:14:54] OK, another goal was to promote better understanding of Americans by people served.

STEVENSON: [01:15:01] Oh, I think it, I think I suspect that was probably the real thing that the Peace Corps accomplished was that these Americans are real people, they come over, actually you can get along with us, we can tell jokes, we do all the other kinds of, as human as anyone else. We've been more blessed than many, but we're, you know, we're not ogres or we're not kings. We're not either end of the spectrum. We're just the same thing. I think that's probably the big, biggest thing that the Peace Corps could accomplish. I think it's a little. I think it's a great goal, but it's a little presumptuous to say that we're going to come over and give all this technological knowledge in a two-year span and have a big impact.

STEVENSON: [01:15:44] But the impact of having people just get to know people. Because I don't like America, but there was one American I really did like. It was this guy that came down here from Grand Rapids or whatever and was with us for a couple of years, and he was really a neat guy or neat gal. That's probably, that's worth a lot. This is kind of balance about that. And we do have people in this country that, you

know, are not in it just for the money. They want to do something that they thought was the right thing to do. And I don't know how the Peace Corps has evolved since then. I think it's become, I think, a little better than when I was in. It was a little bit of an amateur hour to this day. I mean, they had, you know, nobody had really any experience. We were all. Most of us were, you know, in our 20s, we're just right out of college, which one time was the right thing to do. We didn't know we couldn't do it. So it was the training school.

STEVENSON: [01:16:46] I did have one gal when I was training for the Peace Corps in Nigeria in New York. Her name was Elsie, I can't remember. But she was 72 years old, and she was from Vermont. She was a retired schoolteacher. She was going to Nigeria. And she was like typical New Englander. I don't know if she was a spinster or not. I can't recall. But the only thing that bothered her about the Peace Corps training was the field hockey. Because she said, these people are hitting me in the shins and that hurt. Other than that, she could outrun most of us. She was a neat gal. Of course, she's not alive anymore because that was 30 years ago, but she was. I'm sure she went over, she made it through the training program and went over to Nigeria, and I'm sure she did a terrific job.

ZAREMBA: [01:17:38] And then third goal I'll mention is to help promote better understandings of other peoples by Americans.

STEVENSON: [01:17:48] Oh, I think that, you know, I got to understand a little bit more about certainly Latin America and Colombia just by having lived there for a while. I haven't just been sitting in this cocoon in the United States. Europeans have a big advantage because all they have to do is drive, you know, a hundred miles and they're in another country with the culture and they have to learn other languages when they go to school just to do business and everything else. And we really don't have to. I mean, all you learn is English and you learn it really well, that's more than enough. Through CNN, I suspect that in the future, it's going to become even less important. But I think the idea that we learned a lot about other cultures. I think you also value what's really important about our own. I think it's like if you want to really learn



English, try to teach in another language because you don't learn the language, because the grammar really comes through. Do you understand my point? They understand English grammar better because you're looking at it through another language. I think you understand what is it that makes our system really work.

STEVENSON: [01:18:51] I think you also get to realize that it's probably you can't always export it to other places. It's something very unique about the United States. Like we always used to sit there at night. How come the United States turned out the way it did and Colombia turned out the way it did? And Colombia, at least then, I think still is, there's almost a feudal society, where two percent of the people have 85 percent of the wealth. And our conclusion was that the failures of Europe with the successive. So when they had their revolution, it was only where the money went. They just didn't want to send their money back to Spain and Portugal, and they wanted to keep it for themselves. We had the opportunity to have a blank slate. You make this.

STEVENSON: [01:19:45] And we probably had just as many people that were landed gentry that were deciding things, but we weren't. It wasn't just we don't send the money back to England. We want to do something with it. And we changed the mindset. And obviously, it's evolved more successful since then, it probably wasn't that much different back in colonial times. But today it's evolved in a way that you really can do almost anything you want to if you really decide that's what you want to do. And there aren't too many other countries where you can do that. I think it's good that, you know, essentially the future is cashed for you.

STEVENSON: [01:20:24] The country that I think, it's kind of interesting. Amway is a big company here in Michigan. And their biggest country in success right now is China. So they're making almost all their money, not all the money, but a big significant part of it. And I think it's because they offer this dream of you don't have to deal with the parent company. You can have your own company with your own name on the door. And it's that American, you know, you could be a success on your own, make your own way in the world, you don't have to do the same thing that your parents did and your grandparents did, unless you want to. It's a

phenomenal thing, and it's probably not, we probably can't replicate it in other places.

ZAREMBA: [01:21:12] The last question we have is the effect on you of your Peace Corps service. Was there any kind of immediate effect as far as changing soft career plans, whatever?

STEVENSON: [01:21:21] Oh yeah. The Army sent a photographer around with me through basic training and everything else. In fact, they also did it afterwards because I came back and I was a tack officer, one of those guys with the black baseball caps that yell at people at Fort Belvoir. And they had a photographer out following me around that. I was considered one of their positive images that they could give, so it had an impact. You know, after you after you got your first job, where you went to school and what you did doesn't really count anymore. So what are you going to do? So what do you do with yourself as opposed to what you did before. I don't know that Peace Corps has had much weight, although it has.

STEVENSON: [01:22:05] Frank and I were talking, Frank Grove and I were talking about this earlier. We've gotten into a lot of foreign work in the, both in the early '80s, when I was over and I managed our office in Saudi Arabia. The fact that I'd been overseas and that wasn't a big deal, you know. I feel like if I can go to Colombia and be in a country where I have to speak Spanish and do all those other things, well, I can go to Saudi Arabia and help negotiate a deal to get us to work there. Frank and I went over to China and designed an airport. He made a lot more trips than I did. I made of two of them, he made about 12 or 13 because the airport managing. How do you get along in one of these, you know, foreign culture where things are. The criteria and everything else are different, you have to adapt to them and they have to adapt to you.

ZAREMBA: [01:22:57] So kind of a long-term effect on you in that ability.

STEVENSON: [01:22:59] So I think it's a, uh, my company sent me over to England. We bought a company in the United Kingdom and I had to go over

there and look at their plans to see if they were competent. I'm not quite sure I could tell whether they were competent or not. But just the ability to, well, appreciate and adapt to a different culture. Also recognize what the differences are, I think, is a skill you kind of learn in the Peace Corps.

ZAREMBA: [01:23:26] Bringing that up to the present, what are you doing now?

STEVENSON: [01:23:37] Well, my wife, Bobbie, and I met when I was on my way to Vietnam and I was in the Army. We met in the original Friday's in New York, which is a bar. So not all bar romances go bad. We've been married for 35 years. As I said, I was in the Army. We've got two sons, both of them out on the West Coast. The older one is married. He lives in Seattle and his corporate bankruptcy consultant for a division of Ernest and Young, which will probably be spun off. The younger one works for Baxter Laboratories and is a biologist by training, but he manages a lab for a living there in Los Angeles. And I'm the director of architecture for URS, and we're the largest design firm in the United States. So things have worked out pretty well. I thought when we moved to Grand Rapids, we'd be here two to three years tops. Still here 35 years later. It's a really nice place to live. Drive to Detroit or Chicago or fly to New York. Bobbie is originally from New York, so we go back there almost every year to visit a place that they have up in the Cascade mountains. Gorgeous. I'd like to visit more. But I'm sure that they like to visit Grand Rapids when we are there.

ZAREMBA: [01:24:59] Well, thank you.

STEVENSON: [01:25:00] Oh, thank you. I've been kind of interested.

[END OF INTERVIEW]