

Nicholas Montalto Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Nicholas Montalto served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran from June 1969 to June 1971 as an English teacher.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Nicholas Montalto

January 27, 2019
Ringo, New Jersey

By Candice Wiggum

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

WIGGUM: [00:00:01] Today is January 27th, 2019. This is Candice Wiggum and I am interviewing Nicholas Montalto, who was in Iran from 1969 to 1971, and he taught English at a boys school. So welcome, Nicholas.

MONTALTO: [00:00:22] Hi.

WIGGUM: [00:00:23] And what inspired you to join Peace Corps?

MONTALTO: [00:00:27] Well, I guess, uh, the travel bug somehow infected me when I was in college, and I guess I came from a sort of provincial New York background, if you can describe it that way.

WIGGUM: [00:00:43] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:00:44] But I had a fraternity brother who had been to Morocco, and he told me about his adventures. And that sort of piqued my curiosity.

And then when I went to graduate school at Georgetown, I had a roommate who had gone abroad to Egypt with a group called the Experiment in International Living, and he would wax eloquent about his experiences in Egypt. So that kind of reinforced my interest. So I actually then applied to participate in the Experiment in International Living. And so I went there for the summer of 1965. And the way that program works is you spend one month living with a family and then all the Americans in the group, and we were about 10 to 12, we were all paired with Moroccan families.

MONTALTO: [00:01:43] And then we would spend the second month traveling around the country with our Moroccan brothers and sisters. So actually, to this day, we are still close with the family. So now how did I actually get interested in the Peace Corps? I guess everybody was talking about the Peace Corps, and it just seemed like a wonderful thing to do.

WIGGUM: [00:02:09] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:02:10] And I just kind of kind of felt a calling to go. So.

WIGGUM: [00:02:16] And what were you doing about the time that you joined Peace Corps?

MONTALTO: [00:02:22] I was teaching high school. I started teaching high school in '65, and I taught at a boys Catholic high school for two years. And then the next two years I went to the public schools and I went to Midwood High School in Brooklyn, where I met my wonderful wife who was on the faculty there. So I guess we both had the same inclinations, not only to get married but also to do something adventurous. So we got married in February of '69, and we joined the Peace Corps shortly thereafter and went abroad in, I guess it was June of '69.

WIGGUM: [00:03:09] What was the application process like then? It sounds like it wasn't very long between application and acceptance and training.

MONTALTO: [00:03:20] Well, I don't remember the exact sequence, but I know I had applied earlier. And I had gotten assigned to go to Colombia and it involved riding horses in the boondocks of Colombia. And that did not appeal to me.

WIGGUM: [00:03:46] A New York boy.

MONTALTO: [00:03:48] It was a bit, a bit much. So after Gloria and I got married, we both, I guess, had a preference for the Middle East. But the initial assignment was to Korea. And so there again, we, I don't want to say reject, but we asked if there was the possibility of going to the Middle East. And then when they said Iran, we jumped at the opportunity.

WIGGUM: [00:04:16] Yeah. So you guys got married, and a couple of months later, you entered training.

MONTALTO: [00:04:23] Right.

WIGGUM: [00:04:23] And what was training like for you? Where did you do it? What was it like? What was it like as a married couple?

MONTALTO: [00:04:30] I would say because we were in a married couples group, we certainly didn't feel out of place in any way. I mean, there were some single folks training with us, but I would say most of the people in the group were married couples. We were in an idyllic environment in Brattleboro, Vermont. It was so beautiful. And ironically, we were being trained at the headquarters of the Experiment in International Living, which had a contract with the Peace Corps to do Peace Corps training. So I was returning to the Experiment in a different way. So we, you know, we had a lot of language training, which I enjoyed immensely. Um. They did some pretty heavy-handed psychological stuff. You know, in those days, T groups were very popular.

WIGGUM: [00:05:28] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:05:28] And I didn't really like that very much. You know, you were supposed to kind of bare your inner soul and stuff like that. So some of

those sessions were a little bit annoying, I guess I would say. But apart from that, I mean, we made, you know, we liked the people in our group. We liked the teachers. In fact, we're still friends with one of the teachers. So I would say it was a positive experience.

WIGGUM: [00:06:01] Mm hmm. And then from Brattleboro, you went to?

MONTALTO: [00:06:04] So we went home briefly and then maybe we had a week or so to prepare to leave. And then we went to Philadelphia and left from Philadelphia. Everybody reassembled in Philadelphia for departure.

WIGGUM: [00:06:22] How did you decide what to take?

MONTALTO: [00:06:29] I don't know if I really remember the details. There was one item that was pretty crucial, and that was our shortwave radio.

WIGGUM: [00:06:44] Hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:06:44] And that was kind of our lifeline to the outside world where we were. In particular, we couldn't get Voice of America, but we did get BBC. And every night we would listen to the English language service of BBC. Um. But apart from that, I do not remember the details. I don't remember it to be a big deal. I'm sure it was.

WIGGUM: [00:07:08] What was it like landing in Iran?

MONTALTO: [00:07:14] Well, we, we had to go through Paris, I believe, and then Rome. And then Beirut and then finally Tehran. We arrived in Tehran at night. And the most vivid experience that first morning. They put us up in a hotel on one of the main squares in central Tehran. And so I guess we might have gotten in about midnight. And so after waking up in the morning, we looked out the window and we said, where are we? It looks like we're in a nunnery here. All of these nuns roaming around the street.

MONTALTO: [00:08:07] It just took a while for the reality of veiled women to actually set, you know, set in. You know, we just didn't expect that everyone

would be veiled and they would be veiled in black. And, you know, I, I went to eight years of grammar school with nuns. That was my experience with women in black. But Gloria had the exact same reaction. Where are we here? It just seems like we're in a, you know, some sort of Catholic encampment.

WIGGUM: [00:08:40] But you didn't stay long in Iran, in Tehran?

MONTALTO: [00:08:43] No, we didn't. They took us to this agricultural school on the outskirts of Iran and, uh, we went there for, I guess, initial in-country training. I'm guessing that we were there, I don't know, it was about a week, two weeks. I'm not sure exactly how long you were there.

WIGGUM: [00:09:05] And you stayed in the dorms at that time?

MONTALTO: [00:09:07] It was like, yes, we stayed in dorms. One thing that was, created a lasting impression for me was the bats that encircled this place. I mean, if you went out in the evening to go for a stroll, the bats would like be dive bombing on your head.

WIGGUM: [00:09:28] Oh, ow.

MONTALTO: [00:09:29] It's harmless but, you know, a little disconcerting.

WIGGUM: [00:09:34] Yeah. Did you feel like your training was good training? I'm assuming you had Farsi there and probably some, um, Teaching English as a Second Language training. How did you, what did you think about the training?

MONTALTO: [00:09:53] Um, I thought it was good. I mean, I think we were one of the first groups to have significant in-country training. I mean, prior to our time, most of the training was in the United States. So I think with us, they divided a half in the United States and half in Iran, and I think that was a good move. Um. We certainly weren't prepared for the food. I think both of us felt some, my wife and I, we both felt some revulsion with the smells of the food, especially the oil that they used to prepare the food. Um. But, you know, I would say the training was good. We

did, um, we were exposed to a form of language training that is now passé.

WIGGUM: [00:10:56] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:10:57] And it's called the aural-oral method of teaching language.

WIGGUM: [00:11:04] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:11:04] And I'm not sure that method was kind of well suited to Iranian students who, at that time and maybe still to this day, you know, they, they learn by rote memory.

WIGGUM: [00:11:19] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:11:19] And this is kind of challenging you to figure things out on your own. You know, they weren't actually prepared to do that, so it might have been better, but that was all the vogue in those days. So I can't fault the Peace Corps for teaching that methodology because that was.

WIGGUM: [00:11:38] The methodology of the day. Yeah. Did you make friends with the other married couples? Did you guys hang out and talk a lot?

MONTALTO: [00:11:47] Um, yeah. I would say we were quite friendly with, uh, especially couples that came from the same background as we did, so that there was one other couple from New York City that we were close with. Another couple from San Francisco. And so. But, you know, of course you're scattered around the country. You don't have all that many opportunities to interact.

WIGGUM: [00:12:19] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:12:19] The nearest volunteers among the couples. Well, no, I take that, I'm sorry. I was going to say there was a couple close to us. Now by close I'm saying 3 hours away. That was close. But we didn't

interact with them very much because I believe they came from sort of a rural Midwestern background.

WIGGUM: [00:12:48] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:12:48] But there was another couple that were maybe 8 hours away and we would go to their site and they would come to us and we seemed to have more in common with them. There was another single volunteer who lived in the next town over, which would be an hour and a half ride, and we got to see him every so often. He would come to visit us.

WIGGUM: [00:13:16] And were all these on busses? Is that how you traveled back and forth?

MONTALTO: [00:13:19] Always by bus.

WIGGUM: [00:13:20] Yeah. You didn't have any scooters or bikes or anything that you used in country?

MONTALTO: [00:13:29] We did actually have access to bicycles. And now that you ask me about this, we didn't, these were not our own bicycles. Somehow, when we went on a bike excursion, like very often we would go out into the countryside for a picnic, and we would go by bike.

WIGGUM: [00:13:51] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:13:52] I think they brought the bikes for us. The people that we would go with would bring the bikes. Because we didn't have our own bikes and that was a big deal. Not so much for me, but for Gloria, because I don't think there was any other woman in town who ever went on a bicycle in the town. Of course, it would be unheard of today, but, well, maybe not so. Maybe not so much. You probably do find women wearing hijab who go out on a bicycle now in modern Tehran. But in those days it was rare, if not never. You'd never see something like that.

WIGGUM: [00:14:33] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:14:33] And of course, Gloria would always dress modestly when we were on one of these bike excursions. But we did take bike rides outside of town, which was a favorite thing that people would do. They would go outside and they would. The way Iran is, it's, the whole society is walled in.

WIGGUM: [00:14:52] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:14:53] So your house would generally have a wall around it for privacy. And if you owned land outside of town, that land which would have a water source inside, would also be enclosed in a wall. And so if you took your family to that land for a picnic, the woman would be able to take off their veils and enjoy themselves in this parcel of land that was rural. They were growing things, whatever they were growing, and there was always a water source. And people would put their rugs down next to the stream and that's where they would have their picnics. So we did that quite often.

WIGGUM: [00:15:34] Now, did you go with an Iranian couple then? Were they the ones that brought the bikes?

MONTALTO: [00:15:40] Either our neighbors, we often went with our neighbors who lived down the *kucheh*, the alleyway. Or I would go with my students. Now, by my students I'm talking about not my students in the, in the boys high school, but students who wanted to really perfect their English and would come to me for private lessons. So anyone who wanted to really have an intensive English language learning experience could enroll in this class in my house.

WIGGUM: [00:16:19] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:16:19] So I would say I had about ten students. I had high school students for one group and adults for another, and these people would come to my house for lessons. So it was those people in those private classes that would arrange these little excursions into the countryside.

WIGGUM: [00:16:38] Yeah. So you got to go inside some of the walled garden areas?

MONTALTO: [00:16:42] Oh yeah, yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:16:42] Out there, some of that growing areas. Yeah. Nice.

MONTALTO: [00:16:45] Nice. Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:16:45] How did, how did your site get chosen?

MONTALTO: [00:16:52] I believe we were the second volunteers who were assigned to Fassa [also spelled Fasa]. There was a single volunteer who was there before us. Why was Fassa chosen as a Peace Corps site? I have no idea. I don't know. I mean, it is, it was at the time a rather large town. The population was 20,000.

WIGGUM: [00:17:27] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:17:27] And, um, you know, like I guess it was there were no native English speakers in that town. So I guess it was considered ideal to have us as a resource in this particular town. But nobody ever explained to me how Fassa got on the list of Peace Corps sites, and I can't exactly answer the question.

WIGGUM: [00:17:53] What was your integration into Fassa like? What were some of the challenges? What, what surprised you?

MONTALTO: [00:18:04] It was rough, I would say, the first few months. We, when we first arrived, we stayed in a local hotel, which was, as I remember it, a rather dingy place. And you had absolutely no privacy. So you were in a room and there were windows all around and other people staying there. So it was a little really seedy place.

WIGGUM: [00:18:38] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:18:39] Somehow we got transferred to the local military club. And so I don't think we spent more than one night in that hotel and we were moved to this. It was a local army base in town, very small, but there was a club facility that had accommodations for overnight guests. And so we stayed there.

WIGGUM: [00:19:06] And who moved you there?

MONTALTO: [00:19:07] So our contact was a fellow by the name of Et Behnam. And was it Amoud? Amoud was his first name. I think it was Mahmoud Et Behnam. And I guess he was the Peace Corps contact in that town. And he had served in that capacity for the previous volunteer. So he knew where the belongings of the previous volunteer were being stored.

WIGGUM: [00:19:45] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:19:46] And I guess he kind of knew what would have to happen in order for us to really get established in the town. So he was sort of instrumental in getting us to the military club and then helping us find a place to stay. Um. I don't remember exactly how we ended up in our house. I'm guessing that he was the one who was instrumental in making those arrangements. But we saw the place and it was, I would say, by Peace Corps standards, rather luxurious. I mean, we had with a two story home. I mean, it was mud brick, but every house was made out of mud brick, and it had a *hayat* or garden in the back.

WIGGUM: [00:20:40] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:20:40] And then, you know, with every traditional Iranian home, the kitchen and the bathroom is separated from the living quarters. So there was another structure behind the garden with the kitchen and the shower and the bathroom. So it was, it was a very nice place, fairly new construction. It had a hot water heater.

WIGGUM: [00:21:09] Luxury.

MONTALTO: [00:21:10] Yeah, but of course we had no refrigerator. And I mean, there were some creature comforts that we didn't have.

WIGGUM: [00:21:21] Yeah.

MONTALTO: [00:21:21] But the house itself was spacious. More than enough room for us.

WIGGUM: [00:21:28] Mm hmm. What did you cook on?

MONTALTO: [00:21:31] Well, we had this kitchen in the back and there was a sink in the kitchen, and we had this, the two burners, and you had to bring in, what are those cylinders called?

WIGGUM: [00:21:47] Oh, like propane cylinders?

MONTALTO: [00:21:49] Propane cylinders. And, you know, we would.

WIGGUM: [00:21:52] Kind of like a camp stove.

MONTALTO: [00:21:54] Yeah. So we would refill that every once in a while. I mean, somebody probably came around and did that, you know, they would knock on the door. Do you need new propane? And then we needed oil, as I recall now, for the hot water heater, which only worked for the shower, not for any water sources anywhere else in the house. So we had sinks on the, a sink on the first floor. Was there a sink on the second floor? Maybe a sink on the second floor. But that was all cold water. If you wanted hot water, you had to turn on the hot water heater, which we did rarely, because then you used up your oil supply and that was rather costly. But it's a warm climate and the water heater was on the roof, so it usually was warm enough to take a shower except in the middle of winter. But most times of the year you didn't really need to turn it on to take a shower.

WIGGUM: [00:23:04] Mm hmm. What was the hardest thing about integrating?

MONTALTO: [00:23:15] Well, there were a number of things that you had to get used to. One custom that Iranians have is their system of *taroff* [or *taarof*]. T-A-R-O-F-F, I guess is the way to transliterate it. And that is a form of politeness that to the typical Westerner appeals, appears extremely excessive. If you want to laugh sometimes, if you see two Iranians who are traditional and if they are from the same social status, watch them try to get through a door. And sometimes it's really laughable.

WIGGUM: [00:24:07] Hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:24:07] Because as a sign of respect, you allow the other person to go first and. And you go back and forth and you say, I'm not, you know, I'm not, I'm not good enough to go first. You go first. And that kind of stuff. So, you know, they'll say, you know, I am like just under your feet, all of these flowery expressions that they have.

WIGGUM: [00:24:39] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:24:39] And, you know, this goes against the grain. You know, we're very straightforward, most Americans, right? We say what we were thinking. Iranians don't always say what they're thinking. Iranians. An American who's not trained in Iranian culture will say they lie all the time, but they're not lying. What they're doing is they're trying to spare you.

WIGGUM: [00:25:12] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:25:12] They're trying to show respect for you. They want to spare your feelings. They don't want to make, they don't want to make you feel sad. So, you know, like if somebody dies who we know in Iran, they might not tell us because they don't want us to feel bad.

WIGGUM: [00:25:32] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:25:32] Things like that. So that whole system of tradeoff takes some time to adjust to. After a while, you feel very comfortable with it. I

mean, when we get together with our Iranian friends in the beginning, or if I meet somebody new from Iran and I do like a *taroff* gesture, it's really, you know, if they're living in this country, it takes them back. They find it very amusing that American, an American knows the system.

WIGGUM: [00:26:02] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:26:02] So that was one thing. And then the other thing I would say that is. The way students, the way the schools operated. And, you know, I'm more interested in. You know, I believe that you learn when you impose some discipline on children.

WIGGUM: [00:26:31] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:26:31] And so I also believe that you should get a grade that you deserve.

WIGGUM: [00:26:41] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:26:41] And so when you're thrown into a situation where everybody's cheating and nobody gives a damn, including the teachers, it's very frustrating. So. That was my big thing, to whip these kids into shape and to make sure that they weren't cheating and.

WIGGUM: [00:27:09] And how successful were you?

MONTALTO: [00:27:13] I would say I was pretty successful, actually.

WIGGUM: [00:27:16] Good.

MONTALTO: [00:27:17] In fact, the other teachers would remark how disciplined my class was. You know, like if they had, say, a quarterly exam or something like that, the students would go to the auditorium. I would make sure all the desks were spaced out so they couldn't copy from one another.

WIGGUM: [00:27:38] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:27:38] I would make sure they were walking in an orderly line. Now, I'm telling you here, this is after a year.

WIGGUM: [00:27:48] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:27:49] I didn't just wave a magic wand and get these kids to do that. In the beginning, it was awful. I mean, especially with the methodology that we were taught, you know. So like the first thing, I don't know if I already told you this, but the first thing we did in teaching English. We were told to use songs as a learning technique. So to have someone like myself stand in front of the classroom and start singing, row, row, row, your boat. This was hilarious to these students and it was undignified behavior for a teacher to be singing a song in front of class. So I, you know, just lost the class with that. So it took a while to recover from all of that, you know.

WIGGUM: [00:28:38] And how many students did you have?

MONTALTO: [00:28:41] I had classes of, I would say roughly 60 to 70 students.

WIGGUM: [00:28:49] And was it universal education?

MONTALTO: [00:28:51] Yes. I mean, one thing that was really interesting about an Iranian classroom is that you had kids from the elite and kids from the villages all together in the same place. But then the social structure was reflected in the classroom. So that the elite children would sit in the front and the kids from the villages would be in the back. And sometimes the elite kids, because they felt some sympathy for the poorer children, would give them help, like during an exam.

WIGGUM: [00:29:31] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:29:31] So here you had the American concept of how to manage a school with the Iranian concept of, well, these kids need a break and I need to help them and what's so wrong about doing that?

WIGGUM: [00:29:49] Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:29:50] It's like a different moral.

WIGGUM: [00:29:52] Oh, yes, I know.

MONTALTO: [00:29:59] Um, I forgot, what was the question?

WIGGUM: [00:30:01] What we were just talking about, I had asked you if education was universal in Iran at that point, if everybody could go to school?

MONTALTO: [00:30:09] Yeah. You know, the Shah was really into universal education. He introduced a program called the White Revolution, and universal literacy was very much part of that. So I think that's probably why the schools were so overcrowded, because he wanted everyone to get a basic education.

WIGGUM: [00:30:30] And what was it like for you teaching such big classes?

MONTALTO: [00:30:37] Um, I really didn't mind it in the end. I mean, as I said, it took a while for me to adjust to the Iranian system. So, I mean, I do remember feeling very frustrated in the teachers room. So we had this one room where all the teachers would assemble. If you weren't in class, you would go into the teachers room. And at any point in time there might be seven or eight teachers in there. And, you know, although we knew enough Farsi to communicate on a very basic level, when native speakers are talking among themselves, really hard to get it, you know.

WIGGUM: [00:31:25] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:31:26] So I remember feeling frustrated that I, my command of the language wasn't good enough to kind of engage in real conversations with them. I mean, if I stopped somebody and then we started talking one on one. Okay.

WIGGUM: [00:31:40] Yeah.

MONTALTO: [00:31:40] I usually understood. But when they're talking among themselves, I would lose maybe half the conversation.

WIGGUM: [00:31:48] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:31:49] So that was a little frustrating. I think I got the most satisfaction out of the private classes, though, because these were the people who were the most motivated.

WIGGUM: [00:32:00] And were they all self-selected?

MONTALTO: [00:32:04] Yes. I would say so. I don't remember screening people. You know, I don't quite remember exactly how. I think people just volunteered. I said that I was going to have a special class and if anyone wanted to join, they could come. It's quite possible that the class might have been too advanced for some young people and they might have opted out. I just don't remember the details right now. But in the end, I had about seven or eight students in this class, and those students have, uh, some of them have communicated with me over the years.

WIGGUM: [00:32:48] Nice.

MONTALTO: [00:32:50] We did go back to Iran in 1999 and then we went back to our town. We were treated like visiting royalty.

WIGGUM: [00:33:00] Hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:33:01] And because we had such large classes, you know, there were a lot of people who remembered us, not that we remembered them, but they remembered us.

WIGGUM: [00:33:11] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:33:12] So it was really quite something to be feted by these kids.

WIGGUM: [00:33:18] Yeah.

MONTALTO: [00:33:18] And everybody wanted to invite us to their house and have us over for tea and.

WIGGUM: [00:33:23] Nice.

MONTALTO: [00:33:23] It was really nice.

WIGGUM: [00:33:24] It must have warmed your heart after all those years and everything that had happened in the interim.

MONTALTO: [00:33:30] But of course, the kids that I was closest to were the ones in this special class. So we made a point of getting together with them.

WIGGUM: [00:33:39] Were they using their English?

MONTALTO: [00:33:42] Yes, um, as a matter of fact, I think some of them, in particular in my wife's class, did become English teachers.

WIGGUM: [00:33:53] Ah.

MONTALTO: [00:33:53] Yeah. And most of those young people were quite successful and, uh, I can't say that they're using English in their daily work life, but their command of the language is good.

WIGGUM: [00:34:11] Oh, good, good. Nice to hear. Nice to hear. What was your biggest challenge during these two years in Iran?

MONTALTO: [00:34:24] Well, the biggest challenge was in the beginning we felt very isolated. We didn't have any friends. We didn't have any other English speakers to interact with. And there was a certain suspicion about us. What were we doing there? Were we really English teachers or were we just spies sent there by the government? Um. Were we going to somehow corrupt the younger generation because we weren't Muslim?

WIGGUM: [00:35:11] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:35:12] So it took a while before people warmed up to us.

WIGGUM: [00:35:17] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:35:17] And I would say during the first three months that we were there, so let's say September, October, November, we came pretty close to just calling it quits and going home. It was less of a, an ordeal for me and more for my wife, you know, because she was a woman. So I mean, I told Gloria, I said, if you want to go home, I understand. We'll go home. You know, we don't have to stay. And Gloria was determined to see the thing through. So it was the first Christmas really that kind of turned, things turned around for us. And I guess people just got to know us better.

WIGGUM: [00:36:08] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:36:09] They realized that we weren't brother and sister, we were husband and wife, and that, you know, the woman changes her name to the man's name generally in the United States.

WIGGUM: [00:36:19] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:36:19] It was, they didn't quite understand why we both had the same last name.

WIGGUM: [00:36:27] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:36:28] But the first Christmas, we got to meet a number of people and they realized how homesick we were and they realized how important Christmas was to us. And I guess Gloria might have mentioned that to some of the teachers at school. And I believe one of the teachers at school was either the governor's wife or a friend of the governor's wife. I don't know exactly how it came about. But the governor saw to it that we would have a Christmas tree by cutting

down one of the trees in the public garden. So we had more evergreen than we could ever use. Not exactly a tree, but huge branches of evergreen.

WIGGUM: [00:37:24] And in the desert.

MONTALTO: [00:37:25] And in the desert. And we invited folks over and for a little party. And I had kind of a birthday, my wife's birthday is around Christmas, so I had a little party for her. And that's when things really, things started to improve at that point.

WIGGUM: [00:37:43] What did your family think about you going?

MONTALTO: [00:37:46] Oh, ridiculous. They had, no, nobody thought it was a good idea. I mean, I remember, um. I was a little bit of a rebel in those days.

WIGGUM: [00:38:03] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:38:04] There was one uncle that I had, my Uncle Joe, who I looked up to and admired. And I thought of, I come from a very big extended family, lots of aunts and uncles. And my father knew that I kind of looked up to my Uncle Joe. So somehow he commissioned him to come over to the house to try to dissuade me from doing this. And I was kind of surprised that my Uncle Joe was turning on me.

WIGGUM: [00:38:36] Yeah.

MONTALTO: [00:38:40] Um. No, it was a very unusual thing for some, people of our background to do.

WIGGUM: [00:38:48] Mm hmm. And especially newly married and you're taking your wife over there.

MONTALTO: [00:38:51] Right. Right.

WIGGUM: [00:38:52] How did gender roles impact you over there?

MONTALTO: [00:39:00] Gender roles impact us?

WIGGUM: [00:39:03] Yeah.

MONTALTO: [00:39:04] Well, I mean, certainly less of a problem for me than for Gloria. Um. But I think. Iran wasn't exactly a backward society in those days. And so there were women working outside the home. So for Gloria to be a teacher, as a woman, it wasn't strange. So I think she could feel comfortable in her professional role as a teacher.

WIGGUM: [00:39:43] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:39:43] The problem was that she wasn't observing Muslim dress code.

WIGGUM: [00:39:50] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:39:51] Now, there were also Iranian, this is a small conservative town, so you would find more women not wearing the veil in a place like Tehran than you would in Fassa. But even in Fassa, I would say, I'm guessing here, maybe out of a population of 20,000, there might have been 25 women who didn't wear the veil in the street. So the fact that Gloria was on the street, dressed conservatively, always covering her in her arms. It wasn't something that startled people. What startled them was that this was a Western woman, not so much that she was a woman without a veil. Uh, but there were certain times of the year when you had to be very careful and these would be the times of the religious, certain religious observances.

MONTALTO: [00:40:49] And in Iran, sometimes the people were kind of whipped up into a frenzy over certain events in Shia history. And what they would do is they would recreate those events through poetry and song. And people would start crying, remembering what happened to the Shia leaders of the past, the death of Hossein, and all of that. I don't know if you know anything about that. So when those events were going on, you had to be very careful and make sure you didn't go anywhere near

where those festivities were taking place actually out on the street. You'd have somebody who was, you know, kind of chanting.

WIGGUM: [00:41:47] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:41:47] And then also people whipping themselves.

WIGGUM: [00:41:50] Okay.

MONTALTO: [00:41:52] So that was a little scary. I mean, not, not that we it forced us to stay indoors. But you thought twice about how you would get from point A to point B and you didn't want to go anywhere near the mosque in those times.

WIGGUM: [00:42:08] Did you guys celebrate Ramadan with others? Did you go to *ikbar* any time? Did you, what was your interaction with that part of the culture in Fassa?

MONTALTO: [00:42:21] That's a great question. So I told you that I had these private classes.

WIGGUM: [00:42:30] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:42:30] You know, I'm remembering now that not only, I had three classes. I had a class for the young kids, a class for the high school students, and a class for adults. And in the high school student class, there were some very devout Muslims. And I don't know if you know this, but in Islam, you can earn a special place in heaven if you can convert someone to Islam. So I constantly had people trying to convert me to Islam. They would give me copies of books to read in English. So that was a little bit annoying because you knew that there were some people that were kind of cultivating a friendship with me. But they had an ulterior motive, you know?

MONTALTO: [00:43:35] Now, on the subject of Ramadan, I guess it intrigued me a little bit. And so I did observe the Ramadan fast one year. I don't

remember what year it was, but I observed it for a period of three days just to have the experience.

WIGGUM: [00:43:59] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:44:00] And I mean, you probably have to get up early in the morning before sunrise, and you have enough to, try to have enough food to sustain you to the end of the day. But I just wanted to know what it was like. Not, not that I was seriously contemplating becoming a Muslim.

WIGGUM: [00:44:20] Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:44:20] But, you know, they talk about the health effects of the, of the fast and how it's good for your body to do that. So I just wanted to see what kind of effects it would have on me. But three days was enough.

WIGGUM: [00:44:37] And Eid, did you, were you there with the slaughtering of the sheep or anything like that? Any of the post-Ramadan or the other Eid?

MONTALTO: [00:44:46] We saw sheep being slaughtered all the time.

WIGGUM: [00:44:53] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:44:53] It was very common for somebody to have a sheep just right out in the *kucheh* and just be cutting up a sheep.

WIGGUM: [00:45:02] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:45:02] I don't know why they did that, but they did it. So. But I don't remember ritual slaughter or anything.

WIGGUM: [00:45:10] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I'm just picturing two young kids from Brooklyn walking out in the *kucheh*.

MONTALTO: [00:45:19] Of course, one of the grossest things was to go to the meat market, because they don't quite understand that there are different cuts of meat. So the meat market would be the carcass of some animal just hanging from a hook. And if you wanted meat, wherever they were in the carcass, that's where you would get your meat. And it might have not been the healthiest of cows or whatever it is. You know, you couldn't really cook the meat the way we cook the meat. You needed a, you need a pressure cooker. Nobody ever told us that. So we didn't, that wasn't covered in Peace Corps training.

WIGGUM: [00:46:08] It wasn't in your trunk.

MONTALTO: [00:46:10] We had to arrange to get a pressure cooker to do anything with the meat there. Um. So. So, yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:46:24] Yeah. How was the food?

MONTALTO: [00:46:27] We grew to love the food. I mean, it took a while. Like anything else, you have to get accustomed to it. Especially the flavor of the cooking oil, which I guess is sheep's oil? Something like that. It's not in the oil that we use in the United States.

WIGGUM: [00:46:51] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:46:51] But after a while, we loved Iranian food. If we have an opportunity to do Iranian, we do it. And in fact, my wife cooks Iranian sometimes.

WIGGUM: [00:47:00] Cool. Cool, cool. What was it like for you as the end of your time came? Did you guys think about extending it all? Was there even that opportunity? What did it feel like when the end came for your time in Fassa?

MONTALTO: [00:47:21] We didn't think about extending as far as I can recall. So we were ready to go home. We were ready to get on with our lives. We missed our families and we didn't want to go back. I wanted to go to graduate school. We had arranged that from Iran for me to go to

graduate school. Um, I remember the day we left Fassa, in fact, I can't even talk about it now without getting teary eyed, as the saddest day of my life.

WIGGUM: [00:47:58] Hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:47:59] Believe it or not. And when that bus pulled away from that town. Because in those days, you know, chances are you're on the other side of the world, you're never going to get back to Iran. So it's a form of death to leave a place.

WIGGUM: [00:48:17] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:48:17] And by that time, we were, you know, I didn't want to say members of the community, but we were accepted in the town and we had lots of good friends there.

WIGGUM: [00:48:29] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:48:30] And just to see all these people outside the bus saying goodbye. I mean, I cried all the way to, we had to go to Shiraz and then get back to Tehran. But all that bus ride was the worst bus ride of my life.

WIGGUM: [00:48:47] And then what was it like when you came home?

MONTALTO: [00:48:55] Uh. Well, it was very strange because we went from the desert, you know, to Minnesota. So that was kind of weird. Um. You learn to adapt to a culture over two years.

WIGGUM: [00:49:16] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:49:16] And so I remember when we got to Minnesota, I mentioned the *taroff* and all of that, the formal courtesy. A part of *taroff* is anytime you meet someone, even if you saw them 2 hours ago, you meet him again, you shake hands. And so when I arrived in Minnesota, I remember offering my hand like a million times to people, and it was

kind of strange. This guy just wanted to shake hands all the time. I mean, little stupid things like that.

WIGGUM: [00:49:58] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:49:58] Or, you know, being deferential to people and making sure that they go through the door first. They didn't know what was going on in my head. But kind of interesting that most people, maybe it's because of our background and the people we knew, where we came from, but not too many people were really interested in what the experience was like. You could have a 15 minute conversation and that was it.

WIGGUM: [00:50:29] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:50:30] So that was a little bit disappointing, but I don't remember it bothering me that much. It was just surprising that we had gone through this experience.

WIGGUM: [00:50:42] And you had all this stuff.

MONTALTO: [00:50:44] Yeah, most people were really didn't care or didn't know. They probably couldn't appreciate what it was like to.

WIGGUM: [00:50:54] Yeah.

MONTALTO: [00:50:54] Experience culture shock, make the adaptation, and then come back and experience reverse cultural shock.

WIGGUM: [00:51:01] Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:51:01] And we did indeed experience reverse culture shock. A certain amount of revulsion to life in the United States compared to, you know, the simple life in rural Iran. And you get used to that, and you see how kind of wholesome it is.

WIGGUM: [00:51:25] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:51:26] You know, people work hard, but they also know how to enjoy themselves. And it's, it's a lifestyle that I miss actually.

WIGGUM: [00:51:36] Mm hmm. Was there any time when you were in Iran that you felt like you guys were in danger or that your health was threatened? Anything like that?

MONTALTO: [00:51:49] Um. Danger. Well, health, you know, that was always an issue, the possibility of having some gastrointestinal problems. Um. And I think Gloria had a worse time of it than I did. In fact, we used to joke because I would take more risks with eating. And she was always very cautious, but she was the one who would get sick. Um. Any time that we felt in danger? I would say only those times during those religious celebrations or commemorations, whatever you would call them. Once or twice, stones were thrown at Gloria.

MONTALTO: [00:52:49] One time we were traveling in the northern part of Iran. This was during the, uh, it's called the Nowruz celebration. That's their New Year's celebration, the first day of spring. And we were traveling in, uh, all the way up near the Russian border in a town called Ardebil, A-R-D-E-B-I-L [also spelled Ardabil]. And, um. Beautiful little town known for its carpets. And while we were there, we visited a carpet shop to purchase an Ardebil carpet. And at one point we were walking along the street and somebody touched Gloria.

WIGGUM: [00:53:50] Hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:53:50] And I knew who the somebody was. And this is really out of character for me, but it just so enraged me that I lunged at the guy and just pushed him down on the street and called him some sort of curse word and he ran away. There was one other incident like that in the city of Tabriz where we were, uh, crossing a very crowded street. And again, somebody touched Gloria, but I had no idea who it was.

WIGGUM: [00:54:33] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:54:33] It was just too many people. Just, you know, Gloria knew that she had been touched. So it was very frustrating.

WIGGUM: [00:54:43] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:54:43] You know, you feel like it's your obligation, especially traditional male thinking, it's your obligation to protect your wife.

WIGGUM: [00:54:51] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:54:52] And so the way we generally did that, if we were in a crowded city street, is instead of Gloria walking behind me, which is what normally happens in Iran. The man walks ahead of the woman. I would walk behind Gloria so I could protect her from the rear.

WIGGUM: [00:55:17] What was your contact with Peace Corps once you were settled in Fassa? There were no telephones, there wasn't any direct contact, was there?

MONTALTO: [00:55:30] Well, our Peace Corps director did travel around the country visiting the various sites, and he came to Fassa at least once. He might have come twice, I don't remember exactly. And then, of course, we were called back to Tehran all the time for, you know, maybe it was an inoculation or a physical or just some sort of gathering. But I would say over the course of two years, maybe we went to Tehran I'd say ten times something like that. So.

WIGGUM: [00:56:07] And how long a trip was that?

MONTALTO: [00:56:09] Oh, for us it was a long trip.

WIGGUM: [00:56:11] Yeah.

MONTALTO: [00:56:11] It was like all by bus. So it was like 3 hours to get to Shiraz. And then from Shiraz to Tehran, I want to say 13 hours. Maybe 13, 14 hours on a bus.

WIGGUM: [00:56:27] Yes, so that was a trek.

MONTALTO: [00:56:28] Yeah.

WIGGUM: [00:56:29] That was a trek.

MONTALTO: [00:56:31] But it was nice to go to Tehran because, you know, we got to see other volunteers who were there. So it was kind of a reunion.

WIGGUM: [00:56:40] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:56:41] We got to go to the U.S. embassy and have pancakes or whatever you could get at the U.S. embassy, hamburgers, you know, that kind of stuff. We stayed at this hotel that was a favorite haunt for all the Peace Corps volunteers called the Hotel Polaris. And it was really a dive. That's where we stayed. We once discovered that all or some of the rooms had peak holes. That was towards the end when we realized that there were peep holes in the rooms.

MONTALTO: [00:57:25] Um, but Tehran had like an assortment of restaurants. So, like, if you wanted French food, there was a French restaurant. There was an Italian restaurant. So you could get your, if you missed that, you had an opportunity. There was a Hungarian place I remember that was very good.

WIGGUM: [00:57:49] And what was alcohol consumption there?

MONTALTO: [00:57:55] Well, that's a very interesting question because we liked our wine and that we had to be very careful with, because as I said, Fassa was quite a conservative town. We understood that there was a Jewish person who lived in Fassa, maybe the one and only Jewish person in the town, who sold liquor to people. However, we were told, do not patronize this person because you don't want people in town to know that you drink.

WIGGUM: [00:58:34] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [00:58:35] So generally what we would do is we would smuggle in bottles of wine in our luggage every time we went to Shiraz. So in Shiraz we were able to go to a, it was a store either owned by Jewish people or by Armenians. There's quite a large Armenian community in Tehran, in Iran. And Shiraz had this wonderful wine which was called Hazaroyek 1001, was the brand name. And, uh, the grape growers in Fars province. By the way, this is a little bit of an aside. All of them, I understand, left Iran after the revolution and do you know where they established themselves?

WIGGUM: [00:59:34] Australia.

MONTALTO: [00:59:34] Exactly. Yeah. They went to Australia and they began cultivate, I'm trying to remember what's the kind of wine that's famous for?

WIGGUM: [00:59:43] Shiraz.

MONTALTO: [00:59:46] Is Shiraz one?

WIGGUM: [00:59:48] Yeah, there's a couple of different names of it. One's Shiraz. The other one is.

MONTALTO: [00:59:52] It's another name that I'm not remembering.

WIGGUM: [00:59:53] Yeah. Yeah, it's "sha" something.

MONTALTO: [00:59:55] But anyway.

WIGGUM: [00:59:59] That's how I knew it was from Australia, because that's where that came up from.

MONTALTO: [01:00:01] The production of these grapes was transferred from Iran. But that's the wine that we would get from Shiraz and bring back. We usually would bring back maybe two bottles, which would last us like two months or something like that.

WIGGUM: [01:00:13] Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Interesting. Well, is there anything else you'd like to say about either Peace Corps or your experience in Iran or what it's meant in your life?

MONTALTO: [01:00:26] Well, I would say it was like the most formative influence in my life. It certainly set me on a path professionally.

WIGGUM: [01:00:38] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [01:00:40] What I did subsequently is I studied immigration history at the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota.

WIGGUM: [01:00:50] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [01:00:51] So living in Iran kind of helped me to understand the immigrant experience.

WIGGUM: [01:00:58] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [01:00:59] Although I had the support of the U.S. government, you know, unlike most immigrants, but still, I understood a little bit about what it's like to adjust to life in a new society.

WIGGUM: [01:01:09] Mm hmm.

MONTALTO: [01:01:10] So I have pretty much devoted myself to immigrant causes. I had a, I headed up a social service agency that helped immigrants resettle in the United States, and I'm still doing work in that area.

WIGGUM: [01:01:25] Cool.

MONTALTO: [01:01:26] Yeah.

WIGGUM: [01:01:27] Cool.

MONTALTO: [01:01:28] Yeah.

WIGGUM: [01:01:28] Great. Well, thank you very much.

MONTALTO: [01:01:31] Sure. Thank you.

WIGGUM: [01:01:32] Very fun.

[END OF INTERVIEW]