

Ivan C. Browning Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

Creator: Ivan C. Browning
Interviewer: Patricia Wand
Date of Interview: August 1, 2015
Location of Interview: Bethesda, Maryland
Length: 29 pages

Biographical Note

Ivan C. Browning served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia in 1974 in a prison recreation program, and in Kenya from 1975 to 1976 as an audiovisual specialist.

Access

Open.

Usage Restrictions

According to the deed of gift signed September 3, 2015, copyright of these materials has been assigned to the United States Government. This interview is in the public domain.

Copyright

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 The copyright law extends its protection to unpublished works from the moment of creation in a tangible form.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

Technical Note

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

Suggested Citation

Ivan Browning, recorded interview by Patricia Wand, August 1, 2015, page #, Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

DISCLAIMER

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

Oral History Interview

with

Ivan Browning

August 1, 2015
Bethesda, Maryland

By Patricia Wand

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

WAND: [00:00:03] Today is August 1, 2015. This is Patricia Wand, and I am interviewing Ivan Browning, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia for nine months in 1974 and then transferred to Kenya, where he served for two years, 1975 and 1976. In Colombia, Ivan was in an adult rehab prison program where he was assigned to Neiva in Huila, in the Departamento of Huila. In Kenya, Ivan was an audiovisual specialist and was assigned to Nairobi. Thank you, Ivan, for joining me today and for agreeing to talk about your Peace Corps experiences in Colombia and in Kenya. Our focus is on your experience as a Peace Corps volunteer, but will include the events that led up to that decision for you to serve in Peace Corps and how you got to the Peace Corps and then focus on your life as a volunteer in Colombia and Kenya. And then we'll end in the ways in which the Peace Corps experience influenced your later life and in and perhaps your career. So let's begin with the beginning and focus on your childhood. Where did you grow up and

what was your family of origin like in terms of lifestyle and your early years and your schooling through high school.

BROWNING: [00:01:40] I grew up in Jacksonville, Florida, lower middle class family, living in a VA home and fairly close to the downtown area. I went to a public elementary school and then middle school. And because of the construction of Interstate 95 through our neighborhood, we relocated out to a different community in St. John's County, which is the county where St. Augustine is located. And I attended on some kind of either county agreement, a school in Duval County called Fletcher High School, graduated from there in 1967. Subsequently went on, I was recruited heavily as a basketball player and had the opportunity to go to a number of any number of schools around the country. But I had a aunt who was married to a very strong alum of the University of Southern California, who brought me to the attention of the coaches of USC. They started recruiting me and I ended up going to the University of Southern California.

WAND: [00:03:10] Before we talk about your university experience, tell us a little more about your family. Do you have siblings and what was the livelihood of your family?

BROWNING: [00:03:22] Well, my dad was a postal clerk when I was very young, and I have one sister four years younger than I am. When we relocated out to St. John's County into a community called Palm Valley, it was in close proximity to a very affluent area called Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. And he had wanted to change careers and start a construction business, and he had a marvelous talent. They were educated as a contractor, but he just had an innate gift for knowing how to do an analysis of repair or figured out how to read blueprints. And he was in residential construction, repair and remodeling. He had a very, very good family business with my mother assisting and one of his sisters who had an accounting degree assisting with the books, and he was doing all the on-site work and bidding. And, you know, relations with the clients. Excellent business, always had more work than he could do and a great reputation and never advertised a lick, always word of mouth, and he really had a good business for his whole life.

WAND: [00:05:01] So that changed the economic status of your family, then.

BROWNING: [00:05:05] Indeed, indeed. We went from, you know, fairly really not having much money to having enough money to pursue getting some horses for my sister, building some stables. We had a five acre piece of land as opposed to a lot in the city with a house on the lot. We had the five acre piece of land and room for stables and construction sheds and all kinds of storage areas that he was able to use in this construction business.

WAND: [00:05:45] Ok, let's jump now to the University of Southern California. So you go there on a basketball scholarship?

BROWNING: [00:05:53] I actually I didn't. I had good grades out of high school. And the coaches were able to wrangle an academic scholarship out of the university called a trustee scholarship. So I went on a full academic scholarship with the understanding that I would play basketball.

WAND: [00:06:18] And tell us about that.

BROWNING: [00:06:21] Well, an interesting alum of the university is to write a very famous column, Art Buchwald, and Art Buchwald wrote me a letter during the recruiting process. It's pretty funny, he said, if you understand that, you know, you have some basketball skills and you have an interest in journalism. And if you come out here, I have a pretty good idea that they would let you do both. You could study journalism and play basketball. So but anyway, my career was fairly undistinguished. We had a lot of high powered Southern California athletes. I was on the freshman team. The freshman in those years, played in our freshman team, then became eligible for the varsity in your sophomore year of school. So I went to the varsity after my freshman year. We had various members of the freshman team playing kind of equal amounts of time.

BROWNING: [00:07:30] And then on varsity. I was a sub, and it was not a real enjoyable experience. The coaches there were very much believers in driving players as hard as they could in trying to extract the maximum

performance from them. But I didn't feel like they were very good teachers of the game of basketball in spring of my sophomore year. I injured my back in a pickup basketball game and it was severe enough. I didn't have to have surgery, but I did have to have some physical therapy and some extended rest. And I was able to retire from basketball and keep my scholarship because it was academic in nature, not athletic in nature. So the last two years, I was able to be a full time student without the burden of attending basketball practice. So I enjoyed the last two years a lot more than the first two.

WAND: [00:08:50] Did you go ahead and major in journalism as Art Buchwald had encouraged you to do?

BROWNING: [00:08:55] Well, I took a lot of journalism classes, but I decided that I would be a public relations major with a journalism minor. Found out that at USC, that was mostly journalism and two PR courses. And that was the degree I took, a Bachelor of Arts with a major in PR and minor in journalism.

WAND: [00:09:24] So where did you hear about Peace Corps and how did that direct, or did it direct your academic work? Or was this something you learned about later?

BROWNING: [00:09:38] Well, the time of the late '60s, early '70s was the time of the Vietnam War, and I received a deferment in the draft, a 4F classification, due to my height.

WAND: [00:09:58] How tall are you?

BROWNING: [00:09:59] I'm 6'9" and because it was not a declared war, the cutoff was 6'8". So I had a team physician from the basketball team sent the draft board a prescription slip that said Ivan Browning is six feet, nine inches tall, and they sent me back a draft card with 4F on it. So I think I was feeling a little guilty about not serving my country. I really didn't want to go to Vietnam and get killed, and I didn't understand what the war was about as subsequent years and reading about it and study and taught me a lot about it. And, you know, it was a wise decision. Of course, I

didn't have the decision because I was 4F. But in any event, I still felt like I wanted to serve and I'd run out of college. I wasn't interested in working a corporate job.

BROWNING: [00:11:06] I'm not sure how volunteer service came across my radar, but what came across my radar first was VISTA, Volunteers in Service to America. So I applied for VISTA much to my father's chagrin. He wanted me to go into the construction business with him, and I didn't want to do that because in my summers at college, I came back to Florida and worked construction in his business, and I knew from that experience that he and I would not work together well. Some fathers can work with their sons. This son could not work with his father. I love my dad, but we just were not meant to work with each other. So I had no corporate job, no job with my dad's construction business. So VISTA to me presented an opportunity to have a job without really, make a contribution and not have to go right into some kind of corporate career job. So it was a transitional period.

WAND: [00:12:18] And what year was this?

BROWNING: [00:12:20] That was the year I, well, I think that was in '70. I went into VISTA, you know, shortly, I think in the fall of 1971.

WAND: [00:12:36] And '71 was when you graduated from USC?

BROWNING: [00:12:38] Graduated in '71. I got married immediately after graduating and I got into VISTA, but my wife did not. But we, I did receive an offer from VISTA to work and go to training in Seattle, Washington, and I went out there and got my training. And my position with VISTA was working with a youth service bureau out of Lewiston, Idaho, which is right across the Snake River from Clarkston, Washington. And the Youth Service Bureau was providing services to pre-delinquent youth. They were junior high age and more likely, some of them were likely to get into trouble, and there were some community based programs out of the old Community Action Program, was a package of community services. And the Youth Service Bureau was one of those.

WAND: [00:13:55] And was your wife able to join you then at the VISTA?

BROWNING: [00:13:58] She, after I was accepted, we did a, you know, my first assignment and then she applied and was accepted to VISTA.

WAND: [00:14:10] To VISTA. So then she was able to participate and live in the same place where you were at that point.

BROWNING: [00:14:17] Yes. Yes. Actually, it took a while for her to get accepted. But during her training, when she went to Seattle, she met another man and started an affair. And when I found when she came back and told me that she had fallen in love with this other man, well, we tried some counseling. But basically it was, that was the end of our marriage. It was only that one-year marriage, and we probably both got married too early and we didn't have any children. It was fairly low key on the separation and divorce. So we both, we each went our separate ways so.

WAND: [00:15:04] And how long was your VISTA commitment?

BROWNING: [00:15:07] A year.

WAND: [00:15:08] So you were there from then say fall of '71 to fall of '72?

BROWNING: [00:15:16] I was. And during that time, I thought my volunteer service in VISTA had been rewarding. A couple of projects that were significant, got some funding for a program that Honda was running, that they donated a group of mini bikes to a community based program or a community leader would take these kids out on excursions on these mini bikes. And it just kind of a thing to work with the kids. So I got that funded and spun that off and then went to work on a drug education publication in the guise of a literary magazine that was funded through drug education money, a grant to a local mental health organization. So I was so satisfied with those achievements that I thought, I'd really like to go overseas, why don't I apply to the Peace Corps? So that's how I came up with the idea of joining the Peace Corps.

WAND: [00:16:38] Ok, so you apply then, so that must have been, but that still must have taken you a while, right, to go through that application process?

BROWNING: [00:16:48] It did take a while. I mean, there was a lapse between the end of VISTA and being accepted for Peace Corps. And I did a couple of different jobs and different places around the country, none of them any real consequence there, just kind of working with friends in construction or. Just this that and the other, you know. I worked for an attorney as a what he called a paralegal, but it was really a gofer, you know? But he was a one of my friend's fathers. He had a law firm in Jacksonville, and he hired me for a while and I worked for him for a while. But then my application from Peace Corps came in and I decided to accept it because I wanted. I wanted to, I wanted to go, wanted to live in a foreign country. I wanted to serve in the Peace Corps. And so when I got the invitation, my first choice was Africa. But the first offer, I didn't know it was not going to be the only offer, was Colombia. So I took it. I was off, off to receive Spanish language training, enough vaccinations to make a pincushion envious, and an assignment in this adult rehabilitation program.

WAND: [00:18:33] Tell us a little about your training. Where did you go to train and what did your training consist of besides Spanish language teaching?

BROWNING: [00:18:45] Well, our initial orientation took place in Miami, and that was where they started a vaccination program and gave us some initial orientation. But the bulk of the orientation and training took place in country, in Bogota. After a very short period of time in a hotel, we were assigned to live with a host family who was not allowed to speak any English to us. And we started this immersion Spanish training very quickly. There wasn't, because we, you know, this was a brand new program and it turned out to be a fairly controversial program.

WAND: [00:19:40] The in-country training was new?

BROWNING: [00:19:44] Yeah, there was no training to, because we were all basically athletes. And the adult rehabilitation considered consisted of running an athletic program within my little various district prisons around the country. And so I'm not sure what playing basketball and volleyball had to do with rehabilitating someone who was in jail. But that was the job that I had accepted, without really understanding a lot about it. But I knew generally what it was going to be, and I said, OK, if that's what the job is, I'll do it. And so after my language training, did you want to hear some more about the language training?

WAND: [00:20:53] Well, was there? You might just briefly talk about that, but also were there other kinds of classes that you had, you know, cultural or historic or history or?

BROWNING: [00:21:05] No, what training we got in the culture and history was done in the context of the Spanish conversation. All of the training, none of it was textbook. All of it was oral and it was extremely effective because from day one, it was conducted in Spanish. The teachers were very, of course, they were native speaking Colombians and they were very personable. And I feel sure that they had had some teaching experience because they seemed to be following a plan. They just weren't in a room with us shooting the breeze. They had ideas in mind of what they wanted to do with the language training.

WAND: [00:22:13] And how long did that training last?

BROWNING: [00:22:16] Six weeks. Six weeks and living with the host family and having two meals a day with them.

WAND: [00:22:30] And were you living with the host family by yourself or were there other Peace Corps volunteers with you in that same home?

BROWNING: [00:22:37] Just me.

WAND: [00:22:38] Just you.

BROWNING: [00:22:39] Just me and the family.

WAND: [00:22:40] And how was that? How did you develop any kind of a relationship with them that was meaningful to you in terms of person to person?

BROWNING: [00:22:50] Well, because of my limited language skills, I wasn't able to carry on a lot of profound discussions because I was starting from square one, not knowing much Spanish at all when I went to, when I showed up in country. But so we had some good discussions around the dinner table. But I don't think we really had any kind of connection on a personal level where we would, you know, try to stay in touch or anything like that. I think for them, it was an opportunity to make some extra money and probably get a few laughs at the volunteers at the gringo's attempt to say the right thing in Spanish and say an absolutely silly thing, which I know happened more than once.

WAND: [00:23:53] So at the end of the six weeks then, did you have any say in your next assignment or were you just told you're going to go to Huila and worked there?

BROWNING: [00:24:07] I went to Huila and started work, but I know that there was someone from the Peace Corps Colombia that accompanied me to to the city and introduced me to the warden of the prison. And we worked out when I was supposed to show up and my starting date for showing up. And I also stayed with a family in Neiva, and someone had to make those arrangements because I didn't make those arrangements. There were, Peace Corps made those things.

WAND: [00:24:49] You just landed there as you were.

BROWNING: [00:24:51] That was a turnkey operation as far as I was concerned. I just, you know, just brought what little gear I had and came along to do my job.

WAND: [00:25:02] So tell us about the job.

BROWNING: [00:25:05] Oh, the job was. It was very easy. A Colombian prison is organized. A small one is organized in three patios. Patio number one would be places where mentally ill people would be, the poorest of the poor would be. Patio two would be kind of middle of the road criminals. Everybody was sane and they were just a mix of people that didn't have enough money to be relocated to patio three. Patio three was where the prisoners were that had people outside the prison that could give them money so that they could buy better food that was cooked inside the patio. They had better sleeping accommodations. They might have had a mattress that they could put on the floor. And some of the other patios, I never saw it in my prison, but some of the prisoners were packed like 20 or so in a cell and more or less had to sleep standing up. Very miserable. You know, almost any Third World prison that you could pick would not be a very sanitary or healthful place to be. And the prison that I was associated with was like that.

BROWNING: [00:26:52] But probably, and one of the most interesting things about that prison was that in patio number three were two gringos, two young gringos, who had been entrapped in a marijuana sting outside this little town. They had been camping, and a young man from town offered to sell them a bag of marijuana. So they said, OK, bought the marijuana. And a little while later, here comes the young man back with the police and they were busted, thrown into jail. They had tried to bribe their way out. They lost the money that they paid to the first attorney that was going to get them out. And at the time I met them, they really had no idea when they were getting out.

WAND: [00:27:45] And how long had they been there?

BROWNING: [00:27:47] Well, I think they'd been there about five or six months. But they were getting money, so they were in patio number three and they had decent food. But they were glad to see me and first, all the prisoners were glad to see me because it was a break from the routine of just being there in prison. One day we would play have a basketball game and the next day we would play a volleyball game. Volleyball was pretty new to them, which was OK because it was pretty new to me as well. But we had some okay games, but after an hour and a half, two hours of

basketball or volleyball, that was my job for the day. It was over. So I was let out of the prison and the rest of the day I was on my own.

WAND: [00:28:48] And so how did you fill your time?

BROWNING: [00:28:52] I read a lot of books. I bought some food and put it in the kitchen with my family. Preparing meals was not part of the deal, so I had to prepare my own meals or go out to a restaurant to eat. And there were some other Peace Corps volunteers in town, and I became friendly with them. We would socialize, and then it was almost an every night routine to go to the air-conditioned movie theater and watch the movie, even if it was playing the same film four or five nights in a row. Just to be in the air conditioning, we would go to the movies.

WAND: [00:29:45] This is you and the other Peace Corps volunteers.

BROWNING: [00:29:46] Me and the other Peace Corps volunteers. And then we had some parties where adult beverages were served.

WAND: [00:29:54] And of course, you were over 21. So this wasn't a problem.

BROWNING: [00:29:57] I was over 21. But one of the strange things about being in Colombia was that this was right after the United States CIA involvement in Chile, and I felt an almost palpable distrust of me as an American, especially on the part of young people. I didn't feel welcome. I felt sure that most Colombians thought I was CIA.

WAND: [00:30:36] Did any of them say that to you?

BROWNING: [00:30:38] No. But the CIA was very much in the news. Chile was very much in the news. And it's just discomfoting to walk down the sidewalk and pass a little old lady, and she makes the sign of the cross when she passes you. So you just get the idea that maybe this gringo is not particularly welcome in Colombia.

WAND: [00:31:06] And you were a very tall gringo. There was nowhere you could hide.

BROWNING: [00:31:10] No, I was not exactly going to blend in at six foot nine with, in those days, blond hair and blue eyes. I was clearly a gringo. And so, you know, but it was OK that, you know, I mean, there wasn't anybody that. I never felt threatened physically or anything, but I just didn't feel any warm fuzzies from the people. But I also, you know, was getting some vibes from Peace Corps administration that the program was not popular. That there were people in the Colombian government who did not like having gringos in the prisons because not only criminals were in prisons, but mentally ill people were there and political prisoners. So it was, uh, I felt like the ship was sinking on that program. I just didn't feel that it was going to continue. And so coupled with the fact that I didn't feel that the host country really wanted me there, I just told the country director that I wanted to leave and I wanted to quit.

WAND: [00:32:41] And what reasons did you give him? Those reasons specifically?

BROWNING: [00:32:45] Well, it was the reasons of the program that I thought was failing and was unpopular. And I just got that, you know, that vibe was very strong. I don't think I really talked with him about the, you know, the fact of the people not being that friendly or welcoming. I did have an issue at that time of my mother's health, and that was a thought in my mind that I would, you know, I would tell him that. And it was true that, you know, she was not in very good health and that was a concern of mine. And I just with both of these things, the program on shaky ground and her health, I thought it was a good idea for me to leave. Well, he was a very nice guy.

WAND: [00:33:35] Who was that director, do you remember?

BROWNING: [00:33:37] I think his name was Manny Rodriguez. I think it was Manuel. I think it was Rodriguez. Of course, he was an American, Peace Corps country director. But he was very wise in the fact that he said, well, you know, and looking at your folder and your record, you have had an excellent you have been an excellent volunteer in VISTA and what you've done here has been completely satisfactory. Why don't you go

back to Washington, D.C., to the Peace Corps headquarters and look for another job in the Peace Corps? I said that sounds like a plan to me. I will do it. And that's what I did.

WAND: [00:34:29] So you were then, you went into Peace Corps in February. You left in September, you said. And so that's what about eight months, nine months, in the country?

BROWNING: [00:34:46] It was about seven, seven or eight months, yes.

WAND: [00:34:48] Where you were in your site anyway.

BROWNING: [00:34:51] Yep.

WAND: [00:34:52] And so were there some positive things that you took from that experience?

BROWNING: [00:35:00] I really enjoyed the. I really enjoyed speaking Spanish, talking with people, did some touring around to visit other volunteers and see what their jobs were. The country was absolutely beautiful. And some of the cultural attractions in Bogota that we saw while we were there, going to the Museo de Oro, the Gold Museum, and some of the other attractions. I'm sure we went to some other museums and parks, which Bogota had a plentiful supply, and very good restaurants. Neiva not so much. It was a much smaller town, but Bogota, even in those days, was a very, very large town. And but I really enjoyed my time interacting with the Spanish language instructors. They were more well-educated people and they were very, very funny. They liked Americans, they enjoyed their jobs. But I just, you know, I don't have a lot of super positive memories of being in Colombia.

WAND: [00:36:29] Mm hmm. Before we move to your next assignment, are there any individuals, either Peace Corps volunteers or Colombians, with whom you have had contact consequent to your life in Colombia?

BROWNING: [00:36:49] None.

WAND: [00:36:50] Interesting. Mm hmm. Ok.

BROWNING: [00:36:53] I wasn't there long enough to make really good friends with the volunteers or with any Colombians, you know? But with language training in one city, work in another city, and then gone. It was a fairly small length of service, really.

WAND: [00:37:15] Do you have any regrets about that?

BROWNING: [00:37:17] Oh, no, none. It was a very good experience. I enjoyed being there. I mean, I have my doubts that what I did was had any kind of lasting effect. But maybe the fact of interacting with those prisoners and just treating them like regular people and having some fun in an adult recreation was, you know, it certainly helped them in a small way, you know, get through their prison time.

WAND: [00:38:03] Was that prison program continued? Or do you have any idea whether it was continued after you left?

BROWNING: [00:38:10] I don't know for sure. I never heard.

WAND: [00:38:12] Yeah. Ok, let's move you to your next assignment then. What did you do when you left Colombia? Where did you go and what did you do?

BROWNING: [00:38:22] You mean, after I went to D.C.?

WAND: [00:38:24] Yes, is that where you landed directly from Colombia then?

BROWNING: [00:38:28] No. I went home to Florida and was there for a little bit and then went up to D.C. for a couple of days, circulated around Peace Corps headquarters, talked to some people and there was nothing immediately that happened. And then I went back to Florida and thinking, I better figure out what I am going to do with my life because Peace Corps doesn't look like it's happening for me. But a few days later, I got a phone call from D.C. saying we have an opportunity that we think fits your skill set. Would you consider a position in Kenya? And I

said, well, that depends, is it a real job? And they said, oh yes, it's definitely a real job. You would be working at the Medical Training Center in Nairobi. It's in close proximity to the National Hospital, and they train people who are radiologists, physical therapists, pharmacists, and you would be working with the faculty to develop audiovisual teaching aids. I said, OK, sounds good. Yes, I'll do it. So there was a point, I don't believe that, I don't think we really got, well, on the plane to go until January. So I think it was just they weren't ready for me to come until after the first of the year.

WAND: [00:40:25] This would have been January of 1975 then?

BROWNING: [00:40:28] It was. It was. And I went over with one other volunteer. It was not, it was not a big class like we had going to Colombia, a group. It was not a group. It was just me and a woman who had a specialty in being a nurse, a cardiac catheterization nurse. And her assignment was to work with her boyfriend, a cardiac catheterization, a cardiologist, who worked at the, who set up a brand new cardiology clinic at the University of Nairobi. Not coincidentally, the president of Kenya, the first president after independence, Jomo Kenyatta, had a heart condition. And all of a sudden there was money to create a cardiac lab at the hospital, especially if it could be staffed, would have to pay the cardiologist, because medical doctors don't come cheap, especially not heart specialists. But if he could get a nurse that he was comfortable with through the Peace Corps, that was a great situation. So that was my traveling, she was my traveling companion and I was on my way to the medical training center.

WAND: [00:42:20] Ok. So did you have any real training in Kenya or were you did you arrive and immediately walk into your job?

BROWNING: [00:42:31] I had some language training, but there was no training for doing my job.

WAND: [00:42:40] What kind of language?

BROWNING: [00:42:42] Swahili. And the Peace Corps had had a hotel in Mombasa, right on the coast, where the true Swahili speakers live in Kenya is along the coast. And they had a small hotel called the New Sea Breezes. And for a number of years, they were running language classes at the New Sea Breezes. And there were some German volunteers that were also taking Swahili. Kenya has two national languages, English and Swahili. So they felt like we should learn some Swahili because out in the countryside where you would find different tribes, they might not speak any English, but they would probably speak some Swahili. So I really enjoyed my language training and I just enjoy learning language, and it's pretty easy for me.

BROWNING: [00:43:54] So in the Swahili language is not that different from the Spanish language in its rhythm and its pronunciation. Of course, the grammar is different, but the fact that it had the same sounds and kind of the same rhythm made it easier to learn. And so I picked up on some Swahili and had two different phases of Swahili training, but phase one was in the New Sea Breezes is phase one. Phase two was a month or two down the road after I'd been on the job. I was plucked from my office environment and put on an oceanfront hotel to take language lessons under a thatched roof hut on the beach.

WAND: [00:44:50] Tough assignment.

BROWNING: [00:44:51] It was, but the language learning was important. I went, I went, and I did my best in those trying circumstances.

WAND: [00:45:03] It sounds pretty idyllic to me.

BROWNING: [00:45:06] It was. It was really good, especially if you take into consideration the palm wine that was flowing after the language classes were over for the day.

WAND: [00:45:21] OK, so that was the extent of your formal training, and it sounds like it was in the language. And what about your day to day job as an audiovisual specialist? Did you know about audiovisual technology before you went?

BROWNING: [00:45:41] Yes, yes.

WAND: [00:45:43] How had you learned that?

BROWNING: [00:45:44] I was self-taught. I had done some video. I had a part time job in college as a videotaping technician for the L.A. City School District. And that was, you know, I don't know, you know, I knew I could write because I didn't have any problem writing in my journalism classes. And so the rest of the audiovisual component or department at the medical training center was a Peace Corps volunteer who was a medical illustrator. He would draw anatomical drawings and they would run them off on a mimeograph machine. Well, I didn't know when I got there that that mimeograph machine was about the extent of the AV equipment. But my first job was to survey the audiovisual equipment, and it didn't take long to determine that the 16-millimeter projector that they had was ancient and was broken.

BROWNING: [00:47:14] So my daily duties were to show up, read the newspaper, go to tea with the faculty members, morning tea in British. Morning and afternoon tea is a British tradition, and Kenya had been a British colony, so they had a lot of British customs. After that checked the mail, mail time was at teatime, but after that it was pretty much head to the city into town for lunch, and that was the end of the day. Well, it was pretty strange because I knew that, I mean, my associate wasn't working that hard, but he had been there for two years and had extended for two more.

WAND: [00:48:16] So he was a Peace Corps volunteer too.

BROWNING: [00:48:18] He was in his third year as a Peace Corps volunteer, so he knew everybody. Everybody was comfortable with him, and he and I shared an office. I didn't really have anything to do in the office, but we were still in there and he was doing his drawings.

WAND: [00:48:36] And he was the medical illustrator?

BROWNING: [00:48:37] He was the medical illustrator, right. I definitely remember his name was Greg Conline. Because we worked in close proximity and he had a car, a little Mini Cooper van, and we would drive it. He would drive it to lunch and we would go to lunch at Brunner's Hotel, a very famous middle of the road hotel in the central part of Nairobi that many, many people pass through and that had reasonably priced food and very large Kenyan beers. So we would have a beer with lunch, and that was basically the end of work for the day.

BROWNING: [00:49:37] And but I was, of course, nervous about this. I thought that this was wrong, you know, I'm really not doing anything. I wasn't brought here to do nothing. But it just seemed like there was nothing to do except do my daily routine. But after six months of being on the job, I got a summons to the office of the head of the medical training center. And I was extremely worried and knew I was going to be called on the carpet and perhaps fired because I had not done anything except the survey, which was accomplished in a week or so. Even in the most leisurely pace I could come up with it. I stretched it out as long as I could, but it still only took a week or so.

BROWNING: [00:50:46] And so we had our meeting and there was a very cordial exchange of greetings in Swahili and how was everything and everything was fine and I was getting, I was really nervous. I just thought it was the end for me in Kenya, certainly at the medical training center. Well, after the greetings were over the head of the medical training center folded his hands on his desk and looked at me and said, Ivan, you are working too hard. I couldn't believe it, I could not believe that I was working too hard. I said, oh, OK. And I don't remember the rest of the conversation because that was so surprising that he would say that.

BROWNING: [00:51:51] Well, I learned that in Kenya, you have to throttle back on your expectations of what you're going to accomplish. So I slowed down. I did try to pursue some things. I would try to call some people in the government and pursue various projects. But in Kenya, it would sometimes take weeks to reach somebody in a government ministry if you could ever reach them. They were never in their office. We didn't

have reliable phone service, so it was really difficult. But after a year.
[tape break]

WAND: [00:52:52] Ok. So we're talking about Ivan being in Kenya at a medical clinic, and he was assigned to be an audiovisual specialist.

BROWNING: [00:53:05] That's right. And after my meeting with the director, I tried to slow down a little bit, but it's when you're already at stop, it's difficult to slow down any further. But I did look for additional projects that I could do with the medical training center. I can't say that anything came to much, but after another six months of basically nothing, I decided that I would look for another position in Kenya.

WAND: [00:53:38] Was your companion, the medical illustrator Peace Corps volunteer, was he still there and was he continuing to do illustrations?

BROWNING: [00:53:48] Yes.

WAND: [00:53:49] So he was pretty busy then.

BROWNING: [00:53:50] I wouldn't say he was busy, but he had steady, he had steady work.

WAND: [00:53:56] And did he talk with you about what things you might be able to do?

BROWNING: [00:54:02] No, he didn't. No, he was. I think he had the attitude he's been there two years and he just had the attitude of the situation is what it is. You know, you do what's expected and if you can't do anything more than that, it's OK. Nobody's going to get bent out of shape about it. And I'd certainly found that to be true. But still, I'd really come there with the idea of making more of a contribution than drinking tea and checking my mail and reading the newspaper.

BROWNING: [00:54:38] But so I sought another position, and I heard that at the University of Nairobi at the museum that Richard Leakey might have a position. Richard Leakey, son of the famous archeologist Richard and

Mary Leakey, and quite accomplished archeologist in his own right. Well, I had an interview with Richard, and I don't think he was extremely interested in or had anything that he thought I could do within his activities or his projects. But at the same university there was an African Studies Institute and they were looking for someone to assist in the publication of the Research Fellows Journal, which would come out periodically. So I accepted that position of aiding and working with the research fellows of the African Studies Institute.

BROWNING: [00:56:01] And in that job, I had the opportunity to do some traveling, to work with a white Kenyan, he was born in Kenya. His father and mother were the some of the original colonists that came over right after in the early 1900s and he was an accomplished historian and researcher on the ancient Swahili cultures of the coastal area. And he had a house, a very nice house on the Lamu Island, which is like the island, the place that time forgot. It is a small fishing village with very narrow streets, with one car that belonged to the district police constable and no roads to speak of that you could drive on.

BROWNING: [00:57:17] But that was his home base and with him, I went on trips where we would photograph ruins along the coast. He would photograph them and I would photograph him photographing them, and I would also take some pictures of them myself. I also did some recording of the musical performances put on by the men of Lamu that as they celebrated religious holidays. They were all Muslim and they had these dance performances that would go on all night long and in those performances there would just be a continuous beat of drums and the men dressed up in these full length white cloaks garments, would line up and just kind of sway in place. And that was what they considered dancing to and celebrating these religious holidays. So I did some recording of that. That was called Maulidi. So I did some recordings of Maulidi.

BROWNING: [00:58:58] And I really enjoyed my time in Lamu and did bring back some books about the Swahili culture and some wood carvings that were very intricate, some wooden serving platters with my name in Arabic around the circumference of the platter.

BROWNING: [00:59:25] But in Lamu and one of these tradesmen shops where I was ordering the platter, the tradesman asked me if I was the tallest man in the world. I had to tell him, no, I wasn't the tallest man in the world, but to him, I was the tallest man he'd ever seen. That's me. Usually, they're a little bit shorter than quite a bit shorter than I am, but I thought that was pretty interesting that because they were isolated on that little island. You had to take a boat to get from where you park your car or the bus, if you didn't have a car and take a ferry out to the island.

WAND: [01:00:15] And where was the ferry landing on the mainland?

BROWNING: [01:00:20] It was north of, uh, it was north of Mombasa, north of Malindi, which Malindi was, where the hotel was where we did the language training. So you kept going north. And I mean, pretty far north, you're getting close to the I mean, you have to go a bit farther to get to the, well, to get to Ethiopia. But it was far northeastern part of the coast, off the coast.

WAND: [01:00:54] So this director's name, the director of the African Studies Institute, that's the man you were working with?

BROWNING: [01:01:01] No, I was working with a research fellow. His name was James Atalon.

WAND: [01:01:12] And you said you did some of the recordings of these ritual dancing, that you did those recordings in video?

BROWNING: [01:01:20] Audio.

WAND: [01:01:21] In audio, so you weren't able to capture the images unfortunately.

BROWNING: [01:01:26] It was done, no, and I didn't have any video recording equipment. I did have audio recording equipment, but still cameras. But the dancing was done at night by torch light. So it would have been

dramatic if I could have taken video, but just didn't have the ability to capture video like we do today.

WAND: [01:01:54] So did you work with Mr. Allen through then the rest of your Peace Corps?

BROWNING: [01:02:01] No, no. I just did a project with him and I worked some on the journal, but I heard of another project that sounded worthwhile. I had met an American ophthalmologist named Randy Whitfield, Dr. Randy Randall [Randolph] Whitfield, and he had a grant to work out of a hospital near Nyeri. And he also got a grant to bring over a friend of his and do a study of eye problems in the Samburu tribe. The Samburu are cousins of the Maasai. Their more famous cousins. But the Samburu are pastoral. They only raise cows. They don't grow crops. And so the grant was to go and treat any eye diseases that were found and document the condition of their eyes because they built their houses out of dung and they didn't wash very much. There were a lot of flies that were always buzzing around their eyes. So the theory was that there was a high incidence of eye disease and blindness.

BROWNING: [01:03:49] So we had a big safari where we got a safari guide and who packed up enough equipment and get it up to the boonies where the Samburu lived. And we organized a series of, or they organized a series of clinics where we would they would see patients and examine their eyes and either put antibiotics if they found active eye infections or try to encourage people to come to a district hospital where they could if they had cataracts that needed cataract surgery. I sat in on a cataract surgery, not with the Samburu, but in Nyeri with Dr. Whitfield at another time. But so I was out in the field a while on this safari, which was a very enlightening and amazing experience.

BROWNING: [01:04:59] We got to see some rituals that had been prohibited by the government because they tended to get violent. The Samburu would war with other groups of Samburu and people got killed and women got kidnapped and cows get stolen. And the government had prohibited these rites of passage, which is what they were, it was young men becoming.

WAND: [01:05:32] Showing their strength.

BROWNING: [01:05:32] Young men becoming warriors. And in that process, they leave childhood, they get circumcised without anesthetic, and then they go into warrior training and they become warriors. But those things had been prohibited for quite a while, and this was the first time in years that that had been allowed. So it was there was a lot of joyous celebration with the warriors that were already full-fledged warriors dancing. And their dancing consisted of leaping off the ground, repeatedly, way off the ground. And the women, meantime, would just, you know, make these cries that were not melodies. They were just kind of a cry of joy from their, just kind of welled up out of them. I mean, if you've seen movies about Africa, you've heard that kind of cry. But it was the first time I had ever heard it in person, for sure. And it was a happy occasion. And it was, I think in doing that work, we probably helped save some vision for some of those people. It was a short, fairly short-term project, but it had some ongoing aspects that I really wasn't a part of.

WAND: [01:07:09] What was your role in this?

BROWNING: [01:07:12] I was taking photographs and I was a logistics expert, which meant that I would take a Land Rover and pick up a group of Samburu and haul them to a tent where the equipment had been set up. They would be examined and then I would put them back in the Land Rover and take them back close to where I picked them up and get some more people. So I was just facilitating the. I had met Dr. Whitfield is just a friend, a friend of a friend type thing, and it was his idea to invite me along on the study, which I was happy to do. And the African Studies Institute, they were very relaxed about my work and the hours.

WAND: [01:08:09] Did you record any of the things that were happening then, either by photography or video or audio?

BROWNING: [01:08:15] I have still pictures. I have images, but I don't have any audio recording or video.

WAND: [01:08:24] Of the ritual. Right, right.

BROWNING: [01:08:27] A pretty good number of still images.

WAND: [01:08:31] Yes. Ok, so were there other projects that you remember from that work, from your work with the African Studies Institute?

BROWNING: [01:08:48] Um, no, and you know, besides doing the journal the last two or three months of my Peace Corps service, we had published the journal. So the Institute was not in any big rush to publish another. And the director of the country was fairly new. And he when he learned that I had skills in public relations and I really wasn't that busy, he asked me if I would agree to produce a brochure about Peace Corps Kenya. So I said, sure. It wasn't really my idea of what I was supposed to be doing, which was, you know, doing something that a paid staff member would usually do. But I was still agreeable because he was going to furnish a Land Rover and fuel. And I got to go around and visit various volunteers in different places in the country. And I had another Peace Corps volunteer, a woman who was a real photographer who had some good photographic credentials. But he was, he got her to go along to photograph, to make pictures for the brochure.

BROWNING: [01:10:19] So we did that for a while. That was really rewarding because I got to talk to volunteers that were teachers, people that were out in the bush who were very happy with what they were doing. And, you know, they were because they were actively engaged in teaching classes and, you know, doing different types of projects. But, you know, so I did that for a while and produced the brochure, and that pretty much brought me to the end of two years. And I thought, I heard somehow that there was an opportunity to extend for a year, go to Ghana and teach journalism at the university there. So I said, OK, I'll go, I'll go. No commitment to do it. I will go look at it. So I did, I went.

WAND: [01:11:23] You mean this was as you closed your service at Kenya, you just like, went home via Ghana or you?

BROWNING: [01:11:29] Well, it turned out to be that, but I was going there with the idea that if things look good, I would work for another year and teach journalism in this university. And when I got there, I found that things were not so good. They had to fly in food for the Peace Corps volunteers. The markets were pretty much barren. It was just, it was not a real good situation and all of a sudden I just decided, well, I don't think this is a real good idea. Let's just get me a ticket back to the back to the States. I think at that time, I was also, you know, I was not feeling well and I just looked at what the situation was in Ghana and I said, I don't think so. I don't think that's the right thing to do. I think it's the time to call a halt to my Peace Corps service and wrap it up.

WAND: [01:12:42] You know, you mentioned your health. Did you enjoy mostly good health or did you have some sickly times while you were a volunteer?

BROWNING: [01:12:55] I had some real issues in Colombia. I got very sick with amoebic dysentery and I have fond memories of my little Colombian father that I was living with, taking me to the doctor because I could not stop vomiting and dry heaving. And he was taking me to the doctor all the time, patting me on the back and saying, *pobre Ivan*, poor Ivan. And I can remember being in the middle of the Avenida Caracas in Bogota, on this huge island where there's a gazillion cars streaming by in each direction and having to heave in the planter in the middle of this road on the way to the doctor. I was an extremely sick puppy. But after getting some medication, things calmed down. I had to be treated for the amoebas when I returned to the States in between Kenya and, I mean Colombia and Kenya, but I didn't really have any health issues to speak of.

BROWNING: [01:14:17] And in Kenya, except for re-injuring my back, that I had hurt in basketball in college, playing a pickup basketball game. And that one ended me up in the hospital at the University of Nairobi in traction for two weeks, and it put me on medication for another six months after that. I was still able to get around and do what limited responsibilities and had. But, you know, that was a pretty serious injury that could have resulted in a medical evacuation. But it seemed that I responded pretty well to the

ministrations of a very attractive British physical therapist and the traction and being on a fairly high dose of Valium while I was in the hospital.

BROWNING: [01:15:15] And my Peace Corps girlfriend, another Peace Corps volunteer, was quite good about baking me some special brownies and bringing them to the hospital. So I was feeling no pain in the hospital except for hearing at night. The other patients who were in pain and were groaning and moaning in the night. But after the two weeks of traction, things kind of were OK. They felt like they didn't need to send me for surgery, which is fortunate because in those days back surgery was pretty dicey. But generally my health was good. I ate good food. I took care of myself, sort of, and I was young and pretty much invincible, except for the back injury.

WAND: [01:16:08] Ok, so we've got you to the end of your service in Kenya and how were you preparing? I understand you thought you might go to Ghana and that didn't work out. Then what did you do? Did you have specific plans or did you just fly home and start making plans? And what were your plans? What did you do afterwards?

BROWNING: [01:16:29] Well, I really didn't have much of a plan in mind, except I thought I would go back out to the Pacific Northwest because I had friends in the Pacific Northwest from VISTA and my college. One of my college roommates was from Seattle, so I had never lived in the Pacific Northwest, so I thought I would try the Pacific Northwest. And I went out and one day I just got the inspiration. Well, I first got a job with a friend of a friend working at a being assistant manager of a pizza place.

WAND: [01:17:16] This was in Seattle?

BROWNING: [01:17:17] In Seattle, and I was delivering pizzas and cooking pizzas and managing others who were doing the same. But that was short lived, and I was living in a really rundown part of Seattle near the Space Needle, which I'm sure now is gentrified and is very fancy and expensive. But it was had some really low rent flats in those days that occupied by me and a gazillion cockroaches. Not cockroaches, silver fish, those little tiny

ones. Anyway, but right across the street from where I lived, there was a broadcast school and I kept hearing ads for it on the radio. The Ron Bailie School of Broadcast. I thought, well, I would like to be in radio or TV journalism.

BROWNING: [01:18:09] So I enrolled at the Ron Bailie School of Broadcast, took their fairly short. It was a trade school and I got a certification as a first-class radio telephone operator with the FCC, which was a real job ticket. Because radio stations had to have a first-class licensee on their staff just because the regulations, so you could you could get a job even if you were lousy. But as a deejay or a newsman, but I got a job after Ron Bailie working across the bay in a little town called Bremerton. And I was playing music and doing a part time news job. So I pursued a broadcast career in Washington, and then I eventually decided to come back to Florida and did more deejay and journalism work for a while until that career ended and another career started in the banking business.

WAND: [01:19:26] OK, and about when did that transition happen?

BROWNING: [01:19:32] That would have been about 1977, early '78.

WAND: [01:19:39] And then when you went into the banking business, were you also in public relations?

BROWNING: [01:19:46] I started out in public relations, in marketing, and then became a true banker, running, doing consumer loans and managing a bank branch.

WAND: [01:20:01] And how long were you in? Was this in Florida?

BROWNING: [01:20:04] Florida.

WAND: [01:20:04] And how long were you in that?

BROWNING: [01:20:05] I did that about, uh, I did that 10 years old, about 11 years.

WAND: [01:20:11] Mm hmm. So until the eighties, into the '80s, well into the '80s, probably, yeah.

BROWNING: [01:20:17] It was. It was well into the '80s and into the '90s, in fact.

WAND: [01:20:26] Mm hmm. OK. And now you're in the information business.

BROWNING: [01:20:36] I am, the software, the software business. Yeah, we didn't even have computers for much of my, well, of course, in the bank, you have a computer. But in those days it was one little screen connected to a giant computer at headquarters that everybody had to use that one screen. But of course, the personal computer revolution was happening at that time. But yeah, but when the banking industry left me, I got a job with a software company and that's, I'm still working with that same product. The company got acquired, but I stayed with the company that acquired the small software company, and it's been a very rewarding and, for the most part, enjoyable career.

WAND: [01:21:37] Good. Let's, as we wind this conversation down, let's reflect a little bit about how your experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in in two different countries, how that influenced your career or your life.

BROWNING: [01:21:58] Well, I can certainly say that being a Peace Corps volunteer and a VISTA volunteer made me always want to be involved as a community volunteer. Part of my job in the bank was to volunteer with the Chamber of Commerce. I became a Chamber of Commerce leader. I became a board member of the YMCA and I served on a number of civic groups. I'm just a volunteer. That's all there is to it. I just happened to stumble my way into VISTA and Peace Corps, but I found that I really I learned a lot about flexibility and having reasonable expectations. Don't set your expectations for achievement so high that that you guarantee that you will feel that your efforts are a failure. You know, have realistic expectations.

BROWNING: [01:23:32] But in being a volunteer, I've often felt that I have benefited more and learn more by being a volunteer than the people I was supposed to be helping or was helping in some fashion. And it's, you

know, being a volunteer is a tremendous, it's really enhanced my life and wherever I volunteered. Some have been better experiences than others, but I wouldn't trade really any of those volunteer experiences and certainly not my Peace Corps experiences. I'm so glad I did that when I did instead of starting down some traditional career path. You know, it was kind of a time out vocationally because there wasn't a seamless transition from Peace Corps to, OK, now I'm going to take X job. But with my experience in Peace Corps, I had the patience and flexibility to just take things slowly and let things evolve and pursue some interests and things have worked out really well.

WAND: [01:24:57] That's great. Well, is there anything else that you would like to add as we close our conversation?

BROWNING: [01:25:05] I certainly would. Yes, I would encourage anybody. I hope that the Peace Corps continues another 50 years. Celebrated the 50-year anniversary of Peace Corps a couple three years ago. One of the best, if not the best program the U.S. government has ever created. Such a powerful person-to-person effort in opening up Americans to what the rest of the world is about. I highly encourage parents to encourage their children to become Peace Corps volunteers, I encourage people of all ages to become Peace Corps volunteers. Lillian Carter, President Jimmy Carter's mother, probably one of the most famous mature Peace Corps volunteers. But you know, it's just a, it's a wonderful organization. The money spent on Peace Corps has got to be the best investment the U.S. government has ever made, and I'm just 100 percent advocate and believer in the mission of the Peace Corps and the ongoing benefit for somebody that serves as a volunteer.

WAND: [01:26:33] With that, thank you so much, Ivan, for this time and for sharing your story.

BROWNING: [01:26:38] Thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]