

Jeremiah Norris Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Jeremiah (Jerry) Norris served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia from 1963 to 1965 on a cooperatives project (Colombia VI).

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Jeremiah Norris

August 24, 2016
Washington, D.C.

By Evelyn Ganzglass

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

GANZGLASS: [00:00:01] This is Evelyn Ganzglass. I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Somalia, 1966 to 1968, and I'm interviewing Jerry Norris, Jeremiah Norris, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia, 1963 to 1965. He was part of Colombia VI and he worked on co-ops.

NORRIS: [00:00:31] Right.

GANZGLASS: [00:00:32] So welcome. So I'll ask my usual first question. Why did you join the Peace Corps?

NORRIS: [00:00:40] Well, I was working in Chicago for the Encyclopedia Britannica and I was on their management team and one of my jobs was to arrange the retirement dinners for people who were put in their 30 and 40 years. We always gave them a gold watch as a going away present, and it dawned on me that just as their time was running out, that we were giving them a watch. This is where I could be in 30 years.

And so there's got to be something else out there. And it was thankfully. There was the Peace Corps, so that's why I joined.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:31] And how did you know about Peace Corps?

NORRIS: [00:01:33] Well, in the 1960 campaign I voted for, my vote went to Nixon. But then when Kennedy spoke.

GANZGLASS: [00:01:55] You were inspired?

NORRIS: [00:01:57] That's where my heart went.

GANZGLASS: [00:02:03] Yeah, good. So you applied for Peace Corps? And did you have to wait a long time to get in?

NORRIS: [00:02:11] No, actually, it was very quick. I got a call one night at dinner. I lived in Chicago and I got a call from. It was my sister answered the phone and said it was the White House calling. And so I went to the phone and person identified herself as a recruiter for Peace Corps. She was recruiting for Ethiopia, and I didn't know at the time, but that was Harris Wofford's first program. And so I said, well, how many people will be in the program? She said, oh there'll be 300. And I said, well, thank you, but I'm not interested in being with a group of 300. So she said, would you be interested in other programs? I said, yeah. So they called other times, but not from the White House. Other invitations. And on the seventh one, it was Colombia.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:09] They called you seven times?

NORRIS: [00:03:10] Six times and then the seventh one was Colombia.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:14] I guess they really wanted you, huh?

NORRIS: [00:03:16] Well, they were, you know, they had a very active recruitment effort. And when I said how many people in the program and they said it's an all-male program, very small, only 23. I said, that's mine. I like small like that.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:31] How old were you?

NORRIS: [00:03:32] Twenty nine.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:33] You were 29. So you were among the mature people.

NORRIS: [00:03:37] I was long in the tooth. I had done my military first before college and in the military. I was with a very small unit. I like small. In a big world, I like small.

GANZGLASS: [00:03:49] Well, great. So you finally accepted Colombia. Where did you train?

NORRIS: [00:03:56] We assembled for five days of orientation in New York City. We then went to Puerto Rico for 30 days of Outward Bound training. And then we went to the University of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Wisconsin, Milwaukee. For three and a half months of academic training, and then back to Puerto Rico to actually work in an active cooperative for a month. So we'd have a feel of what it was like. So it was a fairly long.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:29] Did you like the Outward Bound part?

NORRIS: [00:04:31] Loved it, loved it. And it was a, no one knew each other until we got into that swimming pool, so to speak. Or into those arduous hikes that they put you through, but 30 days really bonded you quickly.

GANZGLASS: [00:04:52] That's great. And was the training in Milwaukee good?

NORRIS: [00:04:56] It was very good, very good. Language training, very good. Academic training and economics, very good. And the history of cooperatives and what cooperatives, you know, the many different forms of cooperatives. So it gave us a good background for what we were to do in Colombia.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:18] And then you did, I guess, practice cooperative work in Puerto Rico.

NORRIS: [00:05:24] In Puerto Rico.

GANZGLASS: [00:05:24] What kind of a cooperative was that?

NORRIS: [00:05:28] It was an agricultural cooperative, everything from coffee to beans and corn, but it gave you a feel for how to manage a business. Basically, it was a management sort of a management course. So when we got to Colombia, we had I think it was five days of orientation in Bogota and then we split up. And on the day we were to go out to our sites, the Peace Corps director came in to talk to us and said, well, now you're ready to go and we'll see you in six months. For a reunion sort of a meeting. So we had figured that we had six months to do something or show that we could do something. And I was posted to to a very small village, three thousand people.

GANZGLASS: [00:06:42] What was the name of the village?

NORRIS: [00:06:43] It's called La Plata, in the Department of Huila, which had just gone through the long civil war in Colombia. Most of it was pacified. But all the other guys in our group went to big cities like Cali and Cartagena and Medellin. I couldn't figure out why this small town, 3,000 people, you know, sent me to. And when I got there, I couldn't find anyone that had requested a volunteer or knew anything about why one should be there.

GANZGLASS: [00:07:22] Did they know you were coming?

NORRIS: [00:07:24] There were two volunteers there already from a previous group, but they were working in community development. But they said they didn't request anyone, so they didn't know what that was all about. So I worked with them in community development projects for the first three or four months, and then they went home. Fortunately, in working with them, people would say, well, this is what, so this is what you mean by community development. But tell us about cooperatives, what

are they? That kind of thing. That's why I started giving, you know, classes, orientation sessions on the structure of cooperatives.

NORRIS: [00:08:15] And then one day in a very remote village, not where I lived in La Plata, but in a remote village called the El Congreso, which took me hours to get up in foot, slogging on a trail up in the rainforest. These people had been displaced during the civil wars in Colombia, and they wanted to get as far away from the government as they could, so were up in the rainforest. They made their living cutting wood, making cheese, things like that. And I went up. I just liked the people up there and I gave orientation sessions on cooperatives and one day they said, let's do it. And 50 years later, one of my partners returned, and it's still operating.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:23] And what kind of a co-op was it?

NORRIS: [00:09:25] Marketing cooperative.

GANZGLASS: [00:09:29] Marketing what?

NORRIS: [00:09:30] Marketing timber and lumber that they cut. They all individually, before I worked with them, they all individually took their lumber out to the road head, took it down to the nearest city, and made deals with middlemen. But now we could put it all into one package and get a better price and negotiate for a better price on the lumber. And then the first thing we did was a company store, rice and coffee and sugar and salt, and things like that. Started off with four or five items and pretty soon we had 25, 30, 50 items.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:11] To buy cooperatively?

NORRIS: [00:10:15] So it became a cooperative store, which the women liked a lot, because they didn't have to then go into the nearest town, which was always very difficult. But to have it still operating after 50 years was quite.

GANZGLASS: [00:10:31] That's exciting.

NORRIS: [00:10:32] Yeah. And then, we built a physical building for the cooperative where they could mill the wood instead of doing it individually, do it by power saw. Make cheese, which they started to do, process cheese. And what we had. About six months after I was there, two other volunteers came to my site and they were community development volunteers. And they were under CARE, supervision of CARE contractor. So they had access to food from CARE, surplus food. So we brought that into El Congreso and we would, we would say with the cooperative board, one gallon of cooking oil for six broad feet of lumber. So we traded food.

GANZGLASS: [00:11:43] Well, nobody had. Did they not have money or?

NORRIS: [00:11:47] Money was pretty scarce, but food was, you know, the CARE food had huge value to it. Cooking oil is very expensive. Flour was expensive.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:04] Because it had to be shipped in, right?

NORRIS: [00:12:06] Yeah, but here they could. They're cutting wood anyway, so why not trade the wood for food?

GANZGLASS: [00:12:14] And then what did you do with the wood?

NORRIS: [00:12:16] Built the building.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:18] Oh, built the building. And what was your role in all of this?

NORRIS: [00:12:22] I was, you know, after they formed their own junta, I was just an advisor and I'd take the money to the bank back in La Plata. Do arrangements for shipping in more food so they could trade it for wood until the building was up and running.

GANZGLASS: [00:12:45] Wow.

NORRIS: [00:12:48] And then, I didn't realize that since it probably was the most inaccessible geographic area because it was up in the rainforest, that once I got that cooperative started, people would come to see me in La Plata and say, why are you going all the way up there? Come to our town and we'll have a horse for you and all those kinds of things. So one cooperative soon expanded to five in different parts of Huila.

GANZGLASS: [00:13:28] So were they, was this a totally new concept to them, cooperatives? They had never really heard of doing working together like that.

NORRIS: [00:13:37] They had heard of them from prior to World War II. Some Germans were out there, but not in the village where I worked, but in Huila itself. But the Germans formed the co-operative to the point where they could then take all the money and disappear. So it had a bad reputation. The concept had a bad reputation. And that's what the Germans did.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:06] So explain to me what the difference is between your job working on cooperatives, I guess it's more specific than community development. Where do those come together?

NORRIS: [00:14:18] Yeah, community development would be like doing schools, doing farm to market roads, doing bridges, small bridges.

GANZGLASS: [00:14:27] So it's infrastructure development.

NORRIS: [00:14:28] Infrastructure, yeah. And we did, with the other two volunteers. They were very, two very unusual people because they didn't care if they were working on my project or I was working on their project. It was all safe. And so we managed to do schools, a couple of schools. They did a very nice bridge project. One of the guys was a civil engineer, so, he knows construction, knew how to use cable and make a bridge out of their cable and whatnot. And we did, in the town where we lived, then we did a credit cooperative.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:24] And the credit cooperative, I mean, that's a whole banking system, right?

NORRIS: [00:15:28] That's banking, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:28] And you knew you knew how to operate that?

NORRIS: [00:15:31] Well, it was part of the training we had. So I knew, you know, the debits and credits.

GANZGLASS: [00:15:36] 101.

NORRIS: [00:15:36] I was one step ahead of them, perhaps. But I was, I guess I was enough part of the village to know that if we did the credit cooperative and had it based at the church, when they came in on Sunday for marketing and to pay up their dues, they weren't treating the cooperative, they were treating the padre if they weren't paying up.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:09] So you linked the two together, very clever. So you stayed in, where did you live, in La Plata or did you move?

NORRIS: [00:16:17] Lived in La Plata.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:17] The whole time and then you went up to El Congreso?

NORRIS: [00:16:21] That took a bus ride of about 50 minutes and then went through a road head. And then you had a slog in about, depending on the rain, three to five hours on foot to get into El Congreso.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:38] So how often did you go up there?

NORRIS: [00:16:40] I don't. I never counted the times, but I was up there as.

GANZGLASS: [00:16:44] Like once a week or?

NORRIS: [00:16:46] Sometimes twice. I'd stay up there sometimes, overnight. And it's also where I, as you know, the Peace Corps medical kit was a

huge advantage, and I never knew the power of medicine until I had the kit, and I'd take part of it up into El Congreso. And usually with mothers who had splitting headaches and shivers and treat them. So that became sort of my entry to the village. You know, it wasn't just co-operatives, it was health care.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:37] Were there any medical personnel around there?

NORRIS: [00:17:40] No, no, no, no.

GANZGLASS: [00:17:42] Not even in La Plata?

NORRIS: [00:17:44] We had two doctors in La Plata, two medical doctors. One had been trained to when they were bleeding patients, he still was bleeding patients, a throwback to the Vienna School of Medicine. And then there was a young doctor who, unfortunately, was too much into the drink, but you wouldn't want to. As volunteers, we swore we would never.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:16] Go to him.

NORRIS: [00:18:17] If we were injured, we would make sure we got to Bogota.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:25] So what about your book, you talked about the medical kit, what about your book locker?

NORRIS: [00:18:31] The book locker, as you remember, was we had, all three of us had a book locker. And fortunately, most of the books were separate.

GANZGLASS: [00:18:44] Different ones?

NORRIS: [00:18:44] Each were different ones. And when new volunteers came or volunteers came to town, we were trade books back and forth because we had no TV and no radio. A telephone was at a, you had to go down to a central station even to use a telephone. And there was

no, uh, there was intermittent electricity in the town. So at night, what to do?

GANZGLASS: [00:19:14] Read.

NORRIS: [00:19:16] Yeah. It was a liberal education and those were good books, good works.

GANZGLASS: [00:19:22] Did you leave any of them behind left?

NORRIS: [00:19:25] Left them all behind, yeah. One of the things when the two new volunteers came and then the other ones left. Since we all had an allowance, you know, for food anyway, we decided to take our, uh, tried to contract with a family to do our meals and then pay the family. And we ended up, we picked the poorest family in town and she had 11 kids. Her husband was a day worker when he could get it. And we contracted with her to do our meals, and we agreed on a price. And so instead of doing it and some were buying food ourselves or doing it in what passed as a restaurant, we came with the family. And one of my partners married one of the, the youngest daughter. And when they returned, they went. He was from Chicago, and he returned to Chicago and became a professor at the University of Illinois, and she earned two master's degrees in teaching in Chicago school system. So the family.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:06] Benefited, right?

NORRIS: [00:21:08] Yeah, but they all reached back to help each other, which was good.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:13] Really great.

NORRIS: [00:21:14] So out of that family of 11, one became a medical doctor, still practices. One became the vice mayor of Cali, second largest city in Colombia. She did the double master's in Chicago. And they have, the other kids are doing, teachers and whatnot, but they're all doing well.

GANZGLASS: [00:21:36] And you picked the poorest family in town and they all did so well. Do you think it was the relationship with you guys, was it the money, or what was?

NORRIS: [00:21:51] Well, money certainly helped because she had no money. But it was the association of being with them every time we were in town and every time any of the volunteers came by. Or any. We only had one staff visit in all the time I was there, from Bogota, and he came when I wasn't in town and he was very angry that I wasn't there. But he never sent any message that he was coming here, just expected me to be there. So I think it's just the association and being with them on a daily basis and being part of a family.

GANZGLASS: [00:22:34] And was your Spanish really good at that point?

NORRIS: [00:22:38] My Spanish was, I started off horribly and ended off even maybe worse, if that's possible. But I was always able to communicate with. I got my eggs in the morning the way I wanted them, when I traveled. The Spanish used in that part of the Colombia is not Colombian Spanish. When I went to Bogota, it was like a bag was lifted. I said, this is really easy to understand, these people. Where I lived, they cut off the end of words because they speak very, very quickly. It's bastardized language. But in Bogota, it's the king's Spanish. And I understood perfectly in Bogota.

GANZGLASS: [00:23:27] So you spent two years in La Plata doing all of that. What did you do? I guess teachers had summer breaks, but did you travel during your vacation time?

NORRIS: [00:23:41] Only once in the first six months, I went for five days to some island off the coast of Colombia in Cartagena, where we had our first conference. But I didn't, no, I didn't take a vacation. I worked straight through. And then I became a staff member.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:05] In Colombia?

NORRIS: [00:24:08] Colombia.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:09] Doing what? This was after your service was completed?

NORRIS: [00:24:12] No, it was, uh, the director of our program was, just as our program was ending, he was asked to leave. And so they asked me if I would stay on and be the director for the new group of co-op volunteers coming in. So I did that.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:42] And how long did you stay there then?

NORRIS: [00:24:44] I stayed until they could find another director. I stayed as staff for eight months.

GANZGLASS: [00:24:55] So how was it different being staff as being a volunteer, you get a different perspective on the issues, don't you?

NORRIS: [00:25:04] Yeah, yeah. And the new group that came in were 36 strong, so they were spread all around the country. And so I had a, you know, every day you're someplace else because, you know, trying to give support to them. So I got a chance to see Colombia from that perspective because I was going to be on the move and I had carte blanche on an airplane, paid, to move around quickly where I couldn't use a bus or a jeep. So that was that was good.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:46] So you enjoyed that.

NORRIS: [00:25:48] I did, I did enjoy it, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:25:49] But it sounds like you provided more support than you got.

NORRIS: [00:25:54] Well, maybe I was lucky that I didn't get the kind of support because the director of our program was into birdwatching and he had never traveled abroad before. He'd just worked in co-ops in the U.S. and was very senior in the U.S. He was a good, a good man, but he. Things got beyond him where he couldn't be a contribution anymore, if

you know what I mean. We knew more about this situation than he did, and he didn't seem to be that interested in.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:30] Co-ops?

NORRIS: [00:26:32] More birds, you know. Which was kind of.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:39] So Peace Corps pulled him?

NORRIS: [00:26:41] Peace Corps asked the contractor to pull him. And he wasn't helping us at all.

GANZGLASS: [00:26:47] You said the contractor. So the director was not a Peace Corps volunteer, Peace Corps staff person?

NORRIS: [00:26:54] No, he was. Colombia had contracts with different groups like CARE, and this was with the [Cooperative] League of the USA in Chicago, which was the manager that runs all the cooperatives here in the U.S., so they contract. He was not a considered a Peace Corps staff member, but a contractor.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:18] And then you worked for him as a volunteer?

NORRIS: [00:27:23] Yeah, yeah. And I guess most of the people in that group resented that because it was an unusual group. Probably of the 23, maybe 18 or 19 had master's degrees.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:41] All the volunteers?

NORRIS: [00:27:42] Of our group, yeah. Had been around a little bit, you know, they weren't just fresh out of college.

GANZGLASS: [00:27:53] I mean, you were 29. That was pretty old.

NORRIS: [00:27:56] Yeah. Oh yeah, I was the oldest and the others were 26, 25. But they had, you know, graduate school behind them, work

experience. One of my best friends was working at Ford Motor Company. Another guy was, he had a PhD in economics.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:18] Really, huh. That's pretty unusual, though, because most volunteers were straight out of college.

NORRIS: [00:28:24] At that time. Yeah, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:28:29] Did that make a difference, do you think? That they had all of this?

NORRIS: [00:28:31] I think it did, in terms of our ability to absorb the culture quickly, to absorb know what a co-op is, and to try to communicate that where our boss couldn't do that and didn't seem to be that much interested in doing it. He enjoyed being in Medellin, which was a major city of Colombia with his family, he had a daughter and his wife. But it was mainly he was interested in the birds of Colombia.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:05] Well, not a good match then. Did you become friends with any Colombians and maintain contact with them?

NORRIS: [00:29:17] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:18] So the family clearly that cooked meals for you.

NORRIS: [00:29:22] Yeah. Oh, they come here to Chicago a lot. And we see, you know, their kids. One of them married a volunteer out of Central America recently.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:40] So you're still in contact?

NORRIS: [00:29:41] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:29:42] Oh, wow. That's good. And after Peace Corps, did you travel in South America or hop on a plane and come back? How did that work?

NORRIS: [00:29:52] Well, because I was moving on to a staff position, I had to go to Washington to be stamped, I guess, or to be certified by the Peace Corps staff in Washington. And when I was there, they said there's a person who wants to see you. She's an office director. She was running the Office of International Organizations.

GANZGLASS: [00:30:22] At Peace Corps?

NORRIS: [00:30:23] At Peace Corps, so I went to see her. Her name was Diana MacArthur, and she said she's about to take her first overseas trip. And, you know, I'm going to Colombia, would you be my escort officer in Colombia? So I said, yeah, sure, I'd love to show you Peace Corps Colombia. And when I got back to Bogota, the Peace Corps director called me in and said, he said, Jerry, I'm going to give you a chance to pull out of this. I said, why? He said, well, do you know who this woman is? I said, she's the Director for International Operations. He said, no, she's the niece of LBJ. She's mean, she'll burn your career.

GANZGLASS: [00:31:27] Yeah, I mean, she had the reputation of being mean?

NORRIS: [00:31:33] Yeah. And would ruin your career. So I said, no, I'll do it. So I did it. And on the last day, as I was taking her from the airport back into Bogota, we were out at a site visit, the car in front of us hit a dog and she was a real dog lover. Oh, she said, Jerry, stop the car, stop the car. We've got to help the dog. I said, no, no, you can't do that. That's someone's dinner tonight. They'll take care of it. So I thought that any chance I had of going to Washington was out the window. But I think it was about seven days after she returned home, she sent me a telegram saying that she just convinced Sarge to give her another staff position, and she offered it to me.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:38] How about that? And then you came to Washington?

NORRIS: [00:32:44] After I finished, yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:46] So what did you do at Peace Corps then?

NORRIS: [00:32:48] I was a program officer on her staff.

GANZGLASS: [00:32:53] For international organizations?

NORRIS: [00:32:58] Yeah. I learned a lot from her. She was a good, a good boss.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:02] See, so reputations aren't necessarily deserved.

NORRIS: [00:33:06] No, I don't think so. She was good. In fact, when I, I was so surprised to get the offer. I didn't respond for seven days and one day at the office, she rang me up from Washington and I could just see her sitting at her desk, drumming her fingers. I am not used to being...

GANZGLASS: [00:33:29] Good. So did you work internationally, I mean, across the world in that position?

NORRIS: [00:33:43] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:44] Or did you get to travel to other places?

NORRIS: [00:33:47] Oh yeah, and then when she left, I went to other offices within Peace Corps, so that's where I met Margaret, in the Office of Public Affairs.

GANZGLASS: [00:33:58] Uh huh. And how long were you at Peace Corps then?

NORRIS: [00:34:03] Five years.

GANZGLASS: [00:34:09] And after Peace Corps, what happened then?

NORRIS: [00:34:12] After Peace Corps, I was offered a job with the newly formed International Peace Academy in New York City, as their director of administration. So we went to Vienna, Austria, for the first training program of the academy. And it was headed up by a guy who was the peacekeeper, he was in charge of peacekeeping at the U.N. An Indian major general. And he became the first director of the

academy. Very good contacts all around the world. So we did that for a year. And then we lived in New York City.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:10] So they were the academy was to train peacekeepers?

NORRIS: [00:35:14] It was to train people in the arts of mediation and negotiation. So in our first training program in Vienna, we had young journalists from all around the world that could conditions. And he could do first-hand experience from his peacekeeping in the Congo and Indonesia, places like that around the world. But both Margaret and I missed desperately missed Washington. And so we came back to Washington.

GANZGLASS: [00:35:56] And you've stayed involved in international issues throughout.

NORRIS: [00:36:02] Yeah. And we came in during Nixon's term, when anything doing with the Peace Corps was not very employable. And one of Margaret's site partners, Joe Kelly, was with a brand-new company that just got a huge contract from Health and Human Services, and they needed an evaluator. So Joe rang me up and asked me to come over and to interview, and I said, well, Joe, I don't know anything about health. And he said, but you do know the importance of a verb in every sentence.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:49] And that's how you got that job.

NORRIS: [00:36:54] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:36:55] So you're international and health expert. Is it international health or health for most? And that's how you got into health or did you?

NORRIS: [00:37:05] No, that's how I got into it, doing the with Joe Kelly's outfit. And then there was a person at USAID, a former Peace Corps director in Indonesia, who was a close friend of the president of the unit I was with, family health care. And he set the standard that there's got to be

another way for AID to contract for health assistance. You know, consulting firms, because everything was done through the American Public Health Association. So he said, if I could get you a contract, would you be willing to take it? So my boss answered, yeah. It happened to be Korea, South Korea. But 30 days from takeoff to landing, we had to come up with a plan for health reform in South Korea. And so, along with Stan and his vice president, Stan asked me to go with them. Margaret knows Stan very well, Stan is an excellent medical doctor. He can't write though, he wanted someone write this up. And so that's where we wrote it up in 30 days.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:33] And it was implemented?

NORRIS: [00:38:35] Would you believe it?

GANZGLASS: [00:38:38] And it worked?

NORRIS: [00:38:40] He'd sent another team out there to undo it, what we did, and the team came back, said that's it.

GANZGLASS: [00:38:45] So that's good.

NORRIS: [00:38:52] Yeah. Yeah, South Korea, it's still my, I've worked there a lot of times since, but it's still my favorite country. Because once they get an idea, get out of their way because they'll run right over you. They're very hard workers. It was to, when we went out there, the health system was 85 percent public and 15 private. And today is absolutely flipped, 15 percent public and 85 percent private.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:28] Do they have national health care? National health care through the private doctors?

NORRIS: [00:39:33] Yeah, but it's mandated that everybody pays. Even if you're out there in a rural village. The only other tax that's put on a home in a rural area is the defense tax and military tax. So now it's a health tax every month, so they all bought into it.

GANZGLASS: [00:39:53] That's good. So are there any other stories you'd like to tell about your Peace Corps experience in Colombia or staff? Staff in Colombia, staff in Washington, you've played multiple roles.

NORRIS: [00:40:09] Well, did you work in Peace Corps Washington?

GANZGLASS: [00:40:14] No.

NORRIS: [00:40:17] It was a, um, it was a 16th century Italian court scene.

GANZGLASS: [00:40:27] Explain that.

NORRIS: [00:40:30] There was an assassin behind every pillar and two more to take their place. Peace Corps had the reputation of some bright shining star on the firmament because Sarge had direct appointment for 500 people without going through the Civil Service system. As Foreign Service reserve officers. That was unheard of.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:04] That's the way Peace Corps was set up.

NORRIS: [00:41:06] When Kennedy, you know, because Kennedy and Shriver set it up, they set it up that way. But that was enormous political. And so the directors.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:19] Were most of them former volunteers?

NORRIS: [00:41:22] No, when we got there, they started to get former volunteers when I started to come out. Most of them were, you know, if you knew somebody in the Kennedy administration and then LBJ, like my boss being, you know, the niece, they got it. And if you wanted to remove someone, you didn't have to go through any kind of, or you just, you're finished.

GANZGLASS: [00:41:49] So when did that change?

NORRIS: [00:41:51] I don't know when it changed, but that was, I mean, I was the victim of it. I was in one office and the deputy director came down

to our office, went to the light switch and turned it off. He said, you have 30 days to find something else. And that was merciful because normally it was just, you're out. So I got, on the 29th day, I got another offer, but that's how it worked.

GANZGLASS: [00:42:30] So was there an advantage, do you think, just for a quick start up? That's probably why they did it, right? For a quick start up to get people in and not have to go through the whole Civil Service system? Was there a positive side to this? Or was it all negative?

NORRIS: [00:42:50] No, I think it harnessed a lot of raw enthusiasm which they needed. A lot of can do. Nothing's impossible. We'll get it done. And that enthusiasm ran the Peace Corps for maybe up until Joe Blatchford came as director appointed by Nixon, and he was a real, real disaster. I mean, the first thing he did was to redecorate his office and to get a new car. So it was things for him, not the spirit at all. I mean, Sarge had an old jalopy, you know, that he used. He didn't even hang pictures in his office, put them on the floor and lean them up against a wall.

GANZGLASS: [00:43:47] Didn't have time.

NORRIS: [00:43:49] Didn't have time. Sarge interviewed everyone that came on staff. And I was sorry I was the only one that didn't get that because he said, oh, if he's there already, let him go. But he interviewed everyone.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:03] So it was really a team that he felt close to.

NORRIS: [00:44:06] Yeah, yeah. And he had, you know, really good people, Frank Mankiewicz, you know, coming on. And when I went in, I had a, because Frank was the Latin American director, I had to go see him and he's the last person to sign off on my being on staff. And I went into his office and we shook hands and he said, I thought you were younger. And I said, I thought you were older.

GANZGLASS: [00:44:48] That's great. Well, I guess under the Nixon administration, as you said, Peace Corps was not a top priority.

NORRIS: [00:44:55] No, that was sad. And then they melded it in with the ACTION and. But I have, in all the years I've been in Washington, I make it a point not to go near the Peace Corps building.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:13] Why?

NORRIS: [00:45:15] Because that was a different time. This is their time, whatever it is. But even the building changed, and we were on 806 Connecticut right across from Lafayette Square. I'd look down, my office looked down on the White House. I wasn't back more than 10 days when all of a sudden I was standing at the White House next to this big Texan called LBJ. And Bill Moyers.

GANZGLASS: [00:45:49] For what, signing legislation?

NORRIS: [00:45:52] It was a birthday party or something. And poor LBJ was trying to. It was my first time I ever saw a president. He was trying to, the steward was trying to get him some coffee, and Moyers was trying to get a speech up under his left arm for his next appointment, moving him along. And he was trying to go like this and his right hand was just swollen.

GANZGLASS: [00:46:18] Being president is not an easy thing. You keep going.

NORRIS: [00:46:24] And Moyers finally got him moving into the next door. Before the door opened, he said, the guy on your left is this, the guy on your right is this. And when that door opened, showtime. Bill, how in the hell have you been? How's the family?

GANZGLASS: [00:46:45] He was a very good politician. He was a very good politician. You know, you have to like people.

NORRIS: [00:46:52] Outside of Vietnam, I mean, what he created, you know, with Medicaid, Medicare, Voting Rights Act.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:00] A lot of accomplishments.

NORRIS: [00:47:02] Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:04] But he was, I mean, I never met him, but he was quite a character. Yeah, good. So let me ask you, I mean, I don't want to cut it short, but I usually ask people to reflect on the three goals of the Peace Corps. One is to provide technical assistance where requested. Do you think you and the other volunteers really helped in the country?

NORRIS: [00:47:35] I think it was marginal. I think that it's not that it was done, wasn't done organizationally, it was done individually. And unfortunately, it was happenstance more than planning, I think.

GANZGLASS: [00:47:53] Yeah. Is that part of the enthusiasm gap?

NORRIS: [00:47:57] I think so. Yeah, I think so. But that's my view. Every time I traveled when I was working for USAID or any contractor, I always tried to meet with Peace Corps volunteers. And down through the years, I would be disappointed when I would say to one, what do you think of Director Blatchford. And they'd say, who? I'd say, you know, the Peace Corps director. What's his name again? They had no connection with him at all.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:44] Maybe that's good.

NORRIS: [00:48:45] But Sarge [Shriver] was, you can't, you couldn't talk Peace Corps without Sarge.

GANZGLASS: [00:48:49] Sarge. right. That's different.

NORRIS: [00:48:51] But there was no interest there, either. And I felt, you know, especially when I see them working for USAID, I get very disappointed in the in the global AIDS program.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:12] Former volunteers, you mean?

NORRIS: [00:49:15] Active volunteers.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:16] Oh active, are working now.

NORRIS: [00:49:19] Mostly in Africa and they work for PEPFAR, the president's emergency relief program for AIDS. But they're working alongside contractors who are making, you know, \$180,000 a year and have all the privileges. But when they were recruited, they weren't recruited to work in AIDS, global AIDS. Just that when they got in there, there was a health program that converted to AIDS, that's what it was.

GANZGLASS: [00:49:50] So it's basically cheap labor now.

NORRIS: [00:49:53] Cheap labor.

NORRIS: [00:49:53] And I can't blame the volunteers for wanting to do it because they see that as a step into USAID, right?

GANZGLASS: [00:50:01] It's a very different experience.

NORRIS: [00:50:02] Very different. Yeah. So what's in it for me?

GANZGLASS: [00:50:05] But maybe the, I mean, these countries are so much more developed now. Maybe liberal arts graduates can't help a whole lot without specialization.

NORRIS: [00:50:17] I was having lunch with a, she was a director of the National Bank of Rwanda. And as we went around the table introducing ourselves, someone said, you know, Jerry over there used to be in Peace Corps. And she stopped the meeting and she said, why don't you send me volunteers that can work on my national finance program? She said, you send me these volunteers in health and in education, but then, you know, I can't finance health and education unless I get my national accounts together. And you have, this country has those people, why can't you give them to me?

GANZGLASS: [00:51:03] Well, because it's also hard getting finance people to go into the Peace Corps, probably, at that point because you can get other jobs, or maybe the enthusiasm isn't there.

NORRIS: [00:51:15] One of the things I tried to promote unsuccessfully, but they shouldn't have to go for two years in today's communications.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:24] Well, they don't anymore. There are all kinds of short-term options in Peace Corps now for professionals, for bankers, for doctors, can go in for shorter periods. So I think they've really taken that idea and are implementing it. I don't know how big the program is, but I know they're doing it.

NORRIS: [00:51:44] Called resource voluntarism.

GANZGLASS: [00:51:45] Yeah, I guess resource volunteerism, which is great because you get a different set of people involved.

NORRIS: [00:51:54] Yeah, I don't think, you know, they keep going for numbers, but I don't think we need numbers.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:02] Well, the numbers are very small now compared to.

NORRIS: [00:52:04] 7,200. Yeah.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:09] So let me ask you about the other. Second goal of Peace Corps is to promote better understanding of the U.S. Do you think Peace Corps volunteers have done that in countries around the world?

NORRIS: [00:52:26] I think they have, in some cases. At the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps, the government of Korea invited all volunteers who ever served in Korea to come back.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:47] It's incredible.

NORRIS: [00:52:52] Turns out he was educated by Peace Corps.

GANZGLASS: [00:52:56] Oh, well. So that's great.

NORRIS: [00:53:00] That's good. But in terms of, I mean, Colombia is not that far away from the U.S., but I remember one day going up to a village. They met me with a horse and there was a young man that was going to guide me into the village. And along the way, he said, where are you from? And I said, I'm from the United States of America. There's a long silence. And he said, is that as far as Bogota?

GANZGLASS: [00:53:36] Yeah. So nowadays he would know that.

NORRIS: [00:53:41] Hopefully he would know that.

GANZGLASS: [00:53:41] He'd have a cell phone and he'd know all of that. So the third goal of Peace Corps is to promote better understanding of other peoples by Americans.

NORRIS: [00:53:55] Now, I think that may have been the one that we did well. Because I don't see how you could be abroad, living abroad, and not have a better understanding of these different cultures and people.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:18] And virtually everybody I've interviewed somehow has stayed very active internationally, whether it's professionally or in other ways. So we need more Peace Corps volunteers to learn about the world.

NORRIS: [00:54:37] When you see those that have gone into the Congress, you know, people like Sam Farr, and the effect they've had. Very positive effect.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:51] Chris Dodd as well.

NORRIS: [00:54:55] Chris Dodd. And our, who's the.

GANZGLASS: [00:54:58] Oh, Tom Petri, was a congressman from Wisconsin, Republican congressman, he was in our program.

NORRIS: [00:55:05] Oh, really?

GANZGLASS: [00:55:06] He's now retired, but he was in Congress for a long time and always spoke about, you know, pretty conservative, but when it came to Peace Corps, he was always talking about that.

NORRIS: [00:55:18] When I went to Somalia, I asked Marty for some references and he wrote me a very good letter. And when I got there, I didn't know that this guy was the combination, commandant of the city and FBI and CIA and everything else combined. But because of Marty's letter, he gave me an audience. And USAID was trying to put a child survival program into Somalia. So I asked him, why did you ask for this program? And he said, we didn't. What we wanted was we needed tanks and machine guns and airplanes. But what is it you call it again? I said, child survival. Yeah, they said I have to have some of that too. Oh dear.

GANZGLASS: [00:56:17] That's a funny note. Should we end on that note? That's great. Thanks.

NORRIS: [00:56:22] No. And who's interviewing you Evelyn?

[END OF INTERVIEW]