

**Lynn W. Polloi Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
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**Interviewer:** Peter W. Black  
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**Biographical Note**

Lynn Polloi served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Palau from 1966 to 1969 as a teacher.

**Access**

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Oral History Interview

with

Lynn W. Polloi

July 16, 2006  
Koror, Palau

By Peter W. Black

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

BLACK: [00:00:01] This is a test. This is a test. This is Peter Black. Today is July 16, 2006. We're in Malakal Port in Koror. And this is an interview with Lynn Wickersham Polloi, former Peace Corps volunteer in Palau. So then the first thing will be, I just wanted to start with is why you joined the Peace Corps in the first place. What was going on in your life or just why you made the decision to join?

POLLOI: [00:00:44] Well, my older brother is four years older and he was a volunteer in Venezuela. So I think that's what sparked my interest. And I have, between my junior and senior year of college, I got a phone call and a letter that I got accepted to a program in Nigeria after graduation, but I declined that. But then during my senior year college, there was a recruiting table at the student union center with a poster of a couple on a motorcycle, I think, with a picture from National Geographic. I just went up to the table and I said, take me, I'm yours. Meaning I had already been

accepted into the Peace Corps and wasn't having success finding teaching positions. I was limiting myself to the Bay Area. Anyway, so I went up and I said, I'm yours. They got my name and I left my files. And soon I was getting ready to go to Key West.

BLACK: [00:02:04] So, say a few words about your family, where you went to college, what you majored in.

POLLOI: [00:02:11] I grew up in Seattle, Washington, I went to the Washington State University over in Pullman. Majored in education. Had one brother that was four years older. And I always wanted to be a teacher, so that was my education major, so I knew that would fit in well for what Peace Corps has planned for me. Even though my brother has gone to Venezuela and did two years as Peace Corps. My family was not thrilled and was very against it. My father, I don't think he was worried about my safety or whatever. But what I didn't realize then was that he was prejudiced against brown skinned people and didn't like the whole idea of coming out here as a way to continue my education. But I was adamant that this is what I wanted to do.

BLACK: [00:03:19] So, your brother was supportive?

POLLOI: [00:03:21] Yes, actually, he met a woman in Venezuela and came back to Seattle for a visit before returning to Venezuela, where he was living. So he was able to stop the Miami during my training period and we saw each other.

BLACK: [00:03:44] And you were part of the famous Micronesia I training group. So, what can you say about that?

POLLOI: [00:03:49] Well, we were so many. They were deselected left and right throughout the training period. But they said that, you know, just getting anybody basically right out of college for this Micro I program. At the Marina Hotel in Key West, Florida. All of the Micronesian volunteers were together in the hotel. But we also with our own groups and we had our

own rotating schedules, and we didn't really have much opportunity to talk about the other Micronesia volunteers. I remember very painfully the language tests that they gave us.

BLACK: [00:04:39] Who was your language trainers?

POLLOI: [00:04:39] Oh, I just had their names. Robert [inaudible], Caleb [inaudible], [inaudible], Victor [inaudible], John Stool, and the two women were Annie Hama, and [inaudible]. They are all deceased now. They were all teachers. I realize now that they gave up an awful lot to come so far away from their families for the three months. It was probably very intense for them.

BLACK: [00:05:25] I remember our, not so much the [inaudible] but especially the ones from [inaudible]. They were just kind of freaked when we were in Honolulu, it was the big city. [inaudible].

POLLOI: [00:05:45] And then, um, Father, well he wasn't yet Father, but Felix Yau was training at Woodstock at that time. So he was hired and came down for a week or so and spoke to us.

BLACK: Cultural stuff?

POLLOI: Yeah, cultural stuff.

BLACK: [00:06:00] So, what did you think of the training?

POLLOI: [00:06:05] Well, it was such a new experience. It was really unforgettable. I mean we had the time in Key West and then we went out to these smaller islands, Little Munson, where we camped. We learned how to [inaudible]. We learned how to fight the mosquitoes, scale a fish, or you know, these cultural things, I mean. We spent some time in Miami staying in a hotel, and then we were doing, going out in small groups in the community. So I remember going to like impoverished neighborhoods with a community worker, social worker I guess. Just kind of meeting one-on-

one with people. I don't know what really it was training us for. Maybe the best part of our training that was relevant to coming here was the hurricane that we had. Really really bad hurricane. I remember sitting on the floor of the hotel watching the wind and the rain just whipping by. Housebound for the duration. And then all the shots that we had to get, that was a memorable part of the training. I don't know what the reason we're here, so they were shooting immunizations for everything and some people got really really sick. Big doses of whatever.

BLACK: [00:07:31] Were most of the people have an education background?

POLLOI: [00:07:36] No, they were a lot of, what they classified as generalists. They had a college degree and they were young and willing and that was all that was necessary. One of my last memories of Key West was those of us that were selected for this huge gamma globulin shot and we're sitting at the floor of the hotel, I guess it didn't have any chairs, with these really sore butts, you know, and those that were had not been selected were packing up and going home. We didn't know who was in a better situation at that point. But then we got to go home for like 10 days to pack and what not. And then we all met in Oakland. Flew out on a charter flight from Oakland to Guam. Then a lot of Micronesians were on that flight coming home. We were well fed. We had champagne and nice dinners. And then we spent a couple of nights in Guam, so like our last hurrah.

BLACK: [00:08:44] Did you stay in that micro hotel?

POLLOI: Probably. And then went to the old townhouse to buy aloha shirts and muumuus, you know, to come to the islands.

BLACK: [00:09:01] So, why don't you say a few words about your first impressions of Palau.

POLLOI: [00:09:08] Certainly the beauty of the place really struck me. And when we were driving in from the airport into Koror and looking down out of the bus window, looking down at the terraced gardens and the [inaudible] gardens,

just how beautiful it was. So green. It's really very beautiful. We all stayed in an abai. There were 26 of us who were all in this one big room in the abai. The community people brought pillows and sheets for us. But we had no privacy. So the girls, we would take turn holding a sheet up so we could change our clothes. But being the first group with so many white skin Americans, I remember there were slats all around the abai and there'd just be brown faces. All the kids were coming in and they were just so curious to see how we slept, how we ate, and everything. And then the community, certain hamlets, were assigned to feed us. They were trying to outdo each other. So all this food for every meal and then you were taken around and met some of the territory employees and given a further introduction about what we're going to be doing, who was who, and so on.

POLLOI: [00:11:00] So we were in Koror about a week and then we were sent out to our sites. I was assigned to [inaudible].

BLACK: Which is in the big island. Nice beach?

POLLOI: No beach, no beach in sight, just mangroves.

BLACK: [00:11:34] So you stayed with a family?

POLLOI: [00:11:36] No, I stayed [inaudible] were assigned to a house owned by a family, but the family was actually in Koror. So just the two of us there in the house. Actually it had been moved in by, the previous year, by an American teacher [inaudible]. So there was like a bed, some furniture, but [inaudible].

BLACK: [00:12:17] What was the school like?

POLLOI: [00:12:18] The school, I don't know, I was assigned to teach [inaudible]. For some reason, I just freaked out. I think I had culture shock. It just wasn't the right fit for me. Gene and I were friends but not really close and I just didn't feel that it was a good mix for us to be together.

BLACK: [00:12:45] What did you [inaudible]?

POLLOI: [00:12:46] We started to but then some woman would cook for us [inaudible]. I remember doing my own laundry and how the heck I was supposed to wash my sheets and hang them up on the line and I know we could never get [inaudible] so we have to call somebody down to help somebody [inaudible]. The house had a kerosene refrigerator. I felt guilty about using it because we were supposed to be roughing it. Like we wouldn't sleep on the bed because we were supposed to be roughing it, you know. [inaudible] You know, we were trying to tough it out. So anyway, after right after the Christmas break when we all came into Koror for the training and I just kind of broke down, but I didn't want to go home, so they just reassigned me to Koror.

BLACK: [00:13:50] So actually what month did you get to Palau?

POLLOI: [00:13:54] We came in November 1966. The first day was a Sunday. I will never forget that day. [inaudible] So I was transferred into Koror. [inaudible] So a lot of my former students still remember, some of them, I think are still in therapy over that. This frightening tall white American woman, you know, coming in and forcing you to speak English. For some it was terrifying.

BLACK: [00:15:18] So then where were you living?

POLLOI: [00:15:21] Uh, well, I lived on the main road with a family. They had a store in front. And then right after Typhoon Sally, I moved in with [inaudible] mother who was a widow and lived alone. So March or April of '67, yeah after the typhoon because she had some damage. [inaudible] Because there were two women alone in the house, some neighborhood men would knock on the window at night and that was frightening to me. I couldn't sleep. So I found a family [inaudible] and moved in with them and they had a lot of kids.

BLACK: [00:16:25] These other places you went to were kind of hamlets?

POLLOI: Yes.

BLACK: [00:16:32] Say a word or two about the school?

POLLOI: [00:16:39] When I first went there the Missionary Sisters were running the school. And I was not a Catholic. So I was very unfamiliar about nuns and white habits, saying rosaries, and talking to Mother Angelica and all this, but they were very warm and gracious to me. Really made me feel comfortable.

BLACK: [00:17:02] And that's the elementary school for the Catholic school system?

POLLOI: [00:17:08] Right, right. Just the one elementary school and then [inaudible] the high school.

BLACK: [00:17:17] So, you spent the rest of your tour as a teaching [inaudible]?

POLLOI: [00:17:25] No, I spent the two years teaching just at Maris Stella. During that time is when I met Juan. And he was actually he had just returned from, he had just graduated from Canisius College. So he had just got back.

BLACK: Canisius in Buffalo?

POLLOI: [00:17:43] In Buffalo, right. The Jesuits sent him there. He was teaching at the high school, so we met at this massive ceremony after the birth of the first child [inaudible]. And it was right across from this bar called The Boom-Boom Room. Well, they gave us first plates of food and we had no place to sit down there. So her uncle Robert owned the Boom-Boom. So we were happy that Robert opened up the Boom-Boom on Sunday afternoon, closed of course. So we went in [inaudible] and sitting down and then Juan and his cousin [inaudible] were there checking out the Peace Corps. And they came over and that's where I first met him, at the



Boom-Boom Room. That's the reason why I extended a third year was to kind of see if things were going to work out and we really were going to get married and this is where I'd spend the rest of my life.

BLACK: [00:18:55] So what did you do for your third year?

POLLOI: [00:18:57] The same. I was still at Maris Stella teaching. And by that third year, really, I was feeling much more comfortable about the teaching and really getting into it. I think the kids, at least that new year's, you know, kind of got the feel of what's going on.

BLACK: [00:19:18] So. In addition to teaching, what other kinds of things did you do for fun?

POLLOI: [00:19:26] During the summer, we were supposed to be working. And so kind of on my own initiative and with Steve Lewis, who was also in my group, we did this waitress training program. We felt that the waitresses here didn't really know how to properly set the table in order to serve them, which I mean, so we just did this seminar on waitress training program. And then also maybe it was my third year, although it might have been after I was finished being a volunteer because I continued to teach, but anyway I started a Girl Scouts troop. There was a, for a few years, a Girl Scout program here. So I had a Girl Scout troop.

BLACK: Had you been a Scout?

POLLOI: Of course.

BLACK: Had you been a camper?

POLLOI: A little bit, yeah.

BLACK: [00:20:20] Had you ever been to a tropical island before?

POLLOI: [00:20:24] No, never been out of Washington state. Until I went to Florida for training and then all the way out here.

BLACK: [00:20:38] Would you just reflect a little bit on your actual three years as a volunteer. What came out of it for you, for [inaudible], for Palau.

POLLOI: [00:20:56] I guess I felt that this was a place where I felt really comfortable. I liked the idea of being far away from my parents. And I just felt that this was a place where I could contribute something. Basically, yeah, this is a place where I felt comfortable.

BLACK: [00:21:21] It's really interesting how so many people felt exactly [inaudible].

POLLOI: [00:21:36] I don't know, I just yeah, I just had a very comfortable feeling about it. Because Juan, you know, when we met and then got serious and talked about marriage and he'd come back with the sociology degree and felt that's the reason he went to college is so that he could come back and help Palauans develop and that this is where he would want to be, stay. And so was I willing [inaudible] to stay here.

BLACK: [00:22:09] And you have.

POLLOI: Yes.

BLACK: So, not every volunteer would stay here. [inaudible] So when did you and Juan get married?

POLLOI: [00:22:28] We got married on December 27, 1969, which was his birthday. And he decided that was more than that and anniversaries, remembering birthdays were something important to Americans where as Palauans really don't celebrate that kind of event. And so, we got married on his birthday and that would help him remember. I kind of wanted to get married early in the year, but some of his younger sisters ended up getting married on August 15, which is a big celebration here in the Catholic

Church. It's a holy week for the church but it is also when Palauans celebrate the end of World War II when they got their freedom. So that was one sister-in-law. And then the other sister-in-law snuck in their wedding in October. So by that time, we had already settled on December.

BLACK: [00:23:26] So there were three weddings in the same year?

POLLOI: Yes, three weddings in the one year.

BLACK: So your wedding was here?

POLLOI: [00:23:31] It was here in Koror at the Catholic church. Not a real big wedding.

BLACK: Did you become a Catholic?

POLLOI: [00:23:38] I was thinking about it. Although, Juan nor his family never pushed me. [inaudible] Well, Father McMannis had a heart attack in September of '69 and somehow that kind of, something clicked after that and I started thinking more about God and that I needed and wanted to have religion in my life and I said well maybe it was [inaudible] that I ended up being at the Catholic school. I was baptized on Christmas Eve in '69. And then we got married three days later. Father Moore was the one [inaudible]. Because Juan had lived there with his brother in Buffalo and taught Father Moore the Palauan language.

BLACK: [00:24:40] So did any of your family come to the wedding?

POLLOI: [00:24:42] No. My parents hadn't met Juan, but the whole idea of me staying here, they weren't keen on it. They said they wouldn't come, but it didn't surprise me. They were supportive and then they sent money. [inaudible] they chose not to come, but years later, in '92, my father died and my brother and I were there cleaning out my dad's stuff and my mother said you know I always wanted to come to the wedding but your father didn't want to. [inaudible] But I had one of the [inaudible] come and

she was my maid of honor. Then Juan asked his cousin to be the best man.

BLACK: [00:25:48] And then you just kind of carried on teaching?

POLLOI: [00:25:52] Right, I finished out that year as a lay teacher. [inaudible] Got pregnant in the spring, and in the summer we went for two months to the States, like our honeymoon. From the West Coast to the East Coast, back to the West Coast, it was a lot of travelling. But the whole time I was like morning sickness, morning, noon and night, but in the end I lost the baby when we got back. I had a miscarriage of a daughter when I got back. [inaudible]. I had decided on the name Julia Katherine, my great-great grandmother on my mother's side. [inaudible] I think I've digressed from your question. So after that, when I was pregnant we came back and then I wasn't going to teach. So basically during the '70s then I was pregnant. I had my four kids. The first one in '73 and the last one in '79. I did some part-time teaching, some English tutoring. I did my kindergarten thing for a couple years, and tutoring some kids at the house, just about five kids. But basically more home than not during the '70s. Then I went back into teaching and working full-time in the end of '79.

BLACK: [00:27:38] So when you were a volunteer, [inaudible]?

POLLOI: [00:27:46] Well, zero. I finished language training in Key West. That was something that was, I guess, not the highest priority that they were looking for, because I was selected for this and [inaudible]. And then [inaudible] was teaching English and then the other lay teachers, of course there were a number of Peace Corps, but there were also Palauan lay teachers and they spoke enough English. So I really didn't have to use it in my job. And the family I ended up living with wanted me to use it with their kids. It wasn't really until after I was married and living with my in-laws and I could hear them talking about something in Palauan. [inaudible] and then someone would say, "Lynn," and so I say, oh, they're talking about me, I don't know if they're saying good things or bad things. But that was really my motivation to get with it with my Palauan.

BLACK: [00:28:53] And now you're fluent?

POLLOI: [00:28:55] Pretty much, yeah. And I guess Palauans, well assume that I speak Palauan because [inaudible] because people will start speaking Palauan to me. Even if I haven't really met them. So I think it's good for me to be able to still communicate in another language, it keeps the brain cells kicking.

BLACK: [00:29:27] So now you're back in Palau. You're teaching [inaudible]. Are you going to stay here or are you going back to the States?

POLLOI: [00:29:39] Well, I just don't know. Supposedly I'm going for one year to see my granddaughter. So, we'll see, I would like to come back. This is where I spent most of my life. First 22 years in Seattle, and the last 40 years here. It's such a small place, I've been here so long, everybody knows me. I like that. I like that. And, you know, even that [inaudible] really comfortable before because I really didn't have any friends. I had my sons and their spouses families [inaudible] and that was the end of 2002 [inaudible] and I thought I was really going to relocate from here, get a job, settle down, and blah blah blah, sell the house. [inaudible] I have a house in Palau, have all my friends in Palau. Why should I start all over again? And I thought well maybe if I had a spouse with me it would have been a different feeling about starting something new. So I hope I'll be back, but we'll see.

[END OF INTERVIEW]