

Louise Liller Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Louise Liller served as a Peace Corps volunteer in El Salvador from 2006 to 2008 on an agroforestry and environmental education project. She also served with Peace Corps Response in Panama in 2009.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Louise Liller

June 19, 2019

Austin, Texas

By Jeff Liu

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

LIU: [00:00:01] This is Jeff Liu. Today is June 19th, 2019, and I'm about to interview for Peace Corps experience. Sample interview outline. And can you introduce yourself?

LILLER: [00:00:14] This is Louise Liller. What else should I say?

LIU: [00:00:18] Where you served?

LILLER: [00:00:19] I served in El Salvador in 2006 to 2008, and then I did a Peace Corps Response in 2009. I don't know if we're going to talk about that.

LIU: [00:00:33] We can. Yeah. So why did you join the Peace Corps?

LILLER: [00:00:40] I should have known this question was coming. I don't know. At the time, um. So I joined the Peace Corps. I started the Peace Corps when I was 30 and at the time I was doing social work. I was in the social

work field in Austin, Texas, and I had a job that was sort of stressful and it was good. I liked it, but I knew I wanted to do something different. And like every day when I got ready for work in the morning, I had this like, note, this paper stuck in my closet. And it said, like, have a baby, buy a house, and move to another country and learn Spanish. And so those things were just like every day I saw that those are my goals and things that I knew I wanted to do. And so obviously I went in one direction, which was to move to another country and learn Spanish. And so that was kind of, it was in my head and I knew I was ready to do something different.

LIU: [00:01:45] So out of all those other choices you could have done, teaching abroad, or you know, just traveling abroad, why the Peace Corps?

LILLER: [00:01:54] I really have done a lot of different service and that was sort of important to me. So I had been an AmeriCorps volunteer here in Austin and also I had just a feeling of wanting to give back. And Peace Corps seemed like, uh, like I had looked into Jesuit Volunteer Corps a little bit too. But Peace Corps I think just seemed like a more, like it offered some structure I think. And also the time was like it was, being there for a longer amount of time was something that was appealing. I knew I didn't just want to go somewhere for a couple months.

LIU: [00:02:36] That's good. So what was life like before joining the Peace Corps? Work, social, whatever you feel like talking about?

LILLER: [00:02:44] Mm hmm. Um, yeah, I mean, I was. Yeah, I mean, I worked a lot and you know, like I said, like my job was kind of a little bit stressful at the time. And I liked it though. There were lots of things I liked about it. I had finished, sort of recently finished a graduate program in sustainability. But then I was living in a city too. So that may have been another reason why I kind of wanted to get out and be in a more rural environment again.

LIU: [00:03:17] OK. Did you get to pick your country?

LILLER: [00:03:20] No. Yeah, no.

LIU: [00:03:23] You just applied.

LILLER: [00:03:25] I applied. I put down, I think, like they gave me a region. Latin America. Yeah.

LIU: [00:03:28] Can you describe the application process?

LILLER: [00:03:35] Mostly, it was good other than like I had like, you know, they asked some questions about like, had you ever gone to like counseling, which I had, and so then I had to do this crazy battery of like psychological tests. I mean, it was just, it felt.

LIU: [00:03:57] For the application?

LILLER: [00:03:57] For the application, yeah. Like it was in my medical background check. And so that kind of held up the process for a while, which is interesting, but I think it like just sort of slowed it down. But it also gave me an opportunity to be sure that I was really choosing this, you know. Because it was like, at some point it was like, I can't believe I have to do another thing. But then it also, it did. It gave me the opportunity to be sure, like, no, this is really what I want to do.

LIU: [00:04:29] Yeah. That's good. So what was your reaction when you actually got accepted?

LILLER: [00:04:35] Yeah, I mean, I didn't know where, like anything about El Salvador. I remember just kind of like, you know, like looking it up on a map, you know, which was. It was interesting to have it actually be real, I guess. So I was excited and nervous and just didn't really know what to expect.

LIU: [00:05:02] How did your family feel?

LILLER: [00:05:05] Um, I don't know. I think they probably had mixed feelings, but I don't know. I don't know that they actually had any real reservations, but I don't know that anyone was, like, super excited about it either.

LIU: [00:05:19] Or even your friends, when you told them, hey, I'm going away for two years. How did they feel?

LILLER: [00:05:26] Um, I don't know. I feel like I'd gone, you know, had gone and come back. Like I had gone away to graduate school and then I came back. And so it was just sort of a way of. I feel like a lot of people in my life at that time were sort of more nomadic.

LIU: [00:05:42] Yeah, OK. So how did you train for your assignment in the Peace Corps?

LILLER: [00:06:00] Like before leaving?

LIU: [00:06:01] Before leaving, yes, let's start there.

LILLER: [00:06:05] I didn't do anything. I mean, it was like, I was like packing up. I mean, I was quitting my job. And then I ran a summer session of like the Student Conservation Association that summer in Montana. And so I quit my job in Austin and I went to Montana and then I had a 30th birthday party and then I like took a cross-country road trip to my parents. You know what I mean? It was just like a series of things. So I mean, mainly it was just like wrapping up my life.

LIU: [00:06:38] Did you talk to anybody in country or that would've been there?

LILLER: [00:06:42] No.

LIU: [00:06:43] So you just packed whatever you thought you needed.

LILLER: [00:06:46] I feel like they, like, sent out a list or something, and I followed it. And then I was like, why did this person say this? Like, that's crazy. Like when they said, don't take hiking boots. And I was like, don't? And I didn't. And then I was like, of course I need hiking boots, I was doing agricultural work. Anyway.

LIU: [00:07:03] Yeah. OK. So how is, what kind of technical training or training did you get while you're in country?

LILLER: [00:07:10] Mm hmm. The technical training part. Actually, I'm going to take a step back before I get, am I just allowed to interrupt?

LIU: [00:07:17] Yes.

LILLER: [00:07:18] OK, so I was nervous about going and I wasn't really sure still. And it was like the day before. What do you call it when you all meet in D.C. before you leave?

LIU: [00:07:28] Staging.

LILLER: [00:07:29] Staging. So I went and I stayed at a friend's house in Virginia and like she drove me to staging whatever it was like at a hotel or something. And like, it was probably 10:30 in the morning or something.

LIU: [00:07:43] What city was this?

LILLER: [00:07:44] It was in D.C. or maybe in like Crystal City, you know what I mean? Somewhere around that area. And like took me to the hotel bar and we had drinks in the morning and she was just like, you're going! And I was like, am I really doing this? It felt like totally crazy. And then we had our initial like, I checked into the hotel and went to the meeting, and so I wasn't like, you know, anyway. But so I sat down and I was still kind of like sort of feeling apprehensive or unsure if I was going to go or not. And I sat down in that room next to somebody randomly, you know. And then he introduced himself to me and he said, oh, I'm like, you know. Like I said, I'm Louise. And he said, oh, I'm Martin Sanan. And I said, oh, like, we're related. And it was my second cousin who I hadn't seen since I was like eight or nine or something, and he was probably four or five. And he. We didn't know that each other were going.

LIU: [00:08:46] Same country?

LILLER: [00:08:47] Same country.

LIU: [00:08:48] Oh, wow.

LILLER: [00:08:48] Yeah. And so that happened. And then I was like, OK, like, I'm supposed to go.

LIU: [00:08:54] Yeah.

LILLER: [00:08:54] Like clearly I'm supposed to go to the Peace Corps, like I'm supposed to do this thing. So I was still kind of like feeling like, am I really making the right decision? But then that was like, OK.

LIU: [00:09:04] Clearer.

LILLER: [00:09:05] Yeah, totally. I mean, it was amazing. It was just, it was crazy. So that was a really good thing. So then we got to country, in country, and the training that we received, you know. So like I remember doing like one of the things I remember really specifically for some reason is like they had a like a level, like a nivel that they called it, like this like level that you would use when you're doing planting. I have no idea why that's like the one super thing that sticks in my mind. And like tree grafting, which I'd done some tree grafting. I went to graduate school in Pennsylvania, but like, different. So like citrus, you know, so it was like interesting to kind of learn some sort of techniques.

LILLER: [00:09:50] And then a lot of like our training too was about sort of like meeting facilitation. And so some things I still use are actually like some of the community, like doing community mapping and like this way of doing community decision making. Like I still use those now.

LIU: [00:10:11] That's currently impacting your job?

LILLER: [00:10:13] Yeah, totally. I mean, those are good skills. These are great skills to use with people. So things like that I think were really good. And then some of the technical stuff, I mean, it was really interesting. Like, I had studied agriculture and so like going and seeing some different, you know, like those were it was pretty fun to kind of see it in another country. But my Spanish wasn't good when I got there. I mean, it's still not great. But so I mean, that was also just like a big part of it was just sort of being,

like learning Spanish was like a big part of the beginning of my service for sure.

LIU: [00:10:45] What was that part like?

LILLER: [00:10:48] I mean, it was good. So like we had training where I don't remember how long it was, a couple of months. So like, I had a host family for training. That was actually a really sweet part of my service, and I stayed in touch with my host family for, I mean, I guess I'm still in touch with them, you know. My host mom has passed but her children. And it was nice. I mean, they like had other Peace Corps volunteers before and kind of knew the drill and are just, like, very welcoming.

LIU: [00:11:28] Right.

LILLER: [00:11:29] So it was super sweet. And then there was also sort of a nice little community where we'd be doing some things still with other volunteers. And so it felt like, you know, like I felt like part of that community and then.

LIU: [00:11:42] Had support.

LILLER: [00:11:42] Like it was kind of both. Yeah. So that was good.

LIU: [00:11:44] Did you have any in-class language training?

LILLER: [00:11:47] We had training. And so there were like four of us, I think, and then we would meet in our like host community with an instructor. And that was also, those were good classes. And then it was like one of the things I remember most, though, was like El Salvador has had several earthquakes. And that was my first time living in an area that was earthquake prone. And there was like a tremor, I guess. And like our teacher, she just shot outside because she had lived through earthquakes before and like, we were all just sitting there like, what are we doing? It's interesting because part of my job now is like emergency response and like the psychology behind it. And how do you have people make others, you know what I mean? But I think about that moment a lot. It was like she

was just like, she felt like she did not hesitate. She didn't gather anything, you know what I mean? She was just like, get outside. And so that's in.

LIU: [00:12:47] Cultural differences.

LILLER: [00:12:48] Totally. Yeah, lived experience, and you know. Yeah, it was great.

LIU: [00:12:53] Good. Um, can you say something about the strength and weaknesses of your training?

LILLER: [00:13:06] So something that I remember a lot from training too was that, um, our like training host person who's an amazing woman, but she had been like assaulted in country. She'd been raped in country. And so that was a real thing that happened, you know, and like she shared that, which, you know, obviously I wouldn't want her to not, you know, I don't know. But it definitely was like, um, like it was very much, um, like it kind of overshadowed a lot of other things in the training, which was just like, you know. Like it just almost, it was such a strange thing and like almost all inevitable, like, you're going to be sexually assaulted when you're here. And it was just so, um, like, I'm not saying that was negative I guess? I don't know, but I mean, it was just a very, um.

LIU: [00:14:13] It was always the theme of the?

LILLER: [00:14:14] Yes, I mean, it was always there, you know, in that. And it, you know, and our host community for training was safe and again, like people were, you know. But and definitely like where I was placed was like probably less safe than our host community. But yeah, I mean, just sort of like that specter was always sort of there as a volunteer. And it was, um, I mean, that was, I don't know. Again, was that a strength or weakness of training? I mean, it was just a really, yeah. It was a theme.

LIU: [00:14:57] It was a theme that was there. Yeah.

LILLER: [00:15:00] Yeah, for sure.

LIU: [00:15:00] Could have been strength, could have been a weakness.

LILLER: [00:15:02] Right. I mean, would I have been better off, like not having that?

LIU: [00:15:07] Awareness. Hyper awareness.

LILLER: [00:15:08] Hyper awareness I think, hyper awareness for sure. I don't know, you know, it was interesting, but definitely that was something that was perhaps something that also like pretty distinctive that I remember.

LIU: [00:15:23] So where did you get placed?

LILLER: [00:15:26] So I was placed in the eastern part of the country in Morazán.

LIU: [00:15:31] What's that region like?

LILLER: [00:15:32] It's mountainous. It's beautiful, beautiful mountains. Where I was at the time was pretty, not super rural. I mean, there was a dirt road like through town, but yeah, pretty rural. So not close to a highway. I was. Which I know like other like Peace Corps volunteers in Africa would be like, you know, I was probably like five and a half hours from the capital or something, you know, which like volunteers were like, it's nothing. But like in a tiny country like El Salvador, where there were people that could be there in 45 minutes, you know, like it felt like I had this like long.

LIU: [00:16:10] Long journey.

LILLER: [00:16:10] Uh huh, you know, to get anywhere. And there wasn't, there was one volunteer who was in like a pueblo that was on the way to where I lived. Um, but there weren't. There wasn't, like I was in a place that hadn't had a volunteer before and there weren't other volunteers around, really.

LIU: [00:16:30] Do you remember the first day when you had to do a site visit?

LILLER: [00:16:36] So we didn't have a site visit. I don't, like I think I just showed up.

LIU: [00:16:42] Just showed up.

LILLER: [00:16:42] Yeah.

LIU: [00:16:42] Was that like? Like the journey and then seeing the town that you were in? Can you describe that?

LILLER: [00:16:49] Yeah. Um, so like we had whatever the end of training was, and then everybody had a party that night and then so like there was drinking and then like the next day, everybody gets on the bus. And so my site was sort of far away, you know? And so I remember, I mean, getting there and it was kind of like late at night and I had been drinking the night before and I had been on a bus all day and like getting there and just kind of like going to bed. But like, I didn't have a room, like it was like a shared room with like two other people. And anyway, so that was also kind of like, all right, you know, but then like, OK, like it'll be, you know, not privacy. And but what I really remember was the next morning waking up.

LILLER: [00:17:35] So before I had joined the Peace Corps, I'd been vegetarian for about a decade and I knew going in, I was like, you know, like, I'm not going to like, it's OK. Like, I'm not going to not be vegetarian. And, you know, like I'm going to not refuse food and like, that's just like, it's OK, you know? But I really had been vegetarian for about 10 years. And so that morning, so like I got in kind of late, went to bed. That morning, the next morning I woke up and I walk out of the front door and there's a huge table.

LIU: [00:18:12] A feast?

LILLER: [00:18:14] No. There was a huge dead cow.

LIU: [00:18:16] Oh, OK.

LILLER: [00:18:17] So the family that I was staying with, like they were like the butchers for the whole area. And so like walking out and seeing this like in process, like pretty intense, you know? And I walked, you know, and I was just like, it's the first thing in the morning, you know what I mean? And I like turned and like I walked into this other door and this sweet little host mom, she like held up the leg, you know, of the cow. And like she had just like juices like dripping off her arm. And she just shook it at me and she said, I'm going to make you a delicious soup with this. I'm like, uh. And I was just like, OK, you know, and I just went out to the outhouse, like to the latrine, and I just sat down and I was like, oh my god. Like, all right, I'm in it now. And so.

LIU: [00:19:19] That was the moment when you knew you're.

LILLER: [00:19:25] Yeah, shit just got real. Yeah. And I mean, and it's really sweet, like, *sopa de pata* is like a special, you know. But like for me, like that wasn't like, you know, it's a hard thing to kind of like wake up to and just in general.

LIU: [00:19:40] What was your host family like?

LILLER: [00:19:45] They were like super religious Evangelical Christians.

LIU: [00:19:54] Mm hmm.

LILLER: [00:19:55] And I didn't know this at the time. And so like, there was a lot going on like I said. So like, I'm there and I'm sharing a room with these two women who are like, not maybe my age or a little bit younger or maybe, I don't know, you know. They are adult women, you know? Anyway, I mean, it turns out that one of these women had just found out she was pregnant and not, you know, so she's not married and then she's pregnant. And so, but they're not telling me, like, I'm finding out all of this later. There's a lot of stress in the house going on, right? So I did not arrive at a good time for this family. And so, yeah, so then like at one point, they were like, oh, there's going to be a wedding. And I remember like, oh, like, I mean it was like in the capital and I got like a wedding

present or something, you know. Like, I didn't, you know what I mean? I was all.

LIU: [00:20:48] What did you get?

LILLER: [00:20:50] Something like super bizarre, but it was like, who knows what? Like something that you would give as a wedding present here, like a crystal something? You know what I mean? Like, I don't even know what you know, but it just seemed like I should do this thing. There's going to be a wedding. I didn't know she was pregnant, you know what I mean? And then all of a sudden there was like no talk of the wedding. And so then the wedding's off, you know, and I'm just like, I have no, you know, like, nobody's like confiding in me.

LIU: [00:21:14] You found out later.

LILLER: [00:21:15] Later, I find out. Yeah, and so like, she was pregnant, and then he had also gotten someone else pregnant at the same time. You know, I mean, there was all this drama that's going on. And they're super religious, you know. And it was like, it was just, I'm sure a very intense time for their family. And then I show up and, you know, I'm like, yeah, like, not. Anyway.

LIU: [00:21:44] How did you deal with that?

LILLER: [00:21:46] It was just, I didn't know how to deal with it. And so then the woman who, one of the women, the other sister, was a teacher at the school. And so then, you know, I got to the school and essentially. So this was the first time they were having a volunteer at all in site. And essentially, they just like were like ready to just give me an English class and make me a full time English teacher, which, you know, like in retrospect, I don't know what I should have done in that. But I was just like, I'm not going to spend two years teaching English like, you know, like I that wasn't.

LIU: [00:22:25] That wasn't the program.

LILLER: [00:22:26] That wasn't the program I signed up for, and that wasn't really my interest. And I had just been working doing social work in a school for years, you know what I mean? I just wasn't interested necessarily in like. I was wanting to do more like different work than that. And so, you know, we kind of went, but like, I mean, they were ready to essentially just have me have a classroom, and this would be, I would, you know? And um, so then there was tension with that. And you know, and then there was tension in the house that I lived in and I didn't know anybody. So it was. And there hadn't been a volunteer there before, and it just wasn't a great situation. So there wasn't really work for me to, there just, things just weren't really set up, you know, in a good way.

LIU: [00:23:17] Who was your partner at site?

LILLER: [00:23:19] No, we didn't have partners.

LIU: [00:23:21] At the time.

LILLER: [00:23:21] No.

LIU: [00:23:22] How did, I guess, Peace Corps staff deal with this?

LILLER: [00:23:27] So I reached out to Rolando, who was our program person.

LIU: [00:23:35] Director? Manager?

LILLER: [00:23:37] Yeah. And at some point, I think he did come out and make a site visit, you know? But I mean, essentially, he was just like, make it work. And I didn't know how to do that.

LIU: [00:23:53] Was it like that for other volunteers? Or they go to a site and they figured it out on their own?

LILLER: [00:23:58] I mean, I think, yeah, like I think that there definitely, you know, I think that's right. Yeah, I mean, I feel like that's a fair thing. You know what I mean, to try to. But like, I didn't really have a, like I think that works. But if you have someone that's sort of an ambassador kind of between,

you know, to kind of help. And so I mean, I didn't. Like I think they wanted this teacher to kind of be that person for me.

LIU: [00:24:30] Yeah.

LILLER: [00:24:31] But I didn't want to be at the school full time. And then she had a full-time job and she wasn't interested in doing.

LIU: [00:24:39] Secondary projects?

LILLER: [00:24:40] Agricultural work or, you know, I mean, like, that wasn't her thing at all. And so it wasn't, it just, like things weren't clicking. And again, like my Spanish wasn't great and like. So it was just weird. It was weird and hard and I, like it was hard to reach out to Rolando and not like, you know. I just didn't know what to do, you know? And so like, I don't even know all the timelines for everything. And I'm just like, how do I even spend my days? Like it feels kind of weird to think about it, you know?

LIU: [00:25:21] That's the next question. How did you spend your work? How did you spend your workday and leisure day?

LILLER: [00:25:25] Yeah. And so I mean, I know, like at some point I was just like, I'm going to just go house to house, you know, and that's kind of what I did at some point. And just kind of was like trying to, you know, meet people and figure things out.

LIU: [00:25:44] Mm hmm.

LILLER: [00:25:48] And there were some, you know, nice families that, like that was good. So eventually, eventually I moved into another family's house where. That was part of it too. I think even initially, like with Rolando, I was like, this living situation is just too much. Like the family didn't want me there. Sharing a room. There was a lot of other stuff going on that I just didn't understand. I didn't have any privacy. I didn't feel comfortable there, you know. And it was like, you know, like there wasn't, like I couldn't. I didn't even feel like I could just go cook my own food, you know. Like it was this very strange thing where they didn't want me. So then I was like

being served. I mean, it was just weird. The whole thing was weird. And then I, like so, but like he or they or somehow like there wasn't a house or they just didn't like nobody wanted me to live on my own, which I mean like that kind of makes sense I guess.

LIU: [00:26:52] This is the family and Peace Corps?

LILLER: [00:26:55] Yeah, I don't know. I don't know how. I mean, I think the family was fine with me leaving, you know, but there wasn't like, yeah, it just wasn't working. And so then I ended up moving into this other family's house, and that was kind of better, but I was still like sharing a room.

LIU: [00:27:16] What did this family do?

LILLER: [00:27:17] So the mom. She wasn't the mom, she was the aunt. So it was the aunt. She was a farmer. So I liked that. And then her nephew was the mayor. So he. And then they had another nephew that was there that had been deported from the States. So he.

LIU: [00:27:44] Knew English?

LILLER: [00:27:46] Knew English, but he didn't know what he was doing with his life at all. And like at some point, he like maybe had never graduated high school and like he went back to high school. And it was also very weird because he was probably in his twenties, you know what I mean? And then he's like, which is something that's very common too, you know. But that worked out for a while, you know, but again, like, there was no privacy. I definitely was like, the kitchen wasn't, you know what I mean? It was like, it was just like, it was just a hard living situation. And then at some point, like a house, somebody told me about a house or something, and then I had a house, you know. And then it was like my life just was like, everything just kind of changed where I like didn't have to be on like, you know, and I mean, like never being able to just turn off, I think, was exhausting.

LIU: [00:28:45] Yes, you get to relax.

LILLER: [00:28:45] You know, like always being in. And I think also people felt like, oh, I was going to be really lonely or like they were like, why would you want to live alone? You know, and I mean, like, there was this whole thing, like people were just like, what are you talking about? Like, why would you even, you know, when I just wanted to be by myself. Oh, and this is also reminding me. Like the other thing that I did was like the only time I was ever alone. It's like I was running, but like I had been running before leaving. You know, I had this like renewed fitness thing or whatever. But like, it wasn't safe for me to run on the roads as a woman. And so like, the only place I could run would be like a, for sure, like, I was never allowed to be out at night after dark at all. So that was part of it too is like as soon as it was dark, like you needed to be in and locked and everything. Even when I was living with a family like there was just, nobody goes out after dark. And then but I would run around the soccer field, that was the only place I could like exercise. And so I ran. I trained for a half marathon like running in circles around. I know.

LIU: [00:29:53] Oh my gosh.

LILLER: [00:29:53] I mean, yeah, like just, it was so. But that was the only time when I was like, had any space or peace, you know, like when I was. Like, it was really hard. And so I'm sure everybody of course thought I was crazy, you know? I mean, because that's sort of a crazy thing to do. But then at some point, like other people started, you know, and I mean, every once in a while, there would be somebody that would run with me or whatever. But yeah, I mean, it was just, it was a really hard time. I'm feeling emotions talking about this.

LIU: [00:30:24] What did you do in between these periods, like family one, family two? What was your life like?

LILLER: [00:30:30] Yeah. So I mean, I think, you know, like in the beginning was like sort of going house to house and trying to figure out. Like again, there was like, I wasn't going to be an English teacher and maybe I should have. I have no idea, you know what I mean, but I can't go backwards.

LIU: [00:30:45] But you just didn't do English.

LILLER: [00:30:46] At some point I did some English. Yeah. But I wasn't going to, I wasn't ready to be an English teacher. I wasn't ready to have a classroom and do that as my job every day. Like that wasn't what I was, you know, in my mind, I was just like. But so, yeah, so like I did the house visits a lot and then like at some point we had a community meeting and this was again, I told you my Spanish wasn't great. We were like talking about community meeting, and I was like talking about the Peace Corps and like trying to whatever. And like somebody was like, said something like that da da da da *al grano*, like get, which I didn't know what it meant. And so I just sort of like kept talking, but which is like, pretty much like get to the point, like, what are you actually here to do? Which is sort of a funny story. And you know, and I mean, the answer was like, I didn't know, you know. And, I mean, essentially they were asking, like, do you bring money? Like, what are you here to do?

LIU: [00:31:45] How big was the meeting?

LILLER: [00:31:47] I don't know, there are probably 20 people. I mean, it was a good size, yeah, like people came to, you know what I mean? I think they wanted to meet me. It was weird, you know? And then, yeah. And so then like I started kind of going out like with some of the farmers a little bit more, which is like more of what I've been doing and or wanted to do, you know? And then that was how like I was with Rosa, and that was eventually how I ended up moving in with her because she.

LIU: [00:32:16] The third house?

LILLER: [00:32:18] That was the second house. Yeah. And then so I would go out and like, work with her sometimes and then somehow, like she had this other family member. Oh I can't believe I can't remember his name. He was so sweet and amazing. But I would work with him. And then, um, so like doing sort of like just kind of getting the lay of the land it felt like took a long time. And then, you know, like some of the work started.

LILLER: [00:32:47] So like doing school gardens was something that was really good. And doing like family gardens, like working with women, growing,

like women growing vegetables just on their like right at their homes, like trying to do some of that. And then like, there was a like a couple sort of ongoing reforestation project of there was this hill that was right there. And so like, there were like several like.

LIU: [00:33:18] Layers?

LILLER: [00:33:18] Just like, yeah, I mean, like plantings and community events and reforestation events. And that was good. I mean, those projects were, you know, and interspersed with like the rainy season and coffee. And you know what I mean, like there were just like seasonal, like these very seasonal shifts of like times when you could do things and times when you really couldn't. And eventually things like the work parts started coming together.

LIU: [00:33:48] What kind of things did you grow in the gardens?

LILLER: [00:33:52] I mean, mainly it was just like tomatoes and peppers. And I mean, that was what everybody wanted. And yeah, it was interesting. So, um, like people who were doing farming there, it was just like, you know, corn and beans, and there wasn't like, there just wasn't a lot of vegetable gardening for whatever reason happening. And Rosa did some vegetable gardening, but she was one of the only ones in the area. But most people, I mean, it really was, and so like to get fresh vegetables like maybe once or twice a week. Like a car would go through town, you know, and like, you could get some stuff or you'd have to go like into, like you'd have to take the bus into town or so. And there was like one place like a little, she had just a little stand out of her house. And so she would have some things that were like pretty expensive. And yeah, but yeah, so like for women, I think to. And I don't know. And I mean, maybe they just did it to hang out with me, but you know what I mean, like that was actually a really nice project is that just kind of like helping.

LIU: [00:35:08] Did you get the seeds from local farmers?

LILLER: [00:35:12] I feel like I. We just did. I'm trying to remember now I think we did some like I did some planting from seed, maybe like at the school and

then like we planted some stuff at the school and then just took some little. I feel like I just took some little seedlings too. That was sort of how we got started. And like doing the, you know, like trying not to do, you know, like trying to do organic fertilizer and kind of things like that. But it was, I mean, they were like, it really was probably just like the school gardens, I think may have continued like, you know, after I left, but I think mostly with some of those other little gardens, I don't. I mean, I think it was like me coming and like helping and spending time with, you know what I mean? But that was also like a really nice way of like spending time. And so I think that probably most of those women were just like, whatever, come by. And, you know but they, you know, but yeah. So I mean, those were, but it was still like, yeah, like a community building kind of projects.

LIU: [00:36:22] What other projects did you do?

LILLER: [00:36:26] I did work with youth and like young adults, kind of like *jovenes*, a couple of different projects. And so part of it was, um, so I think you probably are hearing that I had a lot of issues with sort of like the gender dynamics. It was really hard for me. Um, I mean, it was pretty wild to be. You know, I think a lot of other volunteers were just coming out of college and maybe they were in a place. You know what I mean? Like, if you had just been in school and you weren't necessary, but like, I mean.

LIU: [00:37:00] You have experience.

LILLER: [00:37:00] I've been on my own for, but I've been living as an adult for many years. And so like to be in a household and then be like really treated like a child in some ways. And I think part of it too is like that my Spanish wasn't good. So like in some ways, I was sort of childlike in my communication, right? Um, but you know, like, I just, it was hard. And then again, like just like, you know, being an adult woman in the States when you just have a lot of freedom and then like, really? But just like, yeah, like being home and having my door locked and knowing, you know, like. And there were, like one of the other teachers at the school, like she was assaulted at night and you know what I mean?

LILLER: [00:37:48] So anyway, so I did work with, there was like a gender and development committee in El Salvador. And so I did some work on like locally, like in my little community and then sort of like regionally, like other volunteers in the area, we would go and put on workshops as a group and so kind of working with younger people. And then also like we put on a couple of camps that were good and then also do work on environmental, um, like business ideas for young adults. And so that was another huge problem is, you know, a lot of young men specifically, but women too, like didn't finish school. And so or even if they did like what, there weren't like a lot of opportunities to make money, right? So doing these like different stoves, these trivo casinos, and you know, like thinking about like figuring out ways to make money off of doing compost like the *abono*, um. And also like working with a women's group and some young women on doing like soap and shampoo from aloe. And just trying to like do some sort of small income generating kind of projects. So that was yeah. But yeah, environmental camps for kids.

LIU: [00:39:18] Did you do this in English or Spanish?

LILLER: [00:39:21] In Spanish.

LIU: [00:39:22] And so your Spanish eventually developed to where this is you're speaking Spanish the whole day?

LILLER: [00:39:29] Yeah, I mean, yeah, yeah, like at some point it was just like, you know, like everybody talks about it, like, you're dreaming in Spanish.

LIU: [00:39:36] Yeah.

LILLER: [00:39:37] And I think also too, I mean, it's funny. You know, my Spanish is like, you know, like, I like, I have kind of like, you know. El Salvador in some ways, like the language is kind of formal too, like they don't use the *tú* form like, you know what I mean, it's like *usted*. And so like, I feel like in some ways, like my Spanish is kind of formal and that I was always like sort of like at work Spanish. Like I had some friends like, you know what I mean? Like I said, like going and like doing those like little gardens with women like it became more of like a friendship thing.

LIU: [00:40:12] Yeah.

LILLER: [00:40:14] But yeah. And then also the other part is that, like my Spanish is sort of like campesino. And so I think I told you my cousin was there. And so like, I remember one time meeting up with him at some point in the capital and me like just saying, like, we were leaving a shop and I was like, *salud*. And he looked at me and he was just like, yeah, like, that's totally not anything somebody would say in the city. And I was like, OK, cool, like noted. But just really being in that like, really rural, you know, like, sort of colloquial. You know, so it's just such an interesting.

LIU: [00:40:46] Diversity even within the volunteers.

LILLER: [00:40:49] Yes, for sure. For sure.

LIU: [00:40:51] So what did you do during vacation time?

LILLER: [00:40:56] I was lucky, like my family came down. But mostly I stayed in El Salvador. So it was nice because the country is so small like you could really get to see the whole country. So that was something that was really good.

LIU: [00:41:09] You guys had to take vacation within country?

LILLER: [00:41:12] Mm hmm.

LIU: [00:41:12] OK.

LILLER: [00:41:14] Yeah. I don't remember how I would do that. I don't know. I know when we like left country, which I came back to the States one time during my service. Or any time you left, like I trained for that half marathon and that was in Guatemala. And so like, you had to like, really let them know if you left country.

LIU: [00:41:35] Like within El Salvador, it's not.

LILLER: [00:41:37] Yeah, I don't think I had to say anything. I don't know. Yeah, I don't remember.

LIU: [00:41:44] Um, so you went back to the States and then you went to Guatemala for the half marathon. Anywhere else?

LILLER: [00:41:51] I don't think so. Oh, I went to Nicaragua. Yeah, I did. A friend of mine from the States got married and I went there, and that was really nice. So yeah.

LIU: [00:42:01] Just leisurely vacations.

LILLER: [00:42:03] Maybe not so leisurely. It's funny. In Nicaragua, we did some hiking. It was really nice. Like they lived in this cloud forest outside of like Esteli. It was so beautiful. It was really great. But yeah, hiking, hiking volcanoes. And then where I lived, it was really nice because I could. There were all these waterfalls that you could hike to. It was so beautiful. Like, that always has been my dream to just be able to, like, walk out of my front door and go hiking. And so that is actually something, when I think about integrating into the community, was that I had like my little minion friends or whatever, but like I was always up for going, you know, like to the waterfalls. And so they like, we're always happy to go with me there, which was really nice. And yeah, like, yeah, definitely I feel like probably connecting with the kids and we had a little book club. And yeah, it was great.

LIU: [00:43:02] Would you say that was one of the best parts of your service?

LILLER: [00:43:04] For sure.

LIU: [00:43:05] Connecting with the kids?

LILLER: [00:43:06] Yeah.

LIU: [00:43:06] Did you make any like significant impact with any one of them or would you like to talk about?

LILLER: [00:43:10] It's so hard to say, you know. I mean, there's definitely folks that I keep in touch with. And now that like Facebook is everywhere, like people sort of have reached out again. And it's nice and it's so sweet and there's always things that are great. And then it's also like, you know, I don't know if you have this or not, but it's like there's often requests for money, you know, that come with that, like reaching out when I haven't heard from somebody in a while and it's like. And I don't know how to deal with it, you know? And like, I'm very inconsistent. And sometimes, yeah, it's very generous and other times not. And like after I left. Like, there's a couple folks who like started like sort of a formal scholarship fund for women, and I didn't do anything like that, but I did, you know, like I sponsored two girls to go to college. And I don't know. It's interesting because it's just like, you know, like in retrospect, it's not like I'm mad that I did it or, you know, and I mean, but it was. I don't know that that changed, like that didn't really change. You know what I mean? It's so hard.

LIU: [00:44:18] It's so hard to tell, yeah.

LILLER: [00:44:19] It's so hard to tell and it's hard like, I mean, I remember coming back to the States and just feeling so messed up about money. Like when you're somewhere where people are living on, you know, like a whole day's work is just a couple, you know? And then it's like, I remember at one point, like walking into Anthropologie. Like, who knows why I even did that? But it was just horrifying, like seeing like somebody, they, you know what I mean, rang up a \$200 purchase. Or, you know, it was just like I had no, you know. And I feel that again, like sometimes I really feel that again, it's just this like disparity. And, you know, like, I have a hard time balancing that.

LIU: [00:44:59] Yeah. Yeah, it is difficult. Did your work and life change in the second year?

LILLER: [00:45:07] It was definitely better the second year. Yeah.

LIU: [00:45:09] So you, in the second year, you pretty much lived in the second house that you were in?

LILLER: [00:45:14] Well, I think the final house, yeah like the third house. Yeah, I mean, I think probably I was there for about a year. That makes sense. And yeah, and I just think that right like that was like easier. Like, I had community that I liked, people that I knew that I hung out with, that were friends and, you know, and right. And then I wasn't with the super religious family anymore. And I wasn't with, you know, like Rosa was a little crazy. She was fine. But you know. But yeah, like just able to like have some space of my own and.

LIU: [00:45:47] Structure.

LILLER: [00:45:47] Structure, yeah. I got to make my structure and structure my days and it was like. Yeah, like I would get up and I would run and I'd come home and I'd make breakfast and I'd go out and do whatever I was doing during the day and then taking a break and then visiting a little bit in the afternoon. Whatever social kind of work visit things. And then like, come home, lock the doors, make dinner. And then it was like, but it was a nice like getting into a nice routine.

LIU: [00:46:16] Mm hmm. Did you extend for a third year?

LILLER: [00:46:18] No. But I did go, like I said to the, I did a Peace Corps Response not too long after.

LIU: [00:46:25] Where was that?

LILLER: [00:46:26] In Panama.

LIU: [00:46:27] Was the experience very similar?

LILLER: [00:46:28] No, it was like a total light year.

LIU: [00:46:31] What was the difference?

LILLER: [00:46:32] I know. I mean, it was like a 180. So I was with a family and the family was very welcoming. And, you know, and I loved living with them and I had a room, you know, like I had space where I could be in my room.

And um, and the family that I lived with was amazing. And, you know, the father was like a leader in sort of the organic agriculture movement. And, you know, we did a lot of great projects together, like he was ready. His organization was ready, you know.

LIU: [00:47:07] For you to come.

LILLER: [00:47:08] For anybody. You know what I mean? They were like, we have all this stuff to do. We need someone. And I was like, great, I'm here, you know? And then his wife and her sister had a little restaurant business kind of thing in their home. And so like, I did some agriculture stuff and then I did. Uh, there were all these little tiny schools, like there were sort of indigenous communities around there too. And like I would go and I would do just one environmental lesson a day at each. So like, I had five schools that I went to, one a day, and I would just did this like series of environmental lessons that another volunteer there and I developed. And it was like, yeah, I mean, it was just a total. Yeah, it was a total 180.

LIU: [00:48:01] What made you want to do Response?

LILLER: [00:48:05] When I got back to the States, I had been expecting that this like former boyfriend and I like, we had these plans to get together again. And then when I got back that like immediately, like anyway, but like fell apart and then I was like, oh shit. And like, and I remember like him even saying, like, well, what was your Plan B? And I was like, I don't have a Plan B. We're going to do this thing together, you know? And so like, that was like this very dramatic thing. And so I went to like yoga school for a month and I did 10 days of meditation. I was like, what do I do with my life? And it was just like Peace Corps Response. And I'm so glad I did because I think had I not like, I think it was really important for me to have a positive experience. And also just because I had felt like, you know, I felt like there was something wrong with me. You know what I mean? Like, everybody else was like doing these things and like things are working out. And I was like, what is it?

LIU: [00:49:09] Other volunteers?

LILLER: [00:49:10] Other volunteers that I knew, you know? But it wasn't, you know what I mean, I mean, or maybe it was, it was a combination of things, you know, but so I mean, I had better cultural competence. I had better language skills coming in and but also coming into a place where somebody was ready to receive a volunteer, I think was also something that was pretty important. But yeah, I stay in touch with that family. And yeah, they're super sweet.

LIU: [00:49:36] And how long was the Response?

LILLER: [00:49:39] So I mean, it was probably around six months, it wasn't super long.

LIU: [00:49:44] Was the training very similar to Peace Corps?

LILLER: [00:49:49] No, we didn't get training really hardly at all. I came in with one other Response volunteer who was kind of at the other end of like this valley. Like we're in Chiriquí and like there was like Volcán Barú in the middle. And um, we wouldn't be able to walk to each other's place. I don't remember. But she and I sort of had similar projects, and she had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Panama before, and so she was doing Response coming back, I think, to her community, maybe even or a similar community. And so, yeah, so like she and I like, yeah, we were able to work well. Like we developed that sort of curriculum together and she was doing it on her side and I was doing it on my side and she had some folks that she was working with in community. And I had mine, you know, but we had good. It was good. Yeah. But I don't think we got much training. I mean, I think it was just like.

LIU: [00:50:55] Go ahead.

LILLER: [00:50:56] Go for it. Yeah. Mm hmm.

LIU: [00:50:59] That's interesting. So let's see, what else about Response. I guess what was your, well, what big projects or what projects were you proud of in both Peace Corps and within Response?

LILLER: [00:51:19] I think that the most lasting project with my Peace Corps El Salvador was the reforestation. And I mean, I always feel that way about any trees that I've planted in my life. You know, it's just that that's like if you want to feel good about yourself, you go back there and like ten or twenty years and be like, OK. But so doing that work like reforesting. And like working with the community on like doing like community events up there and sort of like reclaiming in a way that space for the community was something that I really liked. I felt good about. And um.

LIU: [00:52:03] For that one, did you have to write a grant or how did you get the community to do that?

LILLER: [00:52:10] So I know that the trees I remember getting the trees somewhere in Morazán and having them delivered. And I think that it was actually another nonprofit that had a tree nursery. I don't think I had to write a grant. I think that it was more just connecting this other nonprofit that had funding that had, you know I mean? It was just more about connecting these two. You know, I may have written a small grant, but I feel like now I did write a grant for a latrine project. Um. But I don't. No, I don't think I wrote a grant for the tree project. I think it was more just connection with available trees that needed to be planted.

LIU: [00:53:05] What about Panama?

LILLER: [00:53:07] Um, in Panama, it was, you know, I really. I don't even know how to feel proud of it or not. But I mean, I was just it was really like it was so sweet working with those schools. And I felt really good about. That was like the right amount of teaching for me too, was to go for, you know what I mean, like to do a lesson, you know, and kind of like an hour or two, you know, with each group for a week and not necessarily like doing over and over again. That was just a really sweet project to work on. Um, yeah, and we did some good tree planting in Panama too. There was like a lot of flooding along the Rio Sapo. Well, no, it wasn't the Rio Sapo. But what was the river? Rio Sapo was in El Salvador. Anyway. But in the river valley, we did some good tree planting there. And we did a lot of, you know, I don't know if you did any reforestation stuff. But we like started

these with, you know, like you have the bags and you do the tree, you know, like it was like, so those were sweet projects to work on too.

LIU: [00:54:13] We planted trees once and uh, some guy came up to me. He's like, don't worry about the radiation. I was like, what radiation? And this is in Moldova. And they were like, we tested the land. It was perfectly safe and OK to plant trees. I'm like, alright, I'm going to listen to you and going to plant these trees. Did that for the whole afternoon.

LILLER: [00:54:35] Take a long shower.

LIU: [00:54:36] Yeah.

LILLER: [00:54:38] That's the last thing you want to hear. Oh my gosh.

LIU: [00:54:41] I'll tell you more about that later. Um, OK, so let's see. Now these up and coming questions will be for both of your services, so you can either answer both or answer one or the other. Um, let's see. Did you have any regrets?

LILLER: [00:55:01] Um, I think I wish I would have been a better advocate for myself at the beginning in El Salvador when I knew things weren't working. I was just sort of like, I could have been a better advocate for myself. Mm hmm.

LIU: [00:55:17] Um, let's see. I mean, obviously, you learned a lot of lessons throughout both your services. Could you tell me some of the important lessons that you learned?

LILLER: [00:55:26] Um, I mean I learned a lot about the importance of community and relationship building the importance of that. I think that's something that I take with me now.

LIU: [00:55:44] Yeah. Did your Peace Corps experience influence your plans for the future?

LILLER: [00:55:54] I think it fit nicely with sort of things that I was doing. And so, yeah, I think I was sort of in this path and then it kind of helped me keep going.

LIU: [00:56:05] Yeah. So what do you do now?

LILLER: [00:56:08] I work for the city of Austin and I do community engagement.

LIU: [00:56:12] OK. Yeah, that worked out.

LILLER: [00:56:13] Yes, that's true. Yeah.

LIU: [00:56:17] So how would you assess your service in the light of the three goals of the Peace Corps? Let's go with the first one to provide technical assistance where requested.

LILLER: [00:56:28] I mean, I think that again, with my Response, I think I was able to provide more technical assistance. So that was a positive.

LIU: [00:56:38] Yeah. Number two, to promote better understanding of Americans.

LILLER: [00:56:44] I think that that was helpful with my service in El Salvador. And so, so many people in El Salvador know someone or have a family member in the States and they were sending money, you know. And there's this like very like sort of skewed world view about.

LIU: [00:57:03] Americans?

LILLER: [00:57:03] Yeah.

LIU: [00:57:03] What did you teach them or what did they learn from you?

LILLER: [00:57:06] Oh, you know, now that I said that, I'm like, I have no idea what they learned from me, but I mean, maybe just learning a little bit. I mean, and also, I think too maybe for me, but also, like I said, my parents came to visit and I think that was impactful on my community. Like even more

like, I don't know if they thought that I didn't have parents or, you know, it was so interesting.

LIU: [00:57:28] Saw your family.

LILLER: [00:57:29] I think seeing my family and like, there was just sort of a. Yeah.

LIU: [00:57:34] What did your family do when they were visiting you?

LILLER: [00:57:37] We stayed, um. We stayed with my initial host family from training, which was really sweet. They were so sweet. And then they came and they stayed in my community for a couple of nights. That's when I was living with Rosa. And, you know, I mean, it was like a lot of just like walking around and.

LIU: [00:57:59] Seeing the things, your life.

LILLER: [00:58:01] Uh huh. So that was really nice that they were willing to do that. And then we went to like a hotel that was kind of in the area. Um, yeah, I mean, that was kind of it. But so they did a couple of nights of like, you know, I mean, then it was rustic. I mean, it was all dirt walls and dirt floors. And, you know, not like, it's pretty different.

LIU: [00:58:26] What kind of food do they eat?

LILLER: [00:58:28] Chicken and beans and rice. I mean, and tortilla. That was pretty much, this was the.

LIU: [00:58:33] Common thing that you ate.

LILLER: [00:58:34] Pretty much. Yeah. Yeah, I mean, when I was on my own, that was another thing. I was able to cook more for myself, which was nice. I mean, I still eat a lot of beans and rice, but um, but yeah, it was great. I mean, to like, have a little diversity in my diet.

LIU: [00:58:50] Did you go back to being a vegetarian when you came back?

LILLER: [00:58:53] No. Uh uh. Yeah. So.

LIU: [00:58:55] Peace Corps changed that.

LILLER: [00:58:59] I know, Peace Corps changed that for sure.

LIU: [00:59:01] OK. So to promote better understanding of other people by Americans.

LILLER: [00:59:06] And so I've done a few. Like when I first came back, I did several kind of third goal events, like going and talking to Spanish classes or, you know, in different high schools and middle schools. And then in my last job with the city, I would do these like elementary career days and go and talk about the Peace Corps as a career. But I don't know. Yeah, and not as much. Um, I think when I was there, I mean, the people that I know, who know me, I think were influenced, but as far as like a general broader. I don't know that as much.

LIU: [00:59:47] Yeah. When you when you got back. Well, when you got back the first time and the second time, how was America?

LILLER: [00:59:56] So coming back from Panama. Like so when I was, again, I was like in like emotional turmoil or whatever for like the couple of months that I was like, I was probably in the States for like two months or something before I was just like, OK, I'm done.

LIU: [01:00:11] Yeah.

LILLER: [01:00:13] And coming back. When I got back here to Austin was like, I definitely had some pretty intense reverse culture shock.

LIU: [01:00:24] This is Panama or?

LILLER: [01:00:25] Panama, yeah, like when I was like done done. So it was really weird. It was hard.

LIU: [01:00:31] What kind of things did you go through?

LILLER: [01:00:34] Like the thing with like going in and just being like, disgusted, like just disgusted by the money. Like, just like what you know, it just felt so obscene. And like I remember, I mean, I feel like this is a common thing too. But I remember like going into Whole Foods and I was like going to make dinner for a friend. I needed three ingredients and I was just like just paralyzed almost. And I like grabbed an employee and I was like, these are the three items on my list, like I need you to take me to these. And he kind of like laughed at me a little bit and I was like, no.

LIU: [01:01:08] Being serious.

LILLER: [01:01:09] Yeah, like, I really need you to just do this for me. Yeah. And then one day, you know, like months in like I, you know, like I had found a job, you know, and I was like driving home from work like on MoPac. And I was just like realizing like, oh, like that just feels normal now. And I was like, OK, like I was recognizing the shift.

LIU: [01:01:32] How long did that take?

LILLER: [01:01:34] I mean, that was probably in, I don't know, maybe January or February or something. Five or six months, for sure. But it was also like kind of awesome. It was like bad. But it was also kind of awesome of just being like all of a sudden, all rules are off the table and it was just like, you know, I didn't know what anything was. Like I remember being with my mom and being like, can I leave my purse? Like, I don't know what I can do and what I can't do. Like nothing. And I was like dating and like, I didn't know any the dating rules, you know what I mean? And it was just like very much just like everything just felt like.

LIU: [01:02:14] You were too well-integrated in Peace Corps. Now you came back.

LILLER: [01:02:17] No, it was, though. I mean, like for real, it was just like everything just felt. I mean, I had no like, you know, like, I didn't have good like social context clues for lots of things. And so I mean, it was like kind of exciting and, you know, take like a baby. It's like good and bad.

LIU: [01:02:37] Yeah. So, last question. If you had any advice for current or future volunteers, what would you tell them?

LILLER: [01:02:50] Um, I don't know. Journal more. It's hard to remember things and also just, um, it can feel like it's kind of. No, I feel like a really long time, but it's not. It's like very fleeting too. And another thing I think is just that, like something else was. How about the integration into the culture was just like recognizing that that, you know, like just kind of being in both cultures and recognizing or having an ability to be in both and how valuable that is. And that's something that as that service is farther away like, I've also sort of lost a little bit of that ability. But I think it's helped me though in other ways of just being a more understanding human being in general. So. Keep going. That's what I say to all the current volunteers out there.

LIU: [01:03:56] OK, thank you very much.

LILLER: [01:03:57] Thanks. Yeah.

[END OF INTERVIEW]