

**Barbara Johnston Oral History Interview**  
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**Biographical Note**

Barbara Johnston served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal from 1980 to 1982 in a health and nutrition program.

**Access**

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Oral History Interview

with

Barbara Johnston

April 1, 2016  
Denver, Colorado

By Barbara Kaare-Lopez

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

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:00:06] Good afternoon. Today, myself, Barbara Kaare-Lopez, I am the interviewer. I am going to interview Barbara Johnston, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal from 1980 to 1982. And today is April 1st, 2016. Through the United States, it's April Fool's Day. And Barbara already said her project when she went to Nepal initially was with water supply and then she'll tell you more and then later it switched to nutrition and health. OK, so we have all 13 questions. We might cover them all. We'll see. Some of them might be a little repetitive. So how are you today, Barbara Johnston?

JOHNSTON: [00:01:04] I'm good, thank you.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:01:05] Ok, and also, I have to say, this is the first time using the digital recorder, but I have a tape recorder going also. OK, so the first question is for Barbara to describe her family, work, if she

would like to, current residence to begin with. OK, so let's begin with that Barb Johnston.

JOHNSTON: [00:01:32] My current work?

KAARE-LOPEZ: Yeah.

JOHNSTON: [00:01:35] OK. I am presently live in Denver, Colorado. I am a school nurse and I've been a school nurse for 20 years and planned to retire at in June.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:01:48] And your family situation?

JOHNSTON: [00:01:50] Ok, I have and I'm single and I have an adopted daughter, Abby, who's twenty 22 years old.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:01:57] Where's Abby from?

JOHNSTON: [00:01:59] She was born in Guatemala.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:02:00] Ok, if you can think back to the year before joining the Peace Corps and what you can remember, what was your life like back then? So I know you were 1980, so about 1979. Anything you might want to share with us that influenced you to become a Peace Corps volunteer?

JOHNSTON: [00:02:22] Well, at the time I was, I had worked for the migrant health program. I also lived in an apartment and I was thinking, what was I going to do next. I believe I was working part time at the hospital also or with the Visiting Nurse Association. And I happened to see in the paper where they wanted Peace Corps volunteers when I was looking for jobs and they were advertising for Peace Corps. And I thought, hmm, I'm not sure what I want to do with my life, so I'm ready to make a change. And so I applied. And originally

I was going to go to Yemen in 1980, but because of there some political unrest, then I got switch to go to Nepal.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:03:09] Ok, anything else you might want to add about why you joined the Peace Corps or is that so?

JOHNSTON: [00:03:17] At that time, I was going to go with the water supply group. A couple of those people were had done just construction. A couple of people were bridge builders or engineers. They were all guys and one, a couple of women in the group. And I went with them and obviously and when I got there, I knew that that's not the training that I could do. So I was able to join a health and nutrition group. I was I was the only one, but like a lady ministry or something, let me get involved in the southern part of Nepal. So I was in the tri area called Hetauda. I went between two different villages.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:04:04] Could you spell that village?

JOHNSTON: [00:04:06] Yeah, H-E-T-O-U-D-A I believe [sic]. And the other was a Japong village which is a tribe and it was two or three hours away from there across the river and totally different people in that kind of thing. So I worked in those two, those two villages.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:04:23] Ok, and now the third question, we already talked about how you heard about the Peace Corps. Can you talk a little bit about the process and the timing? For instance, some people say, oh, it took me nine months to get accepted or things of that nature. Do you remember much about how you applied? How long did it take?

JOHNSTON: [00:04:43] The application took as long as it does now. I know people now wait several months. I might have waited several months, but I think the length of time wasn't as long. And I do I did

at the at the time I had a bachelor's degree in sociology, but I was an LPN, so I wasn't an RN at the time.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:05:05] Ok, did you have a specific country or project in mind yourself before you joined?

JOHNSTON: [00:05:13] No.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:05:14] Ok. OK, here's the fourth question. So what were your friends or family's reactions when you were accepted? For instance, was there any hesitation or reservations on their part, your part?

JOHNSTON: [00:05:29] Well, I remember my father said that I need to stay home and get a regular job so I can start getting Social Security.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:05:37] Ok, sorry we're laughing, those of you who are listening.

JOHNSTON: [00:05:40] Ok, and quit moving around or have that. So I remember him saying it was important to get a good job and settle down and start getting Social Security. And that's basically family.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:05:52] How about your mom and or your sister and brother?

JOHNSTON: [00:05:55] Well, I think they were accepting. My mother actually had cancer at the time, was diagnosed and she said, you've always wanted to do something like this, so you need to go.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:06:07] Oh, wow. OK, here's the fifth question. What project were you invited to join? You've already mentioned that a little bit. So maybe we could talk about the nutrition and health then. How did you prepare yourself and others for your, it says dislocation, but like moving away, entering into two years of Peace Corps service?

JOHNSTON: [00:06:30] Well, I lived here in Denver and I had an apartment, so I moved a lot of things home.

KAARE-LOPEZ: Where's home?

JOHNSTON: Wyoming. Casper, Wyoming. And then I did move some of my furniture, a few pieces, my furniture to the San Luis Valley where I had lived before, to a friend that lived out in the country. So but a lot of it just went home at the time.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:06:52] Ok, our next question is about your Peace Corps training. This is question six. The question has to do with where were you trained? If you want to speak about the faculty, the syllabus they used, technical studies, things of that to begin with, then we have more parts to that question. Do you remember much about the training?

JOHNSTON: [00:07:12] Well, training was wonderful meeting Nepali people who I think the cultural aspect of teaching us about different caste systems, about different things, about Nepal were wonderful in the literature they gave us. Now that I'm looking back, I think that was and also the training was fun when we had to go live with families for a while during that period of time. I've kind of forgotten exactly. But I remember the training taught about language, cultural situations, because Nepal has so many varied populations that, Hindu you know, some are Buddhist. And, you know, we had to learn the different cultural situations. So that was a lot of interest. I had a hard time with the language myself. I thought it was very difficult.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:08:09] And which language did you learn?

JOHNSTON: [00:08:12] Nepali. Ok, I'm going to say something about the training.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:08:18] The reaction to other trainees, unless you want to expand on the training.

JOHNSTON: [00:08:21] Well, I just wanted to say the training is that once I got to my village doing health and nutrition, it's hard to do health and nutrition when the buffalo is, you know, wallowing in a mud puddle or something.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:08:36] Was the buffalo a fellow student?

JOHNSTON: [00:08:39] No, and so I do believe training. I wish they'd spent more time teaching about gardening, raising chickens and other things. The cultural aspect was wonderful and that kind of thing. But I wish they had spent more time training because I didn't do gardening here. I mean, you know, and maybe they think that was just automatic. But I think they wish they'd given more training on how to raise chickens, gardening, small goats, things like that.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:09:07] About language training, I don't know if you said this, did you have to live with a family that spoke only Nepali, for instance?

JOHNSTON: [00:09:18] Yes. Yeah, I lived with a couple of different families and they only spoke Nepali and we stayed with them for so many weeks. And then I think we changed to another family.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:09:28] Ok, now I don't know the selection process, what they're doing now in 2016. But at that time many of us had a selection process. I'm assuming that they did for you, like some of the folks in your group that maybe did not make it to become a volunteer. Did you have anything you want to share with us about the selection or did you have other trainees that had to go home that couldn't finish the, I'm assuming, ten weeks of training? Whatever anything you want to share about that.

JOHNSTON: [00:10:04] Well, I just remember one woman friend in our group from California had been there before traveling and she decided not to stay in work and be there as a volunteer. So she left. But that's how I remember I'm sure there were a couple of people. But, you know, I don't know because I kind of work solo in my mind because I was with this nutrition parliament group or associated with a lady in the in this one area. I mean, there were a couple of people left, but I can't remember. I remember she left because she just didn't feel like it was going to fit in. She loved traveling there and she had traveled there before, but I don't think she wanted to work there for two years.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:10:52] OK, do you remember how many people were in your training group?

JOHNSTON: [00:10:57] Oh, there might have been 10 to 15. I can't remember.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:11:03] Ok, while we're moving on to the seventh question, what was your when you first went into the country, enter the country, your reaction to the country that you were saying, which in your case was Nepal, for instance? The project will start with that.

JOHNSTON: [00:11:24] Well, not even just a project, but I remember being in Kathmandu and going out with other volunteers or going out in the evening. And just definitely a culture shock of the mass amount of poverty in the area. You know, people cooking outside, you know, no electricity, no water. You know, even in Kathmandu, you know, streets were very dark, no lighting. And I just, you know, by the mass amount of poverty, not just certain sections like you might see in the United States, but, you know, the poverty. And certainly you could see the lack of resources.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:12:10] I never thought is this is not on the list of questions, but sometimes people talk about the smells. Do you remember or anything like that, if people were cooking outside and I'm not sure



about the bathroom usage then. But anything you remember about that, the sounds, the smell, you know, people would cook outside.

JOHNSTON: [00:12:29] There were hardly any bathrooms around or there weren't any. And so a lot of times, especially the women would go in my villages would go out in the fields. But in the town of Katmandu, you just you know, there weren't a lot of there weren't those kind of things set up. A lot of the restaurants were not very clean either. I think they got used to clean them more when trekkers started coming through and they would clean the rice from the table or whatever. But, yeah, the sense of poverty and health and, you know, made there might be water spigots in the town or whatever, but definitely the poverty and lack of resources.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:14] Yeah. Anything you want to share with us about the Peace Corps staff at that time?

JOHNSTON: [00:13:20] I know they were Nepalis that, you know, were great people. You know, I, I that's all I, I know they were you know, a lot of them had later, I think some of them came to the United States or went on to school or whatever. But, you know, they were, you know, great people to meet. I mean, while I was there, I didn't continue any knowing any of them afterwards.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:45] Now, how long was your training, your Peace Corps training? Don't remember?

JOHNSTON: Don't remember.

KAARE-LOPEZ: OK.

JOHNSTON: [00:13:53] Probably the same as everybody else.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:13:54]. I know mine was ten weeks. But anyways, we're moving onwards to the eighth question, which is to talk about your

assignment. So some of the examples we could use are could you tell us a little bit about the specifics of your job assignment?

JOHNSTON: [00:14:11] Ok, well, I lived in. Hetauda was the main town and I walked probably forty five minutes to a village where I lived with the family and I lived upstairs and they all lived downstairs. And the ama, the mother did cook upstairs. So but anyway, I had a separate room above the tea shop. They had a tea shop down below and one room where the family lived. And I lived upstairs and it was all kind of a road just going through the town. And there were houses on each side and one school at the end of the block. And so I that's where I lived there. And then in the village I lived in the health post and in. As a health post was on one side and I stayed on the other side in a room there, and so I kind of went back and forth between the two villages.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:15:13] Ok, so you might have said this, and I might not have I'd have recorded it. Did you ever actually work in that water supply project for a short time?

JOHNSON: No.

KAARE-LOPEZ: OK, that was the initial project. OK, so you always work on nutrition and health.

JOHNSTON: [00:15:30] Yeah, OK. I might have gone through that part of the training, then I was able to switch over.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:15:34] OK. Can you share with us anything about your living conditions? I mean, you've already mentioned a little bit that you lived above the house. We'll start with that one. So what was your room like?

JOHNSTON: [00:15:46] Well, it's just one room and I get locked out of the window down the road to see everybody coming in and out. And

they had different houses on each side. And when I say houses, they were mostly wooden buildings. And then the other village was much more, they were Japong, they wore loincloths. They were the poverty there was even more. And they grew millet there and their houses were just small with thatched roofs. A lot of them were wooden with that roofs.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:16:20] What did you use for the bathroom or outhouse or whatever?

JOHNSTON: [00:16:24] They didn't have an outhouse. You just, you went. I did try to build an outhouse with some people there. Did build one, but they just used the out by the back of the house.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:16:35] And that's what you had to do also.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: OK, I'm going to assume electricity, there wasn't any?

JOHNSTON: [00:16:40] No. Electricity in the one village was on and off and the other village didn't have any electricity.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:16:46] OK, and how did you get water?

JOHNSTON: [00:16:50] There was a well a river down the road and we brought water up in a bucket from there. So I used a bucket and I would go to the river to bathe and stuff like that, just like sponge bath stuff.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:17:03] Can you tell us about a typical day in your first village? Or maybe they're the same, but the typical day, OK?

JOHNSTON: [00:17:13] Well, I was pretty much on my own, so I had a bag with actually some deworming medicine and the strip that you measure children's arms with for malnutrition. And I went around and I did

have some posters and small posters and I would just go around to the village and do health and nutrition and talk about, you know, washing your hands and trying to build toilets and cleaning wounds. That was one of the biggest things, is seeing wounds on kids that got infected and so making sure they cleaned with soap and water or just water even. And so I did that and I would just kind of walk them down the road and do that a couple of days. I would work in the health post with someone there and people would be coming in for different care there because their kids were sick. And I was at that health post.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:18:15] Speaking of soap, did most families have some type of soap to use?

JOHNSTON: [00:18:20] No, they just they used just water from, you know, that they got from the river. A lot of them didn't have. So some of them made their own soap or, you know, they may have gotten some. I do remember pregnant women, if they killed a goat or something, they would keep the blood, drink the blood because that gave them iron. So, you know, they used every bit of every slaughter, every chicken, every goat, everything that they always used.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:18:47] Did you ever try drinking the blood?

JOHNSTON: [00:18:50] No.

KAARE-LOPEZ: Just wondering.

JOHNSTON: I did eat the goat though.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:18:51] Good. OK, how would you describe your relations with the people of the country? However, if you want to start with your host family, perhaps.

JOHNSTON: [00:19:04] Yeah, my host family had a mother and a father and they had two children living in the house. And the one little girl was deaf, I remember, and she didn't go to school. And I can remember once, while she would have temper tantrums or whatever in the middle of the road, I could hear her mother, you know, getting upset with her or whatever. And they had a brother-in-law or something, ran the tea shop to I didn't see the dad a lot. I think he went to another town, works part of the time or something. But anyway, so I lived upstairs with them and, um. And then what was it. Oh, and the other village I live by myself and I just kind of got to know people in the village.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:19:55] Is that where you lived in the health post? Like a health center or something?

JOHNSTON: Yeah.

KAARE-LOPEZ: OK, OK. Did you have a room to yourself?

JOHNSTON: [00:20:03] No, it was just part of the health, it was in the. There was one room there, there was two rooms. And I guess I stayed in one room, the other room. Yeah, the health post.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:20:13] OK, how about other Peace Corps volunteers? Were there other Peace Corps volunteers?

JOHNSTON: [00:20:19] The other Peace Corps volunteers? When I went to Kathmandu, that's when I saw the Peace Corps volunteers.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:20:24] You might have said this and I don't remember. How far away were your towns from Kathmandu?

JOHNSTON: [00:20:29] Well, let's see. Um, I don't remember.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:20:32] Or how about time, like an hour to get there?

JOHNSTON: [00:20:35] No. From Hetauda you had to take a bus north to Kathmandu. I don't know if I remember, three or four hours on the bus. And so the other one was further away. So I think there were several hours on a bus ride to Kathmandu, but there it was right on the border of India.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:20:51] Ok, another part of this assignment question has to do with your work time versus leisure time. Well, anything you've already talked a little bit about your work time. Anything else you'd like to share about your workday?

JOHNSTON: [00:21:08] Well, I was pretty much very much on my own. So, I mean, I hear a lot of volunteers saying that, you know, it's hard for them to kind of get motivated or because if they were working on their own, you know, do things on their own. I felt like some days I felt like I visited people in the village. And but most every day I went out, you know, walked up and down, went further than my village to do health and nutrition. I did go into the school some I wish I'd done more work in the schools, but I always envy the teachers because I felt like they had kind of a more specific job to do here. They got up and they had a place to go. Yeah, where I mine was, you know, pretty much on my own and but I was thirty two when I went into Peace Corps. And I do hear from a lot of volunteers that when very, very young. They just didn't have a lot of experience before they went. And so they didn't know how to get started. I didn't know how to self start or they didn't know quite how to do things on their own. And so I talked have talked to volunteers saying, oh, gee, you know, it was hard for me to know how to get going instead.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:22:20] OK, how did you know? Like, did you get some guidance from, I'll say, a program manager, like, go to this town and then, you know, within a week you need to visit three times. I'm just making that up.

JOHNSTON: [00:22:34] I was in I was stationed in Hetauda, but I was, I can't really remember. I was kind of under a lady ministry.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:22:44] Ministry of Health or?

JOHNSTON: [00:22:46] Yeah, and that's how I worked with. I didn't work with her. But she's the one that set me up for these two villages and.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:22:53] Nepali minister?

JOHNSTON: [00:22:54] Yeah. I don't know. I can't even remember how I got set up with them her. I only met with her a couple of times though.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:23:01] Ok, how about your leisure time? What would you do when you weren't working?

JOHNSTON: [00:23:06] Ok, well when I wasn't working I went to Hetauda. Oh, there was a Peace Corps volunteer there that I'm still in contact with. He lives in Washington, D.C. And he was working at the college there, had a totally, totally different kind of training or program than I did. He lived in quite a nice, nice little house, but he went to a little college every day and was working with animals something. And but anyway, so he came to my village one time. He said, oh, my gosh, I can't believe, you know, just such a change of, yeah, whatever. But I visited him. Also there were some British people in the town of Hetauda working on a water project. So I spent time with them and Australians visited them.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:23:53] So they had specific projects now working on, working on, OK, British and Australians. OK, would you like to say anything about how your life and work changed over the time you spent there? Anything else you like to add?

JOHNSTON: [00:24:08] Well, it was just very difficult because you don't have resources and you don't have you know. It's very, very difficult

when people I mean, don't have the amount of food. They don't have water to grow things sometimes, you know. So it's very hard to teach nutrition. It's kind of and also their animals are probably, you know, a greater priority. But it's harder to teach nutrition when, you know, they need other things. They need clean water. They need schools. They need you know, they need food, they need vegetables. They need those kind of things. And, you know, to really do a good job and help teach teaching health and nutrition. So I tried to focus on washing hands, building latrines. The kids did have a lot of worms, those kind of things. You know, you saw the malnutrition of kids and you know, so I tried to work on general health stuff.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:25:11] Ok, this is the ninth question that we're going to ask. What this is about the end of your first year within the list of examples they give. Anything you like to share with us about any notable events, your reflections after a year of unexpected events?

JOHNSTON: [00:25:33] Well, I don't remember right now because it was so many years ago. I don't remember a specific thing at that time.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:25:39] Ok, how about health problems that did you have any health problems?

JOHNSTON: [00:25:44] No, I was pretty healthy, except for maybe getting giardia a once in a while. Yeah, yeah. But otherwise I was pretty healthy.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:25:50] Did you take, were you able to take a vacation?

JOHNSTON: [00:25:54] While I was there, I did go to India and I went to Sri Lanka.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:25:57] Oh OK. Did you travel much within the country of Nepal?



JOHNSTON: [00:26:03] Um, I traveled some because I came from the mountains. I was excited about the mountains there, but I was more excited about the different people. So I didn't go to some different tourist places, like a lot of Nepalis or like a lot of Peace Corps volunteers did.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:26:19] Yeah. You know, I think it's they call it the base camp. I mean, I can't remember in a previous conversation, you might have told me. Did you go to the Mount Everest base camp?

JOHNSTON: [00:26:31] Yes, I did go there with some people. The very lowest one where you could still see Mount Everest. So I did go to that one.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:26:37] How what altitude could that have been?

JOHNSTON: [00:26:40] Oh, I don't remember. OK, over ten anyway.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:26:43] Ten thousand. OK. OK, now we're moving on to the tenth question on this suggested list of interview questions. At the end of your tour, your time in Peace Corps, can you explain your sense of achievement or failure? Any pluses and minuses in your relations with the Nepalis or work with the people, the country, anything of that nature? How did you feel after your two years? Did you complete two years?

JOHNSTON: [00:27:19] Yes. Oh, you know, I think, you know, a lot of, um, like a lot of volunteers, I think you kind of walk away feeling like you didn't get enough accomplished. And the main thing is, I think for me is being able to go into different little small villages and be very welcomed by people, even though I just kind of walked in with them. They may not know me, but I can remember saying, oh, do you have a baby in the house or something? And they thought I meant their baby calf because their animals were very, very important to them, you know?

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:27:57] Would you say more than their kids?

JOHNSTON: [00:27:59] Well, not necessarily.

KAARE-LOPEZ: But different.

JOHNSTON: It was the word that I said, you know, let me see your baba. And that meant, you know, their baby calf. And so that's my language wasn't very good. But I think their animals were very precious to them because that's what gave them food. And, you know, I think and I think dehydration was a severe and malnutrition was a serious problem for four children. And, you know, they had I remember going back up to a village one time, and I had been there a few months before and the mother had said that their baby had died, you know, and even the two or three year old that was there. So I did see several children that died when I saw them. And, you know, that was scary. It's very hard. It was very difficult. You know, I think Peace Corps is hard. I think it's not I don't think it was an easy job. I think a lot of people you don't have a lot of resources and, you know, the poverty is extreme.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:28:58] So, yeah. OK, what are your plans for the future? Or maybe let me rephrase it. What were your plans for the future when you finished your two years?

JOHNSTON: [00:29:11] Oh, well, I definitely after I left, I was not a registered nurse at the time. And when I came home, I said, I'm getting my RN, because I loved seeing, you know, I mean, one thing that was very valuable to me there is seeing different things that I would see rashes on people or I would see the malnutrition. I would see things that I just said. You got to get you know, I have definitely a deeper interest in getting my nurse's degree. So as soon as I returned that I finished getting RN.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:29:44] Where did you get your RN?

JOHNSTON: [00:29:49] In Colorado.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:29:54] Ok, now we're moving on to the eleventh question. OK, overall, this is to evaluate your service. You know, remember, the Peace Corps has three goals. We'll start with the first one. How would you say your service was? And as far as were you able to provide technical assistance where requested and if not, your situation was it sounds more primitive.

JOHNSTON: [00:30:22] Well, I didn't do any technical assistance. Like I say, I wish I'd done more in gardening and raising chickens even though they had them. I think that as a health and nutrition provider, I could have spent more time in that area instead of just, you know, seeing sick children and telling them what they needed to do for those kids and how to treat diarrhea and how to build a latrine, that kind of thing. So that I wish I'd done more on that.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:30:55] Speaking of latrines, to many of the families, you tried to teach, build latrines?

JOHNSTON: [00:31:00] Well, we did have one built in the one or near the health post in the other village. But I didn't see a lot of families do that. They did in the one house that I lived in and the one village. But no, I did still did not see that as.

KAARE-LOPEZ: [00:31:15] OK we're stopping. Stop.

[END OF INTERVIEW]