

Wilson K. Mason Oral History Interview
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Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Wilson K. Mason served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil from 1966 to 1968 on an urban community development project.

Access

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Oral History Interview

with

Wilson K. Mason

December 7, 2006

Dallas, Texas

By Robert Klein

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

KLEIN: [00:00:03] This is Bob Klein. Today is December 7, 2006. I'm interviewing Wilson Mason, who was a Peace Corps volunteer in Brazil, 1966 to '68, in a community development project. So let's go back maybe a year before you joined.

MASON: [00:00:19] Okay. What was I doing, you know? I graduated from the University of Texas in Austin. My wife and I were married in November '64. I graduated in May of '65.

KLEIN: [00:00:42] Okay. What was your subject?

MASON: It was finance with interest on real estate.

KLEIN: And at that point, what was your career goal? Did you have one?

MASON: [00:00:50] Yes, I planned to get into real estate. I'd interned with a real estate commercial plan in Houston, Texas, on and off the various summers during college.

KLEIN: Where had you grown up?

MASON: In Beaumont, Texas, which is east.

KLEIN: [00:01:15] During high school years, did you travel, any extracurricular activities?

MASON: [00:01:16] No, not that much.

KLEIN: [00:01:21] And you went in from Beaumont to Austin. During your college years, again, any travel?

MASON: [00:01:30] No, nothing extraordinary.

KLEIN: [00:01:32] Had you learned a second language or not?

MASON: [00:01:34] Had not. My wife had traveled quite a bit, right, but I did not. After graduation, we went with this firm in Houston to return to get started.

KLEIN: Were you both working at that point?

MASON: She was. She'd been working while I was in college. When got Houston, I just started out on a commission basis, which was not a wise decision for a greenhorn. And so I began supplementing work with newspaper wrap, which was not a strong supplementary secondary form of employment, but right, anyway, the career in real estate was the real life question anyway. But I was able to close a few commercial leases that it was difficult to make ends meet.

KLEIN: [00:02:35] Now during your college years, do you recall when you first heard of the Peace Corps?

MASON: [00:02:39] No, other than I had heard of it. But no, I didn't follow it closely.

KLEIN: [00:02:51] Ok. But you knew it existed.

MASON: [00:02:53] Oh, yes, sure. Yeah, it was definitely an attractive exciting adventure.

KLEIN: Even though you hadn't done much travel.

MASON: No, no. That's right. And maybe, maybe because I had not done a lot of travel. I don't know.

KLEIN: [00:03:14] Let's see, '65, '66. The draft wasn't a concern.

MASON: [00:03:14] The draft was a concern. In fact, that was that was a strong motivation. My wife was enthused about this whole idea, but in all honesty, that precipitated serious consideration of my alternatives because I was not an enthusiastic supporter of our involvement in Vietnam. And if drafted, I would have gone. I wasn't going to object, I just objected to our involvement in it. So I wanted an alternative. The Peace Corps seemed like an exciting alternative for the two of us. And as it ended up, I don't know what it was, but our draft board or maybe all universal condition with all of the draft boards, was that you could still be drafted out of the Peace Corps. But so we decided as it increasingly became evident that I could be drafted, we'd small steps and some other pursuit, and that's when the Peace Corps.

KLEIN: This is '65 or '66?

MASON: 1966. Well, it may have been late '65. I mean, obviously as the war right worsened as the draft increased.

KLEIN: [00:04:45] And do you recall the application process?

MASON: [00:04:50] Somewhat.

KLEIN: [00:04:51] Well, a couple of things. One is you're asked whether you are familiar with a foreign language. And I guess that applies to both you and your wife or either of you. Do you recall, if you know?

MASON: [00:05:05] I mean, we had some broken familiarity with Spanish because we live in Texas. But no, I would not say that we would have a strong second language. And my wife had some study in French, maybe. That was not, it wasn't a speaking level knowledge, but if she had had some foreign language.

KLEIN: [00:05:33] Did your wife have a college degree?

MASON: [00:05:33] She did, in English and philosophy.

KLEIN: One of the other things in the application is you can indicate a preference, sometimes the type of project or area. Do you recall?

MASON: Yeah, I think we thought India would be neat. You see, we got pretty close.

KLEIN: [00:06:01] And in talking about joining the Peace Corps, what was the reaction of your peers, your family?

MASON: [00:06:11] Oh, well, I think they were somewhat dismayed, but I think everyone was dismayed at the volatility of the times. Exactly. Particularly for draft age guys, kids, whatever.

KLEIN: [00:06:27] And many people accepted it as a reasonable alternative to going to.

MASON: [00:06:31] Well, somewhat. Yes, I think some of our friends may have thought it was kind of a wild haired. But everybody was kind of troubled by the pressures of the draft and some involvement with service. I'm sure, as I recall, seeing a lot of people raised eyebrows, but then, you know, the alternatives were not very acceptable either. But it was not, it wasn't as though a lot of people suggested that option to us or suggested, as you

know, a form of service either. That was not something familiar with a lot of our peers or friends.

KLEIN: [00:07:23] So you filled out the application. Both you and your wife, you were both pretty much committed to going if you were accepted.

MASON: [00:07:34] We were. We were fully aware that this might not pan out and then I could be drafted. And if so, then I would follow the route of being drafted into the service. So that certainly was, it was not clear that the Peace Corps would be acceptable and that they would accept us or that we would, you know, finish the training program. But we made it, so.

KLEIN: [00:08:05] So do you recall what happened after the application?

MASON: [00:08:08] No, I don't. Other than I heard subsequently, you know, there was a lot of background interviews and FBI. Yeah, and that was intriguing. Actually I was glad to know that they did a thorough background check. So, no, I don't recall much more of the process.

KLEIN: And what, did you finally get a phone call or telegram a letter?

MASON: I don't recall. It must've been a letter. I would think it would be a letter.

KLEIN: [00:08:42] What did you become aware of your assignment and what was going to be?

MASON: [00:08:48] Well, I think first of all, I knew you didn't spell India B-R-A-Z-I-L. So I knew right away that our first option didn't get through, and I don't recall if our second option was a Latin American country or not.

KLEIN: [00:09:05] But you did get an invitation here to go to Brazil.

MASON: [00:09:10] That's true, and I think it may have said community development. I had no earthly idea what all that meant, but what was specific and in fact, it wasn't specific.

KLEIN: [00:09:23] But at that point, was it the assumption that both you and your wife were going to be volunteers, had volunteer roles?

MASON: [00:09:28] That's true. That's the way we applied now, you know, had they accepted only one and not the other? I don't know what we'd do about that. But that's the way we applied, and I think there was another adjunct to that to the job. And maybe that was also educational or secondary education working with, working with teachers. That was part of the program as well.

KLEIN: [00:10:01] Ok, so. You applied for a deferment, and I guess you got your board to indicate that would receive it.

MASON: [00:10:11] I suppose so.

KLEIN: [00:10:12] Okay. Where did you go? Where were you assigned to go for training?

MASON: Brattleboro, Vermont.

KLEIN: At the Experiment?

MASON: Yeah, yeah. Experiment in International Living.

KLEIN: [00:10:28] And in going up to Vermont, then you think the next stop would be Brazil?

MASON: [00:10:34] Yeah, that's right.

KLEIN: [00:10:36] And so you recall the farewell when you're leaving Texas?

MASON: [00:10:41] Yeah, I remember packing up our goods and leaving the cute little duplex that we had rented. We were kind of beginning our own nesting, you know? And everything was just great. And we found that disruptive, but we found it exciting too.

KLEIN: And your wife's family was OK with it also?

MASON: You know, if they weren't, they didn't rattle the cage. And I guess I should say I appreciated that. We didn't feel as though we had many options. As I remember, they were pretty supportive and I think I remember my first two, I think there was there was a risk. It probably admiration and support by all the parents.

KLEIN: [00:11:33] Yeah, certainly in those days, Peace Corps had a fairly good reputation. It was an honorable thing to do.

MASON: [00:11:36] Exactly. And I think people used that. I don't think I don't remember any negative responses from, you know, overt or subtle.

KLEIN: [00:11:53] So you reported up to Brattleboro. Was that your first time on the jets?

MASON: [00:12:00] Oh no, no. But I was not a worldly traveler either. But no, that wasn't the first time I flew. That was a new experience for myself, and in the springtime cold Vermont weather and coming from sunny Texas. I mean, it's cold in the wintertime, is it not like it is here in the spring.

KLEIN: So what time of year do you start training?

MASON: Oh, I think it was around April.

KLEIN: It was in the spring.

MASON: Maybe March, could have been March.

KLEIN: And do you recall reporting? And now you're in the middle of a group of others who've joined the team. You recall your initial impression of the group.

MASON: Sure. Yeah, I do. Well, motley kind of a crew. We were all, you know, kind of starry eyed and wondering what it was about, but full of a lot of piss and vinegar and was eager to prove ourselves and do something you know.

KLEIN: [00:13:13] How many in the group do you recall approximately? On the order of 50 or 100?

MASON: [00:13:21] I think between 50 and. I really don't recall because I know a lot were deselected and didn't make it.

KLEIN: [00:13:29] And were there other married couples?

MASON: [00:13:31] Yes, they were.

KLEIN: [00:13:32] And the group was generally coed. It wasn't married couples plus men and married couples plus women.

MASON: [00:13:38] No. No. Yes. That's correct.

KLEIN: [00:13:41] Okay. And now let's talk about the training itself. Generally, the components are area studies. You learn about your technical studies, depending on where you're going to go, so there can be some level of language training. Let's talk about those elements in training.

MASON: [00:14:08] Sure. Well, I thought they had a good program. I fault myself on the language only because that was a struggle for me. As I thought, the technical side of the training was good.

KLEIN: [00:14:26] What were they training in?

MASON: [00:14:36] Any eventuality of any possible thing which was covered. It was difficult to train in everything.

KLEIN: So it's kind of generic area development.

MASON: Well, the community development thing that was a, in fact, that was a criticism we had at the end of our service, that it was too generic for young kids to sometimes get their hands around. And yet I love flexibility, I love not being tied down, but there is such a lack of structure that it was frustrating when I was in training, but in reality in Peace Corps. What I what I think would have been better with would have been to have some

structured activity that was required, but then to have some time to allow for flexibility such that if you envisioned a need in some area that's being unmet, that could be met and there would be a demand for it, then you could apply energies in that area to the country. But in the meantime, you would have there would be structure to your life too. That would give you some sense of, you know, anchor, that's what we didn't have. And that's what caused so much frustration throughout.

KLEIN: [00:16:09] When do you recall any outstanding speakers or trainers at training?

MASON: [00:16:17] I remember a doctor that we had. He did seem to have a warm personality and did seem to relate to people very well.

KLEIN: And that was the medical training?

MASON: That was in Brattleboro, Vermont. And he was from the area. I don't know where he was from the state of or not from other states in the northeast part, but really nice guy. Seems like Bob George may have been the head of training there, and I thought he was effective. In fact, I remember most of the staffers being effective and helpful.

KLEIN: [00:17:01] How was the language organized, did you break into small groups?

MASON: [00:17:04] I believe that's true.

KLEIN: [00:17:06] Do you recall if you had any sense that if you didn't get up to a certain level in Portuguese that you weren't going to go?

MASON: [00:17:12] I don't recall that. I wouldn't, you know, I wouldn't be surprised that that might have been asked.

KLEIN: Were there any field studies, going out to study community?

MASON: We did.

KLEIN: How was that organized?

MASON: Well, they dropped you off in a little outlying towns. Now that, it was fine.

KLEIN: [00:17:33] It was the two of you, though.

MASON: [00:17:36] Definitely a challenge. And they'd give you like 25 dollars for the weekend or so. It's kind of interesting, but it required such an indulgence on the community for families that, you know, kids roaming around trying to do things. I think the objective is to understand that [inaudible], which were an acronym for, you know, movers and shakers of the community and what the community did. To take matters and cameras or something with acronyms for learning about the movers, shakers and what the community does or how it gets things done.

KLEIN: [00:18:21] In two and a half days.

MASON: [00:18:23] Yeah. Oh, by the way. Yeah. And by the way, figure out how to stretch \$25 over a weekend.

KLEIN: [00:18:28] And you had to find a place to stay?

MASON: [00:18:30] And find a place to stay and eat. And so we ended up, I don't remember, barging in on a Congregationalist minister and his family in, I can't remember this town in Massachusetts. Oh, North Adams, Massachusetts. Nice, nice people. Took us in. Anyway, it was just it was surprising and we were chatting away. But they were nice to us. And so we went through the exercise and it was it was a mental training of just learning how to evaluate size up a situation and see what I could be use of what's needed and how it operates and how to effectively work with the people.

KLEIN: [00:19:29] When you came back from that weekend, did you have a chance to process with the group?

MASON: [00:19:33] Yes.

KLEIN: And to share the experiences.

MASON: Right, so that we'd learn how other people, what stumbling blocks they encountered or what successes they encountered.

KLEIN: [00:19:44] So did anyone stand up and say, well, these skills are what you might be using when you get to Brazil?

MASON: Sure.

KLEIN: Was there anyone from any former volunteers or any Brazils staff members who provided training there?

MASON: [00:19:58] There some former volunteers in Brazil that had returned.

KLEIN: [00:20:05] And how were they used in training?

MASON: [00:20:11] Well, I guess more in the cultural side of training and trying to relate what to expect, how to cope with, you know, the challenges and the cultural differences and what life is like for a volunteer there. The do's and don'ts, to avoid pitfalls.

KLEIN: [00:20:35] Was anyone saying that this is what you likely to be doing once you get to Brazil with any specificity?

MASON: [00:20:42] Well, no, not specifically. But yeah, they did attempt to say, here are ideas of community development. Have a water project, maybe a sanitation project, maybe help with a garden.

KLEIN: [00:21:01] And the implication was that whatever assignment you had, it would be the both of you.

MASON: [00:21:07] That's right. The community development is so flexible. [cough] I'm getting over a cold. Let me stop.

KLEIN: [00:21:20] So you knew you'd be assigned with your wife. But it was open ended enough that she might end up teaching and you might end up digging latrines.

MASON: [00:21:32] And that's exactly what happened. Because, you know, because of the kind of the. It's still culturally Victorian and men didn't work that well with women. Women work better with women, and most of the teachers are women. Therefore, I just wasn't able to develop the rapport that I thought was necessary to be effective with the women teachers.

KLEIN: [00:22:03] And you knew you knew that going in.

MASON: [00:22:07] No, I didn't. I didn't know that. Maybe I should have picked up on it. Maybe they told me, but I didn't do it, too. I was surprised about it.

KLEIN: Two other things about training. The Experiment had been associated with the kind of Outward Bound type of training. And I gather that's where you, you know, jump tall buildings, go up cliffs.

MASON: [00:22:31] I guess so.

KLEIN: [00:22:33] But you didn't have any. The other part of training is the selection process. And how did that play out?

MASON: [00:22:43] Fine. I mean, as I recall, several psychologists, maybe psychiatrists, but I remember having various interviews. I thought that was fine. I was comfortable about it. Other people were not.

KLEIN: Together or separately?

MASON: You know what, I think separately, but I would think that it would have been wise to interview us jointly as well. I don't know if they did that. I don't recall. I would guess that they may have been a good idea.

KLEIN: [00:23:20] And then very often there's a lot of tension about selection, mid selection and then there's a final.

MASON: [00:23:25] There is. That's right. And I remember a lot of people. Some teeth gnashing over some of that and some disappointments, I think, in some who will be deselected.

KLEIN: [00:23:41] Did the group coalesce at all in trying to oppose some of the deselectedees?

MASON: [00:23:46] Yes, a little bit. Sure. You do really build some strong bonds within a short, intense training time.

KLEIN: Yeah, that's true. So a final selection comes and the group has been pared down.

MASON: We actually, we had two different training areas. We trained in Brattleboro, Vermont, came home briefly, went back and trained for, let's say, two to three weeks in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

KLEIN: [00:24:22] And was this to be all field work?

MASON: [00:24:24] Yeah, sort of.

KLEIN: [00:24:27] Did the whole group go there?

MASON: Yes, the whole group.

KLEIN: And how did you spend your time? Did language continue?

MASON: Yes, language continued.

KLEIN: [00:24:35] All of that. Is there a large Portuguese population in Scranton?

MASON: [00:24:43] Not to my knowledge.

KLEIN: [00:24:44] So what did you do? How would you spend your three weeks?

MASON: [00:24:52] Going to the local health department going with them out to see health conditions in the poor areas. I know they had that problems in the

city. They want to show us how they were eradicating rats and I remember that. I remember the eternal coal mine fires that were burning all the time. I don't recall why they decided to make such a logistical right from Brattleboro to Scranton. Maybe it could have been something just as simple as they had another group coming back into Brattleboro, Vermont, and couldn't give us any more time. I never knew the reason. Maybe it was that Scranton had something that was vital for us to learn. Afraid I may have missed that.

KLEIN: So you get through the Scranton phase.

MASON: Come home, wrap up things.

KLEIN: [00:26:03] No second thoughts on your little bit of home leave?

MASON: [00:26:05] No. In fact, we were pretty excited. We were really eager to go.

KLEIN: Had you developed any close friends within the group?

MASON: We had developed friends. Yeah, well, I wouldn't say close enough yet. You know, we were still we were still trying to. We were enthused. But you know, still, there's trepidation.

KLEIN: [00:26:32] Sure, sure. And you had no idea of where in Brazil you were going to be going. I mean, it's a huge country.

MASON: [00:26:41] It is a huge country. Yeah. And it's like you're going to Canada or the U.S., India and China. That's a huge country. But we didn't get an inkling of where we were going right until we got into Rio, which is what we flew in. People began asking us for where we were going to be stationed. It's [inaudible]. Oh. And you knew there was more there was something that you thought they weren't listening when they talked in training. So we heard our book here now to find out more about the state of [inaudible]. It's just a poor country in the northeast part of Brazil. Beautiful area, but it's not a Rio or a Sao Paolo.

KLEIN: Was it coastal?

MASON: Well, the state is coastal, and the city we were in was inland a ways.

KLEIN: [00:27:46] Now when you got to Rio, did the group stay together very long?

MASON: [00:27:50] Well, I would guess for maybe a week, but it was orientation, Peace Corps kind of orientation.

KLEIN: [00:27:58] And at any point did anyone ask you if you had a preference for where you were assigned or did you sense was that you going to go where they sent you?

MASON: [00:28:10] No, we were just going to go where they sent us. There were some there were some people that I think they were just a little more savvy than we were, who found out a little more information. And they began kind of, not politicking, but they decided to do a little promoting of maybe some areas that they thought might work better for them because of their expertise. And as it ended up, one of them did a pretty good job in order to get there. No, we were just going to go along.

KLEIN: [00:28:51] But you might assume that Peace Corps saw a married couple as stable and more possibly better able to handle an isolated society.

MASON: [00:29:01] Yeah, that's true. But that is true. And I assume they might have looked on it that way.

KLEIN: [00:29:09] At what point did you begin dealing with Brazilians?

MASON: [00:29:15] As soon as we, well, we left flew out of New York to Rio, and as I say, it was a brief orientation period, maybe up as long as a week. From there, we then flew out from there. In our case, you know, our group was primarily in the northeast part of Brazil in the states of Alagoas, Ceará. I don't remember all of the states.

KLEIN: So it was like a regional outpost.

MASON: [00:29:49] We were in the northeast, part northeast, part Brazil is. Well, the whole country of South America is like that. Brazil is kind of like this much and the northeast is up here. Largest town is Recife in the state of Pernambuco. Alagoas is just a small state here and its capital is Maceió. Rio, Sao Paulo, Brasilia, Salvador. Some of the better exciting communities. But anyway, you fly in here and we just flew back up here.

KLEIN: Is the area tropical?

MASON: It is. Yeah. Sugarcane region.

KLEIN: So now you really you're getting down to it, I mean.

MASON: So we come into Maceió and we have another orientation.

KLEIN: Now, who's running it?

MASON: The Peace Corps. And they designed an orientation for, first of all, in the city of Maceió just to get people from the host country again, kind of learning relating with the Brazilians. But they're in a controlled environment with all your buddies are still now. Not totally, you know, out of wack, but their orientation is within the city of the capital of Maceió.

MASON: [00:31:28] At this point, then they designed an orientation program where all of volunteers would go out and visit other in-country volunteers at their homes. You know, and in fact, it may be a group that split up a group of five or 10 go to one small little town, learn what that volunteer has been working on. Meet the people he works with. Just get a taste of daily life they live through, and then you rotate. From there, then go to see another volunteer. People there went back here and kind of rode around. So you get a nice smattering of experience from other people in the field. That was smart and helpful.

KLEIN: [00:32:19] But was anyone saying, you know, in which setting you feel more comfortable?

MASON: [00:32:24] No, I'm not following.

KLEIN: [00:32:25] Well, if you've seen four or five different sites, were they trying to get some impression from you where you might fit in? What kind of situation?

MASON: [00:32:33] Probably, probably. But it wasn't explicit. No, probably community development still so all-encompassing so anything goes.

KLEIN: [00:32:44] Did any of the existing volunteers you dealt with say, this is a disaster, you're wasting your time?

MASON: [00:32:52] Yeah, some of them, sure. I think all volunteers have gone through some of that, at least for these type programs, because it really taps the frustration of people. I don't know how you found your experience, but yours sounds very structured to me. There's something new that needed to be done. And you could do it and feel you can feel some sense of satisfaction. What was expected of us was pretty nebulous. What resulted was pretty nebulous. The sense of satisfaction was illusive. So it was, that foments frustration, and we felt that from the people that had been in the field.

KLEIN: [00:33:38] And so they articulated, they weren't just being nice?

MASON: [00:33:42] They weren't necessarily saying it's because of the way the program was. But add to that just the idealistic desire of accomplishing something and realizing you can't accomplish what you were supposed to.

KLEIN: [00:34:00] Well, no one turned to the Peace Corps staff and said, you brought me all these thousands of miles just to do this? I mean, doesn't the Peace Corps staff have some obligation to structure?

MASON: [00:34:15] Yeah, I'm sure. I'm sure that frustration was taken out on staff. I don't know if it's taken out in those words, but definitely it was taken out on staff because everybody looks for a scapegoat.

KLEIN: [00:34:29] Is there any point in these first couple of weeks when you and your wife said, oh my God, we're in Brazil on a mistake?

MASON: [00:34:37] No, not. Well, that may be.

KLEIN: But did you? You must have had some hesitation at that point about what are we doing here?

MASON: Sure. Yeah, we were wondering all the time. Did we make the right decision? Just like most of us, we are respected by the service. You know, although I don't think that that really was not something set in deeply with us. We felt we felt pretty good about this. We weren't comfortable with how things were working out because they weren't working out yet.

KLEIN: [00:35:25] Ok, well, let's get you to this in-country training now finally comes to an end. And now you're going to be assigned as a volunteer.

MASON: That's right. Now there were some input. We, you know, we talked about, what we might be more comfortable with. Some people were in little interior towns have had, you know, 100 people, some in towns that might have been 30,000 people. We ended up being placed on a town of, I would guess is 2,800, 3,000. That was just I was fine with us.

KLEIN: [00:36:07] And were you the only volunteers there?

MASON: [00:36:08] We were the only Americans.

KLEIN: You were the first volunteers there. There hadn't been any.

MASON: That's correct. So first and only volunteers.

KLEIN: [00:36:18] So there's no place to go but up.

MASON: [00:36:20] Well, that's true. Yeah.

KLEIN: [00:36:22] Well, talk about arriving in the town and settling in. You have to have a house, a place to live.

MASON: [00:36:39] Well, sure, it finally came down to dropping us off in the first town and it was Atalaia, Alagoas, sugarcane region town, about two hours, maybe from the capital by bus. We are scared little rabbits, you know? But there really wasn't need. Everybody was gracious, warm. We had all kinds of exuberance, welcome, welcoming, by all the local people.

KLEIN: [00:37:30] How are you doing with the Portuguese at this point?

MASON: [00:37:33] Oh, we were stumbling, but people were generous in their understanding of our broken language.

KLEIN: [00:37:43] You couldn't fall back on English.

MASON: [00:37:46] No, because. Oh, I'll take it back. There was there were there were a few people in town who knew a little bit of English, who were eager to, you know, improve on their English.

KLEIN: [00:38:01] Coming into the town, was there any counterpart or mentor or structure that against which you were going to work?

MASON: [00:38:09] Well, there had been communication with the mayor of the city and with the educational director for the city school, who knew that we'd be working with them. They worked with the teachers. And that we were both kind of in that area. So there was some structure awaiting us to work with teachers and we began that, you know, that process.

KLEIN: Talk about finding a place to live and again, and then we'll talk about the work.

MASON: Well as it ended up. I don't recall now how this worked out. It was a nice little, this common wall unit along the main street there, where we lived and a little living area, a bedroom. And you know a [inaudible] you conduct yourself with. And nice, clean little abode that we fixed that, and they made our own little house.

KLEIN: [00:39:38] And who was doing the cooking?

MASON: [00:39:39] Gwen was. Seems like I might have pitched in on that, too.

KLEIN: [00:39:49] Did you have a steward or a houseboy or someone helping you run the house?

MASON: [00:39:52] No, no, no. Nobody.

KLEIN: [00:39:54] Just the two of you.

MASON: [00:39:55] Just two of us. We had a well, we had a charcoal stove over, just a couple of holes and put charcoal in light it and put your pot on top of this opening. Yeah, but we eventually got a kerosene cooktop and worked out great, it's amazing what we could do. No refrigeration. It wasn't part of the family content. It was just a little unit by itself. I don't know whether the mayor provided that. I don't recall. I don't remember writing a rent check to anybody, so it must have been just provided for us.

KLEIN: [00:40:42] So you have a place to stay. Talk about the first few weeks.

MASON: [00:40:47] And I got sick as a dog. One of the local fellows have not heard, he was just charmed by Americans, and so overly enthusiastic for our presence it was embarrassing. We kind of wanted to avoid him because he was stumbling over himself to be so nice. Well, he was just, poor guy, he was real concerned that I was so sick. Actually, Gwen and I were both concerned that I was so sick. My system just hadn't adjusted. But anyway, he thought of himself as an untrained medical doctor for the area, which he was not. Anyway, he pulled out the syringe, he was going to give it a shot of something that was kind of half powder and that was kind of a frightening experience for my wife. She halted that, but there was that probably the first month, two months before we could kind of get oriented to life in the city with the people, the food, and get acclimated.

KLEIN: [00:42:28] Had Peace Corps given you a medical kit?

MASON: Oh yeah, yeah, and they had a medic.

KLEIN: Was there a process for medical emergency?

MASON: [00:42:36] Sure, sure.

KLEIN: Which was what?

MASON: I don't recall, but we had all kinds of pills and everything. It just they just weren't working at the time. And I was not delirious, but I was having a hard time. That was just [inaudible], you know, a severe case of it.

KLEIN: [00:43:01] So once you realized you weren't going to die, you recovered.

MASON: [00:43:06] I did. And we embarked on what was supposed to be our job responsibility, working with the teachers. And we went out and.

KLEIN: Who decided that your job responsibility was working with teachers?

MASON: That was part of our job description because it was education and community development, and we did do that. We did meet with teachers. We'd go out into the rural areas and talk with the teachers. And it just was evident that Gwen was more effective at responding with the teachers than I was.

KLEIN: [00:43:44] But Gwen was not an experienced teacher, was she?

MASON: [00:43:47] No, she had taught. Dyslexia. She'd been trained to work with kids with dyslexia. So she had that training. Anyway, as it ended up, we continued along that route, but it wasn't satisfying. So I began working with kids in the school programs, recreational programs. Just kind of school projects. These were young kids, like summer activity programs, you know, public posters. Learning about some nutrition, sports activities, just working with kids.

KLEIN: [00:44:52] Were you teaching soccer?

MASON: [00:44:54] No, because I didn't really know soccer.

KLEIN: [00:44:57] In Brazil, you need to know.

MASON: [00:44:59] I try to learn, but I didn't. I didn't have anything to teach anybody.

KLEIN: [00:45:04] Oh my goodness. Could have been a major embarrassment to the U.S. government.

MASON: [00:45:09] It could have been. I got very involved in vegetable gardens.

KLEIN: And the base to this was an elementary school, a K to 8 school?

MASON: You're talking about the working with teachers or?

KLEIN: No, with the kids.

MASON: [00:45:32] Yes. Yeah, that's right.

KLEIN: And it was the same school where Gwen was working as well?

MASON: [00:45:36] There were several schools. She had to go out to several schools, but this was just kids in the city of Atalaia. So it was just it was just that that was not a big enough project to carry on. That was just something that I did when I saw that the other wasn't panning out to me. So from there, I decided to. I realize their diet was almost exclusively just rice and beans, you know, a little bit of meat, a little bit of vegetables. And so my objective was to encourage vegetable gardens by distributing seeds that USAID had available. And to that end, I asked the mayor to contribute some land that we could put on an experimental garden on. And it was like a couple of acres maybe an ace and a half.

KLEIN: [00:46:55] Now, were you reporting all this back to your regional Peace Corps office?

MASON: [00:46:59] Yes. Oh yeah.

KLEIN: [00:46:59] And were they approving or they were just listening?

MASON: [00:47:04] Sure.

KLEIN: [00:47:05] And did anyone come out from USAID?

MASON: [00:47:07] Sure. Yeah, they did, but it ended up being a pretty good project because it was a real promotional plus for USAID.

KLEIN: [00:47:17] And you had no background in small agriculture?

MASON: [00:47:21] Well, nothing other than where I grew up. I mean, I have my grandmother in the garden and I worked in the garden and my mother than they had. My grandfather did some gardening, but that was not their location and we weren't farmers. No, I didn't have real experience, and I just read up about it.

KLEIN: [00:47:39] But there must have been some sophistication to it because if it's a tropical area, I mean, not everything's going to grow and you need to know.

MASON: [00:47:47]. Well, I was just lucky. I don't know. We end up having a heck of a knockout garden. We had all kinds of lettuce, tomatoes, cabbage, carrots, squash.

KLEIN: [00:48:07] How many of those foods were people in the town willing to bring into their diet?

MASON: [00:48:16] I don't know. But they these were all foods that were available at the market in Maceió, but frequently what people would have to do. Someone would drive to Maceió, buy the produce there, bring it back out to the market and sell it. Yeah, and that's a lot. What I was trying to do to encourage people, show them it could be grown there. And they within a very small pocket garden there, you can generally produce quite a good yield of different vegetables.

KLEIN: Who were the agricultural workers in that community, the men or women or both?

MASON: Mostly men. There was sugar cane. So that that was their primary agriculture.

KLEIN: [00:49:06] Was there any structure other than the school that you could work off, work against in developing this? Two acres is going to be substantial.

MASON: [00:49:16] Yeah. Well, I have one guy that I worked with who assigned by, I guess the mayor.

KLEIN: So the town, in the sense was willing to endorse what you did and support it.

MASON: That's right.

KLEIN: [00:49:28] And AID came in. Did they provide anything other than the seed?

MASON: [00:49:34] No, no, no. We did it all with a hoe.

KLEIN: [00:49:39] So was it what, three months, six months into your being in this site that you finally came to the garden?

MASON: [00:49:48] I'm not sure. I would guess, I don't know, three to six months. I don't know. I would guess somewhere in between.

KLEIN: [00:50:00] During the first year, a couple of questions. How long would you be in the village without going out to the capital?

MASON: [00:50:09] Oh, well, maybe three or four weeks.

KLEIN: [00:50:17] Was there a circuit of other volunteers from the group where you could go on weekend or get together?

MASON: [00:50:25] Well, usually we were close enough to the capital. Capital seem to be kind of the magnet. It everybody would come into the capital. Because there was more to do in the capital. We did have another couple

of friends that that resided to the north of us, John and Jan Wunderlich. And we would go up and visit them. We had another friend who was down in another larger city, by the name of Bob Cook, and we would go and visit him. But that was rare. Yeah, usually it was people would just go to the capital.

KLEIN: [00:51:01] How did you get around us?

MASON: [00:51:05] Bus. Bum a ride.

KLEIN: [00:51:09] Related question. Do you recall your first Christmas in Brazil?

MASON: No.

KLEIN: OK. Because sometimes it's the very hardest time, a traditional time back home.

MASON: [00:51:21] No, but my wife might.

KLEIN: [00:51:35] So by the end of the first year, how would you assess, what was your feeling about what you were doing, what you were doing there?

MASON: [00:51:47] Generally I was feeling good about things because I had finally taken something that was so totally frustrating to me and turned it into something that I felt I was beginning to get some sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Which I have not experienced until now. And before that, I was reading a lot in my footlocker and going around seeing people, working with kids and stuff, but I really want to accomplish so much. So once I began this gardening project, it really ended up being very successful. It was quite a show for us. A lot of people came from all around to look at it.

KLEIN: [00:52:35] Did you have visits from a Peace Corps staff?

MASON: [00:52:38] Yeah, yeah.

KLEIN: [00:52:39] What was the visit like?

MASON: [00:52:43] Well, they just saw what I was doing. And the interesting political problem we encountered is that by producing all of these vegetables, and you can produce a lot of vegetables on an acre and a half. We took it to the market to sell. Well, I don't know that I was squeezing the livelihood of this other guy who would drive to Maceió and bring it back and sell it at a high price or something. Ours was at a cheap price. Well, all of a sudden we had a problem, and so we had a voodoo hex put on our garden.

KLEIN: [00:53:22] When was this? Still during the first year?

MASON: [00:53:32] Yeah. One day we found a skull on the fence post, you know, and something dripping off of it, I don't know. And my helper said, hey, we've got to counteract this by doing this counter stuff. So he sprinkled some stuff and then we took it to the market. He sprinkled it around the stand and hopefully. So it was it was an interesting little twist that I hadn't anticipated.

KLEIN: [00:53:59] Yeah, yeah. So you were actually, you and your assistant, or the guy you working with, you were sitting at a stall in the market and selling?

MASON: [00:54:09] That's right. Yeah. And it was intended to be a showplace that would be something that people could see what can be done. And then I would go meet with people and distribute seeds for free. And ask them to come out if they wanted. And I would show them how to plant a garden, how to mix it in there.

KLEIN: [00:54:32] How would you make contact with those people?

MASON: [00:54:35] Up and down the street or whatever.

KLEIN: [00:54:37] So you were you were comfortable enough and you were familiar enough in the town?

MASON: [00:54:42] Well, I would talk to my neighbors and they would show a lot of people.

KLEIN: [00:54:45] Yeah, but there was no farmers co-op or Ministry of Agriculture or Future Farmers of America or?

MASON: [00:54:54] No, none of that that was available. But it was a twofold, multiple, two for one thing. One was to encourage people to have their own gardens and secondly to supplement their food, you know, to improve their diet. So to that end, we were moderately successful, but then we had some frustration because of this political issue that had we hadn't anticipated.

KLEIN: [00:55:36] You know, during the first year, did you and Gwen have a chance to socialize with Brazilians? Yeah, I mean, how does that that work?

MASON: [00:55:51] Fine, probably as a married couple as well, it turned out fine. But we also had one another too. So we weren't as forced to be out and socializing as much. But yeah, that ended up being that ended up fine.

KLEIN: [00:56:15] Sometimes people in a living in another culture find kind of like a mentor or an informant who sort of helps them to understand the rituals, customs that they see. Was there anything like that?

MASON: [00:56:31] Well, this this one fellow was hopeful, but he was so overly eager that you had to distance ourselves a little bit otherwise because he had a way of antagonizing some of the other locals too. Even with his good intentions. But sure, we seem to get along pretty well with all of our neighbors.

KLEIN: [00:57:09] Did you was your Portuguese improving?

MASON: [00:57:11] Yes, it was. Uh-huh. Yeah.

KLEIN: [00:57:14] Was there any point that you felt comfortable?

MASON: [00:57:18] Oh yeah. But then but then I'm not too embarrassed to be, to make a fool of myself and communication with gestures. No, no, I felt fine about it, I mean, I knew certainly that I didn't have the command of the language that I would have liked, but I felt comfortable enough.

KLEIN: [00:57:56] But we're coming to the end of the first year. So coming toward the end of the first year. Did you have any vacation breaks in there?

MASON: [00:58:13] Sure, we would. We would leave on an extended weekend breaks periodically and go to, if not the capital, is not Maceió, the we would go to what they call the capital of the northeast, which was Recife, which was further north from us. Four-hour bus ride. Much bigger city.

KLEIN: [00:58:44] You were being paid by Peace Corps, plus a leave allowance I think?

MASON: [00:58:49] We had some time and I don't recall if it was a leave allowance or not. I mean, we certainly had time off to take a vacation once a year. And for those, we would probably go to Rio de Janeiro or Salvador. For extended weekends we'd go to Recife.

KLEIN: [00:59:09] And where did you go for Mardi Gras?

MASON: [00:59:13] Well, one Mardi Gras we spent in Atalaia, and we didn't try to do Rio on Mardi Gras. It was just too much. We probably didn't have that much money saved up for that anyway. But yeah, Mardi Gras in Brazil is big, big deal.

KLEIN: [00:59:37] Through the year, were you kind of writing back to the families?

MASON: [00:59:46] Yes, just that we missed them a lot. A lot was going on in the United States then too.

KLEIN: [00:59:55] Be able to stay in touch with what was going on?

MASON: [00:59:57] Yes, because I'd have, I've read Time magazine from cover to cover. I mean, all of the letters to the editor, everything little ad in there,

just devour the magazine. That became a kind of a real bonding time for me and the Time magazine. And then I read an awful lot out of the foot locker that they would still have the foot lockers. That was great.

KLEIN: All the books you always intended to read, there they were.

MASON: Yeah, I mean, speaking of my language proficiency or lack thereof. Some of the other volunteers, some of the singles, would even read the Brazilian magazines. Now I never, I read a Brazilian magazine just the way I would look at LIFE. Just look at the photos. And I've read a few of the words, but I didn't get into the stories as much.

KLEIN: Did the group get together at any point, usually between first and second year.

MASON: We did. We did. And in fact.

KLEIN: Was it the whole training group from Brattleboro or just your regional?

MASON: No, just our region. And I recall one of the group meetings was held at some regional school building. And they brought in some people with U.S. AID who were going to talk about gardening. And see, all of a sudden, at that time, that's one of the things that precipitated, really jump-started doing stuff that I thought really might make sense. Then they brought someone in to talk about sanitation, water, some other. I must say that they made valiant stabs at attempting to give us ideas. Little seeds of interest that might, you know, might grow into something. And that was helpful.

KLEIN: [01:02:21] But they weren't out there doing it. They were sort of relying on you to be on the front line.

MASON: [01:02:29] That's right. That's right. Here are some ideas, if it fits with your community, take it and run with it. Call us if you need some help.

KLEIN: [01:02:37] All right. You were mentioning AID people. Do you recall sharing your experiences with others in your group and how did it match up?

MASON: [01:02:50] I did. In fact, some of them came by to see what I have done and how I had done it. But I was trying to share all of that information too.

KLEIN: [01:03:01] But your sense of frustration was not unique and I mean, when you talk to the other volunteers in the group.

MASON: [01:03:06] No, that's right.

KLEIN: [01:03:07] Had many of the group going home?

MASON: [01:03:11] No, not many.

KLEIN: [01:03:17] So did you take a major vacation break between the first and second year?

MASON: [01:03:23] Yes, we did. We went to Rio and from Rio we went to Brasilia, Sao Paolo. We made all of the rounds of the large cities there and then back.

KLEIN: [01:03:44] OK, now returning back to the second year, it sometimes happens with people. They now sort of see the light at the end of the tunnel. We're talking about going into the second year, whether you know that your tour was going to be over within a year and sometimes people say, well before I go, I'd like to achieve this much. Don't let me put words in your mouth. Was there any sense of that?

MASON: [01:04:19] No, no. We were just hopeful that we would be able to cope with it with the frustration. As it ended up, we did make a move from the town of Atalaia to a larger town of Panehu, and that was probably for the last nine months or six to nine months of our stay.

KLEIN: [01:04:49] And how did that come about?

MASON: [01:04:50] Well, that was just over some political pressures in the city. There was some, some strife and discontent over the garden issue. And as it ended up, we were not getting quite the support we thought we needed. There were some personality issues involved too as it ended up. It was just kind of resolved that it's probably better if we relocated to this other city.

KLEIN: [01:05:25] Now you, you initiated this in talks with the Peace Corps?

MASON: [01:05:31] Well, with staff. And everybody kind of decided that was probably better.

KLEIN: [01:05:36] Gwen was pretty much content with it as well.

MASON: [01:05:42] Yeah, we were all. We'd all kind of tried to evaluate what we thought.

KLEIN: So was the feeling that staying another six eight months there was not going to really accomplish anything.

MASON: Not any more than what we had done, we didn't think. And in fact, we were encountering resistance from some of the leadership there. So we had apparently, as I say, I was unaware that I maybe had stepped on some toes in doing what we did.

KLEIN: But obviously, I mean, on one level, you successful in having introduced change.

MASON: Well, I felt so.

KLEIN: And the fact that the resistance occurred is the proof, you know.

MASON: Well, maybe, maybe. But regardless of the circumstances were such that it just needed, it deserved a change.

KLEIN: [01:06:33] So what was your new the new assignment?

MASON: [01:06:38] Well, we went to Panehu, which was a much larger city, about 30,000, and that we located in a small, smaller little house on kind of a farm outside of town. A bigger, bigger city, but in a more remote location.

KLEIN: [01:07:09] Other volunteers in the town?

MASON: [01:07:12] One other volunteer. One other volunteer, who lived in the city.

KLEIN: Doing what?

MASON: He was working with teachers, but at a higher level. I mean, this was a, I don't know what, I guess would be the sort of high school type teachers. You know, so I continued my gardening there.

KLEIN: [01:07:39] And what was the base against which you worked in the second location?

MASON: [01:07:44] The base?

KLEIN: [01:07:49] I mean, the school? You didn't just start a garden

MASON: [01:07:51] Oh, no, actually, at that point, I think I just kind of. I remember I had gotten much more frustrated by now, and I did gardening, but I didn't have a project. I tried to just go around and work with the locals in trying to, you know, I didn't try to put on a big garden project.

KLEIN: [01:08:25] Got it.

MASON: [01:08:26] I just tried to work with the local people and try and encourage them to plant gardens and help them with it and then distribute seeds as well.

KLEIN: What was what was the source of the frustration then?

MASON: Oh, I think because I had I thought I had started a pretty good project. Thought it was reasonably well pursued. But then out of it came these political problems. And it wasn't something I could cope with when I didn't

have political power. And I didn't feel like trying to start another type of project. Frankly, I wasn't sure what else start at the time. At that time I was just beginning to get frustrated with the whole program.

KLEIN: But not willing to say, let's go home.

MASON: No, no, I wouldn't have said that. And but as it ends up, I didn't find another substitute project that was a good alternative.

KLEIN: [01:09:48] And Gwen, in the second assignment?

MASON: [01:09:50] Still working with teachers, still found teachers to work with. But this other guy did have high school teachers that he was working with. And she was able to work with some of the other teachers.

KLEIN: On a side topic, do you recall any point in the two years encountering much anti-American feelings against you personally?

MASON: [01:10:15] Well, somewhat. I mean, we were from Texas. We had lived in Houston. My wife's from Dallas, but it was still fresh on everybody's mind. The assassination of Kennedy. Kennedy was a beloved figure because he was Catholic, but also because of his real pro-Latin relationships. And so there was there was some. Not really resentment, but they were leery of us, whether we were CIA operatives or what, but being from Texas, that added an element to it to them. They didn't, there wasn't out antagonism, but they questioned that. As far as anti-Americanism, just because we were Americans, yes, there was there was some skepticism as to whether we really were legitimate Peace Corps volunteers or something in the guise.

KLEIN: [01:11:32] And that would reinforce the, you know, people opposing the farm project that you had worked on

MASON: Could have.

KLEIN: But you don't know for sure.

MASON: [01:11:43] No, I don't. Some of that just could have been somewhat some jealousy also.

KLEIN: [01:11:55] So as you come into the end of the second year and your tour's over. What's your sense of, was it worth the two of you being there and, you know, could you match up some feeling of accomplishment?

MASON: [01:12:12] Yeah, we could. I was, I had mixed feelings, anger and frustration. By then, I had gotten angry about the war, even more so. Angry about, but I don't actually bother chronologically put it together as to whether Martin Luther King had been assassinated. There was a series of excruciating events. Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, of course John Kennedy. I mean, the deaths in Vietnam, at that point were just increasingly horrible.

KLEIN: [01:13:05] So leaving then what was your plan?

MASON: [01:13:08] Leaving Brazil? Well, we missed the States and were eager to get back.

KLEIN: [01:13:22] But you didn't backpack it up the peninsula.

MASON: [01:13:30] In fact, we when we left, we flew down to Uruguay, Montevideo, then on to Buenos Aires and then flew on back. Almost, we debated about stopping in Mexico City but we didn't. Yeah, but we were kind of eager to get that.

KLEIN: [01:13:53] You recall your reaction coming back together. You came back to Houston or Dallas?

MASON: [01:13:56] Yeah, yeah. We came back to Dallas. We decided to try Dallas. I was going to shift gears. I had gotten my business administration degree. I really wanted to get into something more liberal arts. I took some philosophy courses and took a political science course and I envisioned maybe getting involved with science.

KLEIN: [01:14:27] This is when you after you came back.

MASON: [01:14:31] Yeah. You know, I just knew I wanted to do something different, I thought. Well, we found out that Gwen was pregnant with our twins. I immediately altered that course, I mean, I finished those courses as well, yeah, but they weren't going to lead to any gainful employment, so I took a job. But anyway, coming back here, we both felt really disjointed, disconnected with our peers, the ones that we left behind. We came back radically different people. We've never been radicals, but it had a significant altering effect on our outlook and who we what I think the kind of people we are and we found it difficult to adjust and slow for us to adjust. This was fortunate to had one. We slowly got back involved in some of the activities we've been involved in before, but uh, with a totally different outlook. We're grateful for that. But it certainly keeps you, well the lifeline. The people that we do have as friends. We just think it.

KLEIN: [01:16:26] But I'm not sure this is something you want to get into, but have you stayed in touch with others in the group?

MASON: [01:16:33] Yeah, we've served with what is through reunions.

KLEIN: [01:16:38] Have you traveled back to Brazil?

MASON: [01:16:41] We have not.

KLEIN: I wouldn't see any high motivation to do so.

MASON: We did not, we have not.

KLEIN: [01:16:52] One of the third purposes of the Peace Corps is that in coming back, you inform others about the Third World by your experience. Have you been able to do much of that? It can be very tough at times.

MASON: [01:17:04] Yeah, no, I think that is expressed through our thoughts and our conversations with people. Just because I think that now colors our whole outlook on things. And I think it's I think it's communicated in very subtle but strong ways just in our thought process.

KLEIN: [01:17:32] OK. Your whole life.

MASON: [01:17:33] But I don't go around doing speeches or talking to the Kiwanis or anything about it. I thought about it, but I haven't.

KLEIN: [01:17:44] Anything else about the experience you'd like to mention?

MASON: [01:17:48] Well, I'm grateful for it. Despite the intense criticism I had. But no, I'm very grateful for the experience. We didn't have. We've even had thoughts of wondering whether we should reconsider, fleeting, but we've had those thoughts. We can discuss it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]