

Jennifer W. Fowler Oral History Interview
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection
Administrative Information

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Biographical Note

Jennifer Walter Fowler served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Costa Rica from 1968 to 1971 on a public health project (Costa Rica IX).

Access

Open.

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Oral History Interview

with

Jennifer W. Fowler

June 5, 2008
Denver, Colorado

By Joanne Roll

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

ROLL: [00:00:03] This is June 5th, 2008, and this is Joanne Roll, and I'm going to interview Jennifer Fowler from Costa Rica IX and this test to see how the tape will work.

FOWLER: [00:00:19] My name is Jennifer Fowler. I was a Peace Corps volunteer from 1968 to 1971. And the name of the program was Costa Rica IX.

ROLL: [00:00:35] Jennifer, could you explain a little bit about how we came to do this interview and why you're here in Denver?

FOWLER: [00:00:42] Yes. For the past 10 years, I've been trying to organize a reunion of Costa Rica IX, and I started looking for people in October of 1998. Bit by bit, I was able to find all of the people from my program, except for one. And it was more difficult at the end to find the last stragglers. But finally, I did do that and we had a mini reunion in New York City in 1999 at a place called Victor's Cafe with 10 of us. Now we started

again for this 40th reunion and we have 20 volunteers coming to the reunion. Of those, three are from Costa Rica VIII, volunteers that we worked with in Costa Rica. And the rest are from Costa Rica IX.

ROLL: [00:01:45] So tell us a little bit about where you are in your life now and then go all the way back to right before you joined the Peace Corps. What may have prompted you to join, how you found out about it, and how your family you felt when you first approached them?

FOWLER: [00:02:04] Right now, I'm a single mom. I have two adult sons, the second of whom graduated from college this year, and I practice elder law in New York City. And going back to 1967, when I applied to the Peace Corps, I was a Berkeley graduate and I was working nights in the Berkeley Cinema Guild and I was a nanny during the day.

ROLL: [00:02:40] What had you graduated in, what was your?

FOWLER: [00:02:42] French. I was a French major, and I had spent a year in France. And my employer had terminal breast cancer, and I was being advised by both her friends and my family that I should not continue with the job. And so I was trying to think of what I would do next when my stepmother suggested the Peace Corps. She was involved with the Kennedys through the Special Olympics. And she thought very highly of Sargent Shriver and all of the Kennedys. So I investigated and I thought that I would really like to go to French Northwest Africa to teach French and learn an African language because as a child, I had wanted to be a U.N. translator. So I did apply to the Peace Corps and I asked for Northwest Africa. And I was accepted to go to Tanzania. Um, about two weeks later and I told my parents and they seemed OK with it. And two weeks later, I got a call from Peace Corps Central saying there's been a terrible mistake. You can't be assigned to Tanzania, but we're offering you a place in Costa Rica.

ROLL: [00:04:24] Did they give you a reason why you couldn't go to Tanzania?

FOWLER: [00:04:27] No, and I didn't ask. What I did do is go home very disappointed to my parents and say, what do you think I should do? Peace Corps says I can't go to Tanzania. And my parents said, oh, it's really hard to get into

the Peace Corps. You better just, if you want to go in the Peace Corps, you just better accept that. When I got back from Costa Rica in 1971, I was married to another volunteer. And my father told me that he had been friends with Frank Mankiewicz, who was originally the director of Peace Corps, director of Latin America, and he had called him when he found out I was going to Africa because he was worried about my health and he had had me switched from Africa to Costa Rica.

ROLL: [00:05:22] How did you feel about that?

FOWLER: [00:05:26] You know, terrible. And I never really confronted my father about it. And I got used to it over the years because I got so much out of what I was doing, but it really did change my path in life.

ROLL: [00:05:44] Wow.

FOWLER: [00:05:45] From a French sort of African type life to a Latin American type life. And recently, when I was planning the reunion, I did get in touch with Frank Mankiewicz because I wanted to know if the story was really true. And he did call me and I did speak with him, and he said, yes, he knew father and he was very fond of him. And I said, and I was supposed to go to Africa and he interrupted me and he said, yes, and you didn't want to go.

ROLL: [00:06:26] How awful.

FOWLER: [00:06:28] However, you know how life is what you make of it, and it turned out great so.

ROLL: [00:06:36] So you got an invitation to train. Where did you train and what was your group like and what were you being trained to do?

FOWLER: [00:06:46] Well, the group was supposed to be a bunch of campus leaders, and everybody else probably was. But I had not been a campus leader. I mean, I was at a huge university and there was a lot going on there. So we were the first group that they were doing leadership training with, and not Outward Bound. And they had, uh, we were being trained to

do public health, corn and beans, agricultural development, and microeconomics.

ROLL: [00:07:23] And where were you training?

FOWLER: [00:07:25] In Arecibo, Puerto Rico, at Camp Radley. There were two Peace Corps training camps in Puerto Rico. One was Crozier and the other one was Radley.

ROLL: [00:07:36] Did you do any stateside training at all, on college campuses at all, or you just went straight to?

FOWLER: [00:07:41] Straight to Arecibo. Well, we considered that the States but.

ROLL: [00:07:45] Exactly, yeah. Well, not college campuses.

FOWLER: [00:07:46] Yeah. No, no. We went, and I don't remember where I went from, whether I went from my father's house in San Francisco or my mother's house in Connecticut. But I do know that I met my first husband on the airplane going to Costa Rica. Extremely romantic. It was extremely romantic.

ROLL: [00:08:08] To Costa Rica?

FOWLER: [00:08:09] Going to Arecibo.

ROLL: [00:08:11] And so you didn't assemble as a group before you went to Puerto Rico?

FOWLER: [00:08:15] No, no. We all met for first staging at the Hotel Normandy in San Juan, and we were there for several days and then we went to Arecibo.

ROLL: [00:08:29] What was the training like and how many were in your group and who trained you?

FOWLER: [00:08:34] Yeah, OK. There were 36 in our group, eight women. There were three married couples, so that there were five single women and the rest were men. And we also trained with a fisheries group that was doing fish development in Costa Rica, tilapia and stuff like that. And what was the training like? We had about 10 hours of Spanish a day and we were taught. The women were taught public health, which included birth control, sanitation and nutrition. Heavy weight on nutrition.

ROLL: [00:09:19] The birth control. Was that taught? Were you going to be promoting it?

FOWLER: [00:09:24] We were going to be promoting it, which turned out to be. At the time, Costa Rica was the fastest growing population in Latin America. And, you know, at the time, the concept of birth control wasn't politicized. It was zero population growth. You may remember that.

ROLL: [00:09:44] Right.

FOWLER: [00:09:45] So of course, none of us ended up teaching birth control or doing anything with birth control because we were these young women and they were these experienced *companerios*.

ROLL: [00:09:56] Who trained you? What was the training staff like?

FOWLER: [00:10:01] You know, there was this guy named Mike Turner, who was doing an experimental project from, I believe, the University of Utah. And it was, um, he was doing T groups, sensitivity groups, but they called them D groups, which were development groups. And we had to sit around and confront each other for the time that we weren't speaking Spanish and we all felt it was ridiculous. I mean, here we were this privileged group of college graduates, and we really did react against a lot of it. Ultimately, it was supposed to result in the deselection of certain volunteers, and as we had spoken about, we all got together and decided that we weren't going to deselect anybody. So we all gave everybody positive reviews and they did ultimately deselect four people.

ROLL: [00:11:01] How was that selection knowing that that selection process was ongoing and how did you feel about that?

FOWLER: [00:11:11] Not good, not good. Because we bonded, I think, and we weren't going to see to it that one of us, especially a lot of the men, were there in the group to avoid going to Vietnam. And so it could have been very crucial for a lot of them to be deselected.

ROLL: [00:11:39] And I should probably just explain what deselection is. I know what it is, but.

FOWLER: [00:11:44] Oh, OK.

ROLL: [00:11:45] Cringing the way we are.

FOWLER: [00:11:50] If you were selected, you would go to your country and serve in the United States Peace Corps, serve your country in the United States Peace Corps. And if you were not selected, you would go back to the United States or you might be selected to go into a different program that they thought was more, um, more helpful or where you could be of more help.

ROLL: [00:12:13] So there was an ongoing evaluation all during training.

FOWLER: [00:12:16] Constant evaluation.

ROLL: [00:12:19] And of the four who were selected out, how did that feel when it happened? Did you all?

FOWLER: [00:12:26] It was very upsetting for all of us. Although I did try to find those people and I was unable to find any of them, which I think is very interesting because I found everybody else, even those people who didn't stay in country.

ROLL: [00:12:42] So now what month did you start training?

FOWLER: [00:12:46] We started, we left on August 28th, 1968, and we were in camp until November 23rd, somewhere around Thanksgiving. And then we left for San Jose around November 23rd.

ROLL: [00:13:12] OK, so how was it arriving in Costa Rica? I would imagine that your training in Puerto Rico had kind of prepared you for culture.

FOWLER: [00:13:22] Well, since we were going to be working in teams, it was slightly less scary than it might have been. So we were going to be working in triangles where there would be a public health worker, a corn and beans developer or an agricultural developer, and then the microeconomics, the co-op person. So we were going to be close to one another. And then they decided to place the man who actually became my first husband. They decided to place him near me because they felt that he would be better off if he were if he were in my site.

ROLL: [00:14:02] Were you engaged at that time?

FOWLER: [00:14:04] No.

ROLL: [00:14:05] Was Peace Corps aware of your?

FOWLER: [00:14:07] I think they were very aware of our relationship.

ROLL: [00:14:10] Oh, OK.

FOWLER: [00:14:11] Yeah, definitely. Because we were together all the time in camp.

ROLL: [00:14:16] When you were in Costa Rica, before you went to your site, did you have any training or did you just?

FOWLER: [00:14:21] We had training in country as well. We met with the Ministry of Health and they told us that one of their goals was for us to build what they call them *unidad sanitaria* in our sites. So we were to raise money to help the community build a *hospitalito*, a little hospital, in our site. And ours broke ground before we left, and it was, by the next year it was there

in our community. But before that, they were just sending little railroad cars every other month to our site. And so people would line up outside the railroad cars and they would get their inoculations or they would get looked at.

ROLL: [00:15:04] Let me just take you back a little bit to when you first got to your site. Now did the three team members live in the same town or were you close to each other?

FOWLER: [00:15:14] Well, Michael and I did live in the same town.

ROLL: [00:15:18] OK. What was the name of your site?

FOWLER: [00:15:20] It was called Guacimo de Pococí, and it was really a Caribbean site. I would say English was spoken there as much as Spanish.

ROLL: [00:15:30] What was the town like? How big was it? Now you weren't the first group to go.

FOWLER: [00:15:37] No, no. There had been another female volunteer in in my site and they weren't crazy about her actually.

ROLL: [00:15:45] Do they think?

FOWLER: [00:15:46] No. Maybe she didn't do very much. I don't know.

ROLL: [00:15:50] OK, so tell us about the site.

FOWLER: [00:15:53] There were about, I would say, fifteen thousand people in the environment, and we had to do a site survey, so I really had a very, very broad area that I had to hike in. Actually, the public health workers, I guess were doing the site survey, because I don't remember that Michael ever did one, but I went out, walked for miles knocking on doors. Trying to understand what people were saying.

ROLL: [00:16:25] What kinds of questions were you surveying?

FOWLER: [00:16:27] Well, you know, how many people are in your family? Do you want to have more children? What do you eat? How do you cook? What, you know, how do you wash?

ROLL: [00:16:41] How did the people? Were you accepted? Did you have, before you started the survey was there any announcement that you would be doing this? You just did it cold?

FOWLER: [00:16:52] Well, there were people in the town by the railroad tracks who were quite sophisticated. So they knew us and they knew why we were there. But in the broader site, we didn't know what had been told to people.

ROLL: [00:17:09] Was there any public health presence in the town at all or was it just this train that came in?

FOWLER: [00:17:16] That was it.

ROLL: [00:17:17] So did you work with the mayor or a priest?

FOWLER: [00:17:21] Priest, two priests. Well, there wasn't an Episcopal priest in the site at the time, but there was a deacon and then the Catholic priest and there was a woman called Latina. And I don't remember her name, but she was, you know, part Chinese. And she was a very important woman and she cured a lot of people, not, she wasn't a doctor and she helped us. And then there was a school teacher that was very, very prominent in the town who also helped get me started.

ROLL: [00:17:54] And when you were doing the survey of the town, asking people these questions, for what reason? What was the purpose of gathering the information? What did you explain to people that you were doing?

FOWLER: [00:18:07] That we were there to try to help better their health, and we were working for the Costa Rican Ministry of Health. And of course, they didn't believe it. They thought we were CIA. You know, that's the rumor that they heard, that we were trying to root out socialism or whatever. But,

you know, people were very nice to me even so. I mean, I became a mascot in the town because I was a young woman, and here I was trying to teach all these experienced ladies stuff that they felt they already knew.

ROLL: [00:18:45] Did you get a sense that people were satisfied with the level of care or the level of care that was available to them? Were they satisfied with their lives or was there concern over? And if there was concern, what kinds of things were they concerned about?

FOWLER: [00:19:02] They were more concerned about the terminal type illnesses. There were a lot of people with who seemed to have cancer or TB or debilitating diseases. But they didn't seem very concerned about childcare or having babies, you know, a lot of the women just popped them out. They told stories about being in the fields and all of a sudden getting labor pains and delivering their own babies. So they weren't really concerned about day to day health issues. But they were very concerned about sickness and having to go all the way to San Jose when they were ill and not having enough money to do that. That kind of thing.

ROLL: [00:19:45] So and your purpose was to develop for you all, you were just doing that survey. And when you completed the survey, what did you do with the results?

FOWLER: [00:19:57] We gave it to Peace Corps and we thought maybe. There was a huge CIA presence in Peace Corps. We didn't know what they did with it.

ROLL: [00:20:09] In the Peace Corps?

FOWLER: [00:20:09] Yeah, in the Peace Corps. We didn't know what it was for because.

ROLL: [00:20:12] How did you know there was a CIA presence in Peace Corps?

FOWLER: [00:20:15] Because we would go to the bars in San Jose and these guys would start talking to us and asking us about our political leanings and so on. And then they would tell us that they were CIA.

ROLL: [00:20:26] Oh, really? And you believed them?

FOWLER: [00:20:30] Yes, actually.

ROLL: [00:20:34] And you believed them because?

FOWLER: [00:20:34] Because Costa Rica was a democracy and.

ROLL: [00:20:37] But you said there was a big CIA presence in Peace Corps. Did you mean the CIA in Costa Rica?

FOWLER: [00:20:42] In Costa Rica. Oh, oh, not in Peace Corps.

ROLL: [00:20:44] OK.

FOWLER: [00:20:45] Nothing in Peace Corps. Nothing in Peace Corps. We were always being questioned about our political views and.

ROLL: [00:20:53] And these were Americans, these were gringos?

FOWLER: [00:20:55] Yeah, they were gringos who were somewhat older than we were there, maybe in their thirties or forties. So we didn't. We really didn't know. The site surveys disappeared, and after the site survey was done, we had to ask Peace Corps to determine whether or not we were going to do the job that we had been sent there to do or something else. And I requested at that point not to do family planning because I had had some ridiculous experiences with that, but to go ahead and teach in the public school. Teach health and nutrition in the public school and to help the town raise money to build the hospital. And that's what I did.

ROLL: [00:21:37] Now when you said you asked Peace Corps, did you have a program director in-country?

FOWLER: [00:21:41] Yes. We did.

ROLL: [00:21:44] What was that program? Was that just for your program or?

FOWLER: [00:21:49] No, it was for all volunteers in Costa Rica. His name was Toby Orr and he was.

ROLL: [00:21:55] But there was not like, you didn't have a nurse or any technical.

FOWLER: [00:22:00] We had a doctor, Sidney Nierenberg, but he left after a year and then we had our own Costa Rican doctor.

ROLL: [00:22:12] But in terms of support to the project? No technical support?

FOWLER: [00:22:16] No, no, no. If we had wanted to, we could go to the Costa Rican Ministry of Health and ask for things directly. And we did. And one of the things that they asked me to do was to develop a program with something called. [tape break]

ROLL: [00:22:38] So you were, you decided you would rather not do health education, that you would rather teach in the public school. How did that come about and who asked you to do it and what did you decide to teach?

FOWLER: [00:22:53] Well, I was living in the home of an Afro-Caribbean woman who taught music in the public school, and she suggested that one of the things that I could do would be to teach general science and public health in the school. And I thought that that was a very good idea because I could get right to the kids and I had always wanted to teach anyway. And I had already bonded with the children of the community. So I decided that I would teach sanitation, how germs are spread. I taught vitamins. I taught balanced diet. I had the kids make pictures of foods. I brought in different foods for the kids to try because those children really didn't like to eat anything but rice and beans. And I then, as time went on, I ran out of nutritional curriculum. I ran out of Peace Corps curriculum.

FOWLER: [00:24:00] So I started to teach weather because they really didn't have that kind of science in the school. So I explain to them how clouds were made and why the rain came and what air was made up of, and all kinds of concepts like that. And I made a lot of pictures, I drew. I had crayons and I had all kinds of supplies from the Peace Corps. So I drew a lot of

pictures and I was able to keep their attention. I remember drawing a picture of a fly going from the latrine to the table and trying to explain what happened when that happened. And then I had a washing hands poster, all kinds of posters, and the kids just seemed to love it. But a lot of people told me that maybe it was just that I couldn't speak Spanish very well, and they were just liked to listen to the way I spoke. But after a while.

ROLL: [00:25:02] Let me ask now. How many children were in the school and which group were you teaching? Were you teaching everybody? How many hours a day were you teaching?

FOWLER: [00:25:10] I was teaching two days a week. And I was teaching first through fifth, and I would go from first grade to fifth grade that day, I would just go from one class to another.

ROLL: [00:25:21] How many children in a class?

FOWLER: [00:25:24] About, I would say, between 15 and 25.

ROLL: [00:25:29] Oh, OK.

FOWLER: [00:25:29] It was a rural school, but it was a good building. Good, solid building. It was a fairly sophisticated town that I was in, much different from many of the places where my colleagues were.

ROLL: [00:25:44] OK. And you had electricity and water?

FOWLER: [00:25:47] To a certain extent. We had running water, electricity every once in a while, outhouses. After Michael and I got married, we asked the Episcopal Church if we could live in their parish house, which was empty. And we moved to that stone building and we were on the upper floor of the building and we have programs on the bottom floor for the community. And we had actually had a toilet, which was probably one of the only toilets in Guacimo. So that was really nice.

ROLL: [00:26:22] Well, to go back to the school. How long did you teach? Did you teach the whole time you were there?

FOWLER: [00:26:30] You know, I don't remember doing that, but I have a letter of recommendation for when I applied to graduate school from the school saying that I did teach the full time. The actual fact was that I got pneumonia twice while I was in the Peace Corps and I also was bitten by a dog. And so I spent a good, I would say, two months in La Clinica Biblica in San Jose. So out of my total service of two years and three months, I probably was in the hospital two months.

ROLL: [00:27:10] Did you ever think about coming home when you were sick?

FOWLER: [00:27:13] No, never, never. I loved it, and I really wanted to stay in Costa Rica, and I didn't want to come back. I wanted to what do they call it, rehab? What was it called? There was a word, a government word for re-

ROLL: [00:27:34] I don't know.

FOWLER: [00:27:36] But then my mom died in November, in October of '71. And so we had to go home to the funeral and we did decide to return to Costa Rica to finish our service. And that was why we had the extra months because we were supposed to terminate in November of '70. And because we had been in the States, we decided to go through January of '71.

ROLL: [00:28:04] So you extended.

FOWLER: [00:28:06] We extend it, yeah. And I wanted to extend for another year. But the reality of having my mom pass away made us think that maybe we should go back.

ROLL: [00:28:19] Now, in addition to teaching in the school, you had your other, the two other volunteers in this team. One was doing micro co-ops and the other was doing corn and beans. Did you? And the corn and bean guy was your?

FOWLER: [00:28:34] My husband? Yeah, I married. I got married in April of 1969 and he was my husband. And what he ended up doing, he had a garden, a school garden. Most of the volunteers in our program had school gardens,

and we have pictures of the kids pulling, you know, lettuce and radish out of the ground. I don't know if they ever ate it. And he did do some agricultural consultation in the region. But the guy who was supposed to do macroeconomics, he went back home after two days.

ROLL: [00:29:10] Ah.

FOWLER: [00:29:12] He was a guy from Brooklyn, and he just couldn't deal with it.

ROLL: [00:29:16] So was he ever replaced or did you just, that was that?

FOWLER: [00:29:21] Well, not really. But there was a guy from Costa Rica XIII who was down the line in a town called Guapiles, which was a very, very good town, and he was doing banking and commerce. So we worked with him. But it wasn't exactly the same as the kind of co-op cooperative development. It was a shame because I think that Michael would have done a lot better had he had that team because a lot of the microeconomics was connected to the agricultural programs like, you know, creating the corn or the tomato crop or whatever, and then selling it and making money. So but we didn't have that. So it was just the two of us together.

ROLL: [00:30:03] Now you said that they also, that they wanted you to work on developing a community effort to build a hospital.

FOWLER: [00:30:11] Right. And I did.

ROLL: [00:30:13] OK.

FOWLER: [00:30:13] And that was my major job.

ROLL: [00:30:15] OK, tell a little bit about this. I'm intrigued with the idea of the train coming in twice every other month, and that would be preventive health and public health. And that was the only health presence in the town.

FOWLER: [00:30:29] Right.

ROLL: [00:30:30] And so start, describe how that was and then how you got people to go from that to the hospital, to building the hospital?

FOWLER: [00:30:39] Well, I think it seems to me, and I don't remember so clearly, but it seems to me that the Ministry of Health had already been to the town and had gotten them conscious that they needed a place to have their health needs served. And so by the time we got there, they knew that they needed to raise money in conjunction with the Ministry of Health. That it was like a partnership program with the Ministry of Health. [tape break]

ROLL: [00:31:16] So the people were already interested in having a better health facility in their town instead of this every other month train that would come by.

FOWLER: [00:31:30] That's right. It was a real little railroad car with two doctors on it.

ROLL: [00:31:34] Did they do just preventative work or did they also treat people?

FOWLER: [00:31:37] They treated people as well.

ROLL: [00:31:39] OK, did they treat everybody who was?

FOWLER: [00:31:42] Who came, yeah.

ROLL: [00:31:42] They did.

FOWLER: [00:31:43] Mm hmm. I have pictures of women standing outside this little tiny. I have pictures of women standing outside of this little tiny car waiting to be served.

ROLL: [00:31:54] Did anyone, when you first came, expect you to be a nurse or expect you to treat or to get the medicines?

FOWLER: [00:32:01] No.

ROLL: [00:32:01] There was not that confusion.

FOWLER: [00:32:02] No. Probably because there had been another female volunteer there before me.

ROLL: [00:32:08] Ok. And if and when people got sick and the train was not due, they went into San Jose?

FOWLER: [00:32:17] Yes, an expensive family crippling trip because maybe it costs ten dollars. It was a lot of money for them.

ROLL: [00:32:28] And how far away was San Jose?

FOWLER: [00:32:29] As well as the, it was like 50 miles as the crow flies. But it was, you had to go around the mountains so it was like a six or seven hour trip. It was a long, long trip.

ROLL: [00:32:43] And did they go by bus or were there private cars?

FOWLER: [00:32:45] No, there was no road, so they had to go by train to get to San Jose.

ROLL: [00:32:51] Oh, a train, OK. So that's why it was so expensive.

FOWLER: [00:32:53] Right, right.

ROLL: [00:32:54] OK. And did the train come every day?

FOWLER: [00:32:56] The train came every day, twice a day, and the whole community was centered on the arrival of the train. And everybody sat out on their porches. Because all of the houses that weren't in the campo were lined up on the railroad tracks, so they sat on their porch and they watch the train go by. And then they would gossip about who was getting on the train and who was getting off the train. It was fascinating.

ROLL: [00:33:22] So moving ahead to how you began to mobilize the community for getting ready to build a hospital, which sounds to me like a big undertaking.

FOWLER: [00:33:32] It was a big undertaking and we were trained to do this. We were told in training that we would go into the community and find the community leaders and establish what the felt needs of the community were. You probably had this as well. And so I found this woman, her name was Dona Tencia Howlett Wilson, and she was an important member of the community, somewhat controversial. And she identified for me the important men and women who could help with this project. And then I went individually to each one of them and asked them if they would be involved in a committee. And they all said yes, and maybe two or three of them showed up.

FOWLER: [00:34:20] And so then we began the project of deciding how to raise money. And I was a fundraiser and I've always now been a fundraiser. I've raised funds for so many organizations in the United States, but that was what I was doing. I was organizing people to have parties, to sell tamales, to have fiestas, to have. Oh, we raised money because I started a Girl Scout troop and then I took them to San Jose and Peace Corps paid for it and we marched in a parade and when we got back, we got contributions. So I was always raising money and it was a daily thing of raising money.

ROLL: [00:35:07] And when you were raising money, you were raising money within that community or did you go outside and look for benefactors?

FOWLER: [00:35:16] No, no. Because as I remember, the Costa Rican Ministry of Health was matching the funds that would be raised by the community.

ROLL: [00:35:24] Oh, OK. And how much, say, in a month, would you in the community raise?

FOWLER: [00:35:33] Some months a few *colones*. You know, a *colón* was worth a fifth of a dollar and some months, if we had a big fiesta, we would raise a hundred dollars, five hundred dollars. I always turned the money over to either the one or the other church or somehow the money seemed to get to the right place.

ROLL: [00:35:58] There was never any question about what was happening.

FOWLER: [00:36:01] Not that I knew of. I mean, not that people told me. Yeah, and they were always very grateful for my participation and the fact that I was helping out. And the town was sort of divided, because the Spaniards, the Hispanics, and the. What did they call them? The *morenos*, the colored people. They didn't always see eye to eye, even though they intermarried. So there was some suspicion on both sides as to who is using the money and so on and so forth. But eventually, all the sectors of the society did pitch in for this thing, and it did get built.

ROLL: [00:36:43] Where did the money come for the initial materials, like did people just donate it?

FOWLER: [00:36:49] People donated it. They made food, or they. For example, when we started living in the in the Episcopal parish house, which had been empty for years, these little girls came and helped us clean the house, remove the cobwebs and the moldy smell. And then we would have parties there and people would make cakes and they would make breads and they would make rice and beans or rice and peas or whatever their culture allowed them. And mostly we were having fiestas and selling food. I can't remember ever doing anything else but selling food.

ROLL: [00:37:32] OK. And how long did it take to get enough money to be able to see that you were going to reach your goal?

FOWLER: [00:37:41] I think we didn't know until at least November of 1970 that it was going to happen. But they did break ground while we were there. Because I have a photo of it with Michael, you know, and the picks and the axes and stuff like that.

ROLL: [00:38:02] And how did the community feel? Were they really proud? Did they feel that they?

FOWLER: [00:38:05] Yes. And they felt that they did it, which was what we were supposed to be doing. You know, it wasn't like they came to me and said, thank you so much, Jennifer, for helping us. They really did feel proud of

themselves and that was what we were supposed to do. It was helping people help themselves. So in that sense, I felt really, really successful.

ROLL: [00:38:27] And now talk a little bit about when you fell in love during training and you got married shortly after you were in country. How did Peace Corps handle that? Was that fine with them, or did you have to get permission or?

FOWLER: [00:38:42] Peace Corps encouraged it. I mean, Peace Corps encouraged it. They, you know, we met on the airplane. I met this handsome blond Yale on the airplane who was so interested in me. I was coming out of Berkeley, you know, University of California, totally revolutionized. And here's this solid Yale person who actually, you know, never really separated from me in training and Peace Corps was pretty insistent that we be in the same site. Because I asked to be in a different site from him because I was very, I don't know, independent. I wanted to make my own mark. No, they said they were sending us together.

ROLL: [00:39:33] And so when you say they?

FOWLER: [00:39:36] Peace Corps.

ROLL: [00:39:37] Peace Corps director or?

FOWLER: [00:39:39] Well, director, the training people decided that. I don't think the directors in Costa Rica had anything to do with it.

ROLL: [00:39:48] OK, the training people, these were Peace Corps staff?

FOWLER: [00:39:51] Yes.

ROLL: [00:39:51] Or host country nationals?

FOWLER: [00:39:52] They were Peace Corps staff, Americans.

ROLL: [00:39:56] OK. And they have some of them been in the Peace Corps?

FOWLER: [00:39:58] Yes, many of them were in the Peace Corps. Some of them were in country as well. There was a guy named Ralph Bates who stayed in country. There were quite a few. There weren't any Costa Rican nationals in training that we had, a lot of Latin American Spanish teachers who were really terrific.

ROLL: [00:40:16] OK.

FOWLER: [00:40:18] But it was the selection committee that decided where we were going.

ROLL: [00:40:24] And your final selection was in Costa Rica, not in?

FOWLER: [00:40:27] No, it was in Arecibo. They told us where we were going. They showed us a map of Costa Rica and they told us about our communities. They told us who was going to the boonies and who was going to sort of developed places like we were. They called it like a frontier town where we were going, and there was a lot of prostitution where we were also. So that was another reason to send a public health worker, and there was a lot of alcoholism where we were as well. So, you know, these were things that we might have worked with, which we didn't.

ROLL: [00:41:06] Did you ever, in terms of the prostitution, did you ever look at it? Was there, how?

FOWLER: [00:41:13] There were women who talk to me about, you know, being prostitutes and what it was like, and I, you know, I listened.

ROLL: [00:41:25] OK, do they have any health concerns?

FOWLER: [00:41:28] Yes, serious health concerns.

ROLL: [00:41:30] And did they? What did they do? Were they looking for help from you or are they just wanted something?

FOWLER: [00:41:37] Well, they, I mean, they saw that having medical care come to the community would be a good opportunity for them. But most of them

thought it was silly to talk to a 22 year old American who seemed so much younger than they were about their health needs, their sexual needs or STDs, or whatever it was. So they never really talked to me. And then when I got married and I didn't have a baby right away, they couldn't understand.

ROLL: [00:42:10] When you say they, do you mean?

FOWLER: [00:42:13] The community women.

ROLL: [00:42:14] All the women.

FOWLER: [00:42:14] All the women, yeah. They were always asking me. They were watching me. Did I gain weight? Did I lose weight? You know, always wondering when Jennifer was going to get pregnant.

ROLL: [00:42:29] And what would you tell them?

FOWLER: [00:42:31] No, not yet. And they'd say, you don't eat enough. Because I was sick a lot.

ROLL: [00:42:37] Yeah.

FOWLER: [00:42:37] And I was very thin and they thought I wasn't, and they would bring me aloe and they would bring me food to eat and, you know, milk drinks and stuff like that because they were worried that I wasn't having a baby.

ROLL: [00:42:53] And so it was really a good thing to have a baby, that's what they said.

FOWLER: [00:42:57] Yes. Yes. Yeah.

ROLL: [00:42:58] OK, did anyone ever ask you directly about?

FOWLER: [00:43:02] I'm sure they did, and I think I probably told them that we were waiting, that we were waiting. I don't think I ever said that, you know, I take birth control pills.

ROLL: [00:43:12] OK, so that, this was, you did not. This never became a part of the health education.

FOWLER: [00:43:20] Not really, no. But they were very open in their questions. And but you know, you had to be careful because in Costa Rica, gossip is, can be venal.

ROLL: [00:43:32] OK.

FOWLER: [00:43:33] And so one of the worst thing about Costa Rica, in my estimation, and the thing that got to me most when I was about a year in, was the way people talked about each other in a very cruel way that I wasn't used to. And I got over it. But I know that it still goes on because my son just spent two months down there and he speaks Spanish very well now, and he noticed it also that it's a national pastime and it, um, they say they make up stories about people that are very mean. So to be really open with people could be a little dangerous if you were a public health worker or if you were teaching in the school or something like that.

ROLL: [00:44:24] When the health clinic came into town, the train came into town, did the prostitutes seek?

FOWLER: [00:44:31] Yes, absolutely. Absolutely yes.

ROLL: [00:44:34] So there really wasn't a lot of stigma.

FOWLER: [00:44:37] No. No. Very open. All night long, the saloon would be open. Down the line where all the stores were, there were about four pulperias and a couple of places where you could eat. And there was *una sala* where you could go dancing and all night long, the music would go. And there would be alcoholic fights and people getting wounded with machetes. And the girls would be, the women would be there dancing and whatever afterwards. So it was a real issue that I didn't address. I don't

think I was sophisticated enough at 22 to really know what to do about that to tell you the truth. And we didn't get training in STDs. We got training in birth control.

ROLL: [00:45:27] What kind of training did you get in birth control?

FOWLER: [00:45:29] We were shown the woman's body. We were given charts of the woman's body. We were shown exactly the reproductive cycle. We were shown what how the pills work. We were given all that material. I had one class where I sent out all kinds of messages all over the community to come learn about the reproductive system. And three people came and I set this thing up and I was showing them. I was teaching them and they were just sitting there laughing at me, you know.

ROLL: [00:46:08] These were older women?

FOWLER: [00:46:09] Yeah, then they came just because they were curious. And that was at the very beginning of service.

ROLL: [00:46:15] Were there pharmacies in the town?

FOWLER: [00:46:19] There was a *farmacia* and there was a *botica*.

ROLL: [00:46:23] Would the pill have been available and was it in Gaucimo?

FOWLER: [00:46:27] I think, yes, I think, yes. I don't think that Costa Rica would have allowed us in that country doing what we were doing unless the pill was part of their program. You know that it's a Catholic country, but they don't have the politicization around birth control that we do.

ROLL: [00:46:53] How were your other, the members of your other, the other members of your training group doing? How was that going? Did you get together?

FOWLER: [00:47:02] I never got together with the women. A lot of the men came to visit us and one woman because I became the Peace Corps cook, in order to pass time. You remember we had a Peace Corps book locker and there

was a Fannie Farmer cookbook in it and my husband loved to eat. And so and there were long days and long nights. And so I used my Fannie Farmer cookbook and I learned how to cook many, many other recipes in that book on a little two burner gas stove. And at a certain point, Michael decided he wanted me to bake things and to make casseroles. And so he went up to San Jose and he got a little tin oven that you put on top of the stove. So I would cook every day just like all the women.

ROLL: [00:47:59] Was there a market in town?

FOWLER: [00:48:00] Yeah, there was. Every morning I would go downtown, I would buy my piece of meat, or I would buy my piece of *chancho* and I would go to the bakery and I would buy my bread and I would buy my tomatoes. I was friends with the guy who sold the vegetables. He had a little stand, little board where he'd put out what he had for the day. And you know, I would negotiate with him. I absolutely know what a pound of tomatoes looks like. Every once in a while, there would be a little string of celery. Anything that I could get that was different, I bought. And I learned to cook, and they, the people of the community, taught me all kinds of recipes. I learned how to make Caribbean rice and peas. I learned how to make certain kind of cake that comes from the Caribbean. I learned how to make tamales, Costa Rican tamales. I learned how to make tortillas with my hand. But I also learned how to make all kinds of American food on this really funny stove. So people would come and visit because they heard that Jennifer was making good food and maybe they were tired of rice and beans so they'd come to our house.

ROLL: [00:49:26] How was your Peace Corps living allowance? Did that?

FOWLER: [00:49:29] Definitely. We were saving money. We were saving money.

ROLL: [00:49:34] Did you have to pay it off for any kind of rent when you were living?

FOWLER: [00:49:37] I paid rent to Dona Tencia, but the Episcopal parish house, I believe, was free. I don't remember.

ROLL: [00:49:45] Did you have to pay for electricity at all?

FOWLER: [00:49:48] I don't remember. I mean, we didn't have much electricity. We had mostly kerosene lamps.

ROLL: [00:49:54] OK. And did you get married in your town or did you?

FOWLER: [00:49:58] No, no. We got married in San Jose in the apartment of the Peace Corps director and my really good friend Sally arranged the whole wedding.

ROLL: [00:50:08] And she was a fellow volunteer or?

FOWLER: [00:50:10] She was a fellow volunteer, yeah.

ROLL: [00:50:16] And did the people in your town, they all knew you were getting married?

FOWLER: [00:50:24] Yes, they knew I was getting married, and they were upset that I didn't get married down there in the church. But I had always wanted to get married in a dark green velvet dress made from curtains like in *Gone with the Wind* and my friend Dona Hortensia was somewhat of a seamstress. They all sewed, and the Afro Caribbeans, they did better. They knew more about sewing than the white Costa Ricans. So she took me up to San Jose to this lady's house, and I asked if she could, you know, make this skirt, this green velvet skirt. And she said yes, so I went and I found the material and she made the skirt and I bought a white frilly white blouse, and that's how I got married. With all my Peace Corps friends around me. [tape break]

ROLL: [00:51:32] While you were in Peace Corps, particularly that first year, were there any down times? Did you ever feel that you wanted to go home, that things were not working out?

FOWLER: [00:51:45] The first year, I was totally elated. I just loved it. And one of the things that made me the happiest was that when I would cross the railroad tracks at about two o'clock in the afternoon to go over to the school, I

would have 50 children run at me and everybody wanted to hold my hand. And, you know, I just felt like a star. Dona Jenita, Dona Jenita. So I was very, very happy my first year. Into the second year as the Spanish got better and I realized that this was a place just like the United States or that there were things about the people that I didn't particularly admire. That's when I started to really hate it for a while. I mean, it did pass, but for a while I just hated it. I hated everything about it. And I have a feeling that's part of the adjustment that you make to another culture. That as you learn to understand what's going on more, you begin to be annoyed by things and then you accept it. So by the time I left, I didn't want to leave. But there was that period when I was so disillusioned by how people were behaving that I thought I wanted to leave. But thank God, I didn't.

ROLL: [00:53:23] How did this work with your husband? Did he share some of, did you share that feeling? Did he feel the same way?

FOWLER: [00:53:29] He wasn't, um, he was more removed emotionally from the whole situation. He was more of, um, he was a reserved person and the people didn't take to him as easily as they took to me. And it was good for me because he appeared to them to be an authority figure. And so they wouldn't take advantage of me because he was there and they were very respectful of him, but he didn't. I don't think he was moved one way or the other, by what was going on with them.

ROLL: [00:54:11] Now when did the two of you decide to extend your service?

FOWLER: [00:54:15] When my mom died. It was fascinating what Peace Corps. Peace Corps was wonderful when my mom died. I remember I was coming back from school in the afternoon and Michael was standing right in the middle of the railroad tracks, and I knew something was really wrong. And I said, what's wrong? What's wrong, Michael? And he said, you know, your mother died and we had, as I remember now, we had been up to see her because we knew she was ill. They had let us go back to the States for a couple of days, and I was in total shock. I just didn't expect it. So he said, we're going to Panama and we're going to go, we're going to fly home to the funeral.

FOWLER: [00:55:10] So they put us on an electric railroad car with two men and backpacks. And they took us to San Jose, and from San Jose we were flown on a government plane to Panama, and then we were flown to New York for the funeral. And we stayed in New York maybe two weeks and then we didn't know, would we go back, what we were going to do? We hadn't applied to graduate school yet, and we had this passion to take a motorcycle home. And so we just, I said, I need to go back because Costa Rica is my home now. I need to go back. So we went back and Peace Corps again flew us back. So they were wonderful. The government was wonderful to us. And those were the old days.

ROLL: [00:56:08] And so you extend it for how long, another year?

FOWLER: [00:56:11] No, our service was up on November 22nd and we finished, we terminated in January of '71.

ROLL: [00:56:24] When you went back to your town, how was it after you'd been away?

FOWLER: [00:56:28] They were wonderful. They were wonderful. You know, because my mother died and *la mamá es muy importante*. It was really the right thing to do.

ROLL: [00:56:40] So you and your husband terminated service and at that point, how would you evaluate your Peace Corps service in terms of the three goals? Bringing technical assistance, helping host country know about Americans, and then ultimately bringing home what you learned about Costa Rica.

FOWLER: [00:57:02] With respect to technical assistance, you know, I don't believe that the goal was accomplished because they needed so much more than I was able to give in the short time, especially considering the fact that I had been sick for several times. So I really probably needed to be there another year. But I did get in their brains and I got in the brains of the children, and I think. My aunt went back to Costa Rica. She went to Costa Rica to visit, and she went to Guacimo about 10 years later and they had

a road there, and it was all very modern. So I think it made a difference, but I wouldn't say that I accomplished that goal.

FOWLER: [00:57:51] With respect to understanding what Americans were like. They certainly knew that they had a friend in me. They were more. And also, they learned that all Americans weren't the same because Michael was more remote and they'd never felt that close. Another thing I think I accomplished was getting the Afro Caribbeans and the Hispanics to relate to each other better, and I think I was really successful at that. And so I felt good about that.

ROLL: [00:58:28] How did you do that?

FOWLER: [00:58:29] Just by having them on committees together and having them work together and having them see that all parts of the community were contributing to this project. So I think that was. It isn't like Costa Rica has a real prejudice. You know, I mean, they're much more open about the difference in color and stuff. But there were a lot of suspicions. Oh, they won't help us because of this that happened in the past or that, so that was good.

FOWLER: [00:58:58] With respect to what I got out of the Peace Corps. It totally changed my life. I mean, it is the most important thing that ever happened to me, and it influenced me on so many levels coming back here. It made me more independent, more of a self-starter. It gave me the Spanish language, which allowed me to both teach and be a lawyer to Latino people, to work and have a Latino person taking care of my children for years without requiring that she speak a lot of English. It influenced my children, who are both fluent in Spanish. It influenced my older son, who's been back to Costa Rica twice volunteering in sort of replicas of Peace Corps. It gave me this group of wonderful friends that, it was a group that really fell in love with each other. So it was the key pivotal moment in my life. So it doesn't really matter that my father didn't have me go to Africa.

ROLL: [01:00:22] So is there anything else you'd like to add?

FOWLER: [01:00:28] Um. I think it's a wonderful thing that you're doing this.

ROLL: [01:00:37] I'm not doing it. You're doing it.

FOWLER: [01:00:40] Oh, OK, well, that's said by a true Peace Corps volunteer. Um, the project. I like the project. Um, what else can I say? I think I would be. I hope that you get a chance to talk to a lot of the people who are coming. A lot of them had different experiences. Some of them felt that they got nothing done, that they had a two-year vacation. I don't really believe that to be true because some of them went on to work in fields. One of them worked for the government for many, many years in programs like the ones we were doing in Costa Rica, and every single one of them has had a very satisfactory life.

ROLL: [01:01:30] Have you been back to Costa Rica?

FOWLER: [01:01:32] I have. I went on a dig with Michael in 1976 and then I intended to. I wanted us to go back, but most people don't have that kind of money to be able to just go for a weekend to Costa Rica. So maybe in the future we'll do it. Maybe for the 50th reunion, or maybe for the 45th.

ROLL: [01:02:00] OK, well, I want to thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]