

**Peter Kircher Oral History Interview**  
Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Collection  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Peter Kircher  
**Interviewer:** Tamatha Nibert  
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**Biographical Note**

Peter Kircher served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador from 1973 to 1975 on a bilingual school construction project.

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Oral History Interview

with

Peter Kircher

June 21, 2019

Austin, Texas

By Tamatha Nibert

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

NIBERT: [00:00:01] My name is Tamatha Nibert, and I was a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines from 1992 to 1995, and I am interviewing Peter Kircher, who was a volunteer in Ecuador in 1973 to 1975. And he had a bilingual education project. And today is solstice, June 25th, 2019.

KIRCHER: [00:00:26] Twenty first.

NIBERT: [00:00:28] Oh, June 21st, 2019. So, Peter, why did you join the Peace Corps?

KIRCHER: [00:00:37] I decided I wanted to join the Peace Corps when I was in the sixth grade.

NIBERT: [00:00:44] Nice.

KIRCHER: [00:00:45] It's funny because a lot of people do it on a very impulsive nature, but I just, I'd heard about it and President Kennedy's forming it. And it just made sense to me. And so, well, I'll do that. I'm a fairly structured, rule bound kind of guy. And so they kind of giggled and then, well, I followed that, that decision for, for many, many years.

NIBERT: [00:01:12] I was eight when I decided I wanted to so I understand completely. So where did you grow up?

KIRCHER: [00:01:18] I grew up in different spots, but I guess going, you know, going back to that, the question of why, I mean, that's a 6th grade decision. Why did I continue? Why did I join, actually join the Peace Corps after college, after undergraduate school? I've had international experiences as a child, and I liked that, wanted to continue that.

NIBERT: [00:01:46] Where all did you go as a child?

KIRCHER: [00:01:49] My father was transferred to Japan for three years and so we got to go as a family, to go with him. And so I spent three years in Japan and then when I was in high school, I went to a boarding school because my parents got transferred. My father got transferred to Hong Kong. And at the time, there were no American and English-speaking schools in Hong Kong. This would be in 1966.

NIBERT: [00:02:22] Interesting. Wow.

KIRCHER: [00:02:23] So my father's company said we'll pay the tuition for a boarding school. That's a solution to the problem.

NIBERT: [00:02:29] Nice.

KIRCHER: [00:02:29] So that was nice. That was a very nice experience. So anyway, you know, getting out of undergraduate school.

NIBERT: [00:02:38] Did you study in the States?

KIRCHER: [00:02:40] Yes. Yeah. Union College in upstate New York, Schenectady, New York. And it just that feeling that I wanted to join the Peace Corps never left.

NIBERT: [00:02:50] Nice. Well, you had kind of an interesting international background.

KIRCHER: [00:02:55] The pump was primed through my years in Japan and Hong Kong.

NIBERT: [00:02:59] Exactly. You have to keep the experiences going since your education was more through international travel. That's great. So how was your Peace Corps application?

KIRCHER: [00:03:10] The application process you mean?

NIBERT: [00:03:12] Yeah.

KIRCHER: [00:03:13] It was classically governmental in that, you know, the number of forms to fill out. I don't remember an interview, not to say that there wasn't one, but if I had to bet, I'd say there wasn't one. I filled out forms, mailed them in, and said I wanted to go to any Spanish speaking country. Because I had studied Spanish in high school and college just for fun and because I liked speaking the language.

NIBERT: [00:03:50] So you had a jump start in the language.

KIRCHER: [00:03:51] Yes, that was a biggie.

NIBERT: [00:03:53] That's really nice.

KIRCHER: [00:03:55] And, uh, any Spanish speaking country. And I kind of, you know, this was probably December of 1972, the year I was about, I was going to graduate that spring. And so you fill it out and mail it in and you wait and you wait and you wait and wait and wait. No information and no feedback. And then in August, it's kind of mid-August.

NIBERT: [00:04:26] Oh wow.

KIRCHER: [00:04:26] Of 1973, I get a letter and it says, congratulations, you've been accepted to the Peace Corps. Your country of service will be Ecuador. The plane's leaving on, I think it was September 9th. So, yeah, thanks for letting me plan, you know? So I had like two weeks to figure out packing, pack, get a physical that was mandated.

NIBERT: [00:04:55] Right.

KIRCHER: [00:04:55] I went to a VA hospital in New York City and got a physical and, you know, say goodbyes and think about stuff.

NIBERT: [00:05:06] Two weeks isn't a lot of time.

KIRCHER: [00:05:08] Yes and no. The other part was, you know, sometimes when you don't have too much time to think too much about it, it was just kind of you do this and go.

NIBERT: [00:05:16] Right. Oh, nice. That's an interesting way. So your invitation just came in the mail.

KIRCHER: [00:05:21] It just came in the mail and said show up quickly.

NIBERT: [00:05:23] Gave you two weeks. And so was your training then in country? Did you train in Ecuador?

KIRCHER: [00:05:27] Training was in country. No, I wasn't. I'm sorry. The first part, there was like three days of training in Washington, D.C., and they put us up at a hotel in Dupont Circle. I still remember that. And you had a roommate.

NIBERT: [00:05:47] Did you do like team building activities?

KIRCHER: [00:05:52] Exactly, team building and stuff and a lot of information about the Peace Corps. A lot of shots.

NIBERT: [00:06:00] Yes, a lot of shots. The card is so long.

KIRCHER: [00:06:03] Right. And so we were there for three days and I kind of figured out, and this is just me, but I think they could have done everything that they did that they had to do as far as shots and paperwork and stuff in a day. I think they were sizing us up. There was a psychologist there, and I think we were very closely watched about how do these people get along, how do they get along with people they don't know?

NIBERT: [00:06:34] Apparently there was a deselection at that time, like the psychologist did watch you.

KIRCHER: [00:06:42] Yeah, exactly.

NIBERT: [00:06:43] When I went through the interviewing process in the '90s, they interviewed us for hours and stuff like that instead.

KIRCHER: [00:06:48] You know, there definitely was not a lengthy interview. I would have remembered that.

NIBERT: [00:06:51] Yeah. Interesting, though. So did everybody from your group get to go to country?

KIRCHER: [00:06:56] Yes, it's funny. We didn't really know. I mean, there was just a big bunch of people.

NIBERT: [00:07:02] How many were in your group, do you remember?

KIRCHER: [00:07:04] Not that many. Twenty some odd. Yeah, it was a very small group, even for, might have even been in the teens. And they said our teachers and trainers. So all of this is a really nice group. You know, we're not dealing with 30 or whatever.

NIBERT: [00:07:20] Nice. And then you end up doing the training, more training?

KIRCHER: [00:07:27] The training was in country. All the training really was in country, there was no training in Washington, D.C. And then, you know,

they put us on a plane and we flew down to Ecuador and we stayed in a hotel for several days in Quito. Again, more paperwork and getting to know where our class was. Because we were going to spend two months, I think in Quito, this whole group. Two months in Quito and then after the two months of training, which was mostly language training, we dispersed to our different country sites.

NIBERT: [00:08:06] Now were there other people at the, near you, at your site? Or were you the only one?

KIRCHER: [00:08:11] Yes, there was. It was a little, I wasn't, kind of yes and no. I was. The program, the bilingual education - bilingual being Quechua, the indigenous language of Ecuador, and Spanish - program was very small, four people. The program director and then three volunteers. And we were stationed in Otavalo, Ecuador, and there were a number of other volunteers living in or around Otavalo.

NIBERT: [00:08:45] Oh, nice.

KIRCHER: [00:08:46] And it was nice. And then the other side of it was, you know, I wasn't really in this to hang out with other Americans.

NIBERT: [00:08:55] Of course.

KIRCHER: [00:08:56] And we all seemed to be of the same thought process because we didn't hang out and do things a lot with each other.

NIBERT: [00:09:07] Sure.

KIRCHER: [00:09:08] We did. We ate with each other and we drank beer with each other.

NIBERT: [00:09:12] But not all the time.

KIRCHER: [00:09:13] But not all the time. We pretty much, you know, did our jobs and then on weekends or whatever we would perhaps get together. So that was nice.

NIBERT: [00:09:22] Did you stay with the host family or did you have your own place to live?

KIRCHER: [00:09:25] In Quito, I had a host family for those two months.

NIBERT: [00:09:31] And then at your site, did you have one or did you just live on your own?

KIRCHER: [00:09:34] I went and I lived on my own. I wanted to get, I was very much this whole sixth grade thing. I very much wanted the Peace Corps experience.

NIBERT: [00:09:48] The mud hut.

KIRCHER: [00:09:50] Exactly. No running water. No electricity. I was fine with. I was looking for that.

NIBERT: [00:09:55] And did you get that?

KIRCHER: [00:09:56] I got that, yes and no. In Otavalo, the house that another volunteer rented had electricity and water most of the time, no guarantee, as in developing countries. No guarantee. They would, you know, weekly one or both could be missing for a period of time.

NIBERT: [00:10:18] And in the seventies too, yeah.

KIRCHER: [00:10:20] Yeah, also. But then I, because I still was looking for this consummate Peace Corps experience, I got a mud hut with no electricity and no water in the town of Peguche, which is a short bus ride out of Otavalo, and I lived there.

NIBERT: [00:10:36] And was it a mud hut?

KIRCHER: [00:10:37] There was a mud hut.

NIBERT: [00:10:39] Nice. What kind of roof was it?

KIRCHER: [00:10:42] Tile, you know, clay tile.

NIBERT: [00:10:44] So it was fairly probably cooling.

KIRCHER: [00:10:46] Yes. Oh yeah, yeah, it was dark and there are no windows because they know what they were doing. Of course, but we're at ten or eleven thousand feet. So it was, if you were not in the sun, it was cool. And if you're in indoors, it was cool, particularly if you're indoors in a mud hut that has foot, foot thick walls. It was very well insulated.

NIBERT: [00:11:08] So were you in a forest area?

KIRCHER: [00:11:10] No. In the Andes, up in the Andes, up at about ten or eleven thousand feet. Lots of eucalyptus trees, and that's about it. Mountain. Two mountains, Imbabura on one side and Mount Cotacachi on the other, which were snowcapped. And so we were kind of in a small valley there and that was really nice. And then I spent, part of my job was to build with the community. Our job was to find a community that was monolingual Quechua speaking and those people, the indigenous people of Ecuador, had been very much discriminated against by the Spaniards of Ecuador. And so they kind of got banished to lands up on the mountains. And we would find communities there and they were monolingual Quechua speaking. And so they couldn't really function or do much business in a Spanish speaking Ecuador.

NIBERT: [00:12:15] Interesting.

KIRCHER: [00:12:17] Go find that community, just kind of pretty much stick your finger on a map, you know, in that area and go up there. Some usually walk up the mountain or take the Peace Corps truck as far as you could go and then walk the rest of the way.

NIBERT: [00:12:37] You had a truck you could use?

KIRCHER: [00:12:38] We could, yes and no. We had, uh, it was shared, I think, between three programs. And amazingly they were, the program directors

were pretty good about sharing, so that was good. I could get a pickup truck, it was a Chevy pickup truck, most of the times that I needed one, which wasn't a whole lot, but that was nice. And then so during the way it worked out, we would find a community and then go to the president.

NIBERT: [00:13:13] When you say "we," did you have a?

KIRCHER: [00:13:15] The group.

NIBERT: [00:13:16] So the four of you? So you all worked together?

KIRCHER: [00:13:19] Correct. Correct. The four of us. Myself, a woman who volunteer who has become my wife, a program director, and then another volunteer who had been working in the program for a couple of years already. And that was nice because he knew the lay of the land, both literally and figuratively. So we'd find the leaders of the community and say, look, we could build a school here if you are interested. And not, you know, like the, uh, you need a school. It wasn't our attitude.

NIBERT: [00:13:55] No. Would you like us to help you with a?

KIRCHER: [00:13:58] Would you like a school? And we could put this program in where we teach your kids in Quechua and Spanish. And by sixth grade, ideally, they'd be bilingual. And most of the leaders of the community were already bilingual, but most of the members of the community were monolingual Quechua speakers. And if they said yes, OK, great. So let's go. Then we needed to find some land to build a very small three-room schoolhouse with no electricity or no running water. Lots of windows. And generally, we would find that spot, that piece of land would usually be owned by a church or a *hacendado*.

NIBERT: [00:14:43] What's a *hacendado*?

KIRCHER: [00:14:43] *Hacendado* is a hacienda owner.

NIBERT: [00:14:47] Oh, OK, got it.

KIRCHER: [00:14:50] And so we would go to the.

NIBERT: [00:14:52] So it's private land that you all were building the school on.

KIRCHER: [00:14:53] Yeah, yeah. More times than not. Yes, as a matter of fact, always. It was private land. It was an *hacendado*, a hacienda owner. So would you be willing, you know, this community that's just below your hacienda? Would you be willing to donate what was maybe a half acre of land for the school? And sometimes yes. Sometimes no. Usually yes. And then more times than not, I say that because we managed to build three schools in two years that I was there.

NIBERT: [00:15:31] Wow.

KIRCHER: [00:15:34] There was a path from the base of the mountain and city, small city, small town. There was a path going up to the community and therefore the school site, but not a road. I mean, not passable by a pickup truck for the cement and water and stuff. So we would build a road, which is basically kind of chopping a wider path in the, up the mountain. And that was, you know, laborious work. Picks and shovels, that's all we had.

NIBERT: [00:16:11] Yeah, wow. I'm guessing the community helped you with that.

KIRCHER: [00:16:13] Yeah, that was part of the deal is, so we'll build a school. We'll provide the expertise of building the school. We'll provide the materials. We'll provide, you know, me, Don Pedro. Don Pedro here will live here with you for the time period. And you'll send down as many people as you can every day to help build the school. And that's pretty much the way it worked. And so we chip away and chip away and chip away at the road and then we get the road up to the school site and then we could bring up some cement. You know, no cement mixers. You dumped the cement in the grass and the gravel on the ground, and you work really, really fast with shovels and water. And you had to haul the water out there, of course.

NIBERT: [00:17:06] Wow.

KIRCHER: [00:17:07] And then another, and just kind of classic Peace Corps thing, is I had no construction experience. I was hired as a quote unquote generalist. And so my, the volunteer who had been in the program for a while, he knew how to mix cement and kind of lay bricks.

NIBERT: [00:17:36] Good.

KIRCHER: [00:17:36] And he taught me. And I got a book on mixing cement and laying bricks, although the schools were made out of cinder blocks, not bricks. I was a day or two ahead of the actual construction, you know. They'd finish and I'd go, well, we're going to go around a corner or make a corner, I would at night read about how to make the corner and interface the cinder blocks. And it just, it was nice and it was just so slow, slow going. You do what you can do. There was no pressure if I screwed up. Knock that part of the wall down and do it again. And this community where I lived, I lived in the church, which was a mud hut.

NIBERT: [00:18:26] Nice.

KIRCHER: [00:18:27] They let me do that. And another thousand feet, maybe two thousand at the most, above me was the top of the mountain. So I would wake up every morning to look to my left and I would look up at Mount Cotacachi, which I was on, literally, and not too far away from me it would be snow covered. And it was, uh, and I never, ever, ever, ever got tired of it, you know?

NIBERT: [00:18:56] Sounds pretty magical.

KIRCHER: [00:18:57] Every morning, wow! Wow!

NIBERT: [00:18:59] I'm so lucky.

KIRCHER: [00:19:01] Yeah, exactly.

NIBERT: [00:19:04] That's amazing. So then do you all staff the school afterwards? Did other volunteers come or?

KIRCHER: [00:19:11] Yes. Or that, again, the woman who is now my wife, the volunteer who is now my wife, that was her primary job, was to work with teachers. The government of Ecuador, the federal government as it were of Ecuador, had fairly recently embraced creating and hiring the indigenous people as teachers, and so they would train them. These of course had to be bilingual already.

NIBERT: [00:19:42] Of course.

KIRCHER: [00:19:44] So they were trained as teachers. Most of them were teaching in a Spanish speaking school, so we would find a bilingual teacher who was already employed by the government and say, are you interested? Kind of by definition, they had to be fairly near, living fairly near the school site. Would you be interested in teaching up on the mountain? And more times than not, they'd say yes. And so the schools that I built were one large, using quotation marks in large, one large building, maybe 30 feet long and 15 feet wide and 10 feet tall. And we'd divide it into three rooms, one large room for the classroom. And we put up a wall and a door spot, a door opening, that would open into a room that would be used as the kitchen. Because part of our program, we would try our very best to get food from the CARE program.

NIBERT: [00:20:57] Oh interesting.

KIRCHER: [00:20:57] And periodically we would go into a town, the town of Cotacachi I think usually, and we'd get a number of bags of rice and cereals, stuff that's a little bit more nutritious than rice, but grains of stuff that they would cook up as porridge for the kids to eat at lunchtime. So there would be a kitchen, which was just a room, and it had a spot for a wood stove, just a hole in the concrete there to cook. And then another small room for the teacher, should he or she choose to live there. Most didn't, because they lived at the foot of the mountain. Family, kids, et cetera. And then every morning they would hike probably 40 minutes up the mountain to work, teach, and then hike back down.

NIBERT: [00:21:53] So what was like the living, the quality of life? Because you provided food for the children during school.

KIRCHER: [00:22:00] Quality of life for whom?

NIBERT: [00:22:01] The indigenous folks that you were working with.

KIRCHER: [00:22:06] They were pretty happy. I mean, you know.

NIBERT: [00:22:09] It's always amazing, isn't it?

KIRCHER: [00:22:11] Again, using quotation marks, unlivable for us.

NIBERT: [00:22:15] Right.

KIRCHER: [00:22:16] But they, you know, weren't complaining about their lifestyle, et cetera. They all lived in mud huts, very small mud huts with thatched roofs usually, because they couldn't. They had no money for tiles. And they all had, uh, and interestingly, in that culture, the houses, mostly their huts, were mostly storage facilities. They had guinea pigs, which they raised for meat, and they would store grain and other stuff in their house. Most of their living was outside, just outside their huts.

NIBERT: [00:22:55] So they slept outside?

KIRCHER: [00:22:56] They generally slept outside. You could call it a porch, but it was just the area outside that may or may not have a roof on it.

NIBERT: [00:23:04] So was it moderate temperature? I mean, was it?

KIRCHER: [00:23:07] Oh, it was cold by, you know, our standards. I slept on a cot in a sleeping bag, down sleeping bag, and I was glad I had that sleeping bag. I may have even had a little wool blanket on top of me. And they pretty much did the same thing absent the down sleeping bags. But so I had a cot, just a very simple cot, and I put a piece of plywood on that. And then over the plywood, I put a straw mat, which were very plentiful in that area. And that was a straw mat was my mattress. It was, you know, a quarter inch thick, and I can't imagine sleeping on that now. But as a 22 year old, hey, this is good.

NIBERT: [00:23:52] I slept on a grass mat too, it was very comfortable. But yeah, I was 22 also.

KIRCHER: [00:23:56] Yeah. So um.

NIBERT: [00:23:57] The view makes up the difference.

KIRCHER: [00:23:59] Yes, that helps. And so they lived there and they cooked potatoes. They grew and ate potatoes. They usually sold their meat. They had a grain called quinoa, which has now hit the United States.

NIBERT: [00:24:16] Everybody loves quinoa, yes.

KIRCHER: [00:24:17] Well, we were eating quinoa in 1973.

NIBERT: [00:24:22] It's a good protein.

KIRCHER: [00:24:23] It was high protein grain. And so they would eat that. That was their source of protein. So quinoa and potatoes, both of which they grew, was kind of their diet source. And then they made money by.

NIBERT: [00:24:39] The guinea pigs.

KIRCHER: [00:24:40] From the guinea pigs. Or if it was a really big occasion, I remember. Well, each time we completed a school, there was a party that has a name that I've forgotten, but we'd invite the whole community and anybody from a neighboring community who wanted to come to come and just celebrate the new school. Alcohol was always involved by their mandate, as it were.

NIBERT: [00:25:09] Did they make the alcohol?

KIRCHER: [00:25:10] They made the alcohol. *Trago*, which is drink in Spanish.

NIBERT: [00:25:14] Nice.

KIRCHER: [00:25:15] And it was, wow. Now I've forgotten. Fermented something.

NIBERT: [00:25:23] Coconut? No not coconut.

KIRCHER: [00:25:25] Potatoes? Could have been, but I'm not sure. Maybe I never, because we never made it. And I didn't. I wanted to have as much distance between me and *trago* or, wow, now I've forgotten that. And they had a corn. They made a corn, which was very accessible to them. That's, and I take that back. The *trago* was for pretty special occasions, and they generally didn't make the *trago*. They would buy the *trago*. That was a big deal. And that was like, you know, damn near 200 proof, you know, 100 percent alcohol. It just seemed like grain alcohol here.

NIBERT: [00:26:00] Pretty vicious.

KIRCHER: [00:26:01] Right. And then they'd have *chicha*. That's the name of the corn liquor that they would make. And the parties that we got invited to for school celebrations, and occasionally we'd get invited to one of these communities for a different kind of party. It was a hard thing for us to go to from a health perspective because you, frequently as the guest of honor, were going to be expected to drink more alcohol than you should. Particularly if the *trago* was available, if someone had spent the money to buy *trago*.

NIBERT: [00:26:40] And you can't really say no, can you?

KIRCHER: [00:26:41] And you can't say no. And then so that was hard. And then if we were having *chicha*, which is usually you'd have both, which is the corn liquor that they would make, which is like a porridge. They didn't, it didn't distill down, and they had no way to thin it out or anything. It would just be corn and it would ferment and ferment and ferment until it became alcoholic enough, which was important. But it's like this soup, of thick soup of corn mash.

NIBERT: [00:27:18] And you drink the mash?

KIRCHER: [00:27:20] We had to drink the mash and it was made with water that would make you sick, that we knew would probably give you worms. Sometimes we would be asked to.

NIBERT: [00:27:32] The alcohol didn't kill it?

KIRCHER: [00:27:33] No, no. That was one of the first things you learn in Peace Corps training is that alcohol will not kill the things in water.

NIBERT: [00:27:42] The bad water. Darn it. Would sure be nice if it did.

KIRCHER: [00:27:46] Exactly.

NIBERT: [00:27:46] So were the indigenous folks, did they have dysentery? Where they sickly or were they healthy folks?

KIRCHER: [00:27:52] The answer to that is yes. It was very frequent for them to be sick with diarrhea and other waterborne disease. It was not infrequent for them to die of that.

NIBERT: [00:28:07] Wow.

KIRCHER: [00:28:10] But most of them developed a tolerance to it, for it. And you know, we never did, and we never desired to because to develop a tolerance, you have to drink it. Although we all got sick. We all got *bichos*, bugs.

NIBERT: [00:28:31] Bugs. Was it giardia or amoeba? Do you know what it was?

KIRCHER: [00:28:36] The giardia I don't think ever came up. Amoebas was usually it. And there was a terrible cure to that was another drug whose name I forget. But you had to take it for like three weeks. No alcohol. Because again, alcohol, you could destroy your liver. The Peace Corps nurses were like, OK, you got *bichos*, here's the drug. Don't drink. No alcohol, no alcohol.

NIBERT: [00:29:05] It's a heavy-duty drug that was doing damage to your liver already.

KIRCHER: [00:29:09] Yes. And, you know, wrangling Peace Corps volunteers, because you got most of them young and invincible, is a tough job. A lot of respect for the Peace Corps nurses, one of whom until very recently, and we still, if she's still alive, we'll probably have an email exchange with her. It's just really sweet. And she earned the love literally of many, many volunteers, and my wife and I went back to Ecuador five years after our service and stayed with her.

NIBERT: [00:29:45] Wonderful. Were the schools still in session at that point?

KIRCHER: [00:29:48] Oh yeah, that was a good question. Thank you. That was a sweet thing. So we built over the three years, two years, three schools. And the last one. The first two schools were funded through efforts of the volunteers that are building on me, building, doing, being one of them.

NIBERT: [00:30:14] With your living allowance?

KIRCHER: [00:30:15] No, no. One being a volunteer before me, just figuring out ways to get money. I became aware of a school partnership program and I ultimately read up on it, and I ultimately wrote away to a high school in Virginia, explained who I was, what I was doing, and if they could get me a thousand bucks, I could build a school. And I'd say, whoa, a school for a thousand dollars.

NIBERT: [00:30:46] I know, what a good deal, even in the 70s. What a deal.

KIRCHER: [00:30:51] So, you know, cinder blocks, cement, rebar, tiles for the roof. And we got for the beams, we got trees that were right there. Just cut the trees down and square them off.

NIBERT: [00:31:04] So was it eucalyptus then that you all used?

KIRCHER: [00:31:05] Yes, eucalyptus, which is just indestructible, indestructible. So the first two schools were made with money that we, the volunteers,

provided. Very nicely and to the Ecuadorian government's credit, they kind of looked at this bilingual education thing and educating these people way up on the communities as a good thing. And we approached them for the third school and said, look, if you know, again for a thousand bucks in *suces*, we can build a school. And the guy that we approached, it might have even been, I think it was the Minister of Education for that area, said we'll provide the materials.

NIBERT: [00:31:49] Oh, great.

KIRCHER: [00:31:50] You provide the labor, through you and the community. Great, sign me up.

NIBERT: [00:31:57] So the third school was provided.

KIRCHER: [00:31:59] The materials were provided through the government, which was really sweet.

NIBERT: [00:32:02] Wonderful.

KIRCHER: [00:32:03] Very nice.

NIBERT: [00:32:04] And did they go on to build more schools, do you know?

KIRCHER: [00:32:07] I don't know about the government, but I guess you were asking the question about what my schools. When we went back after five and after about 12 years, both times we went back, schools that we built were still standing. And that was kind of discussion that my wife and I had. So were going back to the community, hopefully they'll remember us.

NIBERT: [00:32:31] Did they?

KIRCHER: [00:32:33] And the school, what about the, you know, so maybe if the school fell down? OK, but I doubt it. Because of my lack of expertise in construction, I overbuilt everything. So that was super strong. Use a little bit extra rebar. If there's always, there was a question of do we do this or not? We'd do it, we do more. And so we went back and schools are

standing and one of them had been turned, and they were still going. They had hired and kept the bilingual education teacher there. I think it was a different person, but kept him. And he gave talked to us a little bit about what was going on, and he had textbooks, which is another part of our program. We had to provide the textbooks. And they were, you know, the thinking was, well, if we go back and they got cows in the schools, they got cows in the school.

NIBERT: [00:33:34] Exactly. It's being used some way. The cows have some rain shelters.

KIRCHER: [00:33:40] So the schools were being used. And they had a health clinic came up from the small town below. A doctor or nurse came up weekly, maybe, or at least monthly and held a clinic and they had some adult education courses there. It was just phenomenal. Just amazing.

NIBERT: [00:34:05] That's great. So it became a health clinic and an adult education.

KIRCHER: [00:34:11] And childhood education. Because it went, and, you know, Peace Corps, that's Peace Corps volunteers' wonder and fear. So I'm here. I've knocked myself out for two years and I've helped, you don't have to say that help thing, but I've worked with a number of people here to make things a little bit better. Is it going to fall apart when I leave? And you know, I come back. And I don't know what the statistics are, but I bet they're high that, oh yeah, that was ten years ago, the Peace Corps volunteer did that, but we don't do that anymore.

NIBERT: [00:34:46] Don't follow through on it.

KIRCHER: [00:34:46] So it was just really warmed my heart or our hearts to see that going on.

NIBERT: [00:34:51] It's great to see when the community takes over and keeps it going. So did they remember you?

KIRCHER: [00:34:56] Yes, they did. The first time we went back, the president of the community was still alive. You know, he was maybe in his fifties when I was working with him. And, you know, 50 in an isolated community is like 80 in someplace else. I mean, his body had seen a lot of years. And then there was, he invited us to his house. Because my wife, the woman that volunteer who was now my wife, and so we walked up the mountain and into the community and, you know, going directly to the school. But by the time we got there, the word of mouth had passed. These people, the gringos are coming up. And I think the president was there to greet us and he said, yeah, you know, Don Pedro. He said, you know, you came back. And so he invited us to his house and we sat on his little porch area there and he ran into his house and you could hear him digging around for about five minutes. He finally comes out with a picture that we had taken before we left, and he just kept this.

KIRCHER: [00:36:14] And the Peace Corps director spoke about that this morning, about the volunteer. Matter of fact, in Ecuador she referenced a meeting that she had with the president of Ecuador, who had lived in the same town as a kid, as a Peace Corps volunteer. And he's president now, and he's talking to the director of the Peace Corps about that volunteer.

NIBERT: [00:36:37] Yeah.

KIRCHER: [00:36:37] So it's those relationships that, and you know, the fact that they remembered us, he invited us to his house, shows us this treasured picture.

NIBERT: [00:36:46] Right. So obviously they thought of you highly in the community. That was going to be one of my questions too. Like, how did they?

KIRCHER: [00:36:52] Yes. Well, that went. Let me finish this thought and then go to that one. So during while we're sitting there talking to the president and stuff and there's two or three other young adults and they're sitting off in the corner and they're kind of giggling and talking and stuff as members of the community. And here's the president's again meeting with these silly old gringos and stuff, and then the president gets this grin on his face. And

he looks at me and he says, see that guy there? This is in Spanish. Says see that guy there in the red shirt? I said, yeah. Said he was a kid when you were building the school.

NIBERT: [00:37:33] Oh, how wonderful.

KIRCHER: [00:37:34] And he went to the classroom.

NIBERT: [00:37:37] And his Spanish was good?

KIRCHER: [00:37:38] Yes. They were talking in Quechua but I would like to think so.

NIBERT: [00:37:44] Well, he was kind of giggling and smirking at you so he's probably following the conversation.

KIRCHER: [00:37:47] Yeah, that's a good point. Very good point. Very good point.

NIBERT: [00:37:50] That's great. You know, it does our hearts good to see that continues after we leave.

KIRCHER: [00:37:55] And as Peace Corps director mentioned, it's the relationships that really matter. We built three schools, bilingual schools, some kids learned Spanish. This community, perhaps, interacted more in the Spanish speaking community. It's wonderful. Not to belittle that, but the relationship that we had with the presidents of those communities, the friends we made in the Spanish speaking towns down at the foot of the mountain where I lived during the weekends and my fellow volunteers lived during the week. You know, they saw us, we got up and, you know, brushed our teeth and put our pants on one leg at a time. And we went to work and we got frustrated and stuff.

NIBERT: [00:38:47] And they see how you resolve it. It's a cultural exchange.

KIRCHER: [00:38:50] Exactly. Just the same thing. We're more alike than we are different. They're one of us.

NIBERT: [00:38:54] Yeah. Yeah, it is very touching. You know, it's a beautiful experience that I think everybody should do or at least try.

KIRCHER: [00:39:02] Yeah, that, and work in a restaurant, in my opinion.

NIBERT: [00:39:07] Seriously. So did you have a counterpart with the Ecuadorian government?

KIRCHER: [00:39:14] Yes, that was the Ministry of Education.

NIBERT: [00:39:18] Got it. That's right, you had already mentioned it.

KIRCHER: [00:39:18] And we had the woman who was the, I guess, Minister of Education, at least in that area. And we worked, we worked, I hesitate to say closely, but she was involved in everything that we did. She would come up to the communities on occasion to check things out and see how the school was going. And without her support, we wouldn't have been able to do anything.

NIBERT: [00:39:49] Exactly.

KIRCHER: [00:39:50] Hey, you got these gringos up on a mountain building in schools? You know, what the hell are they doing, you know? And sometimes, you know, worse, as far as subversive activities and the possibility of that.

NIBERT: [00:40:04] Right.

KIRCHER: [00:40:06] And but that never happened because we had the blessing of the Minister of Education. And that was very sweet.

NIBERT: [00:40:13] Our in-country counterparts are very important.

KIRCHER: [00:40:16] Yes, yes, yes.

NIBERT: [00:40:18] That's what makes Peace Corps pretty special is that we work with them.

KIRCHER: [00:40:21] Yes. Yes, yes. Yeah, you're not just out there, crazy gringos doing something.

NIBERT: [00:40:26] Just going off on your own, yeah, a little bit of tie to the government. Did you have much contact with folks in the United States, with your family at home and stuff?

KIRCHER: [00:40:36] No, no. And that was, it was OK for me. It wasn't OK for my parents, particularly my mom. She, you know, weathered it all wonderfully. But I called, you know, with no phone. We didn't have any phones or cell phones, you know. And that's, you know, the difference between being a volunteer now. You're not ever really out of touch. And this whole Skype thing, I mean, my goodness.

NIBERT: [00:41:06] Exactly. They don't get that intense isolation where you're thrown in the middle of nowhere and let's see how you do. Will you survive or will you go home?

KIRCHER: [00:41:16] Right. You know, I had a shortwave radio and I'd get.

NIBERT: [00:41:18] Oh, I loved my shortwave radio. My boob tube.

KIRCHER: [00:41:21] Exactly, exactly.

NIBERT: [00:41:22] Voice of America, BBC.

KIRCHER: [00:41:24] Exactly.

NIBERT: [00:41:24] And it was just a little bit of the outside world to help us stay alive.

KIRCHER: [00:41:28] Yeah, exactly.

NIBERT: [00:41:29] Remember who we are and where we're from. Yeah. Did you ever go home?

KIRCHER: [00:41:36] So that's where we were. So I called home on Christmas or during Christmas. You'd have to go up to the town square, make a reservation to use the phone that might work. And you know, you called, it was like Lassie or something, you know. You'd call through and you'd speak to the operator and the operator says, I'll try to do that and I'll call you back.

NIBERT: [00:41:58] I know. It's so foreign to think of now. We carry our phones with us. Nope. You had to get called back.

KIRCHER: [00:42:05] Yes. So I did that and it worked. I had a poor conversation, poor from a quality, technical quality, conversation with my mom and my dad. And that was it. Letters that took a long time but happened and they were always really nice to get.

NIBERT: [00:42:28] Oh, wasn't mail wonderful?

KIRCHER: [00:42:29] Yes. Yes, yes. Particularly if you had a girlfriend, you know, who you were pining for.

NIBERT: [00:42:35] So did you have a girlfriend at home?

KIRCHER: [00:42:37] Oh, yes, I did. And so and the volunteer who became my wife went, she went home for, I'm going to say Christmas, maybe Christmas. She went home once. And that may or may not have made a difference, because I had a terrible time readjusting to life in the United States. And she had a less difficult time, perhaps because she had gotten a little taste of it after a year. But personalities, she's much less likely to get upset, and I'm much more likely to have difficulty with change.

NIBERT: [00:43:21] So you did have a challenge in readjusting.

KIRCHER: [00:43:23] It was awful. Yeah, we both did. You'd go, um, we. From the beginning, I adopted a dog, a Dalmatian.

NIBERT: [00:43:33] Aww.

KIRCHER: [00:43:38] Coming back to the U.S. was kind of a fun difficult, and then a difficult difficult. The fun difficult part was that you could go to a grocery store as opposed to an open air market.

NIBERT: [00:43:51] But there's a lot of choices.

KIRCHER: [00:43:53] They had too many choices. They still do, in my opinion. But it was just amazing and we were amazed. We had to, we had dogs while we were there.

NIBERT: [00:44:02] That's right. And did you bring your dog back with you?

KIRCHER: [00:44:04] Yes, we did. And we had to make the dog food out of quinoa. That was high protein, quinoa.

NIBERT: [00:44:11] Where did you buy that in the states in the seventies? Were you able to find quinoa pretty easily?

KIRCHER: [00:44:18] No, um, what did we do? We just integrated dog food like a regular food once we got back to the States, with some rice and slowly in that. But in Ecuador it was quinoa, rice, vegetables, which they grew to like. And maybe a little bit of meat juice, if we could come up with some.

NIBERT: [00:44:41] Sure. Nice. And so what was the challenging aspect?

KIRCHER: [00:44:45] OK, so that was the fun part, I mean, the fun part of it. Challenging was, you know, kind of things were perceived as stupid and waste, the waste.

NIBERT: [00:45:00] The waste of Americans.

KIRCHER: [00:45:03] It was just hard to live with the, uh.

NIBERT: [00:45:07] The whining is what I had a hard time with. Like, you all do not know. You have nothing to complain about. You are so pampered. Just touched.

KIRCHER: [00:45:15] Right. So waste and not walking anywhere, you know, cars everywhere. And it was an irritation, and I struggled. I had a headache for months, that was. Finally my mom, you know, I was. It wasn't months, it was several weeks. It was months because it started shortly before I left Ecuador. Could see the writing on the wall. And then I went home to my mother for, um, that's who I went home to, to my parents, and I started talking about it to my mom. And she said, well, I'll pay for you to go see a psychologist if you want. And I did. And just knowing, he said, you know, there's no physical reason for you to have a headache. I'm convinced that it has to do with your being back in the United States. And just knowing that was freeing.

NIBERT: [00:46:12] Yeah.

KIRCHER: [00:46:13] But it was just, why do we do things this way? It's interesting because many volunteers get to their foreign country and they say, oh, they're not doing it right. I'm here to show you how to do it right. And I never did that, of course. But when I came back to the States, it was, you're not doing it right. We're not doing it right as a country. So that was, adjusting, readjusting to the United States was much more difficult than adjusting to Ecuador.

NIBERT: [00:46:47] And it's surprising, isn't it?

KIRCHER: [00:46:49] Yeah, sure.

NIBERT: [00:46:50] I was surprised that I had more challenging coming back to the States than when I went there. It surprised me.

KIRCHER: [00:46:58] Oh yeah, great to be home. Well, not necessarily so.

NIBERT: [00:47:01] Yeah. Well, it opens your eyes to how different cultures live and how we live. And not always the best. So how long did it take for you to finally feel comfortable and get a job you enjoyed in the States?

KIRCHER: [00:47:26] Probably a year.

NIBERT: [00:47:27] Not too bad.

KIRCHER: [00:47:28] No, it wasn't awful. I came back and waited on tables.

NIBERT: [00:47:34] That's a good way to adjust.

KIRCHER: [00:47:36] For a number of months and then I became a tree surgeon for about three months. And I liked that, I liked the outside part of it and the work, and then.

NIBERT: [00:47:55] In what part of the States were you living at this point?

KIRCHER: [00:47:57] This was in Tennessee. Tennessee, that's where, again, the volunteer who became my wife, that's where she lived. And so we decided. I wanted to have nothing to do with Long Island, New York. Sorry, Long Island, New York, but it was just too busy, too loud, et cetera.

NIBERT: [00:48:17] Too extreme of a difference.

KIRCHER: [00:48:18] Particularly for someone from coming back from a more laid-back culture. But it always was that way for me. So moved to Tennessee and then waited tables and then tree surgeon for a total of about a year. And then all that time researching graduate schools because I wanted to become a teacher and a bilingual teacher.

NIBERT: [00:48:38] And are you?

KIRCHER: [00:48:39] I was a special ed teacher for 25 years. I started out at this university, University of Texas, in the bilingual program. And for a number of reasons transferred from bilingual ed to special ed and made a career out of that, which I enjoyed very much.

NIBERT: [00:48:59] So you're retired now?

KIRCHER: [00:49:01] Correct. Partly. I still substitute teach a little bit.

NIBERT: [00:49:03] Oh, wonderful. That's great. So your overall experience with the Peace Corps, what would you say? What did you like the most about the Peace Corps experience?

KIRCHER: [00:49:12] First, I'd give it a, you know, a 12 out of 10. It was phenomenal. And that's not always the case. And then you said, but what was my? You had a follow up question there.

NIBERT: [00:49:24] What was your favorite experience of the Peace Corps?

KIRCHER: [00:49:30] Um.

NIBERT: [00:49:31] It's kind of hard to narrow it down sometimes.

KIRCHER: [00:49:32] It certainly is. Yeah. But you know, probably just you know getting the school, watching the school, watching me with the help of the community. You know, I'd get two or three volunteers every day. And then I had another Spanish speaking guy from below just to help me. He didn't particularly know construction either, but could follow my stuff, just to have the two of us just speed things up. But watching the schools become. And what I talked about earlier, as far as you know, what did I do right to get to wake up to this, to live on this mountain for, it took us about six months to build the schools, for six months.

NIBERT: [00:50:17] Well, your sixth-grade self knew something.

KIRCHER: [00:50:21] Yes. Yes.

NIBERT: [00:50:22] And you followed through.

KIRCHER: [00:50:24] Yes.

NIBERT: [00:50:24] Which is wonderful. And then did you have any least experience in the Peace Corps?

KIRCHER: [00:50:30] To go back to that question is the, um, you don't have them anymore. Most of them, those people are dead, and just practical reasons

prevent the relationships from continuing. But another positive part was the relationships that we developed between the indigenous people and the Spanish speaking people. You know, you'd go up and you'd go out to dinner or I'd need to buy cement, and I would have this working relationship with the guy at the cement store. Don Pedro, three bags, OK.

NIBERT: [00:51:04] And they were always happy to see you.

KIRCHER: [00:51:07] Exactly. It was just, that was very cool.

NIBERT: [00:51:09] To be part of the community.

KIRCHER: [00:51:10] Yeah, exactly.

NIBERT: [00:51:11] You were part of the community.

KIRCHER: [00:51:13] There you go.

NIBERT: [00:51:13] And it does feel really nice that you're, you know, for them to just embrace you because you're obviously different. And you were working between two different cultures in the same place.

KIRCHER: [00:51:22] Two different cultures, right. Exactly. Yeah, yeah.

NIBERT: [00:51:24] And so it had to feel special to belong to both of them.

KIRCHER: [00:51:28] To both of them, yes, that was that was very sweet.

NIBERT: [00:51:29] So were you bilingual in both of the languages?

KIRCHER: [00:51:32] The Spanish, because I'd studied Spanish in college for fun and was more than functional. I could speak decent Spanish because I took advanced courses in college and actually I did a term abroad. So Spanish, I certainly had a lot to learn, but I was totally, totally functional, bordering on poor, conversational, but still.

NIBERT: [00:52:00] Which is great for an American.

KIRCHER: [00:52:02] Yeah, exactly. But to walk into that. That was everybody's nemesis in training is the language. That was the hardest part for most of the volunteers in my group.

NIBERT: [00:52:13] Because we're afraid we're going to make fools out of ourselves.

KIRCHER: [00:52:15] Yeah, and they were told not to.

NIBERT: [00:52:16] But when you do make a fool out of yourself, you just laugh and move along.

KIRCHER: [00:52:20] They love that you're trying.

NIBERT: [00:52:21] They love when you make mistakes also. They love the humor of it all, you know.

KIRCHER: [00:52:25] So because I knew enough Spanish, I took some Spanish courses, but I also was taught Quechua at the training center.

NIBERT: [00:52:34] And did you feel confident in that also?

KIRCHER: [00:52:37] It was very functional, and you know, it's a fairly rudimentary culture and their conversations were also very functional. I'm sure they got deep as it were and philosophical at times, you know, with their families and stuff. But day to day conversation was mostly functional. Where you going? Where are you coming from? You know, kind of stuff. So I learned to say, you know, see people coming down, if I'm walking up the path. You know, hey, it's good to see you. Where are you going? I'm going downtown. OK, have a good time. Or if I'm working and somebody comes by the school, hey, you're coming up. Where are you coming from? Oh, I've been over at this guy's house or over in this community. OK. And that was that's all I needed. I was one of the community for that, I was one of the boys, which was great.

NIBERT: [00:53:31] Which you wouldn't get if you were visiting just for a week.

KIRCHER: [00:53:33] Oh, totally.

NIBERT: [00:53:34] You know, the Peace Corps experience allows you to become part of the community.

KIRCHER: [00:53:37] Yes. Difficult part. Health was, you know, just always having to be careful, you know, had to boil water or use iodine drops.

NIBERT: [00:53:50] Which do not taste good.

KIRCHER: [00:53:53] No. And so that was hard. At times as though I adjusted I think well and I was never critical, but, you know, behind closed doors, the slowness of the way things operated there could get to me. That was difficult. We had to, on occasion, I would get the Ministry of Education to get me a large dump truck with a driver. I mean, I couldn't have done that. And rocks, sand, I think, and sometimes materials. The materials for the school that they provided, there was a lot of metal in that. And so anyway, they would, I would make it so, OK, well, we got you this dump truck for Monday. You need to be here at 4:30 Monday morning. Because those boys, they're going early. And I lived a 45 minute bus ride away. So yeah, let's get up at 2:30 or 3:00 to go and then show up for the dump truck.

NIBERT: [00:55:08] And it may or may not be there.

KIRCHER: [00:55:11] May or may not be there. OK, I'll just go home and catch up on my sleep. And that is totally, you know, totally cordial. And, you know, the third time it happened I was down with it. You kind of expect it. But at times it could be frustrating. So, health. Having to watch out for your health and knowing that you could get pretty sick was hard.

NIBERT: [00:55:39] You never really got too sick?

KIRCHER: [00:55:40] I got worms a couple of times and Flagyl, that's the drug.

NIBERT: [00:55:46] Oh, that is a pain. It feels like little toxic bombs going off in your system. And then the parasite's like, no, I don't want to die.

KIRCHER: [00:55:55] Exactly.

NIBERT: [00:55:55] Yeah, it is horrible.

KIRCHER: [00:55:57] So I got worms, I don't know, maybe three times, which isn't excessive at all. I got something that was never identified where I had to go to the hospital to Quito, which was a big deal. You know, it's a three hour bus ride on these treacherous roads and to spend a couple of days in the hospital. And I never.

NIBERT: [00:56:23] And they still know what was wrong with you?

KIRCHER: [00:56:24] Just a severe. I don't know. The doctor knew how to treat it. I just, that was never shared with me, I guess. But uh, it was just a, you know, 104 temperature, just felt really bad. And then that anxiety, you know, temperature is 104. If it goes up much more, I could die. And we're getting on this really pokey bus to Quito to go to the Peace Corps office, to then go probably to the hospital. But, you know, it happened to me twice. And you know, I still don't know what it was.

NIBERT: [00:57:04] It happened twice. Interesting.

KIRCHER: [00:57:06] Yeah. But Peace Corps was really, you know, you'd show up there.

NIBERT: [00:57:08] They're on top of it.

KIRCHER: [00:57:10] They don't.

NIBERT: [00:57:11] They don't want you to die either.

KIRCHER: [00:57:13] Exactly. So they, the Peace Corps was very, very good, that office.

NIBERT: [00:57:19] Totally. So since Peace Corps, are you? You all went back five years and then 12 years. Have you had much contact since then?

KIRCHER: [00:57:29] No, not since, actually.

NIBERT: [00:57:31] I mean, it's been quite a few years.

KIRCHER: [00:57:33] Other than a very occasional email with the nurse who still lives there. She's an American who married an Ecuadorian and then became a Peace Corps nurse.

NIBERT: [00:57:47] So your Peace Corps nurse was an American?

KIRCHER: [00:57:49] Yes.

NIBERT: [00:57:50] Oh, interesting. Interesting. Well, that probably was even more helpful since she was immersed into the culture and she knew American quirks.

KIRCHER: [00:57:57] Yeah, yeah. And she knew all to watch out for, and she knew American culture, and she knew American male culture, which we were more likely to get into trouble, I think.

NIBERT: [00:58:09] Did you ever feel unsafe there ever?

KIRCHER: [00:58:16] No. No. And that's, you know, things have changed, and ask my wife that same question. And although, you know, we shared a house and worked jobs in the same towns, et cetera, et cetera, she may respond a little bit differently. But you know, she is a very savvy person and she knew how to dress and how not to dress. Not that dressing, dress.

NIBERT: [00:58:48] It shouldn't matter.

KIRCHER: [00:58:48] It's our responsibility as males.

NIBERT: [00:58:50] But culturally.

KIRCHER: [00:58:53] Culturally. Exactly. And that's, you're becoming offensive, you know?

NIBERT: [00:58:55] Exactly.

KIRCHER: [00:58:57] So she always dressed very conservatively and appropriately.

NIBERT: [00:59:04] The male female relationships in the indigenous culture, were they similar to Americans or did they have very distinct roles?

KIRCHER: [00:59:13] Very distinct roles and just, you know, I mean, it was male, male dominated.

NIBERT: [00:59:19] The woman never helped you build the churches or the schools at all?

KIRCHER: [00:59:23] Oh no, that would be.

NIBERT: [00:59:25] That would be unacceptable. But maybe they provided food? Did they bring you lunch?

KIRCHER: [00:59:29] Yeah. No, that never happened, the lunches, but the food for the celebration they would provide. And they carried things, they carried firewood, they carried water. And it was not atypical to see a couple, indigenous couple, and the man is walking up front because that's what the men do and the women is following dutifully behind him. And she's loaded down with crap and he's just walking, just skipping along.

NIBERT: [01:00:05] And she's carrying the water.

KIRCHER: [01:00:06] She's got the water, the food, if they've got food or whatever.

NIBERT: [01:00:10] Interesting.

KIRCHER: [01:00:10] So, yes, very male dominated.

NIBERT: [01:00:15] Interesting. And then the Spanish community, was it similar? Did the women walk ten paces behind also?

KIRCHER: [01:00:21] No, it wasn't that bad, but the machismo was just rampant. But much less so, but still kind of male dominated.

NIBERT: [01:00:32] Interesting. Did you notice a difference when you went back 12 years, after the 12 year time?

KIRCHER: [01:00:38] No, not enough culturally. The indigenous people were from the beginning, very business savvy for whatever reasons. They were the businessmen when we were there. And were always into some kind of business and were good at it. And they were, uh, they were then when we went back, more indigenous people were owning and running businesses in the Spanish dominated town.

NIBERT: [01:01:11] Well, that's great. Probably because they were more bilingual.

KIRCHER: [01:01:13] Yes, there you go. Thank you very much.

NIBERT: [01:01:17] Yay. And then if anybody was questioning going into the Peace Corps, what would your advice be to them?

KIRCHER: [01:01:24] Uh, go.

NIBERT: [01:01:26] I know, I'm like, why are you questioning it? Just go.

KIRCHER: [01:01:29] And go now. That's a more powerful statement. I think the longer you stay in the United States, as you get older, particularly if you're young person, when you get older, you get stuff. I had a girlfriend and a motorcycle. Said goodbye to the girlfriend, tearful, and put the motorcycle in the basement. And then that was it. You know, I didn't have a car and I didn't.

NIBERT: [01:01:59] Have a house. Didn't have children. You didn't have a lot of things.

KIRCHER: [01:02:02] Exactly. So go and go before you get stuff. Not that, and the Peace Corps is recruiting older people hard now. Not that you can't do it. It's hard.

NIBERT: [01:02:11] There was, in the group of 35 people that I was in, there was only three of us that were fresh out of college. And I thought for certain everybody would be fresh out of college.

KIRCHER: [01:02:22] We were mostly young people.

NIBERT: [01:02:23] Mostly young in your group.

KIRCHER: [01:02:24] We had one who was 50 and one.

NIBERT: [01:02:27] And that probably seems so old.

KIRCHER: [01:02:29] Yes. One young family, actually two. One family couple with teenage kids and one with a two year old daughter, with whom we're still very friendly.

NIBERT: [01:02:42] You still keep in contact with them. Well, that's very nice.

KIRCHER: [01:02:47] And you know, as time goes on, that happens less so. When we first came back, we were in contact with lots of volunteers who are back in our group who were back and stuff, and that's less and less. But we've kept up with one and we visit them, try to visit them annually.

NIBERT: [01:03:02] And what part of the country are they in?

KIRCHER: [01:03:04] They live in Minnesota, but they winter in Texas. So we go down to Mission, which is a long drive. Six hours about, or three hours I guess to get there. But we spent a weekend or more with them each time, and that's really sweet. And the other side of that is that any volunteer in my group could walk into this room now and we could start up as if we had never been apart.

NIBERT: [01:03:38] Exactly.

KIRCHER: [01:03:39] And you know, you weren't close. I was, you know, close with a woman who became my wife, close-ish with this person that I see on, you

know, annually. Another person I exchanged some emails, a woman, and Christmas cards with. But there was, you know, there doesn't have to be that contact, you know, to just kind of pick up where we left off. It would be great.

NIBERT: [01:04:06] Yeah, that is great. Well, Peace Corps is an amazing experience.

KIRCHER: [01:04:10] Yes, it is.

NIBERT: [01:04:10] And you sound like you had a fabulous time.

KIRCHER: [01:04:13] It was. And that's the other side, though, you know, it's kind of go, go now. But Peace Corps is good for most people. It's not good for everybody. We had two people who left. I think one was sent back and one chose to just, I'm sorry, this is harder than I thought it was going to be, or very different from than what I thought it was going to be. And well, OK. No harm, no foul.

NIBERT: [01:04:41] An unhappy volunteer is an unproductive volunteer. And they don't want you there.

KIRCHER: [01:04:45] Peace Corps is very good about, and you know, undoing that.

NIBERT: [01:04:49] Well, culturally, they're not really helping out if they're unhappy.

KIRCHER: [01:04:50] Yeah, you know, grumbly person.

NIBERT: [01:04:53] Yeah, nobody needs that. Yeah. I mean, my group there was 35 and only 17 stayed.

KIRCHER: [01:04:58] Wow. Yeah, no, I think I'm pretty right with the two out of maybe 18.

NIBERT: [01:05:05] That's pretty good. That's fabulous. It's interesting. Would you do it again?

KIRCHER: [01:05:12] Yes, I toyed with that again earlier on. Again, as you get more, oh geez, leaving is going to be so complicated. What are we going to do with the house? Da da da da. Health becomes an issue as you get older. Sadly now I'm fighting prostate cancer, so it would be.

NIBERT: [01:05:29] I'm sorry to hear that.

KIRCHER: [01:05:30] Thank you. I do appreciate that, honestly. So it's out of the question right now. But even before prostate cancer, you know, as I got older, cholesterol became more of an issue and this stuff, so.

NIBERT: [01:05:51] Things you don't think about at 22.

KIRCHER: [01:05:53] I'm getting excellent, excellent medical care here. So it gets. That's another reason of kind of if you're young, go, go now. Because as you get older, it becomes, between the stuff that you accumulate and then as your health, just by nature, it's not going to be as good.

NIBERT: [01:06:11] Yeah. And we're sent to places that don't always, isn't always the easiest for health care.

KIRCHER: [01:06:16] Yeah, yeah. And just the effort that it takes to take care of yourself. I mean, the, you know, just going back to the prostate cancer, the things that I have to do to get through my day related to that, that makes my day difficult enough here in the wonderful United States where everything is at my fingertips. If I had to haul my water or, you know, cook on a one burner gas stove.

NIBERT: [01:06:44] Which was luxurious.

KIRCHER: [01:06:45] Yes, yes. I felt, you know, it's good.

NIBERT: [01:06:47] I felt very fancy when I turned on my one burner and didn't have to build a fire.

KIRCHER: [01:06:51] Yeah, exactly.

NIBERT: [01:06:52] Yeah, we definitely don't take as many things for granted after the Peace Corps.

KIRCHER: [01:06:59] There was one session or something or an interview or something where it was so, you bring, what did you bring back and how has your experience changed you? And you know, in Texas, living in Texas, it helps bring it home, is that if you don't have something under the water faucet, don't have the water turned on. You know, if the water's running, there's something under it.

NIBERT: [01:07:27] To catch it.

KIRCHER: [01:07:27] You know, you're not shaving and then sticking your thing under there and then shaving. You shave, you turn it off.

NIBERT: [01:07:35] You're not as wasteful.

KIRCHER: [01:07:37] Exactly.

NIBERT: [01:07:37] Because water is precious when you have to schlep it.

KIRCHER: [01:07:40] Exactly, when you have to schlep it, you'll appreciate it much, much more. So there's that. Recycling. I mean, the stuff that you would see the indigenous people carrying around, these plastic buckets that are 50 years old, you know, and they're glad to have them, you know, and there's I don't know what could happen to make them throw it away. Nothing. There's nothing. And if it breaks, they'll find something some other use for it, like put it up on the roof or something, you know, to keep the water out or whatever. So I had a good dose of that before I went in the Peace Corps, but it kind of solidified the kind of conservative lifestyle.

KIRCHER: [01:08:26] And you know, my wife and I both taught school in Texas, you know, 48th pay scale in the nation, just did not make much money at all. My wife worked for the state agencies, which, unless you get into management, does not pay terribly well, but.

NIBERT: [01:08:46] Good benefits.

KIRCHER: [01:08:47] But good benefits, you're right, as did working for Austin, the school district. The benefits were good. But we have, we want for, you know, we live very conservative. Conservative from a materialistic lifestyle. We want for nothing. You know, the house is, if we're home in the house in the summer, it's 78 degrees and we're happy as clams.

NIBERT: [01:09:10] It's chilly.

KIRCHER: [01:09:11] Exactly.

NIBERT: [01:09:12] When it's 105 outside, it's freezing.

KIRCHER: [01:09:15] I have to put a coat on it. So it is, it's freezing.

NIBERT: [01:09:19] It's freezing in here.

KIRCHER: [01:09:20] And I like that. I like that.

NIBERT: [01:09:22] Yeah, just how happy the indigenous people were.

KIRCHER: [01:09:25] With so little.

NIBERT: [01:09:27] Right. It just makes you grateful for what you have, which is a wonderful thing. Well, thank you so much for sharing your story.

KIRCHER: [01:09:34] Thank you also.

NIBERT: [01:09:35] I really appreciate it. Is there anything else you would like to add?

KIRCHER: [01:09:44] Um. No. There was like, covered.

NIBERT: [01:09:47] You feel like you've gotten everything you wanted to?

KIRCHER: [01:09:50] Shared what I needed to share.

NIBERT: [01:09:50] Wonderful. Well, you had a great experience.

KIRCHER: [01:09:53] Yes.

NIBERT: [01:09:53] I'm really happy to hear that all that worked out so well.

KIRCHER: [01:09:55] Yes, both the experience and the results.

NIBERT: [01:09:59] Yeah, not everybody has that. So it's really wonderful that you got to share that. And the view.

KIRCHER: [01:10:05] Yes. And the view. I'll never forget that.

NIBERT: [01:10:07] Thank you so much.

KIRCHER: [01:10:08] Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]